Tone and the French Expeditions to Ireland, 1796–1798: Total War, or Liberation?

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Shortly after landing on a remote spot of the Atlantic coast of Ireland and occupying the town of Killala on 23 August 1798, the small French expeditionary force under the command of General Humbert had hoisted a green flag to rally local rebels. On it was the slogan ‘Erin go Bragh’, the Gaelic for ‘Ireland forever’, and a Harp without a Crown, as a local eyewitness had described. Somewhat cynically, this loyalist had mocked its potency as a martial symbol by recycling key phrases in Humbert’s landing proclamation, taking up the effusive phraseology which vindicated the republican mission of the liberators. The flag invited them to ‘assert their freedom’ from English tyranny, and join France’s citizen soldiers who had ‘come for no other purpose but to make them independent and happy’.1 That the French had paid such attention to detail in their pre-deployment planning is corroborated in the diary kept by Theobald Wolfe Tone, revolutionary Ireland’s most influential secret negotiator in Paris and an iconic figure in Irish nationalist history. He had proposed such a standard to the Directory in Paris on 23 June 1796 for the vanguard of the French invasion force for which he had successfully lobbied, essential to the success of Ireland’s revolution. Its device, an uncrowned harp ‘surmounted with the Cap of Liberty’, was that of the United Irishmen, a radical society he had helped found in Belfast and Dublin in 1791.2 The very same day, the Directory duly informed General Lazare Hoche (appointed to lead the expedition to Ireland) of this development, as they did not want to overlook anything which might contribute to his success:

The Irish, like every nation in the world, have a sort of religious respect for certain emblems and principally those that led their ancestors into battle. It is possible to turn this respect and attachment for their ancient emblems to the advantage of the revolution which is being prepared in their country…. It will not be unprofitable to embark some musicians
As commemoration fever grips the Irish collective consciousness in the countdown to the centenary of the 1916 Rebellion and independence, it is vital to relocate the historical foundations of Ireland’s republican culture in two of its most defining realms of memory. This discussion will thus focus on both Tone’s legacy in actions and words and the French invasion attempts of 1796 and 1798 in which he played an instrumental role, as they provide compelling insights into the late eighteenth-century republic and war paradigm. The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland, often generically and exaggeratedly referred to as ‘Wolfe Tone’s Rebellion’ outside academia, was the first armed attempt at secession from Britain and resulted largely (but not exclusively) from the fused influences of the American and French Revolutions on the radicals of Ireland. Traditional narratives have presented 1798 as a heroic failure, often attributed to the poorly timed expeditions, launched by a hopelessly ineffectual Directory. Though the campaigns which did ensue ended as military disasters, the innumerable documents supporting the Franco-Irish alliance, many of which reference Tone’s political agitation and service in the French army, are infused with the rhetoric so characteristic of Directorial political culture, and so contribute to our understanding of the inextricable link between republic and war which defined the age. Furthermore, they illustrate the increasingly ideological underpinning of the political aims of warfare and merit closer scrutiny in the light of current debates on total war. Tone’s eyewitness account, if at times highly subjective, also demonstrates how a classical cult of belligerence was reconfigured in the 1790s to celebrate the soldier, and exalt popular armed conflict as the only road to freedom from tyranny.

Early interest in Ireland prior to Tone’s mission

Ireland’s geographical position as an island gateway to the Atlantic made it England’s weak point, and occupied the minds of French military strategists and buccaneers when contemplating the logistical challenges of launching amphibious landings in the British Isles. By the mid-eighteenth century, new political aims were bolstering geostrategic considerations in numerous invasion plans which would weaken Britain’s commerce and disrupt domestic security. Logistically, it was more feasible to attempt several small diversionary raids to sow panic among local populations, and by the 1790s revolutionary Anglophobia would transform this subversive method of small warfare into an ideological crusade encompassing Ireland. On his arrival in the corridors of the Directory in early 1796, a somewhat naive Tone would discover (to his horror) the reprehensible methods of this strategy, as discussed below. As his lobbying was progressing, various plans devised over the years were being collated and copied; by June, Hoche was consulting them,