

The most well-known advocate for early Irish independence, Theobald Wolfe Tone, was born during the mid-eighteenth century in the country's capital: Dublin.<sup>1</sup> Throughout Wolfe Tone's life, the Irish Catholics were oppressed by the English, therefore he advocated for Irish independence from the destructive nation. Theobald Wolfe Tone's vision for an independent Ireland inspired future generations to advocate for independence from the United Kingdom because after each attempt, the Irish failed yet turned to Tone for hope.

Theobald Wolfe Tone was born in Dublin in June of 1763 as the eldest son of a successful coachmaker as his father, and his mother a daughter of the captain of a vessel in the West Indies.<sup>2</sup> In 1782, at the age of seventeen, Wolfe Tone began to study at Trinity College, however, he was suspended for a year due to a fellow student's death during a duel he participated in.<sup>3</sup> Wolfe was known to be popular amongst his fellow classmates, and his interests for politics sparked while attending Trinity College—he even formed a debate club amongst himself and his friends.<sup>4</sup> Wolfe Tone considered himself to be a Democrat until his Republican friend from Belfast, Thomas Russell, who later became a founding member of the Society of United Irishmen, wrote to him about the inquiries of Belfast. This led Wolfe Tone to his main belief that would ultimately shape his entire political career: “To subvert the tyranny of our execrable Government, to break the connection with England, the never-failing source of all our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country... To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions...”.<sup>5</sup> The turning point of Tone's political career was when the Society realized their reform campaigns failed. Tone became a separatist and a democrat, as he

---

<sup>1</sup> Theobald Wolfe Tone, “Early Life: 1763-91,” in *The Autobiography of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763-1798*, ed. Sean O’Faolain (London, United Kingdom: Thomas Nelson & Sons LTD, 1910), 3, <https://archive.org/details/autobiographyoft00toneuoft/page/16/mode/2up>.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfe Tone, “Early Life: 1763-91”, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfe Tone, “Early Life: 1763-91”, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone* (Liverpool, United Kingdom: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 13, [https://books.google.com/books?id=hxISHyghrCIC&pg=PA7&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=hxISHyghrCIC&pg=PA7&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false).

<sup>5</sup> Wolfe Tone, “Early Life: 1763-91”, 36.

was inspired by the French Revolution.<sup>6</sup> In 1795, the Society of United Irishmen was banned, which resulted in Tone's exile to America.<sup>7</sup> From America, Tone traveled to France, and attempted to conspire an invasion of Ireland to achieve Irish independence.<sup>8</sup> At the age of thirty-five, in 1798, Tone invaded Ireland, however, he, as well as his troop of three thousand men, were captured.<sup>9</sup> Tone was labeled as a traitor by the English and was sentenced to death, however, he committed suicide before his trial.<sup>10</sup>

England has been involved with the Irish island for generations, however, there has never been a peaceful relationship between the two nations. Once English King Henry VIII broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534, the English became Protestant. It was not an easy conversion but it happened nonetheless. The neighboring island, Ireland, has always been a Catholic nation, and when Henry VIII took interest in the emerald island, the Catholics quickly became the target for oppression.<sup>11</sup> One of the many ways the English Protestants oppressed the Irish was through the passing of the penal laws, which were first enacted by the late seventeenth century: "the law had deprived Irish Catholics of most of their political and civil rights and had almost destroyed the Catholic landed class...the [laws] effectively eliminated much Catholic political consciousness."<sup>12</sup> Theobald Wolfe Tone grew up in an oppressed Ireland, and understood the importance of Irishmen reconciliation.<sup>13</sup> In Tone's own words, he stated "that

---

<sup>6</sup> Wolfe Tone, "To America and France", 80.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfe Tone, "To America and France", 78.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfe Tone, "To America and France", 80.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfe Tone, "A Letter from Brest", 285-86.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfe Tone, "Wolfe Tone's Last Adventure: His Son's Account", 299.

<sup>11</sup> John Stuart Mill, *England and Ireland*, sixth (Harlow, United Kingdom: Longmans, 1881), 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/60216767>.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Casey, "Eighteenth-Century Irish Catholicism," in *An Immigrant Bishop: John England's Adaptation of Irish Catholicism to American Republicanism* (Washington, D.C: University of America Press, 2022), 10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2b07tc4.8>.

<sup>13</sup> Theobald Wolfe Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (Belfast, United Kingdom, 1791), 9, [https://books.google.ie/books?id=7dY9AAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.ie/books?id=7dY9AAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false).

English influence in Ireland was the great grievance of the country...”<sup>14</sup> The Irish Catholics could no longer hold a seat in Parliament under the penal laws, which meant that the nation’s politics laid in the hands of their oppressor. From 1785 to 1790, there had been a hiatus in the Catholic movement.<sup>15</sup> In 1791, however, Tone reignited that spark when he released his pamphlet *An Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*. His pamphlet has been described as “highly influential”, and he gave Catholics a “significant boost” to continue the movement.<sup>16</sup> The same year, Tone and fellow advocates established the Society of United Irishmen of Dublin. By 1793, the Catholic Committee pressured the government to pass the Catholic Relief Act of 1793, which permitted them to sit on juries, hold minor offices and junior commissioned ranks in the army, and to vote in elections.<sup>17</sup> The Catholics were not permitted to take seats in parliament, however, this was still a stepping stone in that direction. This act, and others, only passed because Tone inspired the Catholics of Ireland to continue to advocate for their rights. If it was not for Tone to break the hiatus in 1791, the story of the Irish may have turned out differently.

The early 1790s was a period of progression. The Catholics had been advocating for their equal rights, however, the idea started to shift into the Irish to consider themselves as a citizen. This started by the establishment of the Society of United Irishmen. Theobald Wolfe Tone was one of the founders of the Society of United Irishmen, established in 1791 to campaign for a parliamentary reform.<sup>18</sup> The Society of the United Irishmen became the stepping stone for future Irishmen to obtain their independence. In fact, Irish nationalists after 1898, were inspired by the

---

<sup>14</sup> Wolfe Tone, “The Diary of A Mild Conspirator”, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Ann Lyons, “Concepts of Citizenship in Ireland during an Era of Revolutions, 1688–1798,” in *Enfranchising Ireland?: Identity, Citizenship and State* (Dublin, Ireland: Royal Irish Academy, 2018), 41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvgd1dd.6>.

<sup>16</sup> Lyons, “Concepts of Citizenship in Ireland during an Era of Revolutions, 1688–1798,” 41.

<sup>17</sup> Lyons, “Concepts of Citizenship in Ireland during an Era of Revolutions, 1688–1798,” 42.

<sup>18</sup> Jim Symth, “Wolfe Tone’s Library: The United Irishmen and ‘Enlightenment,’” in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 423. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41342521>.

radical and separatist Theobald Wolfe Tone.<sup>19</sup> It is essential to note that the founders of the Society of United Irishmen were inspired, as well as most of the literate Irish population, by Enlightenment ideas and the French Revolution.<sup>20</sup> There were two branches of this Society: one located in Belfast and the other located in Dublin. However, a united Ireland was still the main goal for both Societies.<sup>21</sup> For the Society of United Irishmen of Dublin, “the object of this Institution is to make an United Society of the Irish Nation; to make all Irishmen citizens; all Citizen– Irishmen; nothing appearing to us more natural at all times, and at this crisis of Europe more reasonable, than that those who have cniion interdis, and common enemies, who suffer common wrongs, and lay claim to common tights, mould know each other and should act together.”<sup>22</sup> As for the Society of United Irishmen of Belfast, they stated in their declaration that there is “no national government; [they] are ruled by Englishmen and the servants of Englishmen; whose object is the interest of another country, whose instrument is corruption; whose strength is the weakness of Ireland; and these men have the whole of the power and patronage of the country...”<sup>23</sup> In other words, both of the Societies of United Irishmen embodied the characteristic that many of the social and economic grievances could be improved by a radical reform.<sup>24</sup> A reform was essential for the first step towards an independent Ireland.

One of the many independence attempts of the Irish was the Revolution of 1782. Wolfe Tone stated in his 1791 pamphlet that the Revolution of 1782 was “a Revolution which enabled Irishmen to fell at a much higher price their honour, their integrity, and the interests of their

---

<sup>19</sup> Sylvie Kleinman, “A ‘Democrat’ from the Start: Theobald Wolfe Tone, Emblematic Founder of Irish Republicanism, Anti-Monarchism, and the ‘Baneful Influence of England,’” in *Anti-Monarchism in the British Isles and Beyond*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4000/11uzg>.

<sup>20</sup> Sean Moore, “Introduction: Ireland and Enlightenment”, in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 345, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41342516>.

<sup>21</sup> Quinn, “The United Irishmen and Social Reform”, 189.

<sup>22</sup> *Society of United Irishmen of Dublin : Established November IX MDCCXCI* (Dublin, Ireland: 1794), 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.29823257>.

<sup>23</sup> *Society of United Irishmen of Dublin : Established November IX MDCCXCI*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Quinn, “The United Irishmen and Social Reform”, 191.

country; it was a Revolution, which, at one stroke it doubled the value of every borough-monger in the kingdom, left three-fourth of our countrymen slaves as it found them..."<sup>25</sup> The revolution of 1782 is worth a mention because it was ultimately the start for the Irish legislative movement. Henry Grattan, one of the leaders of the Volunteers, argued that the British government should not be involved with Irish legislatures.<sup>26</sup> According to Tone, the Volunteers "and people of Ireland were very soon after their imaginary Revolution, made, by grievous experience, sensible of the truth of what I have now asserted; they saw the extent of this alarming disease, and they soon discovered the cause and the remedy. They say that had, literally, no weight in the Government, and the clamoured for what, even on the limited plan the proposed, would at least have mitigated the disorder—a *Parliamentary Reform*".<sup>27</sup>

In the beginning of his pamphlet, Tone dismissed the English government and its interest were only with Englishmen, not the Irish: "In England, the King is refindent, and his presence begets infinite advantages; the Government is English, with English views and interests only".<sup>28</sup> Tone then went on to state that the Irish government "is a government deprived from another country, whose interest to far from the fame with that of the people directly crosses it at right angles."<sup>29</sup> In other words, the English government recognized how to manipulate the Irish for the English's economical and political benefit. Tone's main argument of his pamphlet was: "that Ireland, as deriving of her government from another country, requires a strength in the people, which may enable them, if necessary, to counteract the influence of that government, should it ever be, as it indisputably has been, exerted, to thwart her prosperity: That this strength may

---

<sup>25</sup> Wolfe Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Maurice R. O'Connell, "The Revolution of 1782," in *Irish Politics and Social Conflict in the Age of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhhb2j.16>.

<sup>27</sup> Wolfe Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfe Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Wolfe Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, 8.

most constitutionally acquired, and safely and peaceable exerted through the medium of a Parliamentary Reform. And finally, that no Reform is honourable, practicable, efficacious or just, which does not include as a fundamental principle, the extension of elective franchise to the Roman Catholics under modifications hereafter to be mentioned.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, the Irish people needed to become united, and establish a reform which would ultimately weaken England. Another point that Tone made was that the English issue in Ireland was not between the Irish subjects and His Majesty, but between the governments: “I beg I may not be misunderstood or misrepresented in my first position. When I talk of English influence being predominant in this country, I do not mean to derogate from the due exertion of his Majesty’s prerogative: the influence I mean, is not as between the King and his subjects, in matter of prerogative, but as between the government.”<sup>31</sup>

For generations, Tone had influenced advocates for Irish nationalism. He inspired future advocates by his numerous pamphlets, his personal diary, and autobiography in which he conspired his journey as a politician.<sup>32</sup> Tone also considered himself to be an enemy of the English empire which compelled most Irishmen. The most well-known advocate for Irish nationalism, who was inspired by Tone, was James Connolly. Connolly led the Easter Rising of 1916. During the beginning of the twentieth century, England, as well as all of Europe, was suffering from a wounding war: the First World War. With the English’s attention elsewhere, the radicals of Ireland decided to wage a war of their own against the English with the hope that they’d finally accomplish their long-awaited goal. Easter morning, the Irish Republican Brotherhood alongside the Irish Citizen Army seized the main post office in Dublin, and

---

<sup>30</sup> Wolfe Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Wolfe Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Kleinman, “A ‘Democrat’ from the Start: Theobald Wolfe Tone, Emblematic Founder of Irish Republicanism, Anti-Monarchism, and the ‘Baneful Influence of England’”.