

Theobald Wolf Tone

Two hundred years ago, the Irish once again rose against the English in an effort to gain independence. We commemorate the anniversary of the 1798 risings by devoting each of the four issues of the Hedgemaster in 1998 to the 1798 risings. Our first article recalls the life of one of the great leaders of Irish history.

On June 20, 1763, Theobald Wolfe Tone, the great apologist for Irish political rights and future war hero, was born in Dublin, the first of five children to Margaret and Peter Tone. His family were members of the Church of Ireland and were considered part of the ruling class of Ireland. The Tone family lived in County Kildare where Theobald's grandfather was a wealthy farmer.

Wolfe Tone attended Trinity College which was the only university in Ireland and open only to Church of Ireland students. Catholics and other Protestants, so-called Dissenters, were not allowed to attend Trinity. After graduation, Tone, working as a barrister, developed an interest in how Ireland was governed. He made friends with politicians and often went to watch debates in the Irish Parliament.



Parliament was composed of land owning Protestant men, Catholics and Dissenters were excluded. Wolfe Tone was so disturbed that Catholics were excluded from Parliament that he wrote a booklet in 1791 called *The Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of the right to vote and sit in Parliament*.

Inspired by the arguments put forward in the booklet, a small group of men, mainly Protestant, including Wolfe Tone, met in Belfast on October 18, 1791 and established the Belfast Society of the United Irishmen. The aims of the society were the reform of Parliament and the granting of equal rights to men of all religious beliefs. Tone, upon his return to Dublin, set up a Dublin branch.

Another group pressing for changes to be made in the law and in Parliament was the Catholic Committee. Its members sent a petition to Parliament

asking that Catholics be given full rights as citizens. Parliament would not even consider the petition. The Committee decided to mount a vigorous campaign to promote its agenda and, because of his writings, appointed Wolfe Tone as Secretary and Agent in 1792.

Shortly after joining the Committee, Tone and five delegates left for London to hand a grievance petition to King George III. King George instructed the Irish Parliament to do something about the Irish situation. After much debate, the Dublin parliament passed the Catholic Enfranchisement Act in April 1793. This act gave Catholics the right to vote, to go to the university, and to hold certain state jobs. They were still barred from many of the highest positions in Ireland; most importantly, Catholics were still forbidden to sit in Parliament. The Catholic Committee decided that the Act was as good as it was likely to get, so it ended its campaign.

At this time on the continent, by the middle of 1793, France was at war with many countries including England. Nicholas Madgett, an Irishman working for the French government, thought it would be a good idea to send French troops to Ireland to join forces with Irish rebels and drive the British from Ireland. The plan was to use Ireland as a base for attacking England. Madgett needed to find out how much support there would be in Ireland for such a plan. He contacted the Rev. William Johnson, an Irish clergyman, who was working as journalist in France. Madgett asked Johnson to contact the United Irishmen to determine how much support there would be for a French invasion. On April 1, 1794, Johnson and his friend Cockayne met with Wolfe Tone and other members of the United Irishmen to discuss plans for the proposed invasion. Not untypical, the group was betrayed by Cockayne, a British spy. Wolfe Tone avoided arrest for treason by going into exile in America with his family in August 1795.

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 independance of my country -- these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissentions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman, in the place of denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter -- these were my means.
~Tone's Declaration, 1796

Toward the end of 1795, Tone received letters from Ireland saying that the time was right for an uprising. The letters urged him to go to France and ask for military aid. He left for France from New York and after many months of meetings and discussions with members of the French Directory, the Directory decided to send an expedition to Ireland and to make Tone a colonel in the French army. A well respected French leader, General Hoche, agreed to command the expedition.

By the middle of December, a large fleet of forty-five ships and 14,750 men were ready to sail to Ireland. Hoche sailed on the *Fraternite*; second-in-command, General Grouchy, sailed on the *Immortalite*, with Wolfe Tone aboard the *Indomitable*.

On December 21, 1796, the main force of the fleet arrived off Bantry Bay. However, the *Fraternite*, with commander-in-chief Hoche on board, never arrived. General Grouchy did not want to land without Hoche, so he ordered the ships to wait, a wait that led to the expedition being aborted. The weather turned against the French-Irish mission. On December 23, gale force winds scattered twenty of the ships. The direction and strength of the winds now made it impossible for the ships to land.

On Christmas day, Grouchy's ship was driven out to sea and was unable to sail back to Bantry Bay. On December 29, Tone's ship and the other remaining ships abandoned the attempt to land in Ireland and returned to France. The winds that wrecked the plans for the French liberation of Ireland came to be known as the "Protestant winds." General Grouchy sent Tone to Paris to report the disastrous mission to the Directory.

It was almost two years, after much pleading from Wolfe Tone, before the French Directory agreed to mount another expedition to Ireland. Late in October 1798, General Hardy's fleet with Wolfe Tone on board reached the Donegal coast. The fleet was spotted by the English navy which had been patrolling the coast. The French had been warned of the British presence and wanted Wolfe Tone to leave on a small frigate but he refused. In the fierce battle that was fought, Wolfe Tone manned one of the guns on his ship, but the struggle was in vain and all but two of the French ships were taken.

Wolfe Tone was captured and was recognized. Fettered and on horseback, Tone was rushed to Dublin without delay. He was found guilty of treason and was sentenced to be hanged as a traitor. He asked for a soldier's death by firing squad but was refused. On November 11, 1798 while the soldiers were erecting the gallows to hang a traitor, Tone slashed his own throat. His wound was fatal, but he lingered in great pain for a week. Finally, Wolfe Tone died on November 19, 1798 at the age of thirty-five.

Theobald Wolfe Tone is recognized as one of the great heroes of Ireland: A Protestant who argued for the rights *of* refuge in was denied the rights of an officer in the French army; a man who gave his life for Ireland.

(Written by Joseph McCormack, February 1998)

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