

Revolution, counter-revolution and union

Ireland in the 1790s

Edited by Jim Smyth



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1 Introduction: the 1798 rebellion in its eighteenth-century contexts

Jim Smyth

Did the 1798 rebellion have an eighteenth-century context, or merely a 1790s one? How important were its British and European dimensions? These questions raise issues of teleology, perspective and causation long familiar, for example, to students of the English civil war of the 1640s.¹ And, although, as Sean Connolly points out, disagreement is more often than not implicit,² historians of Ireland's eighteenth century, like historians of England's civil war, have not reached any consensus. Nor, because their differences are more conceptual than empirical, are they likely to. One view holds that the scale of the crisis of the 1790s, the mass disaffection, savage repression and open warfare, can be understood only by reference to deep structural fissures in Irish society, stretching back over decades, or even centuries. Others discern in that view the classic Whig fallacy of hindsight: the past is distorted by the selection of evidence which helps to explain what came after, while countervailing evidence, perhaps of a polity and society at ease with itself, is overlooked or undervalued. Historians have fashioned a variety of overlapping, if not always compatible, eighteenth-century 'Irelands'. These include the 'Hidden Ireland', which is Catholic, Gaelic and poor; the spacious colonnaded mansion of Protestant, public-spirited, Anglo-Ireland; *ancien régime* Ireland which conforms to contemporary European patterns and colonial Ireland, exceptional by European standards, by virtue of its 'alien' ruling elite and deep and abiding sectarian divisions. All of them have implications for the interpretation of the rebellion.

I wish to thank Dr Toby Barnard for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this introduction.

¹ For a lively – and engaged – survey of the disputes between English historians of this period see J. C. D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: state and society in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth century* (Cambridge, 1986).

² S. J. Connolly, 'Eighteenth-century Ireland, colony or *ancien régime*?', in D. G. Boyce and A. O'Day (eds.), *The Making of Modern Irish History: revisionism and the revisionist controversy* (London, 1996), pp. 15–33.

Historiography 1: Taking the long perspective

The term 'Hidden Ireland' is taken, of course, from Daniel Corkery's book of that title first published in 1925. Corkery, a literary scholar, set out to explore the Gaelic verse of eighteenth-century Munster, but the context he offered had wider historical application. Others, writing at roughly the same time, and in the first flush of 'independence', subscribed to a similar Catholic-nationalist version of the eighteenth century. No one could accuse these writers of either subtlety or intellectual detachment. Mary Hayden and George Moonan, who produced the standard history textbook for schools in the new Irish state, wrote 'frankly from a national standpoint',³ and slotted the eighteenth century smoothly into the unfolding struggle of the 'Irish nation' against its English colonial oppressors. Even Edmund Curtis, a Protestant, unself-consciously conflated Catholic Ireland with the 'Irish nation'.⁴ In the nationalist schema the Treaty of Limerick in 1691 represents an unmitigated disaster, followed as it was by the foundation of Protestant Ascendancy, the rule of an 'alien minority' and the subjugation of the majority by penal laws. 'The evil effects' of those laws, according to Hayden and Moonan, 'can scarcely be exaggerated. The Protestants developed the vices of slave-owners, becoming idle, dissipated, and neglectful of their duties. The Catholics grew, as a serf population always does grow, cringing, shift and untruthful. They were lazy because they had nothing to work for; they were lawless because they knew the law only as an enemy.'⁵ The rapacity of the – often absentee – landlords was outstripped only by the exploitativeness of the middlemen. And whereas the Protestants oppressed the dispossessed and impoverished Catholics, they were in turn subject to regulation by their masters at Westminster. The wholly Protestant Dublin parliament, a 'shackled and spiritless legislature',⁶ was subordinated to English interests, particularly in the matter of trade. In retrospect the 1798 rebellion, or some sort of violent upheaval, can be seen as the almost inevitable outcome of such inequitable and unjust conditions. Reflecting on the historic sense of grievance nourished by the thousand petty tyrannies of Protestant-Catholic, landlord-tenant relations, Patrick Corish is prompted to the thought 'that when a man like Edward Roche of Garrylough in County Wexford decided in 1798 to assert his rights in the

³ M. Hayden and G. A. Moonan, *A Short History of the Irish People*, part 11, *From 1603 to Modern Times* (Dublin [1921], 1960), iii.

⁴ Edmund Curtis, *A History of Ireland* (London [1936], 1961), p. 291.

⁵ Hayden and Moonan, *Short History of the Irish People*, ii, p. 338.

⁶ Curtis, *History of Ireland*, p. 296.

political nation by becoming an insurgent, it may have been just because he had got tired of being called “Roche”’.⁷

Yet to configure the earlier period through the blood-dimmed lens of the later is, argued J. C. Beckett in suitably Rankean idiom, to misrepresent ‘the eighteenth century as it really was’.⁸ Beckett’s *Anglo-Irish Tradition*, published in 1976, stands as a typically lucid, elegant summary of the essentially Protestant world – from which Corkery’s Ireland is hidden – delineated by W. E. H. Lecky in the late nineteenth century, elaborated by R. B. McDowell and others from the 1940s onwards, and receiving its definitive restatement in volume iv of *The New History of Ireland* (1986). Here it is acknowledged that ‘traditional memories of conquest and confiscation remained alive among the peasantry and were strengthened by religious distinctions’ but this is not allowed to obscure ‘the real achievements’ of the governing elite.⁹ These are most evident in the architectural heritage of Georgian Ireland, in improving organisations like the Royal Dublin Society, founded in 1731, and in the promotion of learning by the Royal Irish Academy, founded in 1785. Ireland, moreover, enjoyed a longer ‘period of internal peace and security than ever before or since’, moderate prosperity and steady economic growth. Protestant liberalism and religious toleration were likewise on the march before being thrown into hasty retreat by the terrible events of the 1790s. If that picture of benign evolution is accurate, what, then, went wrong? Beckett had the indispensable *deus ex machina* conveniently to hand in the guise of the French Revolution. ‘Until the *importation* of French ideas at the very end of the period’ he observes, ‘there was no sign of any political move against the framework of government’.¹⁰

A theoretically more sophisticated model for eighteenth-century Ireland which has recently found favour is that of the *ancien régime*.¹¹ In contrast to the old-style revisionism of the *New History* generation which detected a relaxation of inter-denominational rivalries before the 1790s, this concept, because it entails a confessional state, reinstates sectarianism as a, perhaps *the*, defining force in politics and society. However, the conclusions which are then drawn from that reinstatement

⁷ P. J. Corish, *The Catholic Community in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Dublin, 1981), p. 139.

⁸ J. C. Beckett, *The Anglo-Irish Tradition* (London, 1976), p. 63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 82–3. Italics added.

¹¹ The *ancien régime* concept is put to work by S. J. Connolly, *Religion, Law and Power: the making of Protestant Ireland 1660–1760* (Oxford, 1992), C. D. A. Leighton, *Catholicism in a Protestant Kingdom: a study of the Irish ancien régime* (Dublin, 1994); and Jacqueline Hill, *From Patriots to Unionists: Dublin civic politics and Irish Protestant patriotism, 1660–1840* (Oxford, 1997).

are not always what might be expected. Religion did, to be sure, generate tensions, but these were mitigated, or blunted, by a complex ensemble of social and ideological controls: by the operation of deference, clientship and paternalism, by the ordinariness of penal laws in the Europe of the time, and by the leaderlessness of the lower-class Catholics and their inability to imagine political alternatives to the status quo. Eighteenth-century Ireland was not, in fact, uniquely poor, polarised or lawless. Again, if that analysis is accepted, the question arises: why did the rebellion occur?

Revisionist history is counter-teleological. It denies that great events – the Protestant reformation, say, or the 1832 Reform Act – were in any way inevitable or that they must necessarily have had great (or structural) causes. In place of long-term ‘origins’ it stresses the role of contingency, proximate political or economic conditions, and the range of alternative possibilities which were open to contemporaries. Nicholas Canny attributes rebellion in early modern Ireland ‘an ordered and relatively harmonious community, which enjoyed a modest prosperity as a generally contented partner within a broader British jurisdiction’, to ‘accident, or the excesses of the state, or foreign intervention’.¹²

The colonial model of eighteenth-century Ireland is in some ways the most problematic of all, but it is the one which has the least problem in accommodating the fact of rebellion. Some historians have been as troubled by the imprecision, and misleading connotations of the designation ‘colony’, as eighteenth-century politicians were by the slight which it implied of constitutional inferiority. Constitutionally Ireland was a kingdom, and that undoubted legal status, and the rhetoric of autonomy which accompanied it, had real-world political consequences. Yet the letter of the statute books notwithstanding, Ireland did exhibit many of the features of a colonial society. As the lord chancellor, John Fitzgibbon, reminded his fellow Protestants in 1789, political power and landed wealth were concentrated in the hands of an elite whose title deeds were lodged by ‘an act of violence’. A recent history of conquest, confiscation and settlement together with continued discrimination against the dispossessed Catholic and ‘native’ majority combined, in the eyes of that majority, to deprive the ruling elite and its laws of legitimacy. The subordination of the Irish parliament, by Poynings’ law and the Declaratory Act (6 Geo 1), commercial restrictions imposed by Westminster, the control of patronage, and the appointment of the executive, by London, are all, also, characteristic of a colonial relationship.

Once the lineaments of the colonial dispensation are disinterred the

¹² N. Canny, ‘Irish resistance to empire? 1641, 1690 and 1798’, in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London, 1994), p. 316.

rebellion need no longer 'be regarded as something of an oddity, largely unrelated to the mainstream of political happenings and to the political ethos of eighteenth-century Ireland'.¹³ The 'largely tension-free' zone mapped by *The New History* is more like a 'façade', erected upon politically and socially unstable foundations, and intermittently rocked by the 'constant rumble in Catholic-Protestant relations'.¹⁴ Thus the judicial murders of the Jacobite Sir James Cotter in 1720, and of Father Nicholas Sheehy in 1768, should not be viewed as aberrations which disturbed the calm of the 'quiet, unchanging and dull which still characterised eighteenth-century Irish lives',¹⁵ but rather as symptomatic of a profoundly divided society. Similarly, it is a mistake to overestimate the Protestant sense of security, based on military victory, guaranteed by the British connection, and reinforced by the penal laws. Confidence in the future may have enabled the building of country houses and the planting of orchards; it did not confer historical amnesia. On the contrary, Protestants shared a 'lively folk memory' of the 1641 rebellion, sustained by reprints of Sir John Temple's lurid *History of the Rebellion* and annual memorial services held by the Church of Ireland. Significantly, predictions of '1641 come again' began to circulate during the 1790s.¹⁶ Rebellion, or civil war, are not the inevitable outcomes of deep political and sectarian antagonisms; they are not surprising outcomes either.

Historiography 2: The conditions of politicisation

By locating the 1798 rebellion within its long eighteenth-century context it can be interpreted as the final cracking apart of faultlines embedded in the social and political structure. What such positioning cannot, of itself, explain, is why the rebellion did not happen sooner – or later – than it did. Timing holds no puzzle for Beckett or Canny who, as we have seen, appear to assume that the rebellion would not have occurred at all were it not for the impact of an extraneous event, namely the French Revolution. David Dickson, however, poses a more interesting counterfactual. 'Was an armed challenge from below to the Anglo-Irish government in Dublin Castle a likely event' he asks, 'even

¹³ L. M. Cullen, 'The 1798 Rebellion in its eighteenth-century context', in P. J. Corish, (ed.), *Radicals, Rebels and Establishments, Historical Studies xv* (Belfast, 1985), p. 93.

¹⁴ Thomas Bartlett, 'A new history of Ireland', *Past and Present*, 116 (1986), 216–17; Cullen, 'The 1798 Rebellion in its eighteenth-century context', p. 94.

¹⁵ T. C. Barnard, 'Farewell to Old Ireland', *Historical Journal*, 36, 4 (1993), 910.

¹⁶ Bartlett, 'A new history of Ireland', 214–16; T. C. Barnard, 'The uses of 23 October 1641 and Irish Protestant celebrations', *English Historical Review*, 106 (1991), 889–920.

before Britain and France went to war in 1793, a possible event even before the fall of the Bastille four summers before that?’¹⁷ In other words, if the external factor of the French revolution is removed from the equation, were there internal dynamics within Irish society which might have resulted in armed conflict anyway?

If there is a master theme to recent work on the 1790s it is mass politicisation. The rebellion is no longer seen as ‘irrational’, ‘spontaneous’ or ‘agrarian’. The emphasis instead, is on revolutionary organisation, popular disaffection and the wider *political* framework. The ideas and example of the French Revolution certainly acted on the Irish crisis as a catalyst, but the conditions of crisis were already in place by 1789. Political crisis and politicisation were related to rapid, far-reaching and complex social and economic change. Historians are generally agreed that the rate of change began to accelerate around 1760. Commercialisation, urbanisation, increased literacy, better communications and, perhaps most importantly, population growth, transformed late eighteenth-century Ireland. Some of the connections between developments in economy and society and the intensification of political activity from ‘below’ are obvious enough. For example, as Toby Barnard remarks, ‘the radicalism and mobilisation of the 1790s would be incomprehensible without the towns’.¹⁸ The scale and successes of United Irish propaganda would be incomprehensible too without the spread of literacy. At a very minimum the incidence of rebellion in south and east Leinster and east Ulster is suggestive, because these areas ‘were economically among the most advanced, outward-looking districts in the country, [the] areas most affected by the economic development of the previous half century’.¹⁹

The correlations between urbanisation and literacy on the one hand, and politicisation on the other, are ‘positive’. On the negative side the operation of market forces, particularly as it affected land use, could be socially disruptive. The higher rates of demographic expansion at the bottom end of the socioeconomic scale also exerted pressure on living standards. Popular discontent need not necessarily be political, of course, let alone intrinsically radical, and the cycle of agrarian agitation in rural Ireland after 1760 is often characterised as apolitical and conservative in its limited objectives. Those agitations were conducted

¹⁷ D. Dickson, ‘The state of Ireland before 1798’, in Cathal Poirteir (ed.), *The Great Irish Rebellion of 1798*, RTE Thomas Davis Lectures (Dublin, 1998), p. 16.

¹⁸ T. C. Barnard, ‘The gentrification of eighteenth-century Ireland’, *Eighteenth Century Ireland*, 12 (1997), 148; see too, David Dickson, ‘“Centres of Motion”: Irish cities and the origins of popular politics’, in L. Bergeron and L. M. Cullen, (eds.), *Culture et Pratiques Politiques en France et en Irlande, XVIe–XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1991), pp. 101–22.

¹⁹ Dickson, ‘The state of Ireland before 1798’, p. 25.

by secret societies, the Whiteboys and Rightboys in Munster and south Leinster, and the Protestant Oakboys and Steelboys in Ulster. Their grievances were concrete and immediate: the enclosure of common lands for pasture, county cess (taxes), rents and tithes. Typically, the secret societies demanded customary rights, and 'fair' rents and tithes, not their abolition, and in that respect their approach came closer to defending the 'moral economy' than to social revolution. Thus it can be argued that before 1789 'there was no sign of any political move against the framework of government'.²⁰

Categorising Whiteboyism as purely agrarian involves very narrow definitions of 'politics'. The Whiteboys and their successor movements did not seek to overthrow the state, although there is evidence of the use of Jacobite symbolism. By nineteenth and twentieth-century criteria they did not have a coherent political ideology or programme, nationalist or otherwise, although there is evidence, too, of nationalist symbolism. And if they could not conceive of an alternative government, by their actions, codes and authority structures they asserted alternative forms of legitimacy to those of the state. Whiteboyism, then, can be read as a function of economic dislocation which confronted the authorities with a series of localised and containable law and order problems. Or else it signified something much more: the failure of the (Protestant) landlord class and the state to achieve hegemony. Terry Eagleton imagines 'the mass of the Irish people . . . paying their rulers their dues with one part of their minds while withholding their allegiance with another'. 'It was legality itself', he writes, 'widely perceived as a colonial imposition, which failed to legitimise itself in the eyes of many of its subjects.'²¹ From another angle, hardline Protestant accusations of popish plots and French gold, as groundless as they were predictable, remind us that in the eyes of at least some contemporaries the Whiteboys crossed the bounds of agrarian unrest into the domain of political disaffection.

Once characterised as 'rural rioters'²² the political complexion of the main lower-class secret society of the 1790s, the Defenders, is no longer in doubt. The Defenders originated in an area of intense commercialisation, north County Armagh, in the mid-1780s. The 'Armagh troubles', a sequence of clashes at country fairs between the Protestant Peep O'Day Boys and the Catholic Defenders, arms raids and attacks on property, have been subjected to sophisticated socioeconomic

²⁰ Beckett, *Anglo-Irish Tradition*, pp. 63, 82–3.

²¹ Terry Eagleton, 'Ascendancy and hegemony', in Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: studies in Irish culture* (London, 1995), pp. 31, 86.

²² R. B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 462, 473.

analysis.²³ Competition for leases, the erosion of traditional deference-based social controls, population density and proto-industrialisation in mid-Ulster's 'Linen triangle', all had a destabilising impact in the county. However, the troubles were rooted deeply in Armagh's sectarian landscape. Because each of Ireland's three major denominations, Catholic, Episcopalian and Presbyterian, were represented in roughly equal numbers, Catholic assertiveness – in bidding for leases, for instance – seemed more threatening there than elsewhere. Tensions in the county were related to the national situation: by the late 1770s the long tortuous process of dismantling the penal laws had begun and by the 1780s the demand for further relief – the 'Catholic Question' – had been placed firmly on the political agenda. Some Catholics were admitted to liberal Volunteer companies and, in contravention of the penal laws, armed. The Armagh troubles constitute a local reaction to those political developments. The Peep O'Day Boys enforced the penal laws and Protestant legal privilege – 'Protestant Ascendancy' as it would soon be called – by disarming Catholics. Defender arms raids repudiated ascendancy.

Defenderism spread from Armagh into neighbouring counties, and then southwards into Leinster in the early 1790s. Catholic Ulster remained its heartland, and while it did not penetrate the south west, by 1795 Defenderism may be regarded as a national movement. The genesis, social composition and ideology of the movement reveal as much about the end-of-century crisis, and changing understandings of it, as does the 'rise' of the United Irishmen. Defenderism made the transition from local sectarian feuding to mass-based revolutionary organisation by highly particular adaptations of French Revolutionary rhetoric, and as informal paramilitary adjunct to the agitation for Catholic relief. Reports of events in France carried far into the Irish countryside. 'The great majority of the people in favour of the French', noted Thomas Russell in 1793, 'in mountains where you could not conceive that any news could reach.'²⁴ Allusions to France and the revolution pepper Defender catechisms. The agitation of the Catholic Committee likewise touched the remotest corners of rural Ireland. The committee's signature gathering for its petition in the spring of 1792, and the parochial elections of delegates to its convention, held in the spring and summer, amounted to an unprecedented political mobilisation of the Catholic population. It is no coincidence

²³ D. W. Miller, 'The Armagh troubles' in S. Clark and J. S. Donnelly (eds.), *Irish Peasants: violence and political unrest, 1780–1914* (Madison, WI, 1983).

²⁴ Christopher Woods (ed.), *Journals and Memoirs of Thomas Russell* (Dublin, 1991), pp. 69, 145.

that in 1792 Defender activity escalated abruptly, in County Meath and County Louth for example.²⁵ Economic grievances of the sort associated with Whiteboyism continued to inspire Defender agitation. In Meath they sometimes called themselves 'regulators'. But the political dimensions of agrarian protest implicit in Whiteboyism were now explicit.

There are other, equally important, differences between the Defenders and earlier secret societies. Open confrontation replaced the limited violence and (usually) measured policing response by which the 'moral economy' had previously been negotiated. The horrendous levels of violence witnessed during the 1790s signified a collapse of deference on the one side, and of all semblance of restraint on the other.²⁶ Defenderism was never a 'peasant' phenomenon. The occupational diversity of the rank-and-file reflected, rather, the social diversity of a commercialising society. Its members included canal workers, publicans, schoolmasters, blacksmiths and pedlars as well as small tenant farmers and agricultural labourers. There were Defender lodges in Dublin city.

Defenderism encapsulates the crisis of the 1790s in a number of ways. Whereas its social composition is indicative of economic change – and indirectly of the stresses and strains of modernisation – its ideology amalgamates the old and the new in a manner which illuminates the devastating impact of the French Revolution on Irish society. Defender sectarianism and anglophobia tapped rich folkloric versions of Irish history. Protestants were, indeed, an 'alien minority', the spawn of Luther and Cromwell. The Defenders were millenarian, and the millenium consisted in the recovery by the dispossessed of their confiscated lands. They were also revolutionary, and drew inspiration from the American and French experience, as well as domestic radical prose-lytism. Their catechisms and passwords packed an explosive blend of biblical, Jacobite, Jacobin and masonic symbolism. The Tree of Liberty, the river Jordan and Patrick Sarsfield invoked a world-view at once deeply confused and profoundly political. The United Irishmen set out to 'make every man a politician'. Defenderism and its atavisms demonstrate that while the strategy of the secular and 'enlightened' republican leadership achieved notable success, it neither initiated, nor could it dictate the pace or direction, of politicisation.

²⁵ Jim Smyth, 'Defenderism, popular politicisation and the Catholic Question', in D. Dickson and H. Gough (eds.), *Ireland and the French Revolution* (Dublin, 1991).

²⁶ See Thomas Bartlett, 'The anti-milita riots of 1793 and the end of the moral economy', *Past and Present*, 99 (1983), 41–64.

Contrasts: the British context

The peculiarities of Defenderism can no more be understood outside Irish history than the Chouan counter-revolutionaries can be uprooted from the soil of western France. This becomes even clearer when we consider what did *not* happen in Britain in the 1790s. Britain, of course, underwent more rapid, and more extensive, social and economic change in the late eighteenth century than Ireland. It too suffered the stresses of urbanisation, population growth and the dislocating effects of market relations. Yet, although the French Revolution revitalised British radicalism (and conservatism), Britain, unlike Ireland, avoided a radical-led plebeian insurrection. Historians are struck by the stability of British society²⁷ and the contrast with Ireland is instructive.

One of the ironies, and historiographical dividends, of the current trend towards an inclusive, four nations, 'British' history, is that it can underline Irish distinctiveness in a British Isles context as effectively as a more self-conscious focus on similarities, parallels and integrations can overturn parochial and reductive assumptions about Irish exceptionalism. One resource of British stability in the 1790s lay in the ebullient sense of Britishness shared by King George III's English, Scottish and Welsh subjects; the United Irishmen (and from 1795 their allies the Defenders) moved to outright separatism. Put another way, in Ireland the British project failed. Eighteenth-century politicians, in or out of doors, at College Green, Westminster, Dublin Castle or Whitehall, would have been bemused to discover that Ireland at the time was 'a generally contented partner within a broader British jurisdiction'.²⁸ On the contrary, British ministers were often convinced, not entirely rationally, of Irish (Protestant) aspirations to 'independency', and during the course of the century those suspicions gradually gave way to a reality.

A comparison between the trajectories of Scottish and Anglo-Irish senses of identity in the ninety years after 1707 throws the emergence of Irish Protestant nationalism into sharper relief. In 1706–7 opposition to the proposed Anglo-Scottish union stemmed from three main sources: Presbyterianism, Jacobitism and nationalism. Lord Belhaven famously protested the fate which awaited 'our ancient mother, Caledonia'. Members of the Edinburgh 'mob' proclaimed that 'they were Scotsmen and would be Scotsmen still'. The Irish parliament meanwhile solicited Queen Anne for inclusion in the union. By 1792 these positions were completely reversed. In that year the United Irishmen sent a fraternal

²⁷ An exception to this rule is Roger Wells, *Insurrection! The British experience 1795–1803* (Gloucester, 1983).

²⁸ Canny, 'Irish resistance to empire', p. 316.

address to the reform convention in Edinburgh. 'We rejoice', it said, 'that you do not consider yourselves as merged and melted down into another country, but that still in this great national question you are still – Scotland – the land where Buchanan wrote, and Fletcher spoke, and Wallace fought.' The assembled delegates denounced the address as 'high treason against the union betwixt England and Scotland'.²⁹ The union and Britishness, cemented by a common Protestantism, and underwritten by the autonomy of the Kirk, had survived the Jacobite challenge and delivered the economic benefits of free trade and empire. By the 1790s most Scots, including most Scottish reformers, were content to call themselves north Britons. But if Scotland had 'merged and melted down into another country', Ireland had moved in the opposite direction. The assumption underlying the United Irish miscalculation in pitching their address in nationalist terms is as telling as the Scots reaction.

The United Irishmen were heirs to a well-established tradition of Protestant nationalism which they stretched for the first time to the limits of full-fledged separatism. Protestant Irish claims to the constitutional status of a 'distinct' kingdom were articulated forcefully by William Molyneux in his celebrated tract, published in 1698, *The Case of Ireland Being Bound by Acts of Parliament in England, Stated*. The *Case* was reprinted a number of times during the eighteenth century, including in 1782, and its arguments, recycled by Jonathan Swift in the 1720s, and by Charles Lucas at the end of the 1740s, were reiterated by the Volunteers outside, and by Patriot MPs inside, parliament, in the 1770s and early 1780s. Significantly, the author of the 1792 address, William Drennan, won his political spurs in the Volunteer movement. Protestant nationalism drew sustenance from resentment at commercial and constitutional restrictions, British control of patronage and a creeping appropriation of the Irish past. Whereas Scotland gained entry to English and imperial markets, Irish trade was regulated, mercantilist-style, in British interests. Molyneux's *Case*, in fact, had been prompted by a Westminster-imposed prohibition of the export of Irish wool. Molyneux, however, was more concerned with the constitutional issue which the prohibition raised. Westminster claimed and exercised the right to legislate for Ireland without the consent of the Irish (Protestant and propertied) political nation. Occasional infringements of legislative autonomy occurred within a permanent framework of constitutional subordination: Poynings' Law, and after 1720, the Declaratory Act. Both were repealed by the Irish parliament in 1782. The appointment of

²⁹ The most detailed account of this episode is contained in E. W. McFarland, *Ireland and Scotland in the Age of Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1994).

the executive by London and of Englishmen to Irish jobs, most glaringly to the bishops' bench, likewise fuelled anti-English sentiment. More subtly, as the Protestant elite continued to differentiate itself politically from the metropolitan power, some of its number edged towards a sense of Irish 'cultural' identity.

Protestant nationalism and 'Irishness' were ambivalent, limited and contingent. The self-description 'English' persisted well into the eighteenth century, and there is a sense in which Irish Protestants, like the American colonists in the 1760s, had their nationalism thrust upon them by the 'shock of rejection'; by, for example, the refusal to admit Ireland to a union. Despite allegations to the contrary, and British ministerial suspicions, Patriots like Lucas or the men of 1782 never sought 'independence'. They advocated, rather, a reordering of the relationship with Great Britain, and for most of them the 'constitution of 1782' represented the *ne plus ultra* of their aspirations. Limited in aspiration, Protestant nationalism was also limited in its definition of nation, to which Catholics need not apply. Support for legislative independence proved contingent on the maintenance of Protestant Ascendancy. In 1800, faced with a choice, as they saw it, between an Irish parliament, which might eventually be dominated by the Catholics, and Protestant security within a United Kingdom, a large minority of Irish Protestants opted for a union. The United Irish contribution to the history of Irish nationalism was to strip it of those ambivalences, limitations and contingencies. Wolfe Tone ridiculed the constitution of 1782, extended the definition of nation, and the common name of Irishman, to Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, and strove to 'break the connection with England'. The contrast with contemporary Scotland could hardly be starker.

Although radicals in the late eighteenth century (including Irish ones) could still appeal, in the old Whig mode, to the perfection of the British constitution and to the 'free born Briton's' proud record of struggle for, and defence of, liberty, Linda Colley's³⁰ *Britons* – and historians now insist they were a majority – are loyalist, royalist, Protestant and xenophobic. The historiography of England³¹ in this period has come a long way from the time when, in 1967, E. P. Thompson could concede to his critics that 'we still have everything to learn' about the 'peer-respecting, flag-saluting, foreigner-hating side of the plebeian mind'.³² Since then the focus has shifted relentlessly to the mobilisation of the popular loyalist movement, the dissemination of 'vulgar conservative'

³⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven and London, 1992).

³¹ Scotland in the 1790s is still a largely fallow field.

³² E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968) postscript.

ideas, and the resilience of the traditional social order. According to these analyses, Britain avoided revolution and emerged intact from war because in the court of public opinion the conservatives won the ideological argument with the radicals. Patriotism (or chauvinism), tradition, hierarchy, reformed Christianity, liberty and prosperity were skilfully counterposed to foreign principles, rash innovation, levelling, godlessness, French despotism and poverty. Proactively, loyalist newspapers outsold radical papers and the members of loyalist societies outnumbered the members of their radical opponents. But the countervailing forces of political and ideological inertia were equally decisive in containing the radical threat. Put to the test, the ruling class hegemony which undergirded political stability in eighteenth-century Britain, held.³³

That picture of English popular loyalism is difficult to reconcile with Thompson's robust, Paineite, working-class movement of the 1790s. Fashions change, and maybe there has, indeed, been some of that imbalance and overcompensation to which revisionists of all stripes are prey. No change in fashion, however, or of the historians' *Zeitgeist*, and no amount of the most creative revisionism, could redress the balance of forces in Ireland in favour of loyalism. There radical newspapers outsold pro-government ones, United Irishmen and Defenders outnumbered Orangemen, and Paine's *Rights of Man* enjoyed even wider circulation than in Britain.³⁴ The greater receptiveness of the Irish lower classes to the radical message suggests weaker social cohesion and political stability in Ireland than in Britain, as well as the comparative weakness of the conservative case and of elite hegemony. Radicalism had a spacious constituency because 'the ascendancy . . . largely failed to naturalize their rule'.³⁵ Nevertheless, Barnard makes an important point when he argues that 'since Ireland avoided revolution in the 1790s, the forces of conservatism and stasis, as much as those of spreading modernisation, secularism and rationalism, need their chroniclers'.³⁶ It might be more accurate to say that the counter-revolution triumphed than that revolu-

³³ H. T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1995), pp. 261, 270–3; I. R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 1984).

³⁴ Brian Inglis, *The Freedom of the Press in Ireland, 1784–1841* (London, 1954), pp. 56, 106; John Gray, 'A tale of two newspapers, the *Belfast Newsletter* and the *Northern Star*', in John Gray and Wesley McCann (eds.), *Uncommon Bookman: essays in honour of J. R. R. Adams* (Belfast, 1996); David Dickson, 'Tom Paine', in D. Dickson, Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds.), *The United Irishmen: radicalism, republicanism, reaction* (Dublin, 1993).

³⁵ Eagleton, 'Ascendancy and hegemony', p. 72.

³⁶ Barnard, 'Farewell to Old Ireland', p. 917.

tion was avoided, but that only reinforces the need to scrutinise loyalism more closely.

The ultra-loyalist historian, Sir Richard Musgrave, compared the Orange Order, founded in 1795, to loyal associations in England. And, in their opposition to Jacobinism, attachment to the crown and Protestant constitution, and popular energy, there is little to distinguish British and Irish loyalism. The critical difference lay in the different national contexts in which these movements operated. The militant Protestantism of British loyalism articulated beliefs and prejudices close to the outlook of the average Briton. Protestants did not hold a monopoly on anti-Jacobinism in Ireland – the Catholic bishops were no friends to atheistic revolution – but anti-Jacobin organisation, in the shape of the Orange Order, was exclusively and aggressively Protestant. In Ireland, in other words, anti-popery anchored loyalism to a finite and minority popular base.

Like Defenderism before it, however, Orangeism expanded from its Armagh heartland into a formidable national movement, rising to a membership of about 30,000 by 1797. Overcoming initial wariness about a popular initiative, even from loyalist quarters, the government, and its local gentry supporters, soon co-opted the movement to the counter-revolutionary cause. In particular, Orangemen were recruited wholesale to the Yeomanry, formed in 1796. Orange sectarianism, in some cases state-sponsored sectarianism, shattered United Irish attempts to build a cross-denominational mass revolutionary organisation, especially in mid-Ulster. Moreover, wearing their yeomens' hats many Orangemen saw action in 1798. There were many reasons for the defeat of the rebellion: the disarming of Ulster by General Lake in 1797; the capture of the Leinster leadership of the United Irishmen and the death of the military commander, Lord Edward Fitzgerald on the eve of the insurrection; the quality of government intelligence, break-downs in United Irish organisation, their failure to seize Dublin, the superiority of regulars over irregulars in conventional warfare, and plain bad luck; but the role of the Orange counter-revolution should not be underestimated.

An age of revolution? The European context

If it is a mere truism that the counter-revolution and 'all instances of disaffection or of overt rebellion have to be seen in the context of the pan-European revolutionary decade of the 1790s',³⁷ it is not as straight-

³⁷ Cullen, 'The 1798 Rebellion in its eighteenth-century context', 93.

forward as it seems. The immense political upheavals of that decade affected so many countries so radically that some historians have discerned something more than the 'spread', 'impact' or 'influence' of the French revolution abroad. In place of a contagion theory they posit 'a single revolutionary movement . . . one great movement . . . one big revolutionary agitation'.³⁸ Undoubtedly it would be useful to compare the Irish Jacobins to, say, their Dutch counterparts, or Irish conservatism to its German equivalents. Those exercises would, presumably, highlight the bourgeois characteristics of the former, and the importance of religion to the latter. But surely differences are as important as similarities, the Irishness as relevant as the Jacobinism?³⁹ The concept of 'influence' is also too simple in so far as it implies the importation by Ireland and other countries of readymade 'French' ideas. Where the revolution did have an 'impact' abroad it was modulated by highly complex, dynamic and locally specific adaptations and interactions. Thus the 'Jacobinism' of the United Irishmen owed as much to the English Real Whig tradition as it did to the *philosophes*. The same is manifestly true of Tom Paine and his *Rights of Man*.

The French Revolution served as inspiration, model and a catalyst to Irish radicalism. It helped to break the *impasse* in Catholic-Protestant relations by demonstrating conclusively that Catholics were capable of liberty. It proved that tyranny could be overthrown. To conservatives it represented a terrible threat. The energising and polarising effects of the revolution on Irish politics were essentially ideological. Just as important in shaping the mounting crisis, though surprisingly less examined by historians, were the many practical consequences of the war between Britain (and Ireland) and France, declared on 1 February 1793.

Europe had never before experienced anything like the revolutionary wars of 1792–1815. The French Revolution's self-proclaimed universalism transcended, without eliminating, traditional territorial and balance of power war aims. For both sides, ideological imperatives demanded total victory, and produced the first total war. In turn, the vast scale and enormous costs of total war called for unprecedented mobilisation of human and material resources. It is estimated that as many as one in five Irish males served in the British army between 1793 and 1815. The burden of deficit financing the conflict pushed the British-Irish state to the brink of bankruptcy. The Bank of England

³⁸ R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: a political history of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton [1959], 1964), i, pp. 4–7. The other historian most associated with the 'one revolution' thesis is Jacques Godechot.

³⁹ See T. W. Blanning's objections to the Palmer-Godechot model in Blanning, *The French Revolution in Germany: occupation and resistance in the Rhineland, 1792–1802* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 12–13.

suspended gold payments in 1797, while 'by 1799 the war was consuming some 78 per cent of Irish government expenditure'.⁴⁰ Price inflation, trade disruption, and increased taxation caused economic hardship and provided radicals with a rich store of anti-government propaganda.⁴¹

The ideological complexion of the conflict also ensured that the French cause could count on adherents in all of the belligerent nations. This was a sort of European civil war, of 'democracy' against the *ancien régime*, which, at a stroke, turned domestic reformers into potential traitors. The outbreak of war was quickly followed by government crack-downs on Scottish, English and Irish radicals. In Ireland the 'fifth columnist' danger was soon confirmed when Wolfe Tone and others were implicated with French spies. More seriously, the United Irishmen eventually forged an alliance with France, exposing Britain's western flank to military intervention.⁴² In December 1796, contrary winds forced the French to abort a major attempted landing at Bantry Bay. In August 1798, a smaller French expedition did land at Kilalla in County Mayo. It was too little, too late, but enough to convince William Pitt that the Irish security gap had to be closed. Among other things the act of union was an imperial wartime measure.

The military rationale and European framework of the union emerge clearly from Under-Secretary Cooke's advocacy. Insisting that 'the French will never cease to intrigue in this kingdom [of Ireland]', and that 'France well knows the principles and force of incorporations. Every state which she unites to herself, she makes part of her empire, one and indivisible.' Cooke concluded that 'as we wish to check the ambition of that desperate, and unprincipled power, and if that end can only be effected by maintaining and augmenting the power of the British empire, we should be favourable to the principle of union, which must increase and consolidate its resources'.⁴³ The conclusion is debatable, the premiss is not. War rationalised the European political map. The age of revolution was an age of centralisation and standardisation. Dozens of 'dwarf states', principalities, free cities and medieval left-overs, like the

⁴⁰ Thomas Bartlett, 'Defence, counter-insurgency and rebellion: Ireland, 1793–1803', in Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds.), *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 247; P. K. O'Brien, 'Public finance and the wars with France, 1793–1815', in H. T. Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789–1815* (London, 1989), pp. 163–87.

⁴¹ David Dickson, 'Taxation and disaffection in late eighteenth-century Ireland', in Clark and Donnelly (eds.), *Irish Peasants*, pp. 37–63.

⁴² The United Irish French connection receives definitive treatment in Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: the United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, 1982).

⁴³ [Edward Cooke], *Arguments for and against an Union between Great Britain and Ireland Considered* (London, 1798), pp. 9, 11.

papal enclave of Avignon, were absorbed into larger, territorially coherent, nation-states. The rebellion and the union were events in European history.⁴⁴

1798–1998

Almost before the smoke of battle had cleared, the paper war over what had happened in 1798 commenced. Beginning with Sir Richard Musgrave's ultra-Protestant – and best-selling – version of events, *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland* (1801), conflicting and highly partisan accounts and interpretations of the rebellion ensured that it did not pass out of politics and into history.⁴⁵ From Musgrave's anti-Catholic diatribes, designed to influence contemporary debates on the union, through the monochrome nationalism of R. R. Madden's *Lives of the United Irishmen* (1842–6), to Father Kavanagh's 'faith and fatherland' *Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798* (1870), which, in its heroicising of rebel Catholic priests and denigration of republican secret societies, is transparently aimed at Fenianism,⁴⁶ the nineteenth-century literature on the rebellion offers much unwitting evidence about nineteenth-century political history. That literature coexisted, moreover, with powerful popular traditions, in folklore and ballads, which await investigation. To apply the French historian, Pierre Nora's, formulation, '1798' provides a classic example of an Irish *Lieu de Mémoire* – a site of collective memory – transmitted and transmuted through song, story, stone and commemoration; and, in turn, the vitality of public memory has kindled serious writing on the 1790s.

There are dozens of reasons why individual historians choose to write on particular subjects. These range from disinterested intellectual curiosity, through the promptings of academic fashion or career advancement to frankly political engagement. Historians of Ireland in the 1790s are no less various than the rest of the species. Nevertheless, the recorded encounters of some of their number with what used to be called 'popular mythology' are suggestive. Marianne Elliott in the preface to her pioneering book, *Partners in Revolution: the United Irishmen*

⁴⁴ E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1788–1848* (1962, 1984), pp. 113–14.

⁴⁵ On the nineteenth-century historiography of the rebellion see Kevin Whelan, 'After '98' in *The Tree of Liberty: radicalism, catholicism and the construction of Irish nationality* (Cork, 1996); and on Musgrave, Jim Smyth, 'Anti-Catholicism, conservatism and conspiracy: Sir Richard Musgrave's *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland*', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 22, 3 (1998), 62–73.

⁴⁶ Anna Kinsella, '1798 claimed for Catholics: Father Kavanagh, Fenians and the centenary celebrations', in Dáire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong (eds.), *The Mighty Wave: the 1798 rebellion in Wexford* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 139–56.

and France cites as an early inspiration for her work 'the vivid repertory of United Irish plays staged by my father's amateur dramatic company, the Rosemary Theatre Company in Belfast'. In the preface to *The Peoples Rising: Wexford, 1798*, Daniel Gahan recalls the impact on him, as a child, of 'family lore', and of the songs, tales and local monuments in his native county. Tom Dunne writes that 'growing up in New Ross (County Wexford), my early life was saturated in the culture of '98, its ballads and folklore, its monuments and heroes'.⁴⁷ This is not to imply that scholars of the period are busily deconstructing or confirming received popular versions of the period (although some are); rather, it is simply to suggest that senses of the past shared by the culture at large filter through to the academy. The posthumous 'cult of Tone',⁴⁸ for instance, helps to account for the fact that this republican revolutionary has attracted more biographers than, say, an influential politician, like the lord chancellor, John Fitzgibbon, earl of Clare. More broadly, the fact that it is the 'Croppies', not the 'Yeos', who are celebrated in the ballad tradition,⁴⁹ helps to explain the reversal of the dictum that history is written by the victorious. Indeed 'the ignorant might be forgiven', it has been observed, 'for supposing that revolution succeeded, instead of failing, in the Ireland of the 1790s'.⁵⁰

History as a discipline also has internal dynamics. Historical knowledge advances incrementally by research, by the revision of orthodoxies, and by providing answers to new questions. The study of revolution stimulates, even necessitates, the study of counter-revolution. Popular loyalism, as noted, represents one aspect of the counter-revolution; the state represents another. Four of the essays in this volume, those by Louis Cullen, Nancy Curtin, Michael Durey and Thomas Bartlett, explore the state's responses to the crisis of the 1790s. In the years leading to the rebellion, Cullen discerns a reactive crisis management by an administration reliant, for the execution of its security policy on the ground, upon a politically divided magistracy. Curtin evaluates the role of the magistracy itself on the United Irish movement's Ulster frontline. The 'state' pursued a strategy of repression, introducing Draconian measures such as the Insurrection Act in 1796, indemnifying magistrates retrospectively against prosecution, and suspending habeas

⁴⁷ Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, ix; Daniel Gahan, *The People's Rising: Wexford 1798* (Dublin, 1995), xiii; Tom Dunne, 'Wexford's Comoradh '98, politics, heritage and history', *History Ireland*, 6, 2 (1998), p. 51.

⁴⁸ See the concluding chapter of that title in Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone, Prophet of Independence* (New Haven, 1989).

⁴⁹ Tom Munnally, '1798 and the balladmakers' in Poirteir (ed.), *The Great Irish Rebellion of 1798*, pp. 160–70.

⁵⁰ Barnard, 'Farewell to old Ireland', p. 910.

corpus. It also countenanced extra-legal actions like the destruction by Monaghan militia men of the presses of the *Northern Star* in May 1797. That strategy, however, was always constrained by political calculations and by the courts. By 1797, in fact, law and order had become the dominant political issue of the day. Dublin Castle kept one anxious eye firmly fixed on a Foxite opposition at Westminster, primed to denounce government excesses in Ireland. At local level, magistrates had to practise the art of the possible in communities which might be wholly disaffected. The recourse to courts martial in the post-rebellion period, examined below by Bartlett and Durey, itself testifies to the rootedness of the juridical mentality in governing circles, although that was no comfort at all to the likes of Musgrave who considered whipping as, on balance, a good idea. And the deep unpopularity among many Irish Protestants of Cornwallis's policy of measured severity towards captured rebels indicates that Musgrave should not be viewed as a stray lunatic. Cornwallis's close supervision of the entire courts martial sessions further demonstrates how politics could mitigate the worst effects of coercion. Finally, it is argued by this author that the act of union can be understood as the ultimate security response by the (British) state to the security crisis of the 1790s.

Graham's and Gahan's contributions return to the United Irish perspective. The former explains the decisive shift in leadership in 1796–7, from the cradle and crucible of 1790s radicalism (and sectarianism), Ulster, to Leinster and Dublin. That shift had profound consequences, for United Irish strategy and for the course of the rebellion, but some contemporaries at least, and some later historians, expressed surprise at the Leinster location of that long summer's most bloody military action: Wexford and south Wicklow. Thanks to the detailed investigations of Louis Cullen, Kevin Whelan⁵¹ and Gahan himself, we now have a better understanding of why Wexford erupted so spectacularly. Gahan continues that project here, with a special emphasis on the role of the county towns in effecting the politicisation which preceded the rebellion. 'Supply-side' politicisation is likewise a theme of Mary Helen Thuente, who examines one of the techniques of United Irish proselytising, printed statire, while Luke Gibbons demonstrates that even the remotest corners of Connaught were not immune to the political excitements of the decade.

⁵¹ E.g. Louis Cullen, 'The 1798 rebellion in Wexford: United Irishman organisation, membership, leadership', in Kevin Whelan (ed.), *Wexford: history and society* (Dublin, 1987), pp. 248–95 and Whelan 'Politicisation in County Wexford and the origins of the 1798 rebellion', in Dickson and Gough (eds.), *Ireland and the French Revolution*, pp. 156–98.

Thus far the terms ‘rebellion’, ‘revolution’ and ‘insurrection’ have been used loosely and interchangeably. It has been pointed out, for example, that ‘revolution failed’ or was ‘avoided’ and that ‘counter-revolution triumphed’. But this, of course, begs questions of definition – addressed explicitly by David Miller’s essay on religion. Understood as a (usually violent) transfer of political power, Ireland clearly did not experience revolution in the 1790s. On the other hand, it could be argued that after 1798 Ireland had changed utterly; that the unprecedented scale of mobilisation, the erosion of traditional social controls and the transformations of social relations which that involved, amounted to a ‘revolution’ in political consciousness and participation. And whereas Miller looks beyond narrowly political definitions of revolution, to gauge the extent of change in the churches, Fintan Cullen traces the impact of politics on art, contrasting, for instance, the portraiture of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, with his fashionably ‘democratic’ short hair style, with conventional *ancien régime* and bewigged portrayals of Fitzgibbon.

Thomas O’Conor’s journey from late eighteenth-century County Roscommon to early nineteenth-century New York, reconstructed by Gibbons in the concluding essay of this volume, is emblematic of an Irish republican diaspora which was one of the consequences and legacies of the rebellion.⁵² The after-shock of 1798 resonated far from Ireland’s shores and long after the pikes had rusted in the thatch. Little wonder then, that today it continues to fascinate historians.

⁵² See Michael Durey’s magisterial *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Kansas, 1997).