

Theobald Wolfe Tone: An Eighteenth-Century Republican and Separatist

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*This discussion of Tone's thought, unless otherwise stated, is drawn from my
'The Burden of the Present: Theobald Wolfe Tone, Republican and Separatist'.*

Was Theobald Wolfe Tone the first Irish separatist and the father of Irish republicanism? At one time, Tone's claim to these designations appeared so strong that further inquiry appeared redundant. After all, his declaration that his life's object had been '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' spoke out so categorically as to preclude all further discussion. Similarly, in his speech at his court martial in November 1798, Tone had stated, 'From my earliest youth I have regarded the connexion between Ireland and Great Britain as the curse of the Irish nation; and felt convinced that whilst it lasted, this country could never be free nor happy'. However, his assertion of a life-long commitment to separatism, and indeed to republicanism, has received short shrift from his biographers. The late Frank MacDermott's tart rebuttal of Tone's claim to being a life-long separatist—'the facts furnish all the comment that is necessary'—was later amplified by Tom Dunne, who cast Tone as an unanchored misfit, an 'outsider', who longed to find 'an acceptable career, a meaningful role, some fulfillment of the expectations natural to a member of the colonial élite', and who, through 'alienation and despair' became a separatist and a revolutionary.² Tone's most authoritative biographer, Marianne Elliott, too, claims that Tone's conversion to separatism was almost wholly a product of his American exile of 1795–6, and was thus, not only comparatively late in the day, but represented 'a case of necessity as much as choice' and was even 'an accident of character as much as of timing'. In addition, Tone's scattered references to the 'New Ireland' that would be brought about once French victory had

severed the link with England have suggested to some writers that he was prepared to envisage not so much an Ireland independent, separate and free, but rather a French military colony—a sort of ‘Hibernian republic’, a sister satellite to the other wholly-owned subsidiary republics of *La Grande Nation*—in which there would be laws restricting press freedom, and in which the existing social order (and distribution of property) would be safeguarded. ‘The very same laws which under the English constitution I regard as tyrannical and unjust’, Tone had noted complacently, ‘I would in a free republic preserve and even strengthen’.

As with Tone’s separatism, so too his republican credentials have been called into question. One writer has pointed to Tone’s enthusiasm for colonial enterprises in the South Seas, to his unabashed admiration for French aggression, to his loathing of the new American republic, and has even underlined his fondness and sympathy for both George III and Louis XVI; his conclusion was that such attributes hardly seem in keeping with the common perception of true republican principles. Another biographer has noted Tone’s lack of interest in Irish cultural matters—Irish music, history, language and literature left him cold; Tone’s patronising attitude towards catholics in general, but towards, especially, ‘Poor Pat’ (Tone’s term), the prisoner of war, easily enticed into French service for a bottle of wine and a tumble with a *fille de joie*.³ Tone, it has been remarked, may have turned his back on the ascendancy, but he certainly did not reject the outlook of easy cultural superiority that was inseparable from it.

Moreover, Tone’s biographers have been at pains to stress that his ideas (and he was not a systematic thinker) contained little that was new or even unconventional. His *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (1791), for example, ‘said nothing new and owed much to ideas then in general circulation’, comments Professor Elliott; and there was little that was novel in those other notions linked to his name. The necessity for a strategic alliance with catholics in order to pursue parliamentary reform had been clear since the early 1780s; the desirability of a drastic reduction of English influence in Irish affairs had, likewise, been a common aspiration long before Tone came on the political scene; even Tone’s complaints about the poor figure Ireland cut in international affairs had been anticipated by Sir Laurence Parsons (an ascendancy politician but no revolutionary) and, indeed, by others. Instead, what has been stressed are the elements of adventurism, giddiness, militarism and even opportunism in Tone’s personality and career. All in all, Tone, we are told, was largely marginal to the 1790s: he was *not* the founder of the United Irishmen, *not* the architect of the United Irish-French alliance, *not* the sole United Irish representative in Paris, *not* a player in the 1798 rebellion. Nor, for that matter, was he marginal only to the 1790s, for it has been further argued

that for most of the nineteenth century Tone languished in comparative neglect until he was plucked from obscurity by Patrick Pearse in 1913 and declared to be ‘the greatest of Irish nationalists ... the greatest of Irishmen’. Such provocative claims invite a further reflection on Tone’s thought and achievements; on examination, we may find that his claim to novelty as well as consistency, in both the areas of republicanism and separatism, are rather stronger than his critics maintain.

At the outset, it is clear that Tone’s republicanism must be firmly located in the eighteenth century and judged by the criteria of his period, rather than by the standards of later generations. However, when we come to define what was meant by republicanism in the late eighteenth century, we find that there was little agreement even among ‘republicans’ on the central elements of their creed. Tom Paine, author of *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*, and thus a player in both the American and French revolutions, noted that ‘it has always been the political craft of courtiers and court government to abuse something which they call republicanism: but what that republicanism was or is they never attempt to explain’. And yet, it could be claimed that republicans had only themselves to blame for these attacks, for they themselves were notoriously vague as to what they meant. No less a personage than John Adams, one of the ‘founding fathers’ of American republicanism, confessed in 1807 that he had ‘never understood’ what a republic was and ‘no other man ever did or ever will’. For example, it was notorious that republicans espoused contrary views as to whether a republican form of government was more suitable to a small country or to a large one; they disputed whether a republic would have a propensity for peace or for war (the Renaissance republican, Machiavelli, had appeared to endorse both propositions); contradictory viewpoints were also voiced on the question of whether a republic would foster commerce or seek to restrain economic growth; and there was little agreement on such weighty matters as equality and representation. Nor, indeed, was there a consensus on the question of whether a republic had to adopt a specific form of government. Provided the ‘common weal’ was pursued, and ‘commonwealth’ was for a long time the usual translation from the Latin *respublica*, there was much scope for discussion and dissension.

‘What the republicans take themselves to be describing’, notes the modern political theorist Quentin Skinner, ‘is any set of constitutional arrangements under which it might justifiably be claimed that the *res* (the government) genuinely reflects the will and promotes the good of the *publica* (the community as a whole). Whether a *res publica* has to take the form of a self-governing republic is not therefore an empty definitional question but rather a matter for earnest enquiry and debate.’ Viewed in this

light, it is clear that in the eighteenth century a republic was by no means incompatible with monarchy. Machiavelli, the republican and author of the *Discourses*, was also Machiavelli, the monarchist and author of *The Prince*; and the classic republican texts since then—those by the seventeenth-century theorists Smith, Harrington and Sydney—had been equally ambivalent on this question.

Republicanism since the sixteenth century, in the word of one commentator, was ‘more a language than a programme’, and the vocabulary had been one of protest, of resistance to tyrants, and of rooting out corruption and instilling (and installing) civic virtue. It was generally assumed that political virtue and civic virtue would be found most readily, though not exclusively, in a country whose citizens had the predominant part in the election or selection of their magistrate, prince or king; and for this reason, republicans everywhere sought to give a preponderant role to the people. Where the people had little or no say, either because of despotism or corruption, republicans were generally found to be seeking a return to some golden age or, more often, advocating parliamentary reform.

However, if there was little agreement among republicans on the precise form of republican government, there was universal recognition of the spirit which ought to infuse it. From Machiavelli to Paine, and including Milton, Harrington, Montesquieu and Gibbon, republican writers agreed that ‘public virtue is the only foundation of republics’ (John Adams). This moral dimension to republicanism came before everything else: with it, the common good was promoted and liberty protected; without it, chaos and corruption reigned. Republicanism therefore constituted a moral challenge to its adherents, placing a heavy burden on them to live up to its promise.

Where does Tone stand in this brief examination of eighteenth-century republicanism? Tone never claimed to be an ideologue: he wrote, ‘I confess I dislike abstract reasoning on practical subjects. I am buried in matter. When I feel a grievance pinch me sorely I look neither for the major nor minor of a proposition or syllogism, but merely for the proximate cause and the possibility of removing it’. He was far from being a systematic thinker: Hubert Butler, in his elegant essay on Tone, remarks that ‘what made Tone great was that he had no ideology’.⁴ That said, there are good grounds for arguing that Tone had been from an early date a thorough-going republican; at any rate, he was as much a republican as those whose credentials in that respect have never been questioned.

In the first instance, Tone’s language was unmistakably republican, filled with notions of resistance to tyrants and opposition to hereditary

aristocracies, and replete with aspirations to end corruption and promote virtue. In these respects, we can see Tone's indebtedness to that eighteenth-century commonwealthman or republican rhetoric associated with earlier republican theorists. There existed in Dublin a republican coterie in the mid-eighteenth century, which was vital in communicating commonwealthman ideas to a new generation. Tone's faith in parliamentary reform—'with a parliament thus reformed everything is easy; without it nothing can be done'—was wholly republican and recognisably within the republican tradition. His social conservatism was equally in keeping with republican thought as it had developed since the Renaissance; the references in his writings to the men of no property were few and far between (and were in any case ambiguous); and he grew indignant at the charge that the United Irishmen aimed at 'a distribution of property and an agrarian law'. Nor does Tone's preference for 'strong' government call into question his republicanism. His determination to allow 'just and reasonable liberty of the press', but to punish 'libels and calumnies' on the government, was unexceptional, for libel laws—and sumptuary laws and price controls—were part of the republican agenda at that date. Equally, Tone's admiration for the martial virtues, even to the extent of proposing a military colony in the South Seas, should best be seen, not as the negation of republicanism, but, rather, as evidence of 'a continuing mesmerisation with the military vigour of ancient Rome'.

So far as religion was concerned, Tone followed what could be called orthodox republican thought, though, in doing so, he parted company with Tom Paine who ridiculed religion. Tone was no friend to state-established religions, but he believed that religion had a role to play in the republic. He was, like many of the classical republican writers, very hostile to the institutional catholic church and to the papacy, and he saw republicanism with its emphasis on independence and virtue as the perfect antidote to clerical thralldom in Ireland and Europe. It may be suggested that he especially admired the French revolution for its attack on the catholic church, the catholic clergy, and ultimately on the pope himself. Even Tone's apparent sympathy for George III and Louis XVI ought to be seen as in keeping with republican ambivalence where monarchy was concerned, rather than as evidence of lukewarm commitment to republicanism itself. Tone's republicanism was certainly eclectic; but this was because republicanism was itself eclectic at that time. It is only when twentieth-century criteria of republicanism are applied to Tone that he is found wanting. Viewed amongst his contemporaries, Tone is seen for what he was—a recognisable eighteenth-century republican.

In a similar fashion, Tone's contribution to the modern separatist ideal—that Ireland could exist separate from Britain and independent of all other

countries—may have been underestimated. Certainly, separatism, in the sense of merely severing the links with Britain, had featured somewhere in Irish political discourse for several hundred years: but it had been very much a minority demand, typically voiced by religious exiles marooned on the continent. Much more common were the fervent declarations made by Irish ‘rebels’ of loyalty to the English crown and connection. In any case, rarely, if ever, until the late eighteenth century was it envisaged that Ireland could go it alone. Separation from England was commonly seen merely as a prelude to Ireland placing herself under the crown of Spain or France.

Admittedly, some English ministers were convinced that they could hear the authentic separatist note in the rhetoric of the Anglo-Irish opposition spokesmen of the early and mid-eighteenth century. The Anglo-Irish, noted one English politician, ‘were foolishly and seditiously ... everyday aiming at independency’. And Tone himself may have caught something of these fears when he wrote that his ‘great discovery’, that England was the bane of Ireland, could have been found in the works of Swift and Molyneux. But there was, of course, no hint of separatism in the writings of these men: they were concerned to reform and thus strengthen the link between Ireland and England, not endanger, much less break, it. Yet Tone was correct in pointing out that ‘the bare mention’ of a doubt on the subject of the connection between Ireland and England ‘had an instantaneous effect on the nerves of the English government’. Not the least of the ironies to do with modern Irish separatism is that its origins may be located in English neuroses.

Quite why English observers should have considered separatism to be an element within Irish patriotism is something of a puzzle. Anxiety over the ‘true’ nature of the Anglo-Irish connection—was Ireland a colony, conquered province, or sister kingdom?—may have played a part here, and so too, surely, did the English view of the Anglo-Irish relationship as being similar to that between a mother and her child, with Ireland being cast in the role of dependent child. Implicit in this child-colony/mother-country relationship was the threat that the ‘child’ would one day grow up and seek independence and separation. Moreover, by the 1760s, that day when Ireland might seek independence did not appear to be all that far off. Growing Irish prosperity, the apparent removal of the catholic menace, and the concurrent growth of protestant patriotism threatened to undermine Ireland’s continuing subordination to England. The secession of the American colonies, too, might prove contagious; and it was surely in recognition of this threat that, from the 1770s on, there emerged a distinct constituency in British government circles which saw a legislative union, on both financial and political grounds, as the ultimate solution to

the problem of Anglo-Irish relations. Unionism fed on the fear of separation; and that fear, already heightened by the winning of the 'Constitution of 1782', was further fuelled by the failure in the 1780s to repair that dangerously flawed 'final settlement'. But unionism also bred separatism, for the more talk there was of union and the more that option was couched in the Manichean terms of 'union or separation', then the more the idea of separation came to be discussed. Ironically, it was the arch-unionist, the Earl of Clare, Lord Chancellor of Ireland, who did most to propagate the idea of separatism in the 1780s through his scaremongering tactics during the campaign for parliamentary reform and the regency crisis. Years later, Tone would impishly warn Clare that 'stirring the question' of separation might prove unwise, as 'public opinion is an uncertain thing ... [and] it is therefore possible that the investigation may not serve his side of the argument'.

Where does Tone stand in the separatist tradition? Clearly he did not invent the idea: English anxiety, the American example, the growth of unionism, and, latterly, Clare's incautious pronouncements on the subject had kept the matter in the public domain. Moreover, separatism was, if not implicit, then concealed somewhere in the colonial nationalism espoused in Ireland in the eighteenth century. In any case, separatism as a political concept was in the air: when the American colonies had successfully claimed their independence, secession had received its greatest boost since the setting up of the Dutch republic at the end of the sixteenth century. Nor can we accept Tone's claim, made in France in 1796, that he was a separatist from his earliest days. That said, there was a separatist note to his writings, a separatist logic to his actions, and a willingness to embrace the separatist option that together marked Tone out as the first Irish separatist.

Some years after its publication, Tone claimed that in his pamphlet *Spanish War!* (1790) he had 'advanced the question of separatism with scarcely any reserve'. In fact, overtly separatist sentiments were well concealed in this tract. Tone's demand in this short work for a national flag, navy and army could have been accommodated within the existing Anglo-Irish relationship. On the other hand, such appendages were the usual ones for fully-sovereign states, and it is clear that Tone was, in effect, attempting to move the issue of national independence onto the agenda of Irish politics. But he moved very cautiously. In his *Argument*, he started to answer those who claimed that 'Ireland is unable to exist as an independent state', but then, apparently, he thought better of it:

There is no one position, moral, physical or political that I hear with such extreme exacerbation of mind as this which denies to my country the possibility of independent existence. It is not, however, my plan here to examine that question.

I trust that when the necessity arises, as at some time it infallibly must, it will be found that we are as competent to our own government, regulation, and defence as any state in Europe. Till the emergency does occur it will but exasperate and inflame the minds of men to investigate and demonstrate the infinite resources and provocations to independence which every hour brings forth in Ireland. I shall therefore content myself with protesting on behalf of my country against the position as an infamous falsehood insulting to her pride and derogatory to her honour and I little doubt if occasion should arise but that I shall be able to prove it so.

Some months before the publication of the *Argument*, he had written to his great friend Thomas Russell that as ‘for separation ... I give it to you and your friends as my most decided opinion that such an event would be the regeneration to this country’, but at the same time he admitted ‘that opinion is for the present too hardy’. Tone undoubtedly harboured separatist thoughts from an early date but, while he was prepared to contemplate the hitherto unthinkable, he still remained a reluctant separatist and his advocacy of it was confined to private letters and conversations. It was Lord Clare who brought the separatist option, and Tone’s espousal of it, into the open. Long convinced that the redoubt of the protestant ascendancy could never be captured by storm but only by betrayal, Clare, from an early date, had his eye firmly on Tone, who seemed tailor-made for the role of traitor-within-the-gate. Ruthlessly, he used Tone’s private letter of July 1791 to Russell to denounce all United Irishmen as committed separatists. In July 1793, Tone wrote to the editor of the *Freeman’s Journal* protesting about Clare’s use, or misuse, of a private letter. Tone claimed that he was not a separatist: but his denial was hedged with so many conditions and qualifications as to be quite unconvincing. He accepted that the link could be ‘highly beneficial’ provided there was ‘perfect equality, equal law, equal commerce, equal liberty [and] equal justice’; but so long as the ‘gross corruption in the legislature’ continued, so long as there was a ‘sacrifice of [Ireland’s] interests to England’, then, claimed Tone, the separatist option—‘a question of weighty and serious import indeed’—would inevitably make advances. ‘I for one do not wish to break that connection’, he added piously, ‘*provided it can be*, as I am sure it can, preserved consistently with the honour, the interests and the happiness of Ireland. If I were, on the other hand, satisfied that it could not be so preserved, I would hold it a sacred duty to endeavour by all possible means to break it’.⁵

Even at this stage, surely, Tone knew that the interests of Ireland would receive short shrift from England during the war; that after 1793 the only alternative, as Clare never tired of declaring, was union or separation, not union or reform. Reform to Clare, and increasingly to British ministers, was merely another word for separation. It was Tone’s realisation that

such was the case, that the republicanism which he sought could only be achieved through breaking the link, that drove him along the road to separation. Other republicans, Dr. William Drennan, for example, resisted this logic and sought through their involvement in education and civic improvement to bring about that classical republicanism which alone would 'save the nation'. Drennan, and others, shied away from separatism because they feared that the numerical superiority of Irish Catholics, and, indeed, the very nature of Irish Catholicism, might in fact prevent the realisation of republican ideals if Ireland were to be separated from England. Tone, however, had been an activist on behalf of the Catholics, had been persuaded that they had that necessary capacity for liberty, and was convinced that the perceived repellent aspects of Irish Catholicism would wither away in a republican environment. In any case, the fall of the most Catholic monarchy of France, and the flight of the pope himself, gave grounds for reassurance on that score. However, so long as the connection with England remained, Tone believed that his republican ideals could not be realised. It was, in the end, he believed, English connection, not Irish division, that thwarted the achievement of republicanism: and the English connection therefore had to go.

Notes

¹ Thomas Bartlett, 'The Burden of the Present: Theobald Wolfe Tone, Republican and Separatist', in Dickson, Keogh and Whelan (eds.), *The United Irishmen* (Dublin, 1993), pp. 1–15. Full scholarly support for the arguments advanced will be found in the notes to this article.

² Frank MacDermot, *Tone and his Times*, p. 269; Tom Dunne, *Theobald Wolfe Tone: Colonial Outsider* (Cork, 1982), pp. 16–17, 23, 47.

³ Tone, *Life*, II, p. 64.

⁴ Hubert Butler, *Wolfe Tone and the Common Name of Irishman* (Dublin, 1985), p. 9.

⁵ Tone, *Life*, I, p. 499, (my italics).