

# France-Ireland: Revolutionary Circulations

## How were French and Irish republicanism born together?

**Mathieu FERRADOU**

### ABSTRACT

Between 1792 and 1803, republics sprung up suddenly in France and Ireland. The one in France was founded in 1792 before it disappeared, its meaning having been drained away by the Bonapartist regime from 1799 to 1804. The other one, in Ireland, nearly came into existence several times, but failed repeatedly, in 1793, 1796, 1798 and – albeit in a more unlikely way – in 1802-1803. Yet even those failures served to keep the republican ideal alive as men and women traveled between those two countries and those dates, trying to bring their republican ideal into existence, or to reawaken it when it seemed to have disappeared, whether it had lost its original meaning (as in France after Thermidor) or it was suffering the backlash of the Counter-Revolution. The struggle for the end of monarchy and the founding of republics in both France and Ireland is also part of a larger spatial and chronological context: the “Atlantic Republic” (connecting revolutionary struggles from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries).



D. A. Beaufort, “New Map of Ireland, Civil and Ecclesiastical,” 1797, showing the four provinces and the counties. © [Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division](#).



Portrait of Theobald Wolfe Tone, engraving by Edward Scriven, based on a portrait by Tone's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Sampson Tone, undated (not after 1841). © [Bibliothèque nationale du pays de Galles](#).



Hugh Douglas Hamilton, *Portrait of Lord Edward FitzGerald (1763-1798)*, oil on canvas, 127.7 x 102 cm, ca. 1796-1797. © [National Gallery of Ireland](#).



James Gillray, "United Irishmen in Training," hand-colored etching, aquatint on paper, published by Hannah Humphrey, 13 June 1798: the United Irishmen are training against a British scarecrow in front of a pub at the sign of the "Tree of Liberty" where "true French Spirits" are served. © [The Trustees of the British Museum](#).



James Gillray, "United Irishmen upon Duty," hand-colored etching, aquatint on paper, published by Hannah Humphrey, 12 June 1798. Irish insurgents are portrayed as looters, rapists and murderers, like the rebel slaves in Haiti. © [The Trustees of the British Museum](#).

## **The French Revolution: "The Morning Star of Liberty to Ireland"**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland was both a key element of and a colonial laboratory in the British imperial system. Irish society was riddled with profound tensions stemming from various waves of conquest since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Having expropriated the Catholics, who had been reduced to the status of a legal minority by the "penal laws" established at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, wealthy Protestant landowners held sway. Hence a profound distrust, synonym of Jacobitism (support for the Stuart dynasty against the Hanover British state) was prevalent among Irish Catholics. They looked to France in hopes of freedom arriving by sea, even while the Catholic elite, organized into the Catholic Committee since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, was trying to prove their loyalty in order to relieve Catholics of their civil and political "disabilities."

After the American Revolution (1775-1783), the Protestant elite became divided, and a patriotic movement emerged, the Volunteers, or Irish Volunteers. They demanded legislative independence for the Irish Parliament. Frightened, the English government granted it in 1782. The Volunteers later became divided over the issue of re-integrating Catholics into Irish civil society and politics.

The French Revolution was a thunderbolt: because it proved that a Catholic country could establish a regime based on the principle of civil liberties, it shattered a stereotype that was deeply rooted in Protestant mentalities that Catholics were *incapaces libertatis*, "unfit for freedom." Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798), a young Protestant lawyer in Dublin, grasped that immediately. In July, 1791, he wrote that the French Revolution was the "the morning star of liberty to Ireland," because it enabled the alliance between the Presbyterians and the Catholics in order to make "all Irishmen Citizens, all Citizens Irishmen." That is how the Society of United Irishmen came to be founded in the autumn of 1791 in Belfast and Dublin.

### **Earliest Republican Ambitions**

On November 18, 1792, in the wake of the shock of the advent of the Republic in France, the entire Atlantic revolutionary galaxy gathered at the White Hotel, not far from Paris's Palais Royal, for a "patriotic feast" celebrating France's military victories. English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh patriots, as well as American, Belgian, Dutch, Prussian and Italian ones, gathered to raise a toast to the republicanization of all of Europe, synonym of universal peace. In an address read to the National Convention on November 28, they called for the French armies to lay down their weapons only when "there will be neither tyrants nor slaves," which led to the foundation of the Society of the Friends of the Rights of Man (SADH), which was often (albeit improperly) referred to as the "*British Club*."

In the meantime, the Convention had passed the decree of 19 November 1792, promising "brotherhood and aid to all peoples hoping to regain their liberty." It was the capstone of an intense trans-Channel and trans-Atlantic dialogue between patriotic societies. That decree was in line with the one of 26 August 1792, which had been passed by the National Assembly and which granted French citizenship to eighteen deserving foreigners: British, American, Italian, Dutch, Swiss, German, and Polish. In so doing, France embodied the horizon of republican expectations, and inscribed its own struggles into a universal project, a counter-model to the British liberal and authoritarian Empire.

The Irish were among the most active members of the SADH. At least seventeen signed the address at the Convention (out of a total of about fifty signatures) and several future Irish leaders attended the "patriotic feast." Some of the most notable among them were the brothers Henry and John Sheares (Protestant lawyers from Dublin), as well as Edward FitzGerald, the brother of the Duke of Leinster, who was close to Thomas Paine (1737-1809), the author of both *Common Sense* (1776), which contributed greatly to triggering the American Révolution, and *The Rights of Man* (1791 and 1792), a book that defended the French Revolution. The SADH became a façade for a conspiracy to reform the Volunteers, and, with material support from France, obtain Irish independence, which would, in a kind of domino effect, lead to the republicanization of both Scotland and England. At the same time, the Defenders, a Catholic secret society that recruited from among the working class, went from being Jacobite to Jacobin and also entered into contact with France, in preparation for a general insurrection.

The Irish imperialist Edmund Burke (1729-1797) alerted the English government. Indeed, the influential Whig MP saw in the "Revolution of France" the local expression of a much broader phenomenon, the "French disease" that was contaminating the entire Atlantic region, which needed to be immunized against it. The Crown managed to defuse the peril by provoking a clash with France in January-February 1793 while applying both repressive measures and policies of inclusion for Irish Catholics, who obtained the right to vote in Parliamentary elections, but not the right to hold office. So, the hoped-for insurrection did not take place, and the disorganized Militia Riots that

broke out across Ireland in June, 1793 was put down quickly.

## **When Ireland was France's Republican Conscience**

That first failure was followed by a missed opportunity in 1794, when Archibald Hamilton Rowan (1751-1834), the most famous of the United Irishmen, escaped from jail in Dublin. During his imprisonment, he had become involved with William Jackson, an Irish Anglican priest sent by France first to England and then to Ireland to assess popular support for a French invasion. Having made it to France, Rowan met with the Committee Public Safety, but fell ill a short while later. By the time he was restored to health, Thermidor had taken place and France took no further action on the idea of leading an uprising in Ireland.

Theobald Wolfe Tone resurrected the idea of French support for an Irish uprising. Exiled in the United States for his involvement with Jackson, he contacted the French ambassador in Philadelphia, Pierre Auguste Adet, who sent him to France where he arrived in February 1796 as an "incognito ambassador" for the United Irishmen and the Catholic Committee. He himself was in contact with the Defenders, who, in their oaths, pledged allegiance to the "United States of France and Ireland." Tone persuaded the Directory to renounce its plans to "chouannise" Ireland, which reified the anti-Catholic stereotypes the Irish were saddled with. Those stereotypes meant that the Irish were seen as possible "Chouans" but not as republicans. Thanks to Tone's tireless power of conviction, the naval expedition of December 1796 that was supposed to assist the Irish in establishing an independent republic was launched under the command of General Lazare Hoche (1768-1797). British forces were caught unawares, but a severe storm scattered the French ships, preventing them from landing.

The United Irishman reached their apogee then, as the republic had never seemed more within reach. Yet 1797 turned out to be the year of missed opportunities, like in May-June, when mutinies paralyzed the British Navy. It wasn't until 1798, thanks to the uprising triggered in June in despair over the Dublin government's methodical campaign of repression, that a series of new expeditions was hastily arranged. Too little, too late: only France's General Humbert (1767-1823) managed to reach western Ireland with some one thousand men. The Republic of Connacht was proclaimed, but it disappeared after Humbert was defeated by General Cornwallis's English troops. Some 30,000 people were killed in the repression that followed.

Yet belief in the possibility of a republic did not fade away. Robert Emmet (1778-1803) incarnated it during the rebellion of 1803, which was supposed to have taken place at the same time as an uprising in England led by Edward Marcus Despard (1751-1803), an Irish officer in the British army. In exile in France after 1798, Emmet solicited Bonaparte for assistance from France, to no avail. In his last speech, Emmet felt obliged to refute the accusation that he had intended to deliver Ireland to Bonapartist France, which was synonymous with imperialism.

---

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

ALPAUGH, Micah, *Friends of Freedom. The Rise of Social Movements in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

ELLIOTT, Marianne, *Partners in Revolution. The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1982).

FERRADOU, Mathieu (ed.), « [L'Irlande et la France à l'époque de la République atlantique](#) », [La Révolution française. Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire de la Révolution française](#), n° 11, 2016.

SWORDS, Liam, *The Green Cockade : the Irish in the French Revolution, 1789-1815*, (Sandy Cove: Glendale, 1989).

---

**Source URL:**

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/humanism-enlightenment/political-circulations-in-enlightenment-europe/france-ireland-revolutionary-circulations>