

THE UNITED IRISH RISING OF 1796-98: HISTORY REPEATED?

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October 10, 2025

As history progresses, we are constantly confronted with new information that changes our previous interpretations of events. This becomes even more apparent in the aftermath of periods marked by revolutionary thoughts. During these periods, a vocal minority holding the most revolutionary views interpret events through a biased lens to represent a history consistent with their worldview. This is precisely the kind of biased thinking that one of the most revolutionary figures, Theobald Wolfe Tone¹, found himself representing in a larger “revolution” during the late 18th century in Ireland. Now, over 200 years later, we can reexamine the history without a revolutionary bias to try and see the more nuanced existence of events. During this reexamination, a new view of the United Irish Rising of 1796–98 can be found. The United Irish Risings of 1796–98, though inspired by French republicanism, ultimately failed to transcend older patterns of Irish rebellion due to a misreading of Ireland's internal dynamics.

The two major uprisings before this event in modern Irish history that created a precedent, were the uprisings of 1593–1602 and 1641–1650 — the Nine Years’ War and the Irish Confederate Wars. Both of these risings were rooted in Catholic grievances and the defense of land and religion. The Nine Years’ War was led by Gaelic chieftains, like Hugh O’Neill, aiming to resist English encroachment and protect Catholicism and Gaelic landholding. There was no broader ideological argument presented to unite Ireland together as one. The conflict was mainly contained in a purportedly small area of Ireland, fought in Ulster and Connacht, illustrating a small non-national rising. Despite O’Neill’s temporary success at battles like the Battle of the Yellow Ford in 1598, the momentum turned with the defeat at Kinsale in 1601, and in the end, it ended in failure and brutal repression². The Irish Confederate Wars followed a very similar

¹ Known as Wolfe Tone posthumously.

² Of particular note is the end of Gaelic order and the creation of the Plantation of Ulster.

progression. Sparked by Catholic fear of Protestant domination after the Plantations, they emphasized their religious character, with Catholic identity forming the core of resistance³. Yet, like the Nine Years' War, they failed to unite Ireland beyond regional and sectarian lines. The movement lacked a cohesive national vision and instead fractured under competing interests (between Old English, Gaelic Irish, and royalist factions) and external pressures (broader Wars of the Three Kingdoms). Ultimately, it ended in defeat, marked again by harsh repression⁴ and the reassertion of English control.

These risings were both set within local grievances and lacked any broader national ideological breadth. The risings were unable, or simply unwilling, to create an ideological unity, which resulted in failure to have any cross-community coalition, subsequently leading to the brutal suppression of each uprising. In contrast to these earlier movements, Wolfe Tone sought to redefine the foundation of Irish rebellion. Where past risings were confined by sectarian and regional boundaries, Tone envisioned a unified, secular, and national revolution, forming the United Irishmen in October of 1791 to bring about his vision. This ideological shift led him to take bold steps beyond Ireland's shores. Wolfe Tone ventured to France to enlist French support for a large national uprising in Ireland during February 1796. During his visit he gave two memorial statements to the French government on the present state of Ireland, which present a precise instance of his outlook on Ireland as well as the revolutionary ideas he is a proponent of.

During his first statement on February 22nd, Tone exerts the current situation: "Catholics and Dissenters, the two great sects, whose mutual animosities have been the radical weakness of their country, are at length reconciled and the arms which have been so often imbrued in the

³ Confederate Catholic government in Kilkenny in 1642.

⁴ Most infamously under Cromwell: destruction of the economy and demographic collapse.

blood of each other are now ready for the first time to be turned in concert against the common enemy.”⁵ This quote clearly shows the position he sees Ireland in, which is one ready to unite and fight against English rule. Tone wants to bring about this fight by requisitioning of the French Revolution in Ireland, “eager to emulate the glorious example of France.”⁶ Ending the memorial with, “it would be impossible for the Protestant aristocracy in Ireland to make any stand whatsoever, even for an hour, in defence of the connection with England.”⁷ Tone presents a state of Ireland on the cusp of revolution, fully united and prepared to liberate itself from English rule. These quotes highlight his thought process on Irish unity, something not seen in previous risings. Where in the past small grievances were the core, now Tone suggests a broader grievance, of English rule, to unite Ireland under one movement towards republicanism, displayed by the French Revolution and current government .

In his second statement, on February 29th, Tone lays out a possible framework for an invasion. Tone reiterates the weakening of England and outlines potential benefits for the French Government. He ends with a plea: “I supplicate the French Government to take into their consideration the state of Ireland; and by granting her the powerful aid and protection of the Republic to enable her at once to demonstrate her gratitude, to vindicate her liberty, to humble her tyrant and to assume that independent station among the nations of earth for which her soil, her productions and her position, her population and her spirit, have designed her.”⁸ This ending clearly shows his inspiration from France, speaking of liberty and independence. Wolfe Tone represents a fundamentally different type of rising from the precedent of the past, one that is

⁵Tone, *Writings*, vol. 2, “First Memorial,” 64.

⁶Tone, *Writings*, vol. 2, “First Memorial,” 64.

⁷Tone, *Writings*, vol. 2, “First Memorial,” 70.

⁸Tone, *Writings*, vol. 2, “Second Memorial,” 97.

more akin to a revolution than popular divides. Through inspiration from the French Revolution, Tone comes to the conclusion that a united Ireland is not only possible, but inevitable with French support, showcasing the current unity and strength of the Irish people.

The idyllic concept of a united Ireland went far on paper, but in reality, the internal divisions were too great to overcome to create a united front. Tone misunderstood the depth of sectarian mistrust and regional resistance, which ultimately contributed to the failure of his “revolution.” A perfect case where Tone’s misunderstanding is evident is in the county of Wexford. The Wexford Rebellion core was not focused on shared commitment to revolutionary ideals, but rather the core was founded on anti-tithe sentiment and sectarian tensions. Sectarian massacres such as Scullabogue in June 1798 and the Wexford Bridge executions represent bloody public killings of Protestants, events starkly at odds with what Tone had envisioned. These acts of violence reveal the fragility of Tone’s imagined cross-sectarian alliance.

The reductionist view of Wexford as simply descending into sectarian violence is challenged by Daniel Gahan, who presents a different interpretation. He argues that the Wexford Rebellion may not have been rooted solely in sectarian division as was previously held. Gahan states, “Rebel officers constantly reiterated that their struggle was at its core non-sectarian. Yet, the sectarian dimension may still have played an important part in this entire episode.”⁹ This complicates the motives behind the rising and challenges a singular simple narrative. No longer is it a clear case of revolutionary thought uniting Ireland or sectarian divide, instead there is nuance and complexity. Economic hardship, local grievances, and residual religious tensions all combined to create a situation far removed from the ideological clarity Tone believed existed. His

⁹Gahan, “Wexford in 1798,” 93.

assertion that “there is a certainty of a sufficient harmony and co-operation between these two great bodies”¹⁰ is severely inaccurate to the internal dynamics of Ireland.

In practice, the United Irish ended up echoing earlier revolts. While there was a very clear advance in ideology, influenced heavily by the French Revolution, ultimately any larger unified rising failed due to its incompatibility with the fractured and localized nature of the internal dynamics of the Irish situation. There was not a failure in Tone’s ideology itself, but rather the context in which it was introduced. Tone passed away on November 19, 1798, but his ideology would continue to spread and eventually help inspire and lead to more republican movements in the future.

¹⁰Tone, *Writings*, vol. 2, “First Memorial,” 64.

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