



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

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15 September 1997

Anthony Cary Esq
WASHINGTON

Dear Anthony,

1798

1. Earlier this year you wrote to David Brooker about the commemorations of 1798. As he said in his reply of 27 June, others in the governmental system (ie RID!) would take a lead on this issue.

2. Following your letter we checked with the Irish on their planned programme of commemorations. The latest list is attached. As you can see it includes a commemoration scholarship joint-funded by the Irish and British Governments. Our contribution came from AUSPB and we are currently considering whether to cooperate with the Irish in offering funding for a further year ie a full PhD thesis. Now that the new government has its feet under the table, could Mr Tansley let us know if they have focussed on this issue yet - in his letter to me of 17 July he thought they may well seek to expand the programme.

3. We are not aware yet of any specifically anti-British campaigns that are being planned, similar to some associated with the Famine commemorations. But we should indeed be prepared for some flak on this issue, as on most Anglo-Irish anniversaries!

4. We took up your suggestion of a neutral and accessible account of the Famine. Ted Hallett in Research Analysts has prepared the attached first draft, which he plans to expand in the light of others' comments on his return from leave at the end of this month. Our initial thoughts are that it could give specific example(s) of parallel atrocities, and also dwell a little more on the factor of national security in the British response - the potential for a two-pronged French invasion. I should be grateful for your own comments and those of copy addressees - please feel free to copy further if required. Also, how would you - and Dublin - be able to make best use of such a paper? Is it something you envisage handing out eg to journalists/interested contacts, or something you can draw on as background for responses to

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letters or press articles? we would be rather hesitant about handing out material on anything other than a fairly restricted basis, as its source may lead some to treat it as ~~the~~ British propaganda.

5. We shall in any event work out some sort of standard line on 1798, following the well-worn path of encouraging an honest, critical approach to history rather than using it for present-day recriminations. We shall certainly not want to enter into the detail of the events of 1798. We intend that a short forward by Dr Mowlam to a forthcoming academic booklet (for the Durham University History Society Annual Conference) will be suitable as a source for official lines to take, both on 1798 and also on more general questions of Anglo-Irish history vs the present.

6. Because of the French aspect of 1798, I am copying this letter to Paul Johnston in Paris, in case he is aware of any French commemorations/interest in this issue.

Yours ever,

Kate

Mrs K Vineall
Republic of Ireland Department

cc: Mr Tansley, Dublin
Mr Brooker, NIO
Mr Dunn, Information Department
Mr McCall, DENI, Belfast fax 01247 279721
Mr Johnston, BE Paris

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1798

The immediate background to the rebellion of 1798 began with the French Revolution of 1789. This had great impact on radical opinion in Ireland, particularly among northern presbyterians, who were instinctively attracted to republican forms of government. In 1791, the Society of United Irishmen was formed almost simultaneously in Belfast and Dublin. Theobald Wolfe Tone, born into a protestant family in Dublin on 20 June 1763 and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, was one of the founder members. The United Irishmen had two broad objectives: parliamentary reform to promote greater democracy and the uniting of all Irishmen, whether "catholic, protestant or dissenter", in a republic independent of British rule. Many of its early members were Ulster presbyterians, resentful, just as much as the catholics, of the privileges of the established Church of Ireland. Catholic emancipation was seen by many as a key step towards the achievement of the Society's objectives. Tone himself was of this view, campaigning actively for emancipation as Secretary of the "Catholic Committee", despite his belief that catholicism was a dying superstition. In seeking to unite all Irishmen, irrespective of religion, however, Tone and the United Irishmen seriously underestimated the inherently sectarian nature of Irish politics outside the small and unrepresentative francophile intelligentsia.

The United Irishmen originally sought to achieve their objectives by political action, but eventually concluded that this would not be possible without armed insurrection and the help of revolutionary France. A major factor in bringing about this change was the outbreak of war between Britain and France in February 1793, which gave rise to British fears of the French exploiting Irish discontent to destabilise Britain. The British authorities, in consequence, sought to suppress any organisation which they regarded as subversive. They recruited a county-based militia, both to counter the threat of invasion and to help with the suppression of internal dissent. Ironically, much of the membership of these militia units was catholic.

In May 1794, the Society was formally suppressed by the British authorities and many of its leaders arrested and imprisoned. Thereafter, it became an underground, secret, oath-bound movement, though it was successfully infiltrated by informers. Its views underwent fundamental change as a result of the suppression. It abandoned constitutionalism and became a revolutionary movement, dedicated to ending British rule in Ireland by force, through alliance with France. Radicalism progressively fused with nationalism (though not yet of the Gaelic/catholic variety), based on the conviction, most clearly articulated by Tone, that all Ireland's ills stemmed from the English connection. Tone was forced into exile from June 1795, at first in America and then in France, where he devoted himself to securing French military intervention in Ireland in support of an armed insurrection.

In parallel with the establishment and suppression of the United Irishmen, a catholic peasant movement - the "Defenders" - developed to defend catholic areas from attack from the protestant "Peep o' day" boys and later from the Orange movement. As they gained in strength, the Defenders often perceived attack to be the best form of defence. Realising that they could not mount an insurrection on their own, the United Irishmen formed increasingly close links with the Defenders, while formally remaining a separate organisation. The move to insurrection thus acquired an increasingly sectarian character, which undermined the Society's professed aim of uniting all Irishmen.

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In March 1796, the British authorities passed the Insurrection Act, directed primarily against the Defenders and the United Irishmen. The Act provided for curfews, arms searches and the death penalty for oath-taking. The militia were widely used in the search for arms and frequently resorted to torture - flogging, "half-hanging" and "pitchcapping" - as a means of extracting information. These methods caused much antagonism and undoubtedly stimulated support for rebellion.

To mount a successful insurrection, the United Irishmen needed the French as well as the Defenders. It was Tone's achievement that he persuaded the French revolutionary leaders to provide assistance, though when it came, it was too little and too late. A first attempt was made in December 1796, when Tone accompanied a French expedition of 43 ships and 15,000 men, which intended to land at Bantry Bay in west Cork. It was prevented from doing so by bad weather and eventually returned to France.

Insurrection broke out in May 1798, but this was not the planned rising sought by the United Irishmen, rather a series of sporadic violent clashes between the by now predominantly catholic-supported United Irishmen and regular British troops, units of militia (also predominantly catholic in many areas) and protestant Yeomen and Orangemen, who intervened in support of the authorities in some areas. There were numerous atrocities on both sides. Neither side showed any quarter to captured opponents, who were often summarily put to death. Both sides were also guilty of killing non-combatants.

The rebellion was poorly coordinated and in most areas was quickly put down. Reliance on the Defenders and playing up the fear of Orangemen to attract support gave the insurrection a sectarian character in many areas. Only in Wexford was any success achieved and it is the rising in Wexford which is mainly remembered today. The rebels captured the town of Wexford and held it for nearly a month. They then headed south in an unsuccessful attempt to capture New Ross, then headed north again, to final defeat at Vinegar Hill, near Enniscorthy, on 21 June 1798. There was much brutality on both sides, including a slaughter of protestants at Scullabogue and widespread killing of suspected rebels after the final surrender at Vinegar Hill. One notable incident, which is indicative of the complicated line-up of forces on the two sides, concerns the fate the North Cork militia, who were brought in to help suppress the rebellion. A number were captured by the rebels. They pleaded for mercy in Irish but were not understood, Irish having largely died out in Wexford by this time.

In August 1798, a French expedition under General Humbert landed at Killala and achieved an initial success in defeating government forces at Castlebar, before surrendering to Cornwallis at Ballinamuck. Tone had convinced Humbert that his arrival in Ireland would be the spark for mass insurrection, but this failed to materialise. The captured French were treated well and eventually allowed to return to France. The indigenous rebels were not so lucky and, as elsewhere, many were killed after surrender.

Another French expedition, with Tone on board, attempted to land in Donegal in October 1798, but was defeated. Tone was captured, convicted of treason and sentenced to death, but committed suicide before the sentence could be carried out. After his death, Tone became one of the heroes of Irish republicanism, revered equally by both the militant and constitutional varieties. Separate annual commemoration ceremonies are held at his grave by Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein, both of whom claim to be inspired by his ideal of an Irish

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public, uniting all Irishmen, "catholic, protestant and dissenter".

A more immediate consequence of the unsuccessful rebellion of 1798 was the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland of 1800.

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