

The Tricoloured Shamrock: Franco-Éire Politics

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In 1921 the Irish Republic and the Old IRA were victorious in their war of independence against the United Kingdom, ending the policy of uncontested imperialism in Ireland dating back 1610. Until that time, there was only one period in which a real threat was posed to British hegemony in Ireland: the Wars of the Coalitions. This period would be the only time Irish republicans would have a true external ally, which would be France.

To truly understand the development in Franco-Irish politics, it is important to realize the nature of Ireland and its delegations. Ireland, being a possession of the King of England, had its own Parliament, but in which Catholics and other "Dissenters" were legally ineligible for public office and which was ultimately subject to the King, and was in actuality a puppet government under British Parliament. For all intensive purposes, although the monarch was "King of Great Britain and Ireland," the Crown ruled as if it were King of Great Britain *over* Ireland. Instead of being treated as political and social equals, Ireland was treated as nothing more than a resource deposit and the kingdom's greatest recruiting camp. As a result, Ireland, especially from the American Revolution onwards, was deprived of troops to defend itself, and was therefore forced to rely on Britain, particularly on its navy, for protection.

Some historians, such as R.C. Escouflaire, argue against the validity of the Irish revolutions of this period by citing the reforms introduced in the 1780s and early '90s. Notably, the Penal Laws, which had revoked rights for Catholics, who made up the vast majority of the population, were being repealed; Mitford's Act of 1791, which had begun repealing anti-Catholic legislation in mainland Britain, was offering hopes of similar legislation in Ireland; and Langrishe's Act of 1792 now allowed Irish Catholics the right to sit in on Parliament.

Nevertheless, the changes of the time were not as positive as Escouflaire and his disciples claim. The repeal of the Penal Laws was done in such a methodical and piecemeal manner that instead of creating a sense of relief, it forced the Irish people to recall each and every grievance the laws had created and instilled a sense of resentment, resulting in dispersed instances of violence. Furthermore, not only was most of the British Catholic reform not being introduced in Ireland, but also pro-Catholic legislation was being repealed. More over, the suppression of the Volunteers created at least as much of a public uproar.

The dismantling of the people's defense was not the only measure taken, and the outbreak of war with France would result in a much more repressive environment. 16 May 1794 saw the

Habeas Corpus Act suspended, and royal assent was given to the "Gagging Acts," namely *The Treasonable and Seditious Practices* and the *Seditious Meetings Acts* which outlawed written or spoken dissent or complaints of Government or the Constitution and the gathering of over fifty people without consent from magistrates. None of these acts, however, would result in nearly as much turmoil as the *Gunpowder Act*, allowing authorities to crack down on areas where arms were believed to have been stored, and the *Militia Act* of 1793. Coupled with the unwillingness of Irish Parliament to either grant further rights upon the Catholics or to offer any opposition to these oppressive acts, popular discontent began to flare in Ireland, as well as in Great Britain, and the people began looking towards various societies and political parties for extra-parliamentary solutions.

One Irish politician in particular gained prominence during this period: Theobald Wolfe Tone. He argued that any basis for Irish strife, especially religious, was purely the product of the British government in an attempt to prevent the uniting of Ireland, and that the interests of Ireland could only be served through joint cooperation. His dismissal of religion as a valid source of separation was one of the founding principles of the republican society he helped create in 1791, the Society of United Irishmen. Its purpose was to promote the need to parliamentary reform to create a more representative government with larger local autonomy so as to be able to resist unilateral

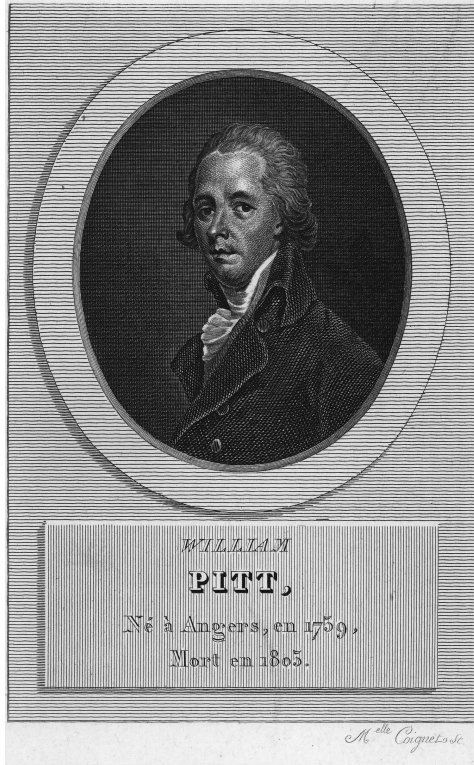
English laws and powers.¹ Although Tone himself favored an independent Ireland, the society simply promoted equality to England, creating a balance between the King's two realms. Unlike the radical institution it would later become, the United Irishmen began as a small group of thinkers who tried to work peacefully through government rather than combat it like the Defenders and Orangemen.

Although the organization was not a physical threat to Irish Parliament or to Britain, it was feared for several reasons. First and foremost is that there were French sympathizers in its rank, especially among individuals such as Tone, Napper Tandy, and Lord Edward Fitzgerald, despite the fact that the organization as a whole was not overly pro-French. Any connection to France, either real or imagined, during the war with France would be viewed as a threat. Furthermore, regardless of its connections, the society called for constitutionalism and universal suffrage, both of which were opposed by Prime Minister William Pitt's counter-revolutionary crusade as being 'French ideals,' for according to him, "We were necessitated to resist French crimes by opposing to them French principles."²

¹ Theobald Wolfe Tone, *Declaration of the United Irishmen*, (1791),

<http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Declaration_of_the_United_Irishmen> (accessed 29 April 2009).

² Tom Holmberg, "Debate in Parliament on the Suspension of Habeas Corpus," *Great Britain: Suspension of Habeas Corpus. 7 May 1794*," (2002), <http://www.napoleon-series.org/research/government/british/c_habeus.html> (accessed 29 April 2009).



Irish Parliament had been trying to discourage the society, and in 1794 an opportunity arose to act. On 26 January, French agent William Jackson arrived in Ireland, sent by the Committee of Public Safety, to propose the possibility of French assistance. Among the ranks of the United Irishmen he was largely thought to be a British agent, and to all appearances it seemed like his overtures would be rebuffed, but his mission was nearly saved by Hamilton Rowan, a leading society member and founder who believed him. However, Jackson was betrayed by friends accompanying him who were in actuality English agents, and he was arrested. Now with a likely connection to France, Mr. Pitt at last interceded and banned the United Irishmen, sending the military to clear them out and arrest the leaders. Most were arrested, but Tone escaped and went into exile in Philadelphia where he

would attempt to communicate with French leadership.

That year, 1794, would be the real starting point for Franco-Irish relations. Previously, despite the November Decree of 1792, the Republic was not enthusiastic or unified on the issue of international revolution, especially after the purging of the Girondins, Hébertists, and Dantonistes in 1793 and '94. In particular, Maximilien Robespierre was far more concerned with combating internal threats than sponsoring foreign revolutions. To top it off, the war along the Rhine was largely accepted as more important than starting a costly and unpredictable naval campaign against Britain.

Nevertheless, opposition to an anti-British or pro-Irish strategy was not a constant truth. Minister of War Lebrun-Tondu in 1793 was a particularly strong supporter of the idea of helping establish an Irish Republic, but he was more interested in peace, so he delayed action concerning Ireland so as not to jeopardize the arrangement with England he was forming but which failed to materialize. Agents were also sent to Ireland, but at this stage in the war, France's intelligence system was still largely undeveloped and uncoordinated, resulting in numerous and redundant agents being sent.

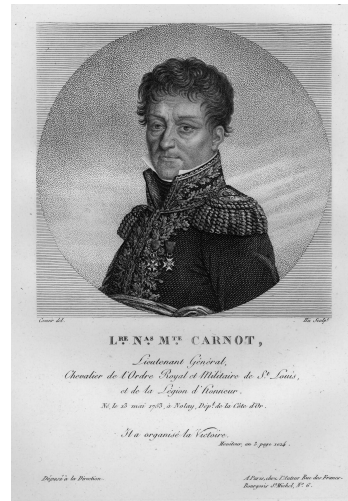
On the behalf of the Irish, it is nearly impossible to overestimate the role of their agent Wolfe Tone in the negotiations with France. His presence was the lifeline of the United Irishmen, their constant contact with the French government. His persistence alone was

greater than any other of their agents in France, and at least as important were who his connections were. Having left his exile in Philadelphia, he arrived in Paris in February 1796, and immediately started arrangements with Charles-François Delacroix, Minister of Foreign Affairs, who referred him in turn to Nicholas Madgett. Born in County Cork yet educated in France, Madgett was an Irish patriot and the accepted expert on Irish affairs, for which reason he was entrusted with arranging and organizing all activities relating to Ireland. Madgett and Tone quickly became the “best friends in the world,”³ so much so that Madgett came under scrutiny for too freely divulging information to Tone on the state of arrangements concerning Irish affairs.

As knowledgeable as Madgett was, and as friendly as he was with Tone, there nevertheless were great delays in negotiations. Tone’s memoirs are filled with gaps of days at a time due to inactivity, or situations where the Foreign Ministry lost documents or papers it needed to forward or translate, which frustrated him to no end. By April his patience was exhausted, and his next action would permanently alter the negotiation process. He decided to bring his request for military assistance to the Ministry of War. However, he did not simply appeal to any minister available there; he approached Director Lazare Carnot directly. Carnot enthusiastically embraced Tone’s proposal, and agreed to work with him

³ Theobald Wolfe Tone, *The Autobiography of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763-1798*, Vol. II, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), 11.

on the matter. Unfortunately, being occupied with affairs of state, he could not handle the issue directly, and so the matter was referred to Henri Clarke, head of the Topographical and Geographical Cabinet of the War Ministry.



As a result of Tone having involved a second ministry with the arrangements, he entangled himself in the internal political

struggle of the two of them. Both Clarke and Madgett resented the involvement of the other, and Carnot further tried to use the situation to strengthen the position of his War Ministry. Personal conflicts and problems quickly became evident. Although Clarke was more capable than Madgett of potentially offering real aid, he was intent on informing Tone of any progression strictly on a need-to-know basis, and while Carnot was particularly amicable towards Tone, Clarke came across as a personally disagreeable fellow, which would cause Tone to approach him with suspicion.

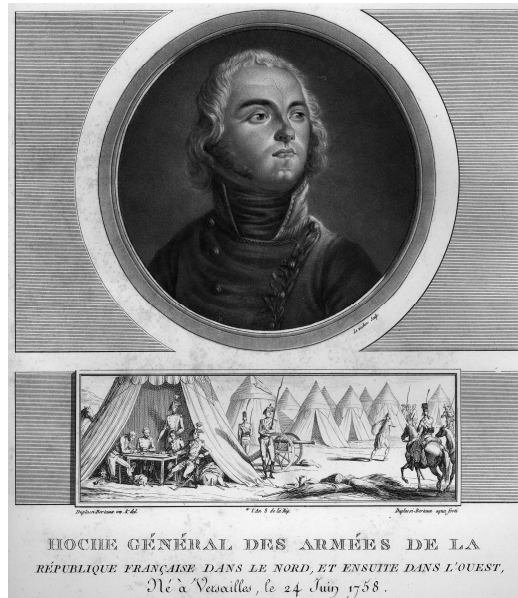
Furthermore, Clarke, like Madgett, was of Irish descent, but unlike Madgett, he was never an inhabitant of Ireland, nor did he have the same grasp of the island’s current affairs and political

realities. Particularly irksome to Tone was Clarke's outdated and largely unfounded belief that the Irish were more likely, upon their liberation from British domination, to establish a Stuart monarchy rather than a republic. Therefore, in the plans drafted by the War Ministry in April, Clarke advised that the French should seek to find a Stuart claimant that would be agreeable to all parties, but through discussions with both Clarke and Carnot Tone managed to have references to a monarchy stricken. However, the rest of the instructions were highly agreeable to Tone, namely the promise of 10,000 men and 20,000 stand of arms to be escorted by nine sail of the line and three frigates sometime in mid to late May.⁴

To understand such an offer of aid, especially in that period where international revolution had ceased to be the official aim of the Republic and where a similar attempt to Ireland had previously been abandoned as harmful to the peace process, there is a certain key issue that must be addressed. Above all else, the single cause that united the French as a whole to the Irish struggle and hardened their opposition to Britain was the Chouannerie, the royalist counter-revolutionary guerrilla force wreaking havoc in the western departments. By 1796 their civil war had consumed about half-a-million French lives, and absorbed the attention of the Directory and the French people. The most troubling aspect of the crisis, however, was the discovery that the British government had been behind not

⁴ Tone, 13.

only the royalists and émigrés but also the Chouans, aiding them financially and militarily and coordinating their efforts, as well as distributing false assignats, which had worsened the inflation problem. For those Frenchmen not previously convinced of such a connection, the Battle of Quiberon from June to July of 1795 was decisive, clearly revealing that Great Britain was determined not only to defeat France but also to utterly ruin it, prepared to employ any means to achieve that goal. General Lazare Hoche, who was



charged to lead the future Irish expedition, had been the Republic's commander of the Army of the West and the one instrumental in pacifying the region, and as a result he had become a devout Anglophobe, along with Director Lazare Carnot and the public itself, which openly cried, "Guerre aux Anglais!"⁵ While former ministers like Lebrun-Tondu had been under the delusion that the English at one point might have become allies and

⁵ Tone, 16.

they should not be unnecessarily combated, there was now a popular desire for more than the defeat of England; they wanted revenge.

One of the primary aims of the War Ministry would consequently be to "Chouannise" Great Britain. The aim would be to gather political dissidents, especially incarcerated royalists and "Jacobins" who were flooding the prisons, along with malcontents from prisoner-of-war camps and foreign patriots opposed to the English government, and employ them as an attachment to the invasion force to cause political and domestic havoc wherever their destination be set in Great Britain, so as to either topple the government or at least render it more susceptible to the real invasion force.

In addition to arranging for forces, Tone also had a few other concessions to seek. For one, he wanted to personally be involved in the expedition and join as a French officer. He met little opposition to this desire, and it was duly granted. His other request concerned the choice of commander to lead the expedition. This was not a unilateral decision by Tone; rather, the United Irish leadership had reached a consensus, and the person they wanted was General Pichegru, who according to them had a strong personal following in Ireland. When Tone proposed Pichegru to Clarke on 22 April, he replied that Pichegru had been appointed as Ambassador to Sweden and would unlikely be interested in heading the expedition. Tone in replied dismissed the need to post such an important

figure to Sweden, which he argued could be filled by "any old woman." Furthermore, "If glory was an object for him, as doubtless it was, the dismemberment of the empire of England, the destruction of her power, and the establishment of a new republic in Europe of 4,500,000 people were not ordinary occurrences."⁶ Tone did not win on this point, but he ended up with an arguably superior general, Lazare Hoche.

Nevertheless, one point that the United Irishmen and Tone were feverishly insistent upon was that the French, at all stages of the expedition, must make it clear to the Irish nation that the French are not invading as conquerors, but rather as liberators. Irish public opinion, although largely in favor of a French invasion, might perceive the French as conquerors if they did not take care. They must also guarantee religious toleration and protection of private property. Tone remarked time and time again the need for proclamations to be prepared and issued imminent to their arrival, on arrival, and at every major juncture of the campaign. Furthermore, the Irish must be left completely free to run their own government. Ireland would remain ultimately under French control so long as French forces occupied their land, but Ireland alone would have the ability to choose its form of government, regardless of whether it be a republic or, referring to Clarke's suggestion, a monarchy, and at the end of the campaign Ireland would be entirely free from foreign control;

⁶ Tone, 14.

they would not exchange English tyranny for French.

To seal negotiations between Tone and the Republic, perhaps the saving grace came in the form of two other renowned Irishmen, Arthur O'Connor and Lord Edward Fitzgerald. O'Connor was renowned for his eloquence in Great Britain and Ireland, and had been popular in reform societies in both. Lord Fitzgerald, on the other hand, was a celebrity of the highest sorts, respected and admired throughout Ireland by his friends and enemies alike. As a devout Republican, he had also been popular in Paris during the revolution where he supported the Jacobins and was good friends with Thomas Paine and Louis-Philippe d'Orléans, future King of the French. His connection to the Society of United Irishmen brought it greater recognition and acceptance, and signified that the society was not some rabble-rousing organization for discontent poor people, but rather a truly unified body without economic or social boundaries.

Both O'Connor and Lord Fitzgerald met with Hoche before the expedition, and were instrumental in arranging for not only his support but also his involvement. They also met with the Directory itself, and their discussion on the qualifications of Tone gave final authenticity to all of the work and arrangements he had been striving for over the past few months. In particular, Lord Fitzgerald makes the impression of a "true patriot," as noted by Director

Paul Barras, who was truly moved to become sympathetic to the cause.⁷

Despite how well negotiations finally seemed to be going, there was still a final problem, and that was the actual commitment of French troops. The expedition did not set sail in May, as Tone had at one point expected, nor was it even near ready. Although Hoche had succeeded in pacifying the Vendée for the meantime, France was still at war on the Continent with Austria. There was still some degree of hesitation among the Directors as to whether Hoche might better be utilized fighting Austria along the Rhine.

At least as important as the decision concerning generals was the one concerning troop distribution. The war had been costly for France so far, and troops were needed on the Eastern front. In particular, the campaign currently occupying much of the Republic's resources was the one in Italy against the Austrians. Throughout the months of negotiations, Tone made time to note the great public enthusiasm following news of the glorious "Corsican," Bonaparte, and his victories.

Here is a novel situation: the Irish campaign was on the verge of being lost due not to the military's failures, but rather to its successes. The troops reserved for Hoche's expedition were nearly redeployed to Italy and the East for a final push against Austria, should

⁷ Paul Barras, *Memoirs of Barras-Member of the Directorate*, Vol. II: *The Directorate Up To The 18th Fructidor*, (London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1895), 323.

the peace negotiations fall through. However, the Directors, especially Carnot and Barras, were not as unsure of success in the Eastern affairs as to dismiss the Irish arrangements.

Nevertheless, crisis for Tone and the United Irishmen was not averted yet. Carnot, Clarke, and Hoche were still contemplating the possibility of using the force to invade Great Britain immediately rather than liberating Ireland. Tone insisted that Ireland was ripe for rebellion, and with Ireland free, Great Britain would be starved of its main source of recruits and be forced to sue for peace. The French, not fully convinced, compromised with Tone. French forces would land in Ireland, but once free, Ireland would have to assist France in the invasion of England, acting as a base of operations and offering troops but more importantly its navy. Meanwhile, the attempt to Chouannise Great Britain would remain unaltered and be conducted simultaneously, with General Humbert, who had served under Hoche in the Army of the West, now in command of that force. As of 19 June, the Directory's plans given to Hoche called for the fleet to set sail for the West Indies in September, and en route deploy Hoche's 6,000 French and 5,000 Dutch troops in Ireland, then land Gen. Humbert's force of 1,000 men in Wales and South-West England.⁸

Due to delays, French troops would only begin consolidating in Brest in

⁸ Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 92-93.

October, and by their departure the total composition of Hoche's force would include 14,450 troops, Tone himself, 41,644 stands of arms, and 5,000 British uniforms taken from royalists at the Battle of Quiberon a year prior.⁹ All the while during this year of preparation, in Ireland the Government had passed the *Insurrection Act*, calling for the death penalty for anyone administering, persuading, or promoting an oath or engagement in any sort of society, brotherhood, or confederation not expressly allowed for by law, and for the transporting for life of anyone who had taken any such oath or engagement that was not deemed to have been "compelled by inevitable necessity." Combined with the suspension of the *Habeas Corpus Act*, the United Irish leadership was in peril, and O'Connor and Lord Fitzgerald had to return to Ireland to reorganize the executive.

The next problem to arise was within the French military itself. Hoche, impatient after all of the delays, would not tolerate the fact that the fleet was not ready to set sail, and that Admiral Villaret was more intent on the West Indies than on Ireland. The latter was due to former instructions from the Directory which had not been retracted yet, but the major problem was that Hoche did not understand how large of an undertaking it was for the navy to arrange for such an expedition, or how much precise detail it required. As a result, Hoche managed to convince the Directory remove Villaret and send all available sailors from nearby ports. His

⁹ Elliott, 111.

reorganization would only prove detrimental, creating a bitter rivalry between the army and navy.

In light of the sheer amount of hesitation that had been involved overall, the Directory finally decided to cancel the expedition on 17 December and ordered Hoche and his troops to Italy instead, but as luck would have it, just as Hoche was about to abandon the project, additional fleets arrived from Toulon and Rochefort, and in a burst of enthusiasm he decided that the expedition should be launched immediately. He left port on 16 December, before the Directory's decision was even made, replaced Gen. Humbert with the American Colonel Tate, and left Tate behind along with Gen. Hédouville behind to gather another 15,000 reinforcements.

Hoche's force, split into 3 fleets, met immediately with fog and storms, causing them to split. According to Gen. Grouchy, who led one of the fleets, Hoche had not given the other 2 fleets instructions for such an eventuality other than to wait for a week at Bantry Bay in the extreme South-West of Ireland. The fleets arrived piecemeal between 21 and 30 December, and they all, with provisions and supplies low, return back to France by 12 January 1797 without ever having landed.

While the French press blamed the failure of the expedition on the weather, Hoche blamed the military, mainly the sailors but also the officers of the other two fleets for not following orders that he claimed he had given them for

coordinating the invasion in such an event. Of greater concern to the French was that while their fleets were anchored off the Irish coast, the people did not rise up in rebellion against the English like the United Irishmen claimed they would. That had been the greatest cause of delay all along. French policy had been to offer aid once a foreign revolution had already been established, and held that the Irish must first rise and be able to hold out on their own for at least a few months. In turn, Tone and the United Irishmen had argued the whole time that if the French would just land the Irish would rise up, but the fear of British reprisals without the guarantee of success they believed would prevent a rising otherwise. They claimed that the French were supposed to land in the North, where they had been expected, and if so the people would have risen, or that even if the French had landed in Bantry Bay there still might have been a rising. Moreover, the Irish had no warning at all, and so they were caught completely by surprise.

Despite the failure of the expedition, the government had still not given up on the desire to Chouannise Great Britain, and so Col. Tate's force of about 1,000 men was dispatched in February 1797.¹⁰ The plan was to sail up St. George's Channel and deploy the forces in or near Cardigan Bay on the West coast of Wales. In the event that they should discover the River Severn little or undefended, the fleet was to sail down it

¹⁰ Elliott, 117.

and destroy Bristol, to “strike terror and amazement into the very heart of the capital of England.”¹¹ From that point they were to cross the Severn and redeploy beneath Cardiff, then move Northward towards Liverpool and establish a position past the River Dee. The force should remain mobile, relying heavily on cavalry, and recruit people along the way, aiming primarily at the lower class and playing off of the British class system. Britons that joined would be formed into separate units under French officers, while Frenchmen encountered would be allowed to join the actual French legion, so long as care be taken to prevent them from forming separate sects or cabals. Overall, their purpose would be to disrupt commerce and military movements and distract the British government by acts such as burning bridges, factories and docks and plundering towns.

Tate’s expedition was a failure. It landed at Carregwastad Point on the night of 22-23 February and simply pillaged local food supplies before, in their starved and weak state, they were caught by the British army by the next night and later repatriated. On a positive note for the French and United Irishmen, one point was made evidently clear by the two expeditions: the British navy was in disarray. Hoche had succeeded in spreading misinformation to the effect that the invasion was intended for Portugal, and so when

¹¹ Gen. Lazare Hoche, *Authentic Copies of the Instructions Given by Gen. Hoche to Colonel Tate Previous to His Landing on the Coast of South Wales, In the Beginning of 1797*, (London: J. Wright, 1797), 8.

Hoche’s expedition had been discovered, the British navy was actually sent to Portugal rather than Ireland. Neither Hoche’s nor Tate’s expeditions were intercepted by the navy, and this greatly aided the United Irish position back in Ireland, where the people realized that the British navy that they had relied on for protection had failed them, meaning that Government had failed them. Moreover, at no point during the French presence off of Bantry Bay had the British send additional forces to Ireland, and in any event they probably could not have spared more than 6,000 men.¹²

Simply because the invasion did not succeed does not mean that it never could have succeeded. One has only to observe the events of the 1798 invasion. When Gen. Humbert landed in County Mayo in Northwestern Ireland with a force of only 1,100 men in August, by the 31st he had reached County Longford in central Ireland and established an Irish Republic, with 30,000 Irishmen rising up to join and “march in mass against the common enemy, the Tyrant of Anglicized Ireland” for the “independence and happiness of Ancient Hibernia.”¹³

The French in 1798 would evidently meet with great success initially with

¹² Elliott, 121.

¹³ Gen. Jean Humbert, “Diary of an Expedition: Humbert’s Army of Ireland, 1798,” (1798). Available from: Ireland Online <<http://www.iol.ie/~fagann/1798/conaught.htm>> (accessed 29 April 2009).

less than a tenth of the previous expeditions, and also successfully evaded the British navy. On the British side, the scare generated by the attempted invasion of Ireland and especially by Tate's expedition in 1796-97 was enough to shock the population at large and create serious justifiable doubts as to their own defense capabilities. Had the French landed either in Bantry Bay or further North in 1796, or especially from April to June of '97 when United Irish membership had tripled and the British navy was paralyzed by mutinies, it is very possible that at the very least a protracted campaign would have resulted, or quite possibly a French victory. Historians must take care to avoid falling victim to the logical fallacy of dismissing the likelihood of events in history simply on the basis that they did not indeed occur, as is a frequent habit when regarding the Irish campaigns of the French Republic.