

Introduction

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The 1798 rebellion is one of the key episodes in modern Irish history, a divisive and traumatic event in which as many as 30,000 people were killed in a few weeks. The events and aftermath of the rebellion have been interpreted in a variety of conflicting and confrontational ways, and are central to this collection of essays. In the volume's opening chapter, James S. Donnelly, Jr, questions recent analyses of the rebellion, arguing that some scholars have adopted a revisionist approach to the revolutionary happenings of the 1790s. This was the case particularly in County Wexford, where scholarly revisionism has advocated the primacy of the political framework and denied any significant sectarian dimension. Donnelly challenges this interpretation and argues strongly for the restoration of the essential sectarian component to the core of popular culture and politics in the 1790s, and specifically for the centrality of sectarianism in the Wexford rebellion, before, during and after the event.

The sanguinary course and violent aftermath of the 1798 rebellion did not extinguish Irish disaffection. The transportation of substantial numbers of unrepentant Defenders and United Irishmen to the distant and vulnerable colony of New South Wales threatened to destabilise that fledgling penal outpost. According to Ruán O'Donnell, the arrival of several hundred political prisoners in the opening years of the nineteenth century introduced republican and seditious sentiment, conspiracy and insurrectionary plotting, and culminated in a full-scale revolt at Castle Hill, Port Jackson (Sydney) in March 1804, which proved to be the last effort of the United Irishmen world-wide.

While disaffection simmered among Irish exiles in the antipodes, in Ireland itself the 1798 rebellion was in the process of acquiring another, equally valid, reality, that of historical memory. The representation and deconstruction of any historical event, the ways in which it is perceived and remembered, are often as important as the event itself. The ideas and ideals of the 1790s generation, the elemental passions that were unleashed during the bloody summer months of 1798, the ferocity and intensity of the reaction created a powerful, almost personal, inheritance, one that affected all sides of the political and religious divide. For some nationalists, 1798 sanctified the idea of Irish independence and legitimised whatever means were necessary to secure it. The legacy of 1798 was seen in the festering political and sectarian sores of the 1820s, and was given concrete, if bathetic and hopeless, insurrectionary expression in the widow McCormick's County Tipperary cabbage garden at the end of July 1848.

By then the country was in the cataclysmic grip of the Great Famine. The

inadequacy of the government response, the bureaucratic posturing, the suffering and death sharpened the political differences between constitutional and more advanced nationalists. In January 1847 the nationalist consensus finally unravelled and the Young Irelanders launched the Irish Confederation to secure Irish independence, by force of arms if necessary. Gary Owens traces the establishment of branch societies in different parts of the country in the summer of 1847, the so-called Confederate Clubs, whose initial activities were essentially pedagogic and socio-cultural. Membership and militancy increased in the wake of the February 1848 revolution in Paris, the arrest of the Confederation leaders in the following month, John Mitchel's conviction for treason-felony in May and his subsequent transportation. But, given the crisis that was enveloping the country, this was a singularly inopportune time to instigate a rebellion. In the fourth year of potato failure, personal survival rather than political idealism was paramount. If the 1848 rebellion was no more than frustrated tokenism, the gesture invigorated and perpetuated the message and memory of 1798.

The events leading up to the 1848 rebellion in Ireland were closely monitored by European journalists. In Germany, according to Brigitte Anton, the middle-class, non-aligned *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* believed that the social and political situation arising from the Famine was capable of precipitating a successful revolution in Ireland, that the participants would use European models and developments to force Britain to repeal the Act of Union. The Young Ireland movement, its leadership and radical republican aims were perceived in a very negative light. The journalistic gaze was firmly focused on Mitchel, who was regarded as the most dangerous of the Irish leaders, an agitator and advocate of land re-distribution, a separatist with socialist tendencies. Mitchel was seen as a real threat to the British empire and his trial and conviction in May 1848 were given considerable coverage. The rebellion itself was derisively and contemptuously dismissed, although there was a lingering fear that Tipperary was merely the prologue to the main event.

The four essays in the volume's second section are grouped under the rubric 'Remembrance' and deal with the popular and elite literature of the pre-Famine period, a literature that is imbued with the events and discordant political and sectarian aftermath of the 1798 rebellion. Tadhg O'Sullivan examines some of the writings inspired by the Rockite campaign of rural insurgency that began in County Limerick in 1821 and became entrenched in the Cork and Kerry heartlands over the next three years. The disturbances associated with the eponymous Captain Rock were central to the millennialism of the early 1820s and represented the most serious outbreak of violence since the summer of 1798. Individuals who witnessed or experienced Rockite threats and intimidation, and those who felt vulnerable in their exposed rural outposts, saw a strong link between secret societies, agrarian agitation and outright rebellion. The ultra-Protestant Revd Mortimer O'Sullivan regarded the activities of Captain Rock as a disturbing echo and reminder of the events of the late 1790s, an explicit threat to Irish Protestantism.

The Revd O'Sullivan asserted that the memory of 1798 was one of hatred and revenge, and that it was preserved and perpetuated in ballads and seditious prophesies. He observed that 'the disturbers find their best solace in the songs and acts of heroes'.

The songs and acts of heroes, and villains, are at the core of Maura Cronin's and Tom Dunne's chapters. Between 1798 and 1848 there was a substantial body of political songs and poems in Irish, offering an insight into the politics and memory of the poor. For Dunne, these songs represent the authentic Gaelic element of popular culture, a culture that was vibrant and receptive to contemporary political ideas and language up to the Famine, one that was shaped and moulded by a shifting, transitional, bilingual, and increasingly politicised world. From the late seventeenth century onwards, Gaelic political poetry and songs reflected the trauma of land confiscation and dispossession by foreign settlers and the memory of that experience among all ranks of Catholics. The recurring themes of poetry and song in the Irish language before the Famine were the reversal of the Williamite settlement, the establishment of the Catholic Church and religion, and the restoration of pre-colonial political and social norms. These concerns were framed and expressed in essentially political and sectarian terms.

Perceptions and memories of Irish historical events, including 1798, were coloured by class, politics and religion. Cronin posits four broad categories of response to the rebellion: ultra-loyalist, liberal Protestant, elite and proletarian nationalist. Liberal Protestants and the Catholic middle and upper classes generally were aware of the divisiveness of the rebellion and attempted to diffuse the discordant sectarian and political elements and legacy. Extreme Protestants and lower-class Catholics danced to an entirely different tune. Ultra Protestants, like the Revd Mortimer O'Sullivan and Richard Musgrave, tended to demonise the 1798 rebels, to portray them as sectarian-driven savages. The Catholic lower orders were unencumbered with the aspirational baggage of the more socially advanced nationalist writers and activists and their response to 1798 paralleled that of more extreme loyalists. The rebellion was popularly seen in sectarian terms and, as evidenced in the songs and street ballads that were articulated over the next half century, was vividly remembered. The perception and memory of 1798 as mediated through ballads from the oral and broadside traditions were of a raw, sectarian conflict, expressed in graphically violent imagery and language. In the half century after the rebellion, according to Cronin, ballads and songs, the voice of the people, lamented defeat and lusted after vengeance.

Such a distillation posed considerable difficulties for the Young Ireland movement of the early 1840s, whose members were intent on promoting egalitarianism and political and sectarian reconciliation. The Young Irelanders perceived a strong political and ideological link, a continuity, between the United Irish movement and their own. Their difficulty was to reconcile the polarities and tensions that arose from the 1798 rebellion, to acknowledge and celebrate the rebels' aspirations and ideals without condoning their excesses. The Young Ireland response was

almost inevitably complex and ambivalent, much of it captured, according to Seán Ryder, in John Kells Ingram's, 'The Memory of the Dead', which was published in the *Nation* newspaper in 1843, and in the writings of Thomas Davis. The latter's idealisation of Wolfe Tone contributed largely to a dilution and depoliticisation of the United Irish message and the 1798 legacy, to a shift in emphasis from the militaristic and sectarian to the romantic and heroic. This perspective was open to changing, circumstantial influences and Young Ireland romanticism was further complicated by the reappearance of the catastrophic in Irish history, the Great Famine. Davis, who was largely responsible for mediating Tone to the 1840s generation and beyond, died before the reality of the Famine became apparent. But that event did shape the political philosophy and response of his fellow Young Irelanders. By spring 1848, the Irish political and socio-economic context had changed utterly and there was considerable revolutionary activity in many parts of Europe. Davis' untimely death and O'Connell's inopportune one, together with the deepening crisis in Ireland, propelled John Mitchel to the political forefront. It was the darker Mitchel who signified government and landlord culpability and to him fell the task of rekindling the revolutionary flame and channelling the tradition to the next and subsequent generations, particularly to the Famine diaspora and their descendants, who were destined to play a pivotal role in Irish nationalist and republican politics for the next century and more.

The volume's six remaining essays, under the rubric 'Representation', continue to explore the ways in which historical events are perceived, remembered and projected. In his analysis of the formulation of John Mitchel's political ideology, Robert Mahony attributes Mitchel's politics and vision to his bitter hostility to British imperialism in Ireland, to imperialism generally, and to curbs on his own individual liberty and freedom. Mitchel's opposition to imperialism was moulded by his youthful exposure to the Trinitarian controversy in the Synod of Ulster, to the rift in the 1820s between 'Old Light' and 'New Light' Presbyterianism, in which Mitchel's father, who stood for religious liberty, played a leading role. The conflict within Presbyterianism represented the tension between majority and minority will, the question of individual liberty, while it also replicated, albeit on a much smaller scale, the Irish political struggle and the relationship between Ireland and the metropolitan power. The Trinitarian controversy helped to shape Mitchel's political consciousness, but it was his personal exposure to the horrors of the Famine that triggered the intensity of his rhetoric and his political activism.

Ireland and Irish affairs presented nineteenth-century English fiction writers, including Dickens, Trollope and Eliot, who explored Irish themes in their prose, with a problem, although it was less one of ambiguity and complexity than of marketing reality. Neil McCaw's analysis of *Adam Bede*, whose author, George Eliot, was sympathetic to Irish nationalist political aspirations and wished to bridge the religious, cultural and economic differences that separated England and Ireland, suggests that in early Victorian England, hostility or apathy to Ireland meant that for commercial reasons Ireland could only be discussed covertly or symbolically in

fiction. Given Eliot's liberal and sympathetic attitude to Ireland, the lack of direct reference to the country's position and problems in *Adam Bede* is surprising, but, McCaw argues, the Irish question is addressed covertly rather than openly in the book. In McCaw's reading of the text, Eliot acknowledges implicitly that England was largely responsible for the catastrophic events and aftermath of the 1798 rebellion in Ireland, which were seen as major historical blunders. The resulting union was one of unequal and incompatible partners. Redemption and forgiveness were possible but could only be secured by severing unsuitable and unsustainable ties. The political union between Ireland and Britain was inoperable and should be ended, a union of hearts offering the only possibility of success.

A union of Irish hearts was what Tone desired and preached, the substitution of the common name of Irishman for Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. Tone is central to Sophie Ollivier's chapter, as indeed he was to the centenary commemoration of the rising in 1898, which, according to Ollivier, embraced the historiographical, the monumental and the ceremonial, adding that the symbolisation of 1798 was just as important as the historical reality. The centenary commemoration provided a common focus for the disparate strands of late nineteenth-century Irish nationalism, the United Irish League, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Irish Parliamentary Party, each of which interpreted Tone to suit its own political vision and ends, just as Davis and Mitchel had done earlier. Ironically, Tone's idea of Irish brotherhood was completely ignored in the 1898 commemorations, swamped by competing versions of nationalist truth. Ollivier compares the centenary commemorations of 1789 in France and 1798 in Ireland and concludes that commemoration 'is a strange activity'.

Of the three typologies of commemoration identified by Ollivier, the monumental is the most tangible and visible, constituting, as it does, a public display of celebration and aspiration. Monuments are more accessible to the general public than conventional, written history and project an idealised version of national heroes and the national past. In Ireland, the 1798 centenary was responsible for raising thirty monuments in different parts of the country, the most concentrated bout of statuary commemoration in Irish history. These monuments reflected the growing confidence of *fin de siècle* Irish nationalism. Their purpose was to counteract colonial symbolism in public places, to inspire the living and commemorate the dead. Contemporary political concerns were to the fore in 1898, not least the dissension and deep division that characterised late nineteenth-century Irish nationalism. According to Orlaith Mannion, the organising committees at Cork and Skibbereen were dominated by advanced nationalists, Fenian sympathisers, unlike similar initiatives in other parts of the country, where parliamentarians and constitutional nationalists took the lead. The representation in these monuments was usually feminine, with the figure of Erin, invariably enveloped in Celtic revival emblems, often featuring. In Cork, the central figure of Erin is protected by Tone, Davis, Peter O'Neill Crowley and Michael Dwyer.

Dwyer also featured in Australian centenary commemorative activities. He was

the most iconic, if not necessarily the most significant and successful, of the hundreds of political prisoners who were transported to the penal colony of New South Wales in the wake of the 1798 rising and Emmet's defeat five years later. Jonathan Wooding traces the history of the national monument to the 1798 rising and rebels that was erected on the site of Dwyer's grave in Sydney and unveiled in 1901. The monument features Celtic revival motifs, battle scenes and a number of the rebel leaders, and, according to Wooding, it is inscribed with very strong sentiments, those in Gaelic expressing a particularly militant version of nationalism.

Public monuments constitute a static form of historical representation and commemoration but another visual medium, film, derives its potency from its immediacy, from movement and change. Monumental commemoration transcends the immediate. It is heroic, symbolic and idealistic, intended to inspire and remind. Cinema is popular and commercial and displays little concern for reality or for the accuracy of historical events.

In his analysis of cinema's depiction of Irish rebellion, Kevin Rockett addresses the question of historical perception and the mediation of history to a popular audience. Most Irish historical films are set in the 1798-1803 period. The makers and producers of these films tended to eschew the events and aftermath of 1641 in deference to Catholic and nationalist sentiment. The 1848 rebellion was too limited dramatically and, like the Fenian rising of 1867, too radical for later Catholic sensibilities. Films with Irish historical themes were aimed at a popular audience and had a number of stock features, suggesting conservative and moral imperatives. According to Rockett, physical force republicanism and the ideology of armed rebellion were cinematically deconstructed as life over death, the rebel protagonists invariably choosing emigration rather than sacrifice on the scaffold, a contrivance often facilitated by the active intervention of the ubiquitous clergyman.

The cinematic projection of history for popular consumption and mass entertainment glossed over the brutal reality of many aspects of Irish history, the bigotry, bloodshed and brutality, the discord, division and death. However, such a distortion of history does underline another theme of this volume, that the perception and memory of an event is often as important and potent as the event itself, that individuals, factions and parties interpret and appropriate history to serve their own ends. The essays in this volume, written from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, substantiate the view that 1798 and other occasions of historical remembrance have been variously fashioned by the ideological requirements of those who remember.