

Foreign enemies and internal rebels: the French War and the United Irishmen in New South Wales

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Although strategic aspects relating to the decision to found a penal colony in New South Wales in 1788 have been debated little attention has been paid to the most threatening post-settlement concern, the French War of 1792–1815.¹ The input of the United Irishmen in this global imbroglio elicited the comment from colonial governor Philip Gidley King that they were 'traitors at home and abroad'.² War transformed the campaign for parliamentary reform in Ireland from a radical to a seditious enterprise and fostered the revolutionary 'partnership' between the United Irishmen and France. The most dramatic result of this alliance was the rebellion of 1798, the aftermath of which included insurrectionary plots in New South Wales in 1800 and a full blown revolt in March 1804. The possibility of the French raiding, annexing or colonising parts of New South Wales could not be discounted until 1811 when British victories in the East Indies secured regional naval ascendancy.³

Britain's declaration of war in February 1793 on the newly proclaimed French Republic initiated a gruelling struggle that risked the empire acquired in the Seven Years War (1756–63) and almost wrecked the economy. Given that the distant, penal colony of New South Wales had yet to attain self-sufficiency, the addition of an external French threat to routine matters of internal security had serious repercussions. Not surprisingly, the importation of hundreds of pro-French United Irishmen became a bone of contention in Port Jackson (Sydney).

The anti-French coalition joined by Britain in 1793 generally comprised Austria, Russia, Poland and Prussia but far from overwhelming their adversary the members of this alliance had to sue for peace at least once during the interlocked series of wars that terminated at Waterloo in 1815. The vast scale of the war effort may be gauged from the fact that Westminster shouldered the expense of maintaining 110,000–120,000 Royal Navy seamen and marines in the 1790s. This inflated establishment was increased in the early 1800s and additionally reinforced

1 See A.G.L. Shaw, *Convicts and the Colonies. A Study of Penal Transportation from Great Britain and Ireland to Australia and Other Parts of the British Empire* (Melbourne, 1977) and Alan Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages, Illusions of Australia's Convict Beginnings* (Melbourne, 1994). 2 Philip Gidley King to —, 7 October 1800 in *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 23 June 1801. 3 For the French dimension see Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution. The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, 1982).

in 1803–6 by the exemption from impressment of 47,000 paid crewmen serving in privateers carrying letters of marque. Even so, defending Britain and Ireland from cross-channel invasion whilst servicing a vast maritime empire led to severe manpower shortages. Barham, First Lord of the Admiralty in 1805, sought at least 20,000 recruits at a time when many ships of the line were too undermanned to put to sea.⁴

British land forces fared as poorly on the continent as the rest of the coalition in the late 1790s, although naval victories at Cape St. Vincent and Camperdown between February and October 1797 kept the French and their allies temporarily from home shores. The Bantry Bay invasion scare of December 1796, when 12,000 French troops reached the coast of Cork only to withdraw in severe weather, ensured that there was no room for complacency. There could be no doubt that the French were willing to make good their promise of military aid to the paramilitary United Irishmen who, by mid-1798, had almost 300,000 members ready to revolt upon the arrival of their republican allies.⁵ There were other failures. A minor incursion by the French 'Black Legion' at Pembrokeshire in Wales in February 1797 and, more seriously, the landing of General Humbert's small corps at Killala, County Mayo, in August 1798 exposed security lapses in Irish waters. The intrepid Citizen Savary delivered 1,100 French veterans to Mayo without opposition and re-visited the west coast of Ireland before the winter.⁶

Rear-Admiral Sir John Warren proved more effective on 12 October 1798 when several French frigates and Wolfe Tone were captured after a running battle off Tory Island, County Donegal. Yet, in view of prior failures of intelligence and interception, few observers could have predicted that the Royal Navy would win every engagement of consequence until the decisive Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805. In the interim, safeguarding British coastlines and the sea lanes to India, the West Indies and North America demanded levels of naval resources detrimental to the protection of New South Wales and to the efficient administration of penal transportation.

What had to be considered in New South Wales was that the sizeable contingent of United Irish prisoners not only perceived themselves to be allies of the French but had sworn an oath to assist them in breaking British connections with Ireland.⁷ Several prominent veterans of the Franco-Irish campaign of August/September 1798 had arrived in Port Jackson by 1802, including rebel officers

4 Christopher D. Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War, 1803-1815* (Manchester, 1992), p. 11. See also Colin White, 1797, *Nelson's Year of Destiny* (London, 1998) and T.C.W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London, 1986). 5 See John A. Murphy (ed.), *The French are in the Bay. The Expedition to Bantry Bay 1796* (Cork, 1997). 6 See Norman Longmate, *Island Fortress. The Defence of Great Britain 1603-1945* (London, 1993), chapter eighteen, David Davies, *Fighting Ships. Ships of the Line 1793-1815* (London, 1996) and Richard Hayes, *The Last Invasion of Ireland. When Connaught Rose* (Dublin, 1937). 7 For a detailed account of initiation procedures see Ruán O'Donnell, *The Rebellion in Wicklow, 1798* (Dublin, 1998), chapter two.

Thomas Rigney, Thomas Gibbons and Roger McGuire. This prisoner cadre could not be ignored given that Defenders and United Irishmen comprised up to a quarter of the total colonial population in 1802 and were proportionally more numerous than in their native country.⁸ In the years 1800 to 1802 governors John Hunter and King were concerned by the arrival of the 'United ships', concerns sharpened by lurid reports of their violent activities in Ireland, mutinous behaviour on the voyages into exile and insurrectionary plotting upon arrival. That very little could be done to redress this source of danger owed much to the context of the French War.⁹

New South Wales and the French War

Accounts of the war reached the New South Wales military establishment through official channels, imported publications and personal correspondence. In September 1801 Captain John Piper of the New South Wales Corps received details from his cousin of the Battle of Copenhagen, a naval action fought five months earlier in which Admiral William Bligh, future governor of the colony, had featured prominently.¹⁰ Bligh, whose family owned an estate in Co. Meath, had suffered the ignominy of being thrown off his ship at the Nore in June 1797 by pro-French mutineers. A considerable proportion of the mutineers were Defenders and United Irishmen who had been transported to the fleet without trial. Pro-French mutinies by United Irish sailors in the Channel and Bantry Bay fleets continued in 1798-9 and several *Defiance* men were subsequently sent out to New South Wales. Similarly, the revolts of United Irishmen sent to serve in the garrisons of Newfoundland, Jamaica and the Cape indicated that the even less fortunate rebel convicts of New South Wales would take advantage of security lapses.¹¹

New South Wales was protected to a degree by its distance from Mauritius, Reunion and other French bases in the East Indies as well as by the scarcity of enemy warships in the southern hemisphere. The colony was further insulated by its comparatively low strategic and commercial value which lessened the likelihood of annexation by the French or their allies. French settlement in other parts of the

⁸ See General Trench to Cornwallis, 10 November 1798, quoted in Hayes, *Last Invasion*, pp. 188-9 and [Littlehales] to General Myers, 20 January 1799, Public Record Office (England), Home Office, 100/86/115. ⁹ See Ruán O'Donnell, 'Marked for Botany Bay': the Wicklow United Irishmen and the Development of Penal Transportation to New South Wales (1791-1805)', PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1996 and Anne-Maree Whitaker, *Unfinished Revolution. The United Irishmen in New South Wales 1800-1810* (Sydney, 1994). ¹⁰ John Piper to John Piper, 26 September 1801, Piper Papers, Mitchel Library (Sydney), MS A254, p. 13. ¹¹ See *Freeman's Journal*, 9 October 1798 and *Hibernian Journal*, 30 October 1798. Bligh persecuted the 1797 Sheerness Mutiny 'standard bearer' Thomas McCann when reunited with his former United Irish adversary in New South Wales ten years later. See George Mackaness, 'Vice Admiral William Bligh, FRS, His Life, Voyages and Misadventure', Ph.D. thesis, 2 vols, vol. 2, pp. 793-807.

continent, however, was held to be a possibility, particularly after the controversial reconnaissance made by Nicholas Baudin in 1802. Sea communications were often vulnerable to the French navy in the Indian Ocean and Atlantic and were shown to be so on 27 September 1805 when HMS *Calcutta* was seized. The ship was homeward bound from Sydney after playing an important role in the suppression of the United Irishmen's Castle Hill revolt.¹²

Few aspects of colonial life were immune from the ill-effects of wartime exigencies. Direct consequences included insufficient levels of shipping available to transport convicts to New South Wales. This was a serious problem given the *raison d'être* of maintaining a costly outpost and the vital dual role played by transport fleets in redressing the often chronic shortages of food and manufactured goods in Port Jackson. Penal transportation, nevertheless, remained a political, practical and moral imperative in Britain given the reforms of the criminal justice system and the shortfall of hulk/penitentiary capacity. Public interest demanded the exemplary punishment of criminals, if not also the persecution of such political offenders as the republican 'Scottish Martyrs'.

The regular dispatch of transports from Ireland was even more important in the late 1790s given the demonstrable failure of the quarterly assizes and magistracy to stem the spread of the Defenders. The 'French Defenders', as they were sometimes called, were a revolutionary Jacobin mass movement subsumed by the United Irishmen in 1795-7. Martial law was introduced in Ireland in 1796 to facilitate counter-insurgency against republican paramilitaries and to circumvent the cumbersome, overwhelmed and ineffective civil forums. Thousands of sentenced and unsentenced prisoners were sent to the fleet or conscripted into the marine divisions and the army's foreign service regiments. Open rebellion, nevertheless, broke out in Ireland in May 1798 and in sufficient strength to force the emergency redeployment of troops needed to protect Britain from possible French invasion.¹³

The restoration of government ascendancy in Ireland by late September 1798 at the cost of at least 30,000 lives and the concession of a generous amnesty to rebel veterans permitted reconsideration of prisoner issues. By March 1799, when a new Rebellion Act required the courtmartial and clearance of detained United Irish suspects, the matter had reached crisis proportions. Increasingly, the expensive option of transportation to New South Wales was taken in cases where circumstances of conviction or unsentenced exile closed off alternative modes of disposal. From 1799, physical infirmity, conviction for murder and known leadership status within the United Irish organisation generally prohibited the main outlet of conscription. Deporting dangerous rebels took precedence over criminals who were

¹² See Memorial of Daniel Woodriff, n.d., ML MS 613, No. 5, p. v. ¹³ See R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution, 1760-1801* (London, 1979), pp. 572-3. ¹⁴ See *Hibernian Telegraph*, 23 April 1800 and O'Donnell, 'Marked for Botany Bay', chapters four and five.

sometimes held back in prisons in the early 1800s so that more recently convicted politicals could be embarked.¹⁴

Deporting prisoners from Ireland and Britain was complicated by the war. The Dublin Castle executive frequently urged the transport and victualling boards to issue orders for the chartering and fitting out of East India merchantmen as convict transports. Protracted wrangling over the *Minerva*, which in August 1799 became the first post-Rebellion transport to sail from Ireland, revealed tensions between Dublin and London over financial liability and responsibilities towards the colonial regime in New South Wales. Once this was settled to the satisfaction of Whitehall and Dublin Castle inter-governmental tensions centred on the availability of vessels for future convict fleets.¹⁵

The transport commissioners and the Home Office did what they could to strike a balance between competing penal and trade requirements but were compromised by their enforced reliance on East Indiamen prior to 1803 and afterwards in the case of Irish convicts. While transport masters were prohibited from putting into both Rio and Cape Town there was an evident lack of will to punish those who did so in furtherance of personal profit. Demurrage and unjustified delays in sailing, however, were often heavily penalised as they complicated convoy administration and breached charter party conditions.¹⁶ Most striking of all was the latitude granted to transport crews for the often extreme violence used to suppress mutiny attempts on ships carrying Irish political prisoners. Verdicts from the courts that had examined maltreatment and the deadly use of force by the crews of the *Marquis Cornwallis* and *Britannia* in 1796-7 established that masters who had starved, severely flogged and even summarily executed Irish prisoners in 1800-1802 need not fear meaningful reprimands. Indeed, the notorious abuses of the *Atlas I* and *Hercules* in 1801, while excoriated by Vice Admiralty courts and in London, did not impede the subsequent careers of the officers responsible.¹⁷

A somewhat greater degree of control was envisaged in the spring of 1802 when the Addington ministry advocated the transportation of British convicts in Royal Navy vessels. It was hoped that the high mortality rate of the Third Fleet (1791) could be reduced although the provision of adequate medical personnel had to await the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815.¹⁸ Only then were sufficient naval surgeons freed from military duties to implement the far sighted recommendations of one-time Belfast United Irishman, Dr William Redfern. Redfern's perspective on transportation in 1814 was informed by his having been dispatched to New South Wales in June 1801 for seditious offences.¹⁹ Addington's primary concern in 1802, as Alan Frost contends, was the procurement of strategic naval stores such as

¹⁵ See Castlereagh to John King, 16 July 1798, P.R.O., H.O. 100/81/265; 31 January 1799, P.R.O., H.O.100/86/82 and 12 July 1799, P.R.O., H.O. 100/89/93. ¹⁶ See Hardwicke to Pelham, 10 November 1802, P.R.O., H.O. 100/110/340-1. ¹⁷ See O'Donnell, 'Marked for Botany Bay', pp. 355-65 and *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 3, pp. 720-21; 4, pp. 315-20. 425. ¹⁸ Shaw, *Convicts and the Colonies*, pp. 115-8. ¹⁹ See William Redfern to Macquarie, 30 September 1814 in *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 8, p. 278.

hemp, flax and timber for the return journeys. These goods, if not sourced in the colony, were to be amassed there for repatriation by trading missions to India and New Zealand. In March 1803 Governor Hunter, grappling with immediate problems of colonial subsistence, furnished a small load of materials for the hold of HMS *Glutton* once emptied of its convicts. Disappointment at this meagre supply was overshadowed by the loss of the timber laden *Calcutta* and its crew to the French two years later.²⁰

The French War created huge demand for crews, guards, escort vessels and the finance necessary to convey convicts, supplies and reinforcements to the colony. Wage inflation, amongst other factors, exacerbated the problem of desertion from the navy into merchantmen and privateers. This obliged the East India Company transports to hire Lascars for crewing its Irish transports and prisoners put on board the *Friendship* in the summer of 1799 were surprised to find themselves under the control of 'moors' and 'blacks'.²¹ A more serious problem for colonial administrators was the seeming indifference of the various civil and military authorities in Dublin, Cork and Waterford to their requirements. Symptomatic of this was the frequent failure of Irish transport masters to furnish governors with indents detailing the names and sentences of the convicts. The *Friendship's* indent had to be reconstructed from available documentation and that of the *Anne* arrived eighteen years after the ship.²²

It was obviously an issue of the first importance in a penal colony that the identity of convicts was verifiable and that their crimes and length of sentence were accurately set down. Omission of such basic data evinced a lack of political will in Dublin Castle to confront well-known corrupt practices in the transportation system. In the early 1800s rations and clothing were routinely stolen for private sale by the transport crews and agents. Scope for corruption was evidently boosted by the inter-marriage and social intimacy between the jailers, victuallers and transport masters in Cork, the centre of the Irish convict system. In the late 1790s and early 1800s the Reeds, Sainthills, Jennings and Hardings formed a tight social circle whose mutual vested interests in August 1799 coincided with preparations to dispatch the *Minerva*, *Friendship* and *Anne*. Incompetence or disinterest in Cork resulted in the sailing of the *Friendship* with 200-300 tons of cargo less than her hold was capable of carrying, an oversight decried in the struggling colony.²³

What mattered to the Irish authorities was ridding the country of certain

²⁰ See Alan Frost, *Convicts and Empire. A Naval Question, 1776-1811* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 168-9. ²¹ Mathew Sutton to his father, 25 May 1799, National Archives of Ireland, State Prisoner's Petition, 846. ²² Hardwicke to Pelham, 21 May 1802, P.R.O., H.O. 100/110/164 and Reg Wright, 'If All Else Fails' in *Descent*, XVI, part three, 1986, pp. 118-24. ²³ Hunter to Portland, 20 March 1800, *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 2, p. 473. See also *ibid.*, pp. 550, 572 and Marsden to Shee, 26 January 1802, P.R.O., H.O. 100/110/29. For corruption on board the *Queen*, the first transport to sail from Ireland in 1791, see David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales . . .* (2 vols., London, 1798-1802), vol. 1, p. 180.

categories of political prisoners in such a way as to render unlikely their unauthorised return or confederation with the French. What happened once these deportees were delivered, dead or alive, to New South Wales was immaterial as long as more prisoners could be sent out when the necessary political, logistic and penal circumstances re-aligned. In this they were implicitly backed by the Colonial Office and the transport board who ignored the attempts of governors King and Hunter to impose reasonable pre-conditions regarding the numbers of Irish politicals sent out and the inadequate provision of garrison troops. Between 1800 and 1806 eight convict transports left Ireland carrying at least 600 political prisoners to New South Wales.

Another byproduct of the war was the furnishing of particularly low grade recruits into the unfavoured New South Wales Corps, the colony's only resident professional military formation. An Australia-bound reinforcement recruited from French and Irish inmates of the Savoy Military prison in 1797 seized the British female convict transport *Lady Shore* en route to Port Jackson and, having killed or expelled loyal crewmen, diverted the ship to South America.²⁴ Fraternisation between Defender/United Irish political prisoners and their guards was also a factor in the mutiny attempts on the *Marquis Cornwallis* and *Britannia* in 1796-7.²⁵

Mutiny would not have presented a critical problem were it not for the fact that recapture was unlikely as escort vessels could not be spared to accompany convict fleets to New South Wales. Irish transports of the early 1800s were generally required to await the departure of merchant fleets from Cork to North America and the West Indies in order to gain the protection of the warships which shepherded them into the Atlantic. This amounted to temporary cover as the destination of the transports obliged them to break off to steer for either Rio or Cape Town.

On parting with the merchant fleet in October 1799 Captain Salkeld's *Minerva* elected to abandon its slower convoy mate, *Friendship*, which then altered course for Cape Town. Preparations were made by Salkeld shortly after leaving Rio to repel a boarding attack from the feared 22-gun French privateer *Bounaparte*. Swedish, Spanish and Danish vessels were variously encountered, outrun and communicated with but no sign of the French was detected. The naive and humane Salkeld was dismayed when the famous rebel leader General Joseph Holt, to whom he had entrusted the operation of a cannon, disclosed his intention to turn the piece on the quarterdeck and destroy the *Minerva's* steerage had the *Bounaparte* appeared.²⁶ Irish convict ships, unlike their English counterparts, had armed guards

²⁴ See Bonwick Transcripts, ML A2000/4, pp. 1027-30, *London Chronicle*, 2 March 1798 and 7 September 1800, *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 2, pp. 636-7. ²⁵ See Ruán O'Donnell, 'Desperate and Diabolical'; Defenders and United Irishmen in early New South Wales' in Richard Davis et al. (eds), *Irish-Australian Studies* (Sydney, 1996), pp. 360-72. ²⁶ O'Donnell, 'Marked for Botany Bay', pp. 344-5 and Joseph Holt, *A Rum Story. The Adventures of Joseph Holt, Thirteen Years in New South Wales (1800-12)* edited by Peter O'Shaughnessy (Sydney, 1988), pp. 43-4.

and augmented crews to keep the prisoners in check but such precautions failed to inhibit mutiny attempts by political prisoners on the *Minerva*, *Anne*, *Hercules* and *Atlas I*. The struggle for the *Hercules* on 29 December 1801 claimed eighteen lives and contributed to the deaths of twenty-six more.²⁷

The efforts of Hunter and King to stem the flow of Irish political prisoners were driven by several factors. One of these was that the United Irishmen in early colonial Australia were the living embodiment of the international menace of the French. Their presence in New South Wales established the uncomfortable fact that 'the French disease' had taken strong root in Ireland and Britain. Indeed, the steady arrival of Irish republicans until February 1806 reminded penal administrators that sedition retained a level of popular appeal in Ireland, notwithstanding military defeats in 1798 and 1803 and the general acknowledgement of French rapacity in occupied lands. Part of King's discomfort derived from his conviction that his 'infant' colony was being overrun by Irishmen professing the 'most notorious, seditious and rebellious principles. . . ready, and only waiting an opportunity to put their diabolical plans in execution'.²⁸ While sympathetic towards King's predicament, the Home Office simply urged the 'most vigilant circumspection and unabated firmness' in dealing with Irish prisoners.²⁹ Far from committing the financial resources, troops and war material needed to render the colony impregnable, London looked to New South Wales and New Zealand for strategic supplies.

Transported Irish rebel convicts were presumed to be violence-prone combatants and promoters of militant republicanism; in Sydney, Parramatta and Van Diemen's Land they represented the visible face of an ongoing revolution. This elicited hostility from the small non-convict population who, as Holt recorded, were 'filled' with 'dread' owing to the fearsome reputation of 'United [Irish] Criminality'. Mrs Elizabeth Patterson claimed in October 1800: 'I have no idea myself that they will ever appear in numbers or in noon-day, my terror is private assassination breaking into our houses in the dead of night in which they were but too successful in their own country. Government I trust as they have now sent them will take some steps for our protection, either by sending more forces, or stationing a man of war, as a guard ship in the harbour.'³⁰

Settlers and administrators were often reminded of the presence of this fifth column in their midst by the provocative conduct of Irish prisoners. In April 1799 Irish convicts at work in Toongabbie planted 'trees of liberty', cheered false news of the approach of French invasion forces and anticipated evacuation to freedom by their republican saviours. Such episodes indicated that there was a real prospect of collusion between a substantial element of the convict population and the

27 John Washington Price, 'Journal of a Voyage from Ireland to New South Wales and India on *Minerva*, May 1798-June 1800', British Museum Library, MS 13, 880, p. 46. 28 King to Portland, 10 March 1801, *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 3, pp. 73-4. 29 Hobart to King, 30 January 1802, *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 3, p. 369. 30 Elizabeth Patterson to her uncle, 3 October 1800, ML Ap. 36/6.

French. There were other signs that the exiled United Irishmen remained true to the cause that had resulted in their transportation: they retained their paramilitary titles, developed informal county and regional groupings and made suspicious use of the Irish language when forced to attend Anglican services. Insubordination of this order might ordinarily have been interpreted as facets of cultural diversity but when viewed against the background of attempted risings in the years 1800-1804 such traits represented a troubling pattern of dissent.³¹

Successive 'Irish plots' in Port Jackson/Parramatta and Van Diemen's Land in 1800 and the far more serious Castle Hill revolt of 1804 threatened the stability of the colony when it was comparatively vulnerable. Pikes were manufactured by transported blacksmiths, armaments procured by raids on free settlers and elements of the colonial garrison suborned. Added to these machinations were less dramatic but unsettling outbreaks of brigandage by groups of United Irish convicts. James Hughes, a rebel captain in south Leinster in 1798 and afterwards the leader of a violent rebel faction, was one of Australia's first bushrangers. He escaped custody with other 'insurgent fugitives' shortly after being transported, was outlawed in September 1803 and, having harassed isolated free settlers for a time, was presumed dead in 1804. Other bands of United Irishmen periodically broke out of the loosely-guarded Castle Hill settlement to terrorise the well-affected and exasperate the colonial authorities.³²

Protecting New South Wales was the undistinguished and dispersed New South Wales Corps and two civilian yeomanries, the Sydney Association and the Parramatta Association. British ordnance and engineers could not be spared to protect the exposed landward side of Sydney against a foreign aggressor, let alone properly command the expansive harbour. Small batteries were built and rebuilt around the harbour between 1798 and 1801 at Dawes Point, Bennelong Point, Garden Island and Middle Head but doubts remained as to the efficacy of their ten guns.³³ The pessimistic assessment of Captain Daniel Woodriff was that the improved Dawes Point defences 'would in a few minutes be silenced and defeated'.³⁴ He argued 'a naval force is absolutely necessary on the coast of New South Wales' to protect it from the French and to deter American opportunists from harassing resident sealers, as had occurred in Bass Strait in 1803. Significantly, Woodriff highlighted the Irish dimension when advocating an ongoing Royal Navy presence to

³¹ Collins, *Account*, II, p. 77. See also O'Donnell, 'Marked for Botany Bay', chapter nine.

³² *Sydney Gazette*, 18 September 1803 and Andrew Doyle to Anon., 9 March 1804, B.M., MS 35,644, p. 295. ³³ See King to Portland, 10 March 1801, *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 3, pp. 73-4 and Collins, *Account*, vol. 2, pp. 128, 263-4. In 1802 Lt James Tuckey, of Mallow, County Cork, was surprised that 'not the smallest step has yet been taken to put the chief settlement in a state of defense against the probable revolt of the disaffected convicts, or the hostile attacks of a foreign enemy'. J. Hingston Tuckey, 'A Sketch of the Current State of the Colony of New South Wales', ML A2001, p. 36. ³⁴ Memorial of Captain Daniel Woodriff, n.d., No. 6, p. ii. See also *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 4, p. 331.

guard 'against Foreign enemies, or in support of the same, against internal Rebels'.³⁵

Direct contact between the French navy and United Irish exiles in New South Wales occurred between 20 June and 3 July 1802 when two French brigs and the explorer Nicolas Baudin arrived in Port Jackson. It was believed that Baudin had been dispatched by Napoleon in October 1800 to make a comprehensive examination of the Australian coastline with a view to the possible future establishment of French colonies. The arrival of the *Geographe* and *Naturaliste* in Van Diemen's Land in January 1802 excited considerable interest in New South Wales but no direct hostilities ensued as the ostensibly scientific purpose of the mission entitled the French to safe passage.³⁶ Governor King correctly deduced the underlying motives of the French and stepped up his drive to deny them access to prime port locations by establishing convict communities in Derwent (Hobart), Port Dalrymple (Launceston) and Port Phillip.³⁷ James Hingston Tuckey, first lieutenant of HMS *Calcutta*, was also perturbed by the thoroughness of the French investigations. He noted that over a period of three months 'the officers minutely surveyed the [Sydney] harbour and also made scientific excursions into the interior by which they acquired a more extensive knowledge of the nature of the country than the colonists themselves possessed'.³⁸

On 10 December 1802 ex-United Irishman Dr Daniel McCullum, and James Fleming arrived on King's Island to find that the French had established a temporary settlement. Three days later the colonist party 'dined at the French tents', perhaps consoled by the belated realisation that the Peace of Amiens (27 March 1802) had halted the war. The treaty was a major setback for the United Irishmen but did not deter Robert Emmet and others from attempting to negotiate foreign military aid. In New South Wales, moreover, the general demeanour of the French during their sojourn convinced several observers that Baudin's premature death may have been the main reason that a rival European colonial venture was not pursued in the early 1800s.³⁹

A more hostile reaction to Baudin's visit would probably have been forthcoming had their overtures to prominent United Irish prisoners been detected by the authorities. It was not until late 1804 that the incriminating correspondence of Cork United Irishman William Maume was obtained in a security crackdown. Maume, a former associate of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, held a series of secret meetings in July 1802 with Captain Emmanuel Hamelin of the *Naturaliste*, Lieutenant

35 Woodruff Memo, n.d., ML MSS 613, No. 5, pp. ii-iii. 36 See Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, pp. 165-6. For earlier French interest in colonies in Australasia and the East Indies see Alan Frost, 'The Colonization of New South Wales' in John Hardy and Alan Frost (eds), *European Voyaging Towards Australia* (Canberra, 1990), pp. 85-92. 37 King to Hobart, 9 August and 17 September 1802, *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 3, pp. 535, 578 and Jan Kociumbas, *The Oxford History of Australia, Possessions, 1770-1860* (Oxford, 1992), p. 93. 38 Tuckey, 'Sketch', ML A2001, p. 36. 39 'Journal of a Voyage to King's Island by James Fleming', December 1802, ML MS SZ 994, p. 6.

Louis de Freycinet and the naturalist Francois Peron and prepared a written report for them on colonial affairs. Hamelin informed Maume that the French anticipated the collapse of Amiens and intended to seize New South Wales. A role for the Irish prisoners was evidently intended, as was the employment of the liberated convicts in projected attacks on British possessions in the East Indies. Maume was pressed for 'useful intelligence' in the days following 3 July 1802 and offered passage to Mauritius for induction into the French military. He declined to leave at that time but over forty aspirant escapees were removed from the French ships before they sailed. Failed attempts were also made to rendezvous with the French at sea using stolen boats.⁴⁰

The French were evidently confident of overcoming such colonial defences as existed in 1802 even without Irish assistance. Two French officers told Maume 'that one or two vessels could totally destroy the colony, as by keeping out until dusk they could get into Botany Bay, and take the garrison in their beds, and that the stores, provisions, etc, independently of the political advantages to their nation, by obtaining seamen and soldiers, would amply compensate for the enterprise'.⁴¹ They also requested news of General Holt, a well known figure in France from reportage of his 1798 exploits in *Bien Informe* and one of the main United Irish figureheads in the colony. It is possible that the *Naturaliste* officers were aware of Holt's written communications with the French Directory in the autumn of 1798 and that he, on occasion, claimed the authority of Napoleon in anti-government proclamations. The full extent of French liaisons with Irish republicans in 1802 is unknown but Maume's account suggests that they were encouraged to believe they were central to French strategy in the region.⁴²

Britain's resumption of war with France on 18 May 1803 led to fears that the groundwork laid by the Baudin expedition rendered invasion or raids more likely. News of hostilities reached the colony six months later and General Orders of 23 November 1803 attempted to allay the fears of loyal inhabitants by stating that foreign attack was 'improbable'. This optimistic and necessarily ill-informed forecast was undermined by a section of the Orders which announced the training of 'proper persons' in operating cannon.⁴³ While possibly a coincidence, the launching of what proved to be the United Irishmen's last effort worldwide, the Castle Hill revolt of March 1804, closely followed receipt of news that their comrades at home remained militant. Emmet's coup d'état may have misfired in July 1803 but

⁴⁰ Information of William Maume, 1 September 1804, quoted in George Rusden, *Curiosities of Colonization* (London, 1874), pp. 86-8. See also Tuckey 'Sketch', M.L., MS A2001, p. 36 and Whitaker, *Unfinished Revolution*, pp. 76-7. ⁴¹ Maume, 1 September 1804 in Rusden, *Curiosities of Colonization*, p. 87. ⁴² Holt was friendly with two of the colony's small French community: Ferdinand Meurant was transported with him from Ireland on the *Minerva* in 1799 and Francois Durinault conspired with the Wicklowman in the planning stages of the Castle Hill revolt. Holt Petition, n.d., 1804 quoted in Rusden, *Curiosities of Colonization*, p. 83 and Whitaker, *Unfinished Revolution*, pp. 91-2. ⁴³ General Orders, 28 November 1803 in *Sydney Gazette*, 4 December 1803.

it demonstrated that the Act of Union which came into force on 1 January 1801 had not demoralised the surviving United Irish networks. In December 1803 the transported Wicklow rebel officer Thomas Brady claimed on the basis of information smuggled out to him that 'the preparation throughout England to obtain . . . a revolution is carried on with great vigour'. He was also allegedly apprised of an 'intended invasion', although it is unclear whether this referred to the territory of the United Kingdom or New South Wales.⁴⁴

The Castle Hill revolt of 4-5 March 1804 was quickly contained by the rapid reaction and ruthlessness of Major George Johnson and by the fortuitous availability of military personnel in Port Jackson. It proved, however, that four years of flogging, executing and dispersing recalcitrant Irish rebels had not secured the colony from the determination of hundreds to take arms when the opportunity arose. Castle Hill convinced Governor King that the 'appearance of foreign enemy' was very likely to 'revive' the grave threat posed by the United Irishmen. He soon ascertained from letters seized in the homes of Maume and Brady that this external stimulus was expected by leading members of the Irish political prisoner community.⁴⁵

One peripheral territory deemed particularly attractive to the French in 1804-5 was the Pacific outpost of Norfolk Island where many United Irishmen had been deposited for acts of sedition in the main settlement. The Island's chief jailer Robert Jones claimed: 'We were always in a state of excitement during the appearance of any vessels. There was a fear that the French were coming to take possession of Norfolk Island. Upon one occasion the Island Notive was at once given to chief constable Edward or Ted Kimberley to have all prisoners placed in their cells and scaffolding erected covered with brushwood. The soldiers were to set fire to the prisoners upon a signal from me.' Although a somewhat unreliable commentator, the existence of a plan to immolate the Irish prisoners upon sighting French ships was confirmed by Holt and the missionary James Mitchell.⁴⁶

Rumours of Irish plots and the arrests of suspected conspirators continued until 1807 but had all but ceased by 1810 when the arrival of Governor Lachlan Macquarie heralded a period of tranquillity and consolidation. Assimilation into colonial society due to emancipation and rapidly decreasing proportional strength in New South Wales disposed more and more United Irish exiles to take advantage of economic opportunities. Also important was the vastly diminished prospect of deliverance by the French, a factor which had also resulted in the gradual collapse of the United Irish movement in Ireland. The French military threat to the colony had been significantly reduced by the commencement of Macquarie's tenure owing to the severity of their naval losses at Trafalgar in October 1805 and

44 Thomas Brady to Holt, 14 December 1803, quoted in Rusden, *Curiosities of Colonization*, p. 80. 45 King to —, 12 March 1804, Rusden Scrapbook, ML B1374/1, p. 17.

46 Robert Jones, 'Recollections of 13 Years Residence in Norfolk Island', ML Safe 1/2d, pp. 12-14. See also James Mitchell journal, ML MSS 27, Item 3.

by Britain's seizure of the strategic Cape of Good Hope from the Dutch in 1806. Napoleon remained interested in striking at New South Wales from the East Indies as late as 1810 but his capacity to do so was eliminated by 1811 when the Royal Navy seized the French and Dutch naval bases essential to the undertaking.⁴⁷

The Great French War jeopardised the security of New South Wales to a greater degree than hitherto considered between 1793 and 1811. No aspect of colonial life was unaffected by the crisis which, indirectly, furnished the fledgling society with the most dangerous category of prisoners ever imported.

⁴⁷ Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, pp. 172-3.