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Unravelling of a Mystery

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**Thomas Wilson (1758–1824) of Dullatur,  
the Scottish Second Husband of Matilda Tone:  
The Unravelling of a Mystery**

**Jane Rendall and C. J. Woods**

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Hidden in the middle of a long letter, dated 11 February 1797, from Theobald Wolfe Tone in Paris to his wife Matilda in Hamburg, is a casual mention of a ‘Mr Wilson’ who was evidently then in Mrs Tone’s company. This letter was first published in 1826, by their son William, in *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*.<sup>1</sup> Two months previously, with her three small children and her unmarried sister-in-law, Matilda Tone had arrived in Hamburg from Princeton, New Jersey, where her husband had left them in December 1795 to make his way to Paris to seek the support of the French government for the revolutionary United Irish movement in their native Ireland.<sup>2</sup> The couple had married in Dublin in 1785, he twenty-two, she barely sixteen. Though Tone soon left his bride in Ireland to go off to London and read for the bar, and though, between his return to Ireland in December 1788 and the family’s departure for America in June 1795, he was often away from home on legal and political business, they were entirely devoted to each other. Of this there is ample evidence in Tone’s frequent, long and affectionate letters to Matilda and in the regular journals he wrote, whenever absent, for her to read on his return.<sup>3</sup> Yet in the letter written from Paris, despite their long separation and the likelihood that they would remain separated for several weeks more, Tone is uninquisitive about his wife’s Hamburg companion. There is no trace of curiosity or jealousy. Although his diaries are full of elucidating detail about men and women whom he met, and Wilson is mentioned in two other

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<sup>1</sup> *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone ... edited by his son William* (2 vols, Washington, 1826), II, 391.

<sup>2</sup> An article on Matilda Tone (1769–1849) by C.J. Woods is in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (9 vols, Cambridge, 2009), IX, 406–8.

<sup>3</sup> Tone’s life and career are treated definitively in Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven, 1989), extensively revised edition (Liverpool, 2012). Over fifty letters from Tone to his wife are to be found in T.W. Moody, R.B. McDowell and C.J. Woods (eds), *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763–98* (3 vols, Oxford, 1998–2007), which is the complete edition of his writings (letters, journals, autobiography and other documents).

letters printed in the *Life*,<sup>4</sup> nowhere does Tone seek or give any information about him. And in the third of these letters, dated 10 November 1798, his last before his expected death—he had been taken prisoner after the capture off Lough Swilly by the British of a French warship, the *Hoche*, removed to Dublin and there tried by a court-martial on a charge of high treason, convicted and sentenced to death—the mention appears in a postscriptum: ‘I think you have a friend in Wilson, who will not desert you’. Who was this mysterious Mr Wilson?

William Tone identifies him in his *Life* of his father as ‘Mr Wilson of Dullatur, a Scotch gentleman’, and goes on to explain how eighteen years after Tone’s death Wilson became Matilda Tone’s second husband.<sup>5</sup> In the same volume Matilda Tone recounts the fate of herself and her family after 1798. Wilson was ‘a second Providence’ who:

from Scotland watched over me with care which might be called paternal. He had purchased a large sum in the French funds and left it to M. Delessert the banker’s hands for my use, to use, sell or dispose of as I pleased . . . To Scotland I wrote how things stood with me, and received an answer urging me in the strongest manner not to lose a moment, when my son’s term at the Lyceum expired, but to take the money necessary and enter him a pensioner in the School of Cavalry.<sup>6</sup>

Tone’s confidence in Wilson could not have been better placed. The son referred to here, William, who left the Lycée Impérial in 1809 or 1810 and entered the École de Cavalerie at Saint-Germain-en-Laye on 13 November 1810,<sup>7</sup> writes further that Wilson:

was, to my mother, a brother, an adviser and a friend; he managed her slender funds, and when sickness and death hovered over our little family, when my sister and brother were successively carried off by slow and lingering consumptions, and I was attacked by the same malady, he was our sole support. On his departure from France, our correspondence continued, and he left to his bankers in that country,

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<sup>4</sup> *Life of Tone*, II, 394, 538.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 563.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 576.

<sup>7</sup> An article on William Tone (1791–1828) by C.J. Woods is in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, IX, 417–19.

the enlightened and liberal MMs Delessert of Paris, unlimited orders to supply us whenever we should require it.<sup>8</sup>

On how Wilson came to make Matilda Tone's acquaintance, on how he came to have Tone's confidence, on what he was doing in Hamburg, on why and when he moved to France, on what a Scot was doing there during a war between France and Great Britain, William Tone is silent. Just when Wilson left France is unclear from his statement. He could have left conveniently in 1802 or 1803 during the peace of Amiens. William Tone implies that he remained until after the death in 1806 or 1807 of his younger brother, Frank Tone. Clearly, from Matilda Tone's account, Wilson was back in Scotland by 1810 if not long before. The two accounts put together show that he returned to France from Scotland in July 1816 to marry Matilda at the chapel of the British ambassador in Paris on 19 August.<sup>9</sup>

In 1825, in the *New Monthly Magazine*, an unknown writer signing himself 'C.E.', perhaps William Henry Curran, a son of Tone's friend John Philpot Curran, published an account of a visit made to Matilda Tone, by then Matilda Wilson, nine years earlier on the evening of that wedding, describing her as 'alone, ... unusually sad, ... and dressed in white'. On catching sight of the portrait of Wolfe Tone, he said, she had retired, 'in silence and in tears'.<sup>10</sup> In an appendix in the *Life* Matilda Wilson impugned C.E.'s reliability and expressed her annoyance at the 'hackneyed and commonplace novel scene' represented by him. If he had arrived early he might have found her in her wrap: but there were no tears at all. Nearly fifty, she was 'past the age for those *prettinesses*' and had 'accepted the protection of, and united my fate with that most pure and virtuous of human beings', meaning Wilson, and Tone in heaven and his son on earth were approving witnesses.<sup>11</sup> But, tantalisingly, neither William Tone nor his mother disclosed Wilson's forename.

That piece of information, like Wilson himself, was to remain a mystery until long after the very name of Theobald Wolfe Tone, eldest son of a Dublin

<sup>8</sup> *Life of Tone*, II, 563.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 563, 593, 673.

<sup>10</sup> 'Some Further Particulars of the Widow and Son of Theobald Wolfe Tone', *New Monthly Magazine*, 13 (1825), 271; C. J. Woods, 'The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone: Provenance, Publication and Reception', unpublished paper read at a seminar on Theobald Wolfe Tone at the Royal Irish Academy on 5 April 2008.

<sup>11</sup> 'Narrative of my Mother's Interview with Napoleon, Written by Herself', *Life of Tone*, II, 591–2; see also Catriona Kennedy, 'Republican Relicts: Gender, Memory and Mourning in Irish Nationalist Culture, c. 1789–1848' (unpublished paper).

coachmaker, and his courtship of and marriage to Matilda Witherington, a daughter of a Dublin woollen merchant, had (thanks largely to their son's publication of Tone's literary remains) become legendary. It escaped even R. R. Madden, the historian of the United Irishmen who had a great flair for unearthing biographical detail. In 1846, Madden brought out the first of two volumes featuring Tone in his multi-volume *United Irishmen, their Lives and Times* (1842–60).<sup>12</sup> It was not until after another Irishwoman, Alice Milligan, went to America half a century later and spoke to the Tones' descendants that devotees of the Tone legend learned the first name of the Scotsman who married Tone's widow — Thomas. This appeared in Alice Milligan's *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone* (published in 1898) together with a few details of his burial in Washington and reburial in New York.<sup>13</sup>

The mystery of Thomas Wilson has remained. Marianne Elliott, in the final edition of her well-researched biography of Tone (published in 1989), offered little or no new information on Wilson and, referring to his marriage, comments that 'Matilda Tone, her son and later Irish nationalists were at pains to depict it as a marriage of friendship', thereby implying that Wilson was regarded by them as being of little or no public interest.<sup>14</sup> Nancy Curtin, writing on Matilda Tone a few years later, has to admit that 'little is known about the Scotsman Thomas Wilson'.<sup>15</sup> Work on the third (and final) volume of a new edition of Tone's writings by one of the present writers,<sup>16</sup> and on women moving in Scottish radical circles in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the other,<sup>17</sup> has uncovered information on the

<sup>12</sup> R.R. Madden, *The United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times* (11 vols in 4 series, Dublin and London, 1842–60). The 'memoir' of Tone appears in the 3rd series (1846), I, 121–84; it reappears in a revised version in the so-called 'second edition' (really a fourth series, partly new, partly revision), II, 1–173. For Madden's treatment and the complicated arrangement of his material, see C.J. Woods, 'R.R. Madden, Historian of the United Irishmen' in Thomas Bartlett, David Dickson, Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds), *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective* (Dublin, 2003), 497–512.

<sup>13</sup> Alice L. Milligan, *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone* (Belfast, 1898), 118–21.

<sup>14</sup> Elliott, *Wolfe Tone* (1989), 406.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Curtin, 'Matilda Tone and Virtuous Republican Femininity' in Dáire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong (eds), *The Women of 1798* (Dublin, 1998), 42.

<sup>16</sup> Moody, McDowell and Woods (eds), *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Rendall, "'Friends of liberty and virtue': Women Radicals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1789–1848' in Caroline Bland and Máire Cross (eds), *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter-Writing, 1750–2000* (Aldershot, 2004), 77–92; idem, "'Women that would plague me with rational conversation": Aspiring Women and Scottish Whigs, c.1790–1830' in Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (eds), *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (London, 2005), 326–48; idem, 'Prospects of the American

mysterious Thomas Wilson of Dullatur allowing this biographical article to be written.

Briefly, something must be said of what has been known until now of Wilson's married life. He and his bride, after spending a few months in Scotland, including presumably some time at Dullatur, emigrated to America. They did so for no other reason than that William Tone, a Bonapartist officer who had given allegiance to the restored Bourbons but unwisely (as things turned out) changed it again after Napoleon's return from Elba, was obliged to leave France after Waterloo; and, as a native of Ireland bearing an illustrious name likely to inspire disaffection, he was refused permission to reside either in Ireland or in Great Britain. Not long after Waterloo, Wilson had advised Matilda and William Tone to try and obtain permission to resettle in England; the British ambassador, Sir Charles Stuart, was sympathetic, but their application for a passport proved futile.<sup>18</sup> Mr and Mrs Wilson settled in New York in 1817, but moved, in or before 1820, to Georgetown, District of Columbia, where Matilda Tone Wilson (as she sometimes called herself) lived until her death in 1849. The couple visited Scotland again in 1822, this time with William Tone.<sup>19</sup> Thomas Wilson died in Georgetown on 27 June 1824, and was buried in the Maybury Burying Ground there.<sup>20</sup> His remains were removed, with those of his wife and William Tone, from Georgetown to Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York, in 1891, when the Maybury Burying Ground was sold; their gravestones were transferred some months later.<sup>21</sup>

The identity of Thomas Wilson has however been illuminated through a closer look at an unduly neglected autobiography which throws much light on early nineteenth-century Edinburgh society, by Eliza Fletcher. Born Eliza Dawson in Yorkshire in 1770, she married in 1791 Archibald Fletcher, a lawyer and an active leader of the Scottish burgh reform movement of the 1780s. Her autobiography, published by her daughter in 1875, records her lively and varied familial and political life over nearly seventy years until her death in

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Republic, 1795–1821: The Radical Politics of Robina Millar and Frances Wright' in Peter France and Susan Manning (eds), *Enlightenment and Emancipation* (Lewisburg, 2006), 145–59.

<sup>18</sup> *Life of Tone*, II, 671–2.

<sup>19</sup> *Autobiography of Mrs Fletcher with Letters and Other Memorials, edited by the Survivor of her Family* [Mary Richardson] (Edinburgh, 1875), 154–5.

<sup>20</sup> Some of the information in this paragraph is taken from J.J. St Mark, 'Matilda and William Tone in New York and Washington after 1798', *Éire-Ireland*, 22, no.4 (1987), 4–10.

<sup>21</sup> Milligan, *Life of Tone*, 118–19. The author's informant was Catherine Maxwell, a great-granddaughter of Matilda Tone.

1858. The National Library of Scotland holds not only the manuscript of her autobiography, from which key passages were omitted by her daughter, but copies of a series of thirty-two letters between herself and Matilda Tone Wilson, dating from 1821 to 1848.<sup>22</sup> The letters contain much political discussion and many memories of the past, and also news and gossip of the Wilson family into which Matilda married. With the clues drawn from this material, and the use of standard works of reference, it became very easy to identify the man who married Matilda Tone and to understand why Eliza Fletcher and Matilda Tone Wilson had come to know each other so well.<sup>23</sup> For Thomas Wilson had come from the heart of the Scottish legal establishment. In the rest of this paper we reconstruct between us what we have been able to trace of his unusual biography. He was one of a group of young Scottish lawyers committed to the politics of reform in the late 1780s and early 1790s, and also an Atlantic traveller, an investor and an improving landowner.

Thomas Wilson was born on 20 October 1758. He was the eldest son of William Wilson (1710–87), a Writer to the Signet, of Howden, Midlothian, and his second wife, Margaret Young, daughter of an Edinburgh merchant; the physician William Cullen, then Professor of Medicine and Chemistry at the University of Edinburgh, and John Home, an Edinburgh coachmaker and Margaret Young's brother-in-law, witnessed his baptism in the Old Kirk, St Giles, Edinburgh.<sup>24</sup> The Wilson family owned the property of Wester Howden, including Howden House, in Mid Calder in Midlothian from 1753, with other small properties elsewhere, in the parish of Torphichen, then in Linlithgowshire, and another in Shotts in Lanarkshire.<sup>25</sup> William Wilson had a

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<sup>22</sup> 'MS of part of the autobiography of Mrs Eliza Fletcher (1770–1858)...', National Library of Scotland (NLS), MS Acc. 3758; typescript copies of the correspondence between Eliza Fletcher and Matilda Tone Wilson, 1821–48, from the Dickason papers, NLS MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>23</sup> Particularly useful sources have been: Scottish Record Society, *The Faculty of Advocates in Scotland, 1532–1943, with Genealogical Notes*, CXLV, ed. Sir Francis Grant (Edinburgh, 1944); *Register of the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet* (Edinburgh, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> This and subsequent information on dates of birth and on baptism is drawn from <http://www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk/> [accessed 23 July 2010]; *Register of the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet*.

<sup>25</sup> Hardy Bertram McCall, *The History & Antiquities of the Parish of Mid-Calder* (Edinburgh, 1894), 149–50; Saisine of William Wilson, 1 March 1780, National Records of Scotland (hereafter NRS), RD 27/250, ff. 76–79; Abridged Register of Saisines, Lanarkshire, 1781–1820, NRS; Abridged Register of Saisines, Linlithgow, 1781–1820, NRS; Abridged Register of Saisines, Edinburgh 1781–1820, NRS. We are grateful to Janet Brown for further information on the Wilson and Young families.

well-established legal practice in Edinburgh. He appears in the diaries of James Boswell, with whom he worked on several cases.<sup>26</sup> And since the early 1750s he had been the man of business and close friend of William Cullen, who witnessed the baptism of all his children. Thomas Wilson had two younger brothers, John (born 28 June 1761) and William (born 22 September 1767), and a sister, Margaret (born 4 December 1762). He matriculated at the University of Glasgow in 1771, and attended the University of Edinburgh between 1772 and 1777, going to the classes of Andrew Dalzel in Greek, John Robison in natural philosophy, Adam Ferguson in moral philosophy, and Hugh Blair in rhetoric. His classmates included John Clerk of Eldin, and the young Lord Lauderdale, then Lord Maitland, and his brother Thomas Maitland. Andrew Dalzel was later, in a letter of recommendation for Thomas Wilson, to write of his particularly close friendship with John Clerk, who later became a judge of the Court of Session.<sup>27</sup>

In 1780 Thomas Wilson became a member of the Speculative Society, a society which had a limited membership, only thirty in that year, and which was a forum and training ground for young advocates, politicians and academics. Other members then included John Clerk, the Maitland brothers, and Dugald Stewart, the future Professor of Moral Philosophy. Wilson appears to have been active in the society between 1780 and 1782, delivering a total of three discourses, and regularly participating in debates.<sup>28</sup> Once he had submitted his legal thesis, he was admitted to the Faculty of Advocates on 24 July 1781.<sup>29</sup> Two years later, on 17 July 1783, he was admitted to Lincoln's Inn, London, two months after his brother John.<sup>30</sup> From the mid-1780s to the early 1790s

<sup>26</sup> Charles McC. Weis and Frederick A. Pottle (eds), *Boswell in Extremes, 1776–8* (London, 1971), 142, 206, 208; Joseph W. Reed and Frederick A. Pottle (eds), *Boswell, Laird of Auchinleck, 1778–1782* (New York and London, 1977), 27 and 52.

<sup>27</sup> W. Innes Addison, *The Matriculation Rolls of the University of Glasgow. From 1728 to 1858* (Glasgow, 1913), 97; [Typescript] Matriculation Roll of the University of Edinburgh. Arts, Law, Divinity. Transcribed by Dr Alexander Morgan, 1933–1934, Edinburgh University Library (hereafter EUL). On Andrew Dalzel, Clerk and the Maitland brothers, see entries in H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (60 vols, Oxford, 2004); Andrew Dalzel to Robert Liston, 15 March 1796, National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS), Liston Papers, MS 5589 f. 53.

<sup>28</sup> *History of the Speculative Society, 1764–1904* (Edinburgh, 1905); Microfilm of MS Minute Book of the Speculative Society, vol. 2, 1775–1787, EUL, Mic. M.1077.

<sup>29</sup> Stair Society, *Minute Book of the Faculty of Advocates, vol. 3, 1751–83* (Edinburgh, 1999), 322; Thomas Wilson, *Disputatio juridica, ad tit. XX. Lib. XLIII Digest de aqua cottidiana et aestiva ...* (Edinburgh, 1781).

<sup>30</sup> Grant (ed.), *Faculty of Advocates; Records of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn, vol. I*



Thomas Wilson took his place as an advocate at the Scottish bar among his legal contemporaries.<sup>31</sup>

Andrew Dalzel, the Professor of Humanity at Edinburgh, was to be a helpful patron of Thomas Wilson, and their association also indicates a developing network of reforming affiliations. Dalzel had in the early 1770s been a private tutor to the Lauderdale brothers, taking them to hear the lectures of John Millar in Glasgow, where they later also studied. The Maitland brothers were to be among the leaders of the Foxite Whigs both in Scotland and in the House of Commons and with others took the initiative in founding the Association of the Friends of the People in London in 1792.<sup>32</sup> Also, the Wilsons' association with the Cullen family indicates a link with reforming politics. Though William Cullen himself had never been politically active, his son Robert, also an advocate, had drafted the bill for the reform of electoral representation in Scotland in 1785 and was to remain active in Whig and Foxite politics until the mid-1790s.<sup>33</sup> Robert's brother Archibald, another lawyer, at the Middle Temple in London, was a strong supporter of Charles James Fox.<sup>34</sup> And by the early 1780s, if not before, Thomas Wilson would have been acquainted with his contemporary John Craig Millar, the radical son of the Whig Professor John Millar of Glasgow, who was admitted as an advocate in December 1783, who married William Cullen's daughter Robina in 1790.

These associations came together through Wilson's involvement in the understudied but significant burgh reform movement of the 1780s, in which Archibald Fletcher, Eliza's husband, was the moving force. Fletcher had been an apprentice to Thomas' father, William Wilson, before he was himself admitted as a Writer to the Signet on 4 July 1783. A fortnight later, on 17 July, on the same day as Thomas Wilson, he was admitted to Lincoln's Inn; theirs are the only two admissions recorded for that day. The two men would have been well known to each other some time before Fletcher's marriage to

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*Admissions from A.D.1420 to A.D. 1799* (Lincoln's Inn, 1896), 506–7; *Register of the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet*.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Dalzel to Robert Liston, 15 March 1796, NLS, Liston papers, MS 5589 f. 53.

<sup>32</sup> Lucyle Werkmeister, *A Newspaper History of England, 1792–93* (Lincoln, NE, 1967), 74–5; Patrick O'Leary, *Sir James Mackintosh: The Whig Cicero* (Aberdeen, 1989), 28.

<sup>33</sup> Archibald Fletcher, 'Paper X. Memorial of the General Committee of Delegates of Scotland', in Christopher Wyvill (ed.), *Political Papers, chiefly respecting the attempt of the county of York... to Effect a Reformation of the Parliament of Great Britain*, (6 vols, York, 1794–1802), III, 34; Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of his Time* (Edinburgh, 1856), 144–5.

<sup>34</sup> John Ewart to Henry Cullen, January 22 1788, Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, Cullen MSS, vol. 32, box 1774–90.

Eliza Dawson.<sup>35</sup> In March 1787, Thomas Wilson, with seven others, including Archibald Fletcher, Robert Cullen and the leading Whig advocate Henry Erskine, signed a letter to the man they identified as the leader of the burgh reform movement, Robert Graham of Gartmore, calling for the introduction of a bill for burgh reform into the House of Commons.<sup>36</sup> Thomas Wilson's brother John, who by that date had opted for a legal career in England as a London solicitor, was the London secretary of the burgh reform movement. He canvassed Scottish members with little success before he turned to lobbying opposition members from all constituencies.<sup>37</sup> By late 1788, John Craig Millar was giving Archibald Fletcher powerful support in the drafting of reform proposals.<sup>38</sup> Thomas Wilson's friend John Clerk of Eldin was also a supporter, and consultant on the legal aspects, of burgh reform.<sup>39</sup> This group of young lawyers, with a few others, in the 1780s and early 1790s formed what Robert Cullen, who was one of them, called 'a whig cabinet' around Henry Erskine, the Whig Dean of the Faculty of Advocates.<sup>40</sup>

This commitment to reform continued, as did the campaign for burgh reform, into the years dominated by the impact of the French Revolution. On 14 July 1791, leading Foxite Whigs organised a commemoration of the taking of the Bastille at the Fortune's Tavern in Edinburgh. Seventy-three attended. Of these, writing of the event forty or more years later, Sir James Gibson Craig could remember the names of only twelve. These included John Clerk, John Craig Millar, Archibald Fletcher and Thomas Wilson, together with three other lawyers besides himself. It was this group, wrote Gibson Craig with hindsight, who were to become 'the nucleus on which the liberal party of Scotland was founded'.<sup>41</sup> The twelve included three later judges of the Court

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<sup>35</sup> *Register of the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet; Records of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn.*

<sup>36</sup> Henry Erskine, Robert Cullen, John Dickson, James Sommers, Gregory Grant, William Dunbar, William McIntosh, Thomas Wilson, Archibald Fletcher to Robert Graham of Gartmore Edinburgh, 5 March 1787, NRS, GD 22/1/315/4

<sup>37</sup> 'Excerpts from Mr Wilson's Letter of the 24<sup>th</sup> March 1787', attached to Archibald Fletcher to Robert Graham, 27 March 1787, NRS, GD 22/1/315/6–7.

<sup>38</sup> John Craig Millar to Robert Graham, Edinburgh, 27 November 1788 and 5 February 1789, NRS, GD 22/1/315/21 and 30; Grant (ed.), *Faculty of Advocates.*

<sup>39</sup> Archibald Fletcher to John Wilson, 13 April 1792, NRS GD 22/1/315/48(3); John Wilson to Archibald Fletcher 10 April 1792, NRS, GD 22/1/315/52.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Cullen to William Adam, 19 January 1794, Blair Adam MSS, quoted in Nicholas Phillipson, *The Scottish Whigs and the Reform of the Court of Session, 1785–1830* (Edinburgh, 1990), 20.

<sup>41</sup> J.D. Brims, 'The Scottish Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1983); Sir James Gibson Craig, Bart., to

of Session, two future MPs, two future sheriffs, John Allen, later of Holland House, and John Thomson, later professor of surgery and biographer of William Cullen.

In the spring of 1792 there was constant communication between Archibald Fletcher and John Wilson in London, as the latter briefed Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who had finally been persuaded to introduce the bill for burgh reform.<sup>42</sup> In June 1792, Archibald Fletcher wrote to Robert Graham of Gartmore of the need for a society for the reform of political institutions in Scotland and of ‘about a dozen [*sic*] of advocates with whose sentiments I am acquainted’ as being in favour of establishing a society similar to that of the Association of the Friends of the People in London, but only if they were supported by ‘a concurrence sufficiently respectable, especially of landed gentlemen of weight and consideration’.<sup>43</sup> By December that year the conservative George Home could write from Edinburgh to a correspondent:

You will be surprised to find the associations more numerous and more formidable here, than in the manufacturing counties — but this is the Paris of Scotland, and the Parliament house has become a hotbed of sedition. There are a parcel of Advocates and writers, some of them not without abilities, who collect little knots of people at different houses of rendezvous and harangue them upon the rights of man and the new doctrines of equality.<sup>44</sup>

Although John Craig Millar did for a time play an active role in the Scottish Society of the Friends of the People in late 1792, there is no direct evidence of Thomas Wilson’s doing so. Yet all his associations suggest that he might be thought of as one of this ‘parcel of Advocates’.

However, he was also, after the death of his father in 1787, responsible for the care of his family. He had, as eldest son, inherited the family properties. Between 1788 and 1791 he sold the small properties in Torphichen and Shotts; in December 1788 he purchased from an Edinburgh builder a two-storey tenement, number 5 South Frederick Street, in the rapidly rising Edinburgh New Town, and in May 1790 he borrowed £800 to buy another tenement in

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Major-General Fox, n.d., in ‘Biographical Notices of the Author’, prefixed to John Allen, *Inquiry into the Rise and Growth of the Royal Prerogative in England...* (London, [?1854]), xi–xviii. We are grateful to Emma Macleod for this reference.

<sup>42</sup> NRS, GD 22/1/315/44–52.

<sup>43</sup> Archibald Fletcher to Robert Graham, 17 June 1792, NRS, GD 22/1/315/55.

<sup>44</sup> George Home to Patrick Home, 3 December 1792, NRS, GD 267/1/16.

North Frederick Street.<sup>45</sup> From 1793 to 1795 he lived with his mother, and probably other members of his family, at 5 South Frederick Street, joining the many other advocates and writers moving to the first streets of the New Town. He was close to the Fletchers in Queen Street, and the Millars at 2 North Frederick Street.<sup>46</sup>

But in August 1793 Wilson's fellow advocate, Thomas Muir, was tried for treason, and sentenced to transportation. John Clerk of Eldin defended Muir's associate Thomas Fyshe Palmer at his trial in September 1793, but the two men were transported together in February 1794.<sup>47</sup> The political climate had been dramatically transformed. Not only did lawyers of even moderately reforming opinions, like Archibald Fletcher, find it hard to get employment, but for the first time one of their own had been subject to the full and brutal penalties of the law. Muir's trial had a major impact on the young Francis Jeffrey, who attended it and 'never mentioned it without horror'.<sup>48</sup> However, Wilson was a man of some resources. In May 1794 he sold the old family home at Howden, having earlier, in May 1792, sold a part of the tenement in North Frederick Street.<sup>49</sup> In March 1795, in a document drawn up at the office of his brother John, now a London solicitor, he appointed his mother, his aunt Katherine Young, his brothers John and William and sister Margaret, and two Edinburgh Writers as commissioners for his affairs 'considering that I mean to be for some time absent from Britain'.<sup>50</sup> Between March and September 1795 he travelled to the United States.

In March 1796, Andrew Dalzel wrote to the British representative in Philadelphia, Robert Liston, to recommend his former pupil, already in the United States: 'He was bred an Advocate and practised for a good many years at the bar here, till becoming fond of America from the accounts he heard of it, he was tempted to make a voyage to that hemisphere merely to take a view of the ground; & either to remain there or return, as he should conceive it to

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<sup>45</sup> Abridged Register of Saisines, Lanarkshire, 1781–1820, NRS; Abridged Register of Saisines, Linlithgow, 1781–1820, NRS; Abridged Register of Saisines, Edinburgh, 1781–1820, NRS.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Aitchison, *A Directory for Edinburgh, Leith, Musselburgh...* (Edinburgh, 1793), and volumes for 1794 and 1795; A.J. Youngson, *The Making of Classical Edinburgh, 1750–1840* (Edinburgh, 1966).

<sup>47</sup> Brims, 'The Scottish Democratic Movement', 540.

<sup>48</sup> Lord Cockburn, *Life of Lord Jeffrey, with a Selection from his Correspondence* (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1852), I, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Abridged Register of Saisines, Lanarkshire, 1781–1820, NRS.

<sup>50</sup> 'Commission granted Thomas Wilson, Advocate, to John Wilson and others', NRS, RD 3/270, ff. 796–801, 12 March 1795.

be agreeable, or the contrary.’ He emphasised that Wilson was ‘master of an independent fortune & may act as is most agreeable to himself’.<sup>51</sup> This tactful introduction surely masked the political attractions of the United States. In travelling there, Wilson was part of a transatlantic migration by radicals, including Thomas Cooper and Joseph Priestley, from all parts of the British Isles in the 1790s.<sup>52</sup> Among those who had been persuaded by the attractions of Pennsylvania were John and Robina Craig Millar, who chose for both political and financial reasons to emigrate rather than remain in Scotland. They had landed, armed with good introductions from Edinburgh, in Philadelphia on 7 May 1795.<sup>53</sup> Benjamin Rush introduced them in August 1795 to Henry Drinker, a leading Philadelphia Quaker, shrewd, wealthy, and philanthropic, deeply engaged in land speculation, suggesting Millar as a likely land agent in the development of land around the headwaters of the western branch of the Susquehanna River, purchased by Drinker and his land company in 1794.<sup>54</sup> It is now just north of the small town of Ebensburg, on the borders of Cambria and Clearfield Counties, Pennsylvania. On 28 September 1795, Drinker wrote to another of his agents, John Canan, to tell him that ‘my friend Millar has some prospect of having in this journey the company of a gentleman of the name of Thomas Wilson who is also from Scotland, and my information is that he is a person of merit, of respectable connections and of considerable property, and to whom I wish they [?] friendly attention should he come your way.’<sup>55</sup>

Millar was hoping to build a Scottish community on Drinker’s lands, a community which would include a school and a Presbyterian meeting-house and minister, which ‘would give an eclat to the settlement in Scotland particularly that would repay the expense tenfold’.<sup>56</sup> Millar was accompanied

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Dalzel to Robert Liston, 15 March 1796, NLS, Liston Papers, MS 5589 f. 53.

<sup>52</sup> Richard J. Twomey, *Jacobins and Jeffersonians: Anglo-American Radicalism in the United States, 1790–1820* (New York, 1989); Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> *Aurora and General Advertiser*, 12 May 1795.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin Rush to Henry Drinker, 5 August 1795, Drinker papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP), Correspondence and business papers, 1794–1796; Robina Craig Millar to Henry Drinker, 23 July 1796, Drinker papers, HSP, Folder, John Craig Millar July 1796–November 1796; for further discussion of the Millars’ project, see Rendall, ‘Prospects of the American Republic, 1795–1821’.

<sup>55</sup> Henry Drinker to John Canan, 28 September 1795, Drinker papers, HSP, Letter-book, 1793–6, 359–60.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Copies of papers & proposals respecting J.C. Millar and the Company’, Henry Drinker to John Craig Millar, 17 November 1795, HSP, Drinker papers, Correspondence 1793–1802.

throughout his journeys to the back country by two Scottish friends, and mentioned to Drinker other prospective settlers from Scotland.<sup>57</sup> Archibald Hamilton Rowan, the Irish radical who had visited Edinburgh to attend the radical convention there in 1793, had arrived in the United States in August 1795 and was also briefly tempted by the possibility of this settlement.<sup>58</sup> Rowan, who had been a neighbour of Theobald Wolfe Tone in County Kildare, and a close associate in the Dublin Society of United Irishmen, socialised with him in the United States, at Philadelphia and at Princeton.<sup>59</sup>

Wilson was clearly following his friend's progress. Robina Millar's sister Margaret wrote to her that a mutual friend had heard 'by a letter from Mr Wilson [that] ... you were well at German Town with Mr & Mrs Liston the 12th of Aug[us]t. Mr W. gives also an agreeable acc[oun]t of Mr Millar's situation & says that you were to join him in a fortnight.'<sup>60</sup> It is not known whether Wilson rejected the opportunity offered, or whether it was the news of John Craig Millar's sudden and unexpected death on 25 August 1796 that made him leave the United States and return to Europe.<sup>61</sup> Before he did so, he sent the news of Millar's death home to his family. Fenella Cullen, Robina Millar's sister-in-law, wrote to her from London that she had heard the dreadful news only through 'a few lines from John Wilson'.<sup>62</sup>

During the period that Thomas Wilson and Matilda Tone spent in America, there is clear evidence that they had at least two acquaintances in common. One was Robina Millar, who met Mrs Tone in 1795 or 1796. The evidence is a letter Mrs Millar wrote to her friend Frances Wright, who was visiting Matilda in New York after her return to America as Wilson's wife: 'tell Mrs Wilson that I do remember Mary Town with much interest'.<sup>63</sup> 'Mary Town' was surely Matilda's daughter Maria or her sister-in-law Mary, both her constant

<sup>57</sup> John Craig Millar to Henry Drinker, 28 July [1796] and 'Notes—for Mr Drinker's information since my last,' [12 and 14 August 1796], HSP, Drinker papers, Land correspondence.

<sup>58</sup> Archibald Hamilton Rowan to his wife, 20 February 1796, William H. Drummond (ed.) *The Autobiography of Archibald Hamilton Rowan* (Dublin, 1840; repr. Shannon, 1972), 290–91.

<sup>59</sup> Tone, *Writings*, esp. I, 188, 273, 505–08, 512–16, II, 14, 57, 73, 224, 255, 336–7, 339–40.

<sup>60</sup> Margaret Cullen to Robina Millar, 13 October 1796, Folder, John Craig Millar July 1796–November 1796, HSP, Drinker papers.

<sup>61</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette*, 21 September 1796.

<sup>62</sup> Fenella Cullen to Robina Millar, 31 October 1796, Folder, John Craig Millar, July 1796–November 1796, HSP, Drinker papers.

<sup>63</sup> Copy of letter from Robina Millar to Frances Wright, endorsed 'received Nov. 19th' (1818?), Cornell University, Theresa Wolfson papers, Box 41/17.

companions in America. Maria Tone, aged ten or eleven when in America, died in Paris in 1803. Mary Tone, having accompanied her to Hamburg, married there, lived in France for a while and died in the West Indies about 1800.<sup>64</sup> Matilda Tone's acquaintanceship with Robina Millar, herself an acquaintance of Wilson, is at least circumstantial evidence that she came to know Wilson before leaving for Hamburg.

The second friend in common was a Scottish radical, John Maclean, to whom Matilda Tone recalled, writing to him when revisiting America in 1807, 'the placid and amiable days I spent at Princeton'.<sup>65</sup> Maclean had studied chemistry and medicine at the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and then in London and Paris, returning to Glasgow in 1790. Like his good friends John and Robina Millar, he left Scotland for America for political reasons in April 1795. With the help of an introduction to Benjamin Rush—who apparently also befriended Tone's fellow exile and confidant James Reynolds<sup>66</sup>—he was by October the newly-appointed professor of chemistry and natural history at Princeton College. It is clear that the Millars spent some time at Princeton and knew Maclean. The Tones were there from late October 1795; Matilda Tone, after her husband's departure, remained there until she left for France in October 1796. It is quite possible that Thomas Wilson encountered Matilda Tone at Princeton, a very small town in the 1790s.<sup>67</sup>

On the evidence of Tone's letter of 11 February 1797, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it is likely that Wilson met both Matilda Tone and Tone himself while still in America. If he met Tone, it must have been between August 1795 when the Tones arrived in Delaware and the following December when Tone left New York for France. Tone's closeness to Hamilton Rowan in America suggests that he knew something of the Susquehanna project. Moreover the existence of a memorandum on the possibilities of a pioneering agricultural settlement which Tone wrote shortly after arriving in America suggests that he would have given it serious con-

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<sup>64</sup> 'Genealogy of Theobald Wolfe Tone' in Tone, *Writings*, III, 490.

<sup>65</sup> Matilda Tone to John Maclean, n.d., John Maclean (ed.), *A Memoir of John Maclean, M.D.* (Princeton, 1876), 40–42. The editor of this volume, Maclean's son, is confused about the chronology of Matilda's stay at Princeton and the date of this letter. Internal evidence combined with evidence of her visit to Irish friends in New York indicates that it must have been written at the beginning of October 1807. See William Sampson, *Memoirs* (New York, 1807), 413–16.

<sup>66</sup> *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*, ed. G. W. Corner (Princeton, 1948), 322.

<sup>67</sup> *Memoir of John Maclean*, 17–20.

sideration.<sup>68</sup> It can be inferred, from a letter Tone wrote to his wife on 2 December 1796,<sup>69</sup> that he had received no letter from her since leaving New York, which makes it even more likely that Wilson met him in America and gained his confidence there.

There remains at least the possibility that the acquaintance of Thomas Wilson and Matilda Tone began on the slow voyage from New York to Hamburg,<sup>70</sup> in which case the discovery by Mrs Tone of the existence of friends in common would have provided her with some assurance of his respectability and permitted her to be regularly in his company. On the same voyage, apparently, Mary Tone struck up a friendship, with a Swiss merchant, Jean Frédéric Giaouque, which soon resulted in marriage.<sup>71</sup> If, as is most likely, he was already socially acquainted with Mrs Tone and her family, it is at least plausible that he embarked on the same ship in order to afford Matilda, Mary Tone and Matilda's three young children — the eldest, Maria, was only ten — protection from the kind of incivility that had occurred on their outward voyage when their ship was stopped and boarded by a British warship.<sup>72</sup>

Why was Wilson making for Hamburg? It seems likely that he wanted to reach the European continent, not his native island of Britain, for he could easily have found a ship sailing for a British port. His reason for leaving Scotland—pressures being placed on democrats by the authorities—was also a reason for not returning. Another reason may have been the prospect of making money in a neutral city that was trading without discrimination with Britain, France and other belligerent states and which had the reputation of welcoming political émigrés. Whatever the reason for the destination, Wilson would have disembarked, like Matilda Tone's party, at Cuxhaven, at the mouth of the tidal Elbe, towards the middle of December, and made his way by road to Hamburg, very low temperatures having made access by river impossible. Wilson presumably remained in the German imperial city until he moved to France.

On 8 January 1798, Wilson was in Paris, staying at the Hôtel Taranne in the Rue Taranne. From there he wrote formally to the minister of police describing himself as a 'patriote écossois' who had 'été forcé de se réfugier

<sup>68</sup> Tone, *Writings*, III, 458.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 403–08.

<sup>70</sup> This is stated as fact by 'C.E', regarded by Matilda Tone however as an unreliable authority (see above, 3).

<sup>71</sup> Giaouque is even more mysterious than Wilson. Both remained in Hamburg for some months before moving to Paris. Were they associates? See Tone, *Writings*, III, passim.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 1, 335.



en France pour se soustraire à la persécution du gouvernement anglais' and explaining that he had just arrived in Paris by virtue of a passport issued by the French ambassador in Hamburg authorised by a letter of 27 brumaire 6 (17 November 1797), from the French foreign minister. Wilson uses on this and later occasions, a pseudonym, Theodore Wilkins, a wise precaution for a British subject in France at that time. He requests the minister to 'accorder telle protection que vous jugerez à propos pour sa sûreté pendant son séjour à Paris'. The letter is endorsed by Tone stating that he knows 'Wilkins' and answers for 'son patriotisme et son intégrité'.<sup>73</sup> The wording of the letter is similar to others endorsed by Tone ('adjudant général'), who probably supplied it; the handwriting appears, from the signature, to be that of Wilson. His claim to have been forced out of Scotland by persecution was a necessary exaggeration if he was to be permitted to remain; Tone's recommendation was almost a guarantee. On 26 January the minister informed Tone that he had authorised a *carte d'hospitalité* to 'Théodore Wilkins'.<sup>74</sup>

No evidence has been found of any interest by Wilson in political matters whilst in France. Nowhere else does Tone refer to Wilson as a patriot, reformer, democrat or republican. A search of the series Correspondance Politique Angleterre in the archives of the Département des Affaires Étrangères uncovered some letters from or to Thomas Muir, in exile in Paris in 1798, concerning other Scottish democrats in France.<sup>75</sup> Wilson is not among them. If Wilson had attempted to get in touch with Muir, Tone, who considered Muir to be doing more harm than good to the United Irish cause, would surely have discouraged him.

Among the papers of Lord Castlereagh, who was Irish chief secretary in 1798, is a 'List of patriots emigrants at Paris with some anecdotes concerning them', undated but evidently about May 1798 and apparently supplied by Samuel Turner, an active United Irishman who became a government informer and was trusted by United Irish exiles in Hamburg and Paris.<sup>76</sup> Turner mentions Wilson briefly but significantly as being an associate in France of John Tennent,

<sup>73</sup> Théodore Wilkins to minister of police, 19 nivôse 6 (8 January 1798) (Archives Nationales, Paris, Police Générale, F<sup>7</sup>, 7293, dossier B<sup>4</sup> 2671). We are grateful to Dr Sylvie Kleinman for a copy of this letter.

<sup>74</sup> Tone, *Writings*, III, 195–6.

<sup>75</sup> Archives des Affaires Étrangères, Correspondance Politique Angleterre, cote 592, ff. 204, 209, 217–19.

<sup>76</sup> Turner's reports from Hamburg and elsewhere are in C.J. Woods (ed.), 'Samuel Turner's Information on the United Irishmen, 1797–8', *Analecta Hibernica*, 42 (2011), 181–228.

a Belfast United Irishman, in connexion with a financial matter: ‘Tennent received £2,500 of remittance; he instantly cut his countrymen and went with one Thomas Wilson to [BLANK], where they have made a purchase’.<sup>77</sup> The significance is that ‘one Thomas Wilson’ was unknown to Turner and that Wilson was pursuing a business opportunity. Of Wilson’s association with Tennent (though not of its nature) there are indications in some of Tone’s letters to his wife.<sup>78</sup> A document in the police files at the Archives Nationales tells us that Wilson sought, and apparently obtained, permission in March to go to Carcassonne to purchase ‘des biens nationaux’.<sup>79</sup>

An answer to the question just when Wilson left France is provided in another document in the police archives. On 11 June 1802, ‘Théodore Wilkins’, described as a ‘négoiateur’—meaning ‘broker’—domiciled in Paris, was granted permission to travel, for family reasons, from Paris to London.<sup>80</sup> This was ten weeks after the signing of the peace of Amiens, an effect of which was to give British subjects in France an opportunity to return conveniently to Britain. By then Wilson may have found France disappointing for the business opportunities it offered. Tennent had moved to Hamburg, from where he wrote letters to his brother Robert in Belfast between December 1799 and January 1802 concerning prospects there.<sup>81</sup> It seems highly likely that Wilson returned to Britain in 1802. If the family reasons were genuine, he would most likely have made for Edinburgh, where his mother was still living as late as 1804.<sup>82</sup>

William Tone’s mention of the Delesserts, the Paris banking family, may be a clue to Wilson’s financial affairs in France. Étienne Delessert (1735–1816) flourished under the Directory, lending to the régime, and in 1801 established sugar-beet and cotton factories at Passy not far from Paris. A business partner from an early age was his son Benjamin (1773–1847).<sup>83</sup> Benjamin Delessert,

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>78</sup> Tone, *Writings*, III, 228, 236, 326, 339.

<sup>79</sup> Archives Nationales, Police générale, AN F<sup>7</sup> 7293. The ‘biens nationaux’ were lands and other property seized and confiscated during the revolution.

<sup>80</sup> Police générale, AN F<sup>7</sup> 3504.

<sup>81</sup> Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Tennent papers, D1748/C/1/210/8–11.

<sup>82</sup> *Denovan & Co.’s Edinburgh and Leith Directory, from July 1804... to July 1805, etc* (Edinburgh, 1804).

<sup>83</sup> For the Delesserts, see *Dictionnaire de biographie française*, x (Paris, 1965), cols 804–07; for Benjamin Delessert’s visit to Scotland see Gordon Macintyre, *Dugald Stewart. The Pride and Ornament of Scotland* (Brighton, 2003), 70, 73 and for his career as a banker, Romuald Szramkiewicz, *Les régents et censeurs de la Banque de France nommés sous le Consulat et l’Empire* (Geneva and Paris, 1974), 78–84.

with his brother Stephen, had attended classes at the University of Edinburgh in 1784–5.<sup>84</sup> He joined the French revolutionary army in 1793 and at the sieges of Maubeuge and Ypres was aide-de-camp to Charles Jennings de Kilmaine, an Irish-born general whose acquaintance Theobald Wolfe Tone made in April 1798, Kilmaine having command of the *armée d'Angleterre*, the force that embarked on the fateful expedition to Lough Swilly—he wrote to the Directory in November in a futile attempt to save Tone's life.<sup>85</sup> Demobilised in 1796, Benjamin Delessert rejoined his father's business and in 1802 was appointed *régent* of the Banque de France. Possibly Wilson, or one of his Edinburgh circle, had become acquainted with Benjamin Delessert in Scotland and Wilson was able to draw advantage from this connexion on arriving in France. It is evident from William Tone's statement that Wilson had, at the very least, a substantial deposit with the Delesserts at the time of Tone's death; the common bond which both Benjamin Delessert and Tone had with Kilmaine, whose own fortunes rose with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, may have given Wilson greater confidence that Matilda Tone could continue to rely on the Delesserts. It is even conceivable that Wilson was connected with the Delesserts' industrial and commercial enterprises.

On his return to Scotland, probably in 1802, it would appear that Wilson did not again practise as an advocate, but kept a cautious and fairly low profile. It is evident from the statements of Matilda and William Tone given above that he was in correspondence with Matilda Tone; there is evidence that in 1811 he was writing to her care of the American consul general in Paris, David Bailie Warden.<sup>86</sup> Wilson's interests in Scotland turned in a different direction, towards farming and agricultural improvement. Between June and August 1809, he purchased a small estate, Lower Easter Dullatur, of around 141 acres, in the parish of Cumbernauld, then in the detached part of Dumbartonshire, today in North Lanarkshire.<sup>87</sup> There is evidence that Wilson either partially owned or

<sup>84</sup> EUL, Matriculation Roll of the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>85</sup> Tone, *Writings*, III, 226–8, 424–5.

<sup>86</sup> Matilda Tone to D.B. Warden, 25 September 1811, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Warden papers, microfilm pos. 8436 at the National Library of Ireland.

<sup>87</sup> Register of Saisines, Dumbartonshire, 1781–1820, NRS; 'Procuratory of Resignation, 24 December 1833', RD 5/497 ff. 427–33, NRS; the co-ordinates of the estate are 55° 58' 0" North, 4° 1' 0" West and the National Grid reference is NS 747772. Maps which show the estate include: 'Sketch of the Canal and Mr Wilson's adjacent Lands West end Dollatur Bog (1827)', North Lanarkshire Archives (hereafter NLA), Russel & Aitken Papers, UT/149/2 (9); 'Plan of the Estate of Dullatur in the Parish of Cumbernauld, County of Dumbarton. Taken from the Ordnance Survey 1881', NLA, Russel & Aitken Papers, U107/1/2 (2).

rented this land from 1805, taking up what may well have been a much earlier interest.<sup>88</sup> In 1784, he had been one of 128 original constituent members of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, along with several of the future members of the burgh reform committee — Archibald Fletcher, Robert Graham, John Clerk, and Henry Erskine.<sup>89</sup> The transactions of the society suggest that its interests were by no means limited to the Highlands.

The land at Dullatur would have presented him with some problems. The Forth and Clyde Canal ran through his land, on the northern boundary of the parish of Cumbernauld, its edge marked by the Kelvin Water. The estate included a substantial section of what was known as the Bog of Dullatur, along with sections of the Roman Antonine Wall. The canal had been completed in 1790, although the bog had presented its engineers with major difficulties.<sup>90</sup> In 1811, the *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Dumbarton* recorded Thomas Wilson's 'extensive and apparently successful essay in bog improvement' of land originally in a miserable state as having been achieved since 1805.<sup>91</sup> He had ditched and drained, with a drain running in a tunnel under the canal, into the Kelvin Water, and then levelled, ploughed, and cultivated hitherto moss-covered land, to produce profitable crops by 1810. Nevertheless the land flooded again from the south side of the canal in 1810, 1812 and 1815, causing significant damage. Only in 1822, in a deed witnessed by Tone's son, William Theobald Wolfe Tone, 'Lieutenant of Artillery in the service of the United States of North America', did the proprietors of the Forth-Clyde Canal commit themselves to building embankments and providing drainage to preserve Wilson's land from flooding.<sup>92</sup> Most of the land to the east of the estate is now a nature reserve.

We assume that Wilson lived quietly on his estate in this period, although he does not appear to have played any significant part in the life of the locality. He was represented by an agent at the heritors' meetings of the church at Cumbernauld.<sup>93</sup> There is no record in Edinburgh directories of the

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<sup>88</sup> Rev. Andrew Whyte and Duncan Macfarlane, D.D., *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Dumbarton* ... (Glasgow, 1811), 174.

<sup>89</sup> Alexander Ramsay, *History of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland* ... (Edinburgh, 1879), 539–46.

<sup>90</sup> James Hopkirk, *Account of the Forth and Clyde Canal Navigation, from its Origin to the Present Time* (Glasgow, 1816), 24–5; Jean Lindsay, *The Canals of Scotland* (Newton Abbot, 1968), 24–30.

<sup>91</sup> Whyte and Macfarlane, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Dumbarton*, 174–7.

<sup>92</sup> NRS, RD 5245 ff. 284–99

<sup>93</sup> Cumbernauld Heritors Minute Book, 1809–40, NRS, HR 27/1

period that he ever returned to live in the city, and he identified himself after this point as ‘of Dullatur’ or ‘of Ealan’ (after Ealan Wood on his estate). In February 1813 he bought more land in the vicinity.<sup>94</sup> Dullatur appears to have been his home until he went to France to marry Matilda Tone in 1816, and he continued to keep a watchful eye on its affairs after his departure. Between 1817 and 1821 the rental income from his property at Dullatur ranged from £300 to £400, though by 1823 it had fallen to £217.<sup>95</sup> This suggests that he paid a purchase price of several thousands in 1809.

Thomas Wilson’s marriage contract of 1816 has survived and records that the couple had long ‘entertained a mutual affection, and the most perfect esteem’ for one another.<sup>96</sup> Some months after the marriage, which took place on 19 August, Matilda Wilson (as she now was) wrote to Tone’s barrister friend Peter Burrowes about her new husband: ‘I lament that Mr Wilson is not personally known to you; one would think that two men like you were formed by nature to be friends’. She told Burrowes, ‘on our marriage, Mr Wilson & I signed an act making over to William all that belonged or might belong to me’.<sup>97</sup> Having agreed to move to the United States, Wilson wished not only to settle his business affairs in Scotland but to introduce Matilda to his family there. In Edinburgh towards the end of 1816 Matilda Tone met for the first time her sister-in-law Margaret, her brother-in-law William Wilson and his family, her husband’s friends Archibald and Eliza Fletcher, their daughter Grace and other children, and probably renewed her acquaintance with the widowed Robina Millar; the newly married couple remained in Edinburgh at least until early April 1817.<sup>98</sup> Many years later, writing in 1844, Eliza Fletcher paid tribute to Matilda as ‘one of the most remarkable persons I have ever known with great energy, great talents and uncommon quickness of parts and the most intrepid public spirit. She united the warmest private affections and the gentlest heart ... I admired and loved her for the union of magnanimity and gentleheartedness that she possessed’.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Register of Saisines, Dumbartonshire, 1781–1820, NRS.

<sup>95</sup> ‘State of Rent received for Dullatur since 1817’, NRS, GD 1/1367/11.

<sup>96</sup> ‘The Marriage Contract of Thomas Wilson and Matilda Witherington, August 8, 1816’, Office Register of Wills, Clerk of the Probate Court, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, quoted in St Mark, ‘Matilda and William Tone in New York and Washington’, 4.

<sup>97</sup> MW to Peter Burrowes, 21 South Castle St, Edinburgh, 27 December 1816, Royal Irish Academy, Burrowes papers, MS 23/K/53.

<sup>98</sup> EF, ‘Memoir of Grace Fletcher’ in Richardson (ed.), *Autobiography of Mrs Fletcher*, 354–7.

<sup>99</sup> ‘Autobiography of Mrs Eliza Fletcher (1770–1858) ...’, NLS, Acc. 3758, ff. 88–9;

The Wilsons kept in touch from the United States with friends in Scotland. In 1819, Robina Millar sent her young protégée, the future utopian socialist Frances Wright, travelling with her sister to New York, into the safekeeping of the Wilson household. William Tone helped and encouraged the radical young woman, supported her in the performance of her first play, *Altorf*, on the New York stage in 1819, and introduced her to the radical publisher Matthew Carey in Philadelphia, where her play was also performed and published.<sup>100</sup> But both Matilda Wilson and Eliza Fletcher watched Wright's later career, and her foundation, at NRShoba, Tennessee, of a short-lived community, notorious not only for abolitionist sentiments but for its defence of free love, with considerable apprehension and ultimate disapproval.<sup>101</sup>

Thomas Wilson appears at all times to have maintained a responsibility for his family in Scotland. In 1820, his brother William, now a Writer to the Signet, acted for him in the purchase of the superiorities or feu-duties of the estate at Dullatur.<sup>102</sup> In October 1821 Matilda and Thomas Wilson, with William Tone, visited Scotland again, shortly after the death of Thomas' brother William in July 1821, no doubt partly out of concern over the welfare of his brother's orphaned family, his nephews William, Thomas and James and nieces Margaret, Elizabeth and Catherine; he was appointed one of their curators, or guardians.<sup>103</sup> Eliza Fletcher recalled in Matilda at that time 'the same vigour and originality of mind' as in their earlier intimacy, and her happiness at being with her son.<sup>104</sup> She gave the Wilsons an introduction to Robert Owen at New Lanark, writing to Owen of her friends: 'You will find them full of candour, benevolence and liberality. They are remarkably well inform'd, and they cannot think of quitting Scotland, Mr Wilson's native country, without seeing an institution of which they have heard so

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Fletcher, *Autobiography*, 143 and 354, in which the full text of Eliza Fletcher's tribute to Matilda Wilson is omitted.

<sup>100</sup> William Tone to Matthew Carey, 30 March 1819, Edward Carey Gardiner Collection, Matthew Carey correspondence, no. 381 and other letters in this correspondence; Frances Wright, *Altorf: A Tragedy First Represented in the Theatre of New-York, Feb. 19, 1819* (Philadelphia, 1819); Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge, 1984), 27–30.

<sup>101</sup> EF to MW, 19 July 1826 and 16 October 1834; MW to EF, 29 April 1827, NLS, MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>102</sup> 'Papers relevant to the purchase of the superiority of the lands of Easter Dullatur by Thomas Wilson through his brother, William Wilson, WS acting as his commissioner', NRS, GD 1/1367/11.

<sup>103</sup> EF to MW, 10 October 1821, NLS, MS Acc. 4278; NRS, RD 5/296 ff. 460–75.

<sup>104</sup> Fletcher, *Autobiography*, 154.

much as that at New Lanark.<sup>105</sup> On 2 October 1822, Thomas Wilson reappointed commissioners, including his sister Margaret, his nephew William, now apprenticed as a writer, and two Writers to the Signet, to deal with his business affairs in Scotland.<sup>106</sup> Two years later, Margaret Wilson visited her brother in Georgetown, just before his death, after a brief, unpleasant illness, on 27 June 1824.<sup>107</sup>

In his will Thomas Wilson provided an annuity of £200 annually for his wife, with a specific legacy of all ‘household furniture ... and all horses and carriages which may belong to me at the time of my decease’. He also left to her and to her son William \$1,000 each. The estate of Dullatur and the Edinburgh property still remaining in South Frederick Street went to his eldest nephew William, and his other effects and capital first to his sister Margaret and then to be equally divided between his nephews and nieces.<sup>108</sup> Among others, a James J. MacDonnell is named in the will as the assignee of \$6,855 of loans repayable to Wilson’s estate; this was probably the former United Irishman, James Joseph MacDonnell.<sup>109</sup> William Wilson sold 5 South Frederick Street in 1825, and gradually sold off the estate at Dullatur after 1840. In spite of the bog, Dullatur proved to have been an excellent investment, situated as it was on the major transport corridor between Edinburgh and Glasgow. In 1840, and again in 1841, William Wilson sold portions of the land to the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway Company.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> EF to Robert Owen, 16 February 1822, NLS, MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>106</sup> NRS, RD 5/245 ff. 576–80.

<sup>107</sup> EF to MW, 28 October 1824, NLS MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Last will and testament of Thomas Wilson, January 16 1823’, Office Register of Wills, Clerk of the Probate Court, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., quoted in St Mark, ‘Matilda and William Tone’ (a copy of this will also survives in the Linplum papers, in private hands, National Register of Archives for Scotland 2720/859); ‘Disposition of William Wilson to Robert Strachan WS’, RD 5/296 ff. 460–475; EF to MW, 27 December 1845, NLS, MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>109</sup> James Joseph MacDonnell (1766–1848?) joined the French force that landed on the Mayo coast in 1798; he fled to Paris after its defeat, was friendly towards Matilda Tone there, married a Scottish woman, Henrietta Mackie, by whom he had a daughter, Josephine, and moved to New York, c. 1806. Josephine also married a Scot, Robert Hutton. Very little is known of MacDonnell’s life in America. See *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, V, 952–3.

<sup>110</sup> Abridged Register of Saisines, Edinburgh, 1821–6, NRS; Abridged Register of Saisines, Dumbartonshire, 1821–45, NRS; ‘Papers relevant to the building of a cottage “proposed to be built” at Dullatur by Miss Margaret Wilson, 1828 ...’, NRS, GD 1/1367/1/11.

The continuing links between Matilda Tone and the Wilson family in Scotland, even after Thomas Wilson's death in 1824, can be traced through the surviving thirty-two letters between Matilda Tone and Eliza Fletcher, from 1820 to 1848. Eliza Fletcher gave her friend very regular reports on the wellbeing of Thomas Wilson's family, to whom she remained close.<sup>111</sup> There was much news of the children, but also sad news, of the deaths of Thomas Wilson's niece Catherine in 1831, of his sister Margaret in 1833, and of his sister-in-law Mrs William Wilson in 1837.<sup>112</sup> Matilda Wilson also clearly shared her husband's affection for his old Edinburgh friends and Eliza Fletcher continually sent news and gossip of all those in their common circle, including Robina Millar, and the Listons. Of John Clerk, Thomas Wilson's old friend, she wrote in 1828 that 'Poor Lord Eldin whom you knew as John Clerk is quite superannuated and unable to perform his duty as a judge'.<sup>113</sup> Matilda Wilson sent news of the family of John Maclean.<sup>114</sup>

In 1837 Matilda Tone was contemplating retirement to Edinburgh close to her husband's family, since after the death of her son William, her daughter-in-law, Catherine, with her family the Sampsons, was considering moving to Ireland. However, she clearly had reservations about this. Eliza Fletcher defended the Wilsons, if in terms which recognised the justice of these reservations: 'I believe William and Marg[are]t to be affectionate and of a refined nature, but then it is Scotch refinement which piques itself in never using one expression of ordinary kindness or endearment'. One of Thomas's nieces, Elizabeth, or Bessy, had become an evangelical Protestant, in a way which Matilda might well think 'ascetic, bigoted, and illiberal'. Eliza urged her old friend to live with her, rather than enter 'en famille' till she had made up her own mind. But 'you being in or near Edinburgh may be, and will be (if they know how to appreciate it), a great benefit to these young people...'<sup>115</sup>

This plan clearly never materialised. By 1840 however Eliza Fletcher feared Matilda Wilson was in some financial difficulties. She offered her £50 herself immediately but also urged her to get in touch with William Wilson, of whom she wrote, 'William Wilson is as good and kindhearted a man as your Mr

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<sup>111</sup> For a full discussion of this correspondence, see Rendall, "'Friends of liberty and virtue'".

<sup>112</sup> EF to MW, 15 December 1827, 26 December 1831, 29 July 1833, 24 July 1837, NLS, MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>113</sup> EF to MW, 12 June 1828, NLS, MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>114</sup> EF to MW, 15 December 1827 and 12 June 1828, NLS, MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>115</sup> EF to MW, 25 November 1837, NLS, MS Acc. 4278.



Wilson was<sup>116</sup>. Again, in 1845, she urged her to confide her plan to settle in New York to the newly married William Wilson. As his uncle's heir, he would ultimately inherit the proceeds of the Georgetown property, and would, Eliza Fletcher believed, happily split the proceeds with her or allow her the life-interest.<sup>117</sup> In her last surviving letter, of March 1848, Eliza Fletcher celebrated the news of the revolution of 1848 in France: 'have you and I slumber'd since 1798 to be awaken'd once more by the tocsin sounding in the streets of Paris?' She concluded by urging her friend, as she had never ceased to do, to visit her once more, giving her news as usual: 'The Wilson family are all well. William most happy with his charming wife.'<sup>118</sup>

Thomas Wilson's nephews all achieved some success, William as a Writer to the Signet, like his father and grandfather, and Thomas as a rear-admiral in the Royal Navy. James, born in 1813, took Anglican orders and in 1851 travelled with the Canterbury Association to New Zealand. In the following year he built himself a house in Christchurch called Dullatur; in 1871 he became Archdeacon of Akaroa, and died in 1886. The whole family benefited from their legacies from their uncle.<sup>119</sup> The family name and legal tradition survive to the present day, in Dundas & Wilson, a major British commercial law firm.<sup>120</sup> But there are no longer any family members with the firm or any archives held.

Much of the mystery surrounding Thomas Wilson remains. His career may be seen in the context of Emma Macleod's argument for the development of a significant body of Foxite Whig opinion among the lawyers and landed classes of Scotland in the late 1780s and early 1790s.<sup>121</sup> His life also points to the potential internationalism and cosmopolitanism of that movement;

<sup>116</sup> EF to MW, 4 February 1840 and 11 March 1842, NLS, MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>117</sup> EF to MW, 27 December 1845, NLS, MS Acc. 4278. Eliza Fletcher may have been mistaken in her belief that Thomas Wilson had owned a property at Georgetown; after his death Matilda lived for many years at Kalonama, the former Georgetown home of the radical Joel Banlow (1754–1812), who had been resident in Paris 1797–1805 and again 1811–12.

<sup>118</sup> EF to MW, 19 March 1848, NLS, MS Acc. 4278.

<sup>119</sup> Accounts of Admiral Thomas Wilson and Archdeacon Wilson with Messrs Dundas and Wilson, NRS, GD 1/1367/20/; G. H. Scholefield, *A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (2 vols, Wellington, 1940).

<sup>120</sup> The subsequent history of the firm can be traced in David M Burns, *Dundas & Wilson: The First Two Hundred Years* [privately printed, 1987]; see also their website at <http://www.dundas-wilson.com>, accessed 23 July 2010.

<sup>121</sup> Emma Vincent Macleod, 'The Scottish Opposition Whigs and the French Revolution' in Bob Harris (ed.), *Scotland in the Age of the French Revolution* (Edinburgh, 2005), 79–98.

his story has been told here in relation to Irish revolutionary politics, the opportunities presented by revolutionary and imperial France, and the attractions of American republicanism, as well as the growth of reforming opinion in Scotland. Yet there is much that remains unknown. We do not know the extent or source of the ‘independent fortune’ he possessed when he left Scotland for America, or why he chose in 1796 to sail to Hamburg and then move to Paris. We have no information on the nature of his business in France, or on how he was able to purchase the estate at Dullatur. No political statement by him has been found, no reported conversation, and only one letter bearing his signature. His reforming loyalties have been traced, and were rooted in, his associations with family and friends, and occasional presence at political meetings; these loyalties and friendships drew upon shared political ideals across national boundaries. Nevertheless, until we began our researches into the life and career of Thomas Wilson, the contrast between the paucity of information on him and the richness of the detail of the life and career of his wife’s first husband was striking. We have at least reduced that contrast and rescued ‘Mr Wilson of Dullatur’ from obscurity. And we can offer readers the fine epitaph which Matilda Tone Wilson inscribed on her second husband’s tombstone: ‘A true philanthropist. His life was consecrated to deeds of benevolence, and his wishes and endeavour all tended to the happiness, information and freedom of mankind.’<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> ‘Graves of the Wolf [sic] Tone family’, *Nation* (Dublin), 7 August, 1869, 3.