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Ambassador *incognito* and Accidental Tourist: Cultural Perspectives on Theobald Wolfe Tone's Mission to France, 1796–8[1]

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Tone is a keen, sensible man [who] writes with perspicuity and elegance.[2]

Il n'y a pas d'aventures, sinon celles de tous les jours.[3]

I. A Compulsive Writer and Romantic Adventurer

If the age of the French Revolution is most remembered for the turmoil and bloodshed which violently shook the foundations of the old order, the Enlightenment can equally be defined by the intellectual discoveries which resulted from the increase in human mobility, and voluntary or enforced travel. Influenced by the confessional writing of the eighteenth century, travellers of all kinds recorded their observations and sensations, some responding to the need to justify their actions. These narratives, whether factual, semi-romanticised or a combination of both, became firmly established as one of the most enduring of literary genres, travel writing, and in the next century were to influence memoir writing and campaign narratives. But as this golden age of tourism was also one of great political upheavals, foreigners often witnessed and even became swept up in momentous events. Posterity can be grateful to those who recorded their experiences in letters and journals. Written with the emotional immediacy of a generation imbued with ideas of sentimentality, these narratives often

[1] Versions of this paper were delivered at the University of Aberdeen, Trinity College Dublin, and Hertford College Oxford. I am grateful to Michael Brown, Liam Chambers, Cairns Craig, Roy Foster, Patrick Geoghegan and Michael Rapport for their insightful comments.

[2] From a report by Leonard MacNally, a government informer, to Thomas Pelham, 17 September 1795, National Archives of Ireland, Rebellion Papers, NAI/620/10/121/29.

[3] Jean Giono, Preface to his translation of the French edition of Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (Paris, 1955), cited by Lewis Mansfield Knapp (ed.), *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (Oxford, 1998), xv.

became chronicles of historical change and national self-exploration.

Nothing better illustrates the confrontation of the old and new orders, as well as eighteenth-century ideas of conviviality, than the visit to the Panthéon, in the heart of Paris, of a *ci-devant* French aristocrat and an American merchant one crisp day in March 1796. The Terror had ended and order had been re-established under the weak but stable régime of the first Directory. Though forever 'revolutionised', France had become a somewhat less obnoxious country, to paraphrase an earlier comment of British Prime Minister William Pitt. Aristide Aubert du Petit Thouars was a well-travelled naval officer who had served in the American Revolution and could finally return from exile to serve his country. During the transatlantic crossing, the only passenger who was not French, an American merchant called James Smith, had befriended him and then insisted on lending him one *louis* to ward off their fleecing innkeeper in the seaport of Le Havre. To settle this debt, they had met up again in Paris and embarked on a lengthy tour of the capital, the Frenchman adjusting to the new street names and administrative or military use of churches, while his 'bon Américain Smith' simply marvelled at discovering the French capital.

The Panthéon itself embodied the dynamic clash between their two worlds. In 1791, the Constituent Assembly had decreed that the former Church of Ste Geneviève would become a republican resting place for the ashes of the great men of the era of French liberty, a monumental, but atheist, tribute from a grateful nation to their 'Mighty Dead'. Du Petit Thouars' correspondence reveals he had been a reverent Catholic as a youth, but remains silent on what reactions to this new civic Temple he may have shared with his American companion.[4] On the other hand, Smith, a committed republican, confessed to his diary that night an emotional response to this institutional effort to unite all men. 'Certainly nothing', he declared, 'can be imagined more likely to create a great spirit in a nation than a repository of this kind, sacred to everything that is sublime and illustrious and patriotic.'[5] He is unlikely to have shared such views with his tour guide. Smith went on to express regret that his aristocratic companion belonged to a social order he vehemently despised and detested. Yet the Frenchman was such a practical philosopher, and had

[4] Amiral Bergasse du Petit Thouars (ed.), *Aristide Aubert Du Petit Thouars, Héros d'Aboukir 1760–1798. Lettres et Documents inédits* (Paris, 1937), 420–1. See Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789–1799* (Cambridge, 2007) for a thorough discussion of the early history of the Panthéon.

[5] Theobald Wolfe Tone, *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, *Volume II*: *America, France and Bantry Bay (August 1795 to December 1796)*, T.W. Moody, R.B. McDowell and C.J. Woods (eds) (Oxford, 2001), 102.

known so many adventures and reverses of fortune, that Smith could not help but like him. With du Petit Thouars, he had enjoyed climbing 'to the top of the Panthéon, from whence we could see all Paris, as in a ground plan, together with the country for several leagues round … there being a foot of snow on the ground … It was the most singular spectacle I had ever seen.'[6]

Some ten months later, fate would throw the two men together once again. In the most extraordinary of chance encounters, du Petit Thouars learned that Smith was neither an American nor a merchant. While the purpose of Smith's visit to France did indeed entail negotiations with the French authorities, the sale of American grain was not on his agenda. Going about his duties in the naval port of Brest in January 1797, as a *chef de division* compiling reports from ship logs of the ill-fated French expedition to Bantry Bay in Ireland, du Petit Thouars confessed to his sister what he had been stunned to discover:

> Une singulière rencontre vient de me faire beaucoup de réflexions et j'étais oppressé quand je me suis retiré chez moi. Je t'ai parlé d'un Smith en compagnie duquel je traversai l'Atlantique l'année dernière: je viens de le retrouver sur les vaisseaux qui reviennent de l'expédition d'Irlande, revêtu de l'uniforme de chef de brigade. Il m'a dit qu'il était Irlandais, et … qu'il retournait pour tâcher de délivrer son pays qui était tout prêt de briser le joug; s'il était pris, il serait pendu.[7]

The American merchant and purposeful *chef de brigade* was in fact the leading United Irishman Theobald Wolfe Tone, who – despite the relatively modest achievements of his short life – was to become after his death in 1798 one of the most loved and venerated of Irish nationalist heroes. Of the decisive episodes in Ireland's struggle for nationhood, surely one of the most cherished in Irish collective memory is the perilous and clandestine mission he undertook to France in 1796. Since the first publication of his journals in 1826, generations of Irish nationalists have admired and praised his courage and determination in leaving his peaceful exile and his young family in America, and sailing to France on a false American passport. While the authorities in London and Dublin presumed he was tending to his farm in New Jersey, in Paris he took on the French political and military élite, overcame major

[6] Ibid.

[7] Bergasse du Petit Thouars (ed.), *Aristide Aubert Du Petit Thouars*, 454. From a letter dated 3 January 1797.

obstacles such as his inability to communicate competently in the language of his hosts, and brought about the ill-fated, but formidable, French naval expedition to Bantry Bay later that year. With France and Britain at war, and Tone still officially a British subject, his actions in France were nothing short of treasonable. An abundance of French archival material corroborates his own testimony: he had initially to lie low and remain *incognito* in Paris, which was swarming with English spies and adventurers, many of them posing as Americans.[8] For a gregarious and curious individual who thrived in convivial settings, the subterfuge and solitude must have been personally difficult. If this introduction seems protracted, it is because scholars have only recently discovered the references to Tone in du Petit Thouars' correspondence. His letters confirm the clandestine nature of Tone's mission as he lived it, while reinforcing it as a genuinely romantic and heroic adventure.[9]

If Tone is one of the most loved among nationalist heroes, it is, as his biographer Marianne Elliott points out, because his substantial written legacy makes him seem one of the most familiar.[10] His polemical writings aside, he left behind a detailed diary and correspondence which combine keen observation and utter candour. In exile in France, he responded to his enforced idleness with a creative impulse to write, composing a brief autobiography that became part of the canon of Irish nationalism. Yet most studies of Tone have concentrated on the political dimension of his legacy, overlooking other vibrant dimensions of the diary in particular. Elliott has argued that the image of a well-read and cultivated man comes out most forcefully in his journal after his arrival in France. Indeed, Tone was one of those individuals the French historian Marc Bloch so cherished, a 'témoin de l'histoire malgré lui', as a witness and chronicler of French history. This is an essential dimension of his writings during the period 1796–8, as Thomas Bartlett has emphasised.[11] With the recent publication of the third and final volume of the scholarly edition of Tone's *Writings*, painstakingly footnoted and indexed by a dedicated team of editors, it is timely to examine the overlooked cultural aspects of Tone's three years in Europe. Such efforts can enrich our growing understanding of the Irish diaspora throughout the centuries, and of Irish identity within

[8] Tone, *Writings*, II, 162, 192.

[9] Discussed in Sylvie Kleinman, *Translation, the French Language and the United Irishmen (1792–1804)* (Ph.D. thesis, Dublin City University, 2005).

[10] Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven and London, 1989), 1–2.

[11] See the insightful editorial introduction in Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone* (Dublin, 1998), vii–xlvi.

Europe. This article will discuss Tone's communicative strategies as Ireland's first 'ambassador *incognito*' to France, and his insightful chronicle of the French Directory. By highlighting the cultural wealth of his diary, it will then go on to demonstrate how his mission turned him into an accidental tourist, before concluding with a discussion of the contribution made by Tone's written legacy to our understanding of the Irish diaspora.[12]

II. Ambassador *incognito*, or 'minister plenipotentiary planning a revolution'[13]

Shortly after his arrival in Paris, Tone mocked himself as the Irish 'minister plenipotentiary planning a revolution', yet he immediately undertook his mission with seriousness of purpose and dogged determination, and would within weeks be among the few foreigners privileged to be granted permission to stay in the capital.[14] The Directory had been briefed by the French envoy in Philadelphia about his arrival and was aware of his real identity. His mission led to the massive French expedition to Bantry Bay in December 1797, an abject military failure and thus the subject of much scrutiny and retrospective analysis. Successive anatomies of this lost opportunity have distracted attention from the intercultural processes without which it would not have come about.

First to be considered is an essential element of the legend surrounding Tone, one which emerged from his diary from the time he set foot on French soil. For months after his arrival, he peppered his journal entries with self-deprecating comments suggesting that he had embarked on his perilous and clandestine mission as a United Irish envoy unable to speak French. Indeed almost two years after his arrival, in December 1797, sporting the uniform of a French adjutant general, Tone met the rising star of the French army, General Napoleon Bonaparte. His record of the end of their interview boldly formulates his lack of competence, and it is no wonder confusion has surrounded the vexed

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[12] I am grateful to the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences for awarding a Post-Doctoral Fellowship to my project, an illustrated book on Tone's travels and adventures in France and French-occupied Europe (1796–8), a theme first explored in Sylvie Kleinman, 'The Accidental Tourist: Theobald Wolfe Tone's Secret Mission to Paris, 1796' in Jane Conroy (ed.), *Cross-Cultural Travel: Papers from the Royal Irish Academy Symposium on Literature and Travel, NUI Galway November 2002* (New York, 2003), 121–30.

[13] Tone, *Writings*, II, 60.

[14] Ibid.

question of his knowledge of French. Generations of readers have taken the 'evidence' Tone provided at face value: 'Buonaparte … then asked me where I had learned to speak French? To which I replied that I had learned *the little* that I knew *since my arrival in France*, about twenty months ago.'[15] Napoleon was not himself a native speaker of the language, but his curiosity at Tone's French – evidently competent by that stage – serves our purpose by contradicting the Irishman's self-assessment. However, Tone's distress during the early days must have been genuine, and he relates with humour his experience of that most intimidating dimension of cultural difference, the language barrier. In February 1796, attending to basic 'tourist-host' encounters in Le Havre, he experienced what modern commentators would describe as 'culture shock'. His frustration at being reliant on a French travelling companion he did not like is palpable: 'Damn it, rot it, and sin it for me, that I cannot speak French!' To embellish his dilemma he then misquoted Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: 'Oh, that I had given that time to the tongues that I have spent in fencing and bear baiting.'[16] At an inn on the way to Paris, he particularly resented being ripped off for his first bad meal: 'A most blistering bill for our supper … poor wine … execrable ragout … In great indignation and the more so because I could not scold in French.'[17]

Tone was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, had practised as a barrister, and was very well read.[18] It is therefore difficult to believe that he had not learned French as a young man, particularly in light of the French Enlightenment's impact on intellectual life. Yet we have too readily confused the Francophilia of the age with Francophonia, by which is meant a functional communicative competence in the French language. Though French was undeniably the *lingua franca* of the intelligentsia, the most widely read titles, be they polemical, philosophical or literary, were widely available in English translations. Many members of the urban middle class admitted not speaking French, though they possibly could read it with the help of a dictionary. Even if Tone had a smattering of conversational French, the language of polite salons

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[15] Theobald Wolfe Tone, *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, *Volume III: France, the Rhine, Lough Swilly and Death of Tone (January 1797 – November 1798)*, T.W. Moody, R.B. McDowell and C.J. Woods (eds) (Oxford, 2007), 185. The emphasis is mine.

[16] Tone, *Writings*, II, 43.

[17] Ibid., 46.

[18] This is demonstrated by the abundance of literary references quoted by Tone, many of which were identified by the editors of the Oxford edition of his *Writings* before searchable electronic databases entered the scholar's life. See Tone, *Writings*, III, 539–44.

and erudite debate, this would not have equipped him to uphold consumer rights in a coaching inn. As late as 1796, the French language as written by Voltaire and Rousseau was by no means universally spoken, especially outside Paris. Patois and regional dialects were still the norm. Therefore, when faced with 'execrable ragout' and an innkeeper who had not been educated as a lawyer in a capital city, Tone philosophically concluded, 'Passion is eloquent but all my figures of speech were lost on the landlord.'[19]

Yet, within weeks he was to undertake successful negotiations with French politicians and military leaders, and – while a range of strategic factors influenced France's military policy – Tone's ability to convince the most senior figures in power was instrumental. In her discussion of the Irish-English language barrier during the Tudor Conquest, Patricia Palmer pointed to a self-evident issue in international relations, namely that persuasion presupposes a common language.[20] This aspect of communication is often occluded in various narratives and chronicles, but is highly relevant to the flurry of lobbying and petitioning which the United Irishmen engaged in with the French Directory.[21] In fact, Tone's command of French during the 1796 negotiations could not have been as pitiable as he claims. Were his encounters effective only through 'fumbling … pidgin phrases … mispronunciations and mistakes', that is, the stereotypical depiction of intercultural encounters? [22] Tone's first official contact (that we know of) was with Pierre Adet, the French minister in Philadelphia, and – as in subsequent interviews – he is clear about the dynamics of communication across language barriers. He had only been in Philadelphia about one week when they met: 'He [Adet] spoke English very imperfectly, and I French a great deal worse; however, we made a shift to understand one another'.[23] Yet Adet's official dispatches to his government do not portray a fumbling Irishman, but an eloquent patriot, well worthy of their attention.[24]

Tone's next challenge arose during the transatlantic crossing from New York to Le Havre, as his nine fellow passengers were all Frenchmen. Though

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[19] Tone, *Writings*, II, 46.

[20] Patricia Palmer, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland: English Renaissance Literature and Elizabethan Imperial Expansion* (Cambridge, 2001), 49.

[21] This issue is discussed in greater detail in Kleinman, *Translation, the French Language and the United Irishmen*.

[22] Patricia Palmer, 'Interpreters and the Politics of Translation and Traduction in Sixteenth-Century Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, 33 (2003), 257–77.

[23] Tone, *Writings*, II, 337.

[24] Pierre Adet to the Comité de Salut Public, 1 October 1795, Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères (Paris), Correspondance Politique, Angleterre, 589, 23^{r}–23^{v}.

he says virtually nothing of the crossing in his diary, du Petit Thouars recorded his vivid impressions of the rough winter sea and generally dull atmosphere. With nothing to do on board, *ennui* set in among the small group huddled in close quarters, and below deck it would have been difficult to avoid conversation. Though his companions probably spoke some English, Tone must have felt singled out as the only non-native speaker of French. In the twentieth century, applied linguists would formulate such 'total immersion' settings as the ideal way (for adults in particular) to learn a language. We can be grateful however to du Petit Thouars for casually commenting on the books being passed around. One was the narrative of Viscount George Macartney's embassy to China in 1792, which epitomised East-West cultural collision, as he alone of the delegation was able to avoid the ceremonial kowtow to the emperor Quianlong. Of particular relevance was the fact that Macartney was from Lissanoure, County Antrim. If the book belonged to Tone, it would be intriguing that the narrative of an Irish-born envoy describing the challenges of cultural contact and diplomatic ritual was on board the same ship as the Irish 'minister plenipotentiary planning a revolution'.[25]

Tone's first official contact in Paris was the American ambassador James Monroe, with whom he discussed which members of the Directory to approach. Tone surprisingly did not prioritise their likely support of the cause of Ireland, preferring to maintain his political ambiguity. He mentioned Lazare Carnot, who was admired in Irish radical circles and was also know by Tone to speak English. Monroe replied that there was nobody fitter, and that Louis-Marie de La Révellière-Lépeaux also spoke English. We then get a revealing insight into the realities of Tone's existence in Paris. As he retrieved his (false) American passport from Monroe's secretary, the latter immediately detected he was an Irishman, presumably because his speech was marked by a perceptible Hiberno-English lilt. The authorities in France had issued warnings about the swarms of English spies posing as Americans, and therefore speaking French was much safer than English, as a brogue does not transfer into French. Tone was a keen observer of language and communication. One diary entry records the interrogation of the American captain of a Liverpool vessel taken by the French, at which General Lazare Hoche had asked for Tone's assistance (to interpret, though that term is not used). He concluded that the captain was a liar, 'for he was a Scotchman, with a broad accent.'[26]

[25] Tone, *Writings*, II, 60.

[26] Tone, *Writings*, II, 364.

The first book Tone purchased was a copy of the French Constitution, predictable reading given the radical reformer that he was, but hardly a leisurely way to improve one's conversational French. He did not comment on its contents, but recalled the engaging conversation he had with the charming wife of the bookseller. This occasion may have sparked his comment that the French language was 'so adapted for conversation' that the women 'all appear to have wit'.[27] Tone recorded his lengthy interviews with French dignitaries such as Carnot, Charles Delacroix (the Minister for External Relations), General Hoche and Napoleon from both the perspective of participant and chronicler. As the former, this would make his journalising somewhat subjective, yet his accounts shed much light on the mechanics of parleys across the language divide as an essential dimension of crucial contacts in history.

Tone recounts his first meeting with Carnot in an almost melodramatic fashion, which begins with him 'conning his speeches in execrable French all the way' to the Luxembourg Palace.[28] After several stages of frustrating progress past clerks (one of whom he boldly addressed in English), Tone finally found himself alone, face to face with Citizen Carnot, the great Organiser of Victory. He mischievously juggled with status and power relations, exploiting the language issue. Henry Kissinger once remarked that the way one entered negotiations was as important as what followed, a strategy Tone was familiar with: 'I *began* the discourse by saying, in horrible French, that I had been informed he spoke English. [Carnot] *answered*, "A little, Sir, but I perceive *you speak French*, and if you please we will converse in *that* language."'[29] This was 24 February 1796, and Tone had landed on French soil only twenty-two days earlier, not 'speaking' French, as he would later tell Napoleon. Leaving aside this issue, he also recorded the dynamics of the interview. Psycholinguistics informs us that in conversations between people of different status, the more powerful person can 'treat conventions in a cavalier way', and allow 'varying degrees of latitude' to the less powerful speaker.[30] Tone handed Carnot this opportunity: 'I answered, still in my jargon, that if he could have the patience to endure me I would endeavour, and I prayed him to stop me [if] I did not make myself understood.'[31] We take the liberty of speculating that Carnot ('enduring' his interviewee's posing) reacted with a characteristic Gallic shrug

[27] Ibid., 60, 182.
[28] Ibid., 75, and following 75–80.
[29] Ibid., 76. The emphasis is my own.
[30] Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (Harlow, 1989), 47.
[31] Tone, *Writings*, II, 76.

of the shoulders, replying 'Mais non, je vous comprends parfaitement'. Tone recorded conversations a bit like a court transcript, punctuating his narrative with verbs which signal each participant's turn to speak, such as 'I *told* him', 'he *stopped* me', 'I *answered*' or 'to which he *replied*'. This 'feedback' leaves the reader with the impression that the conversation flowed relatively easily between the two men. At one stage, however, Tone was at a loss for a French word, and asked for assistance. Carnot, 'seeing my embarrassment', supplied it. Just as Tone had strategically entered negotiations, he likewise signalled the end of the interview, as he had taken enough of Carnot's time. He flattered the Director that he was 'the very man of whom [the United Irishmen] had spoken', and then drew further attention to Carnot's reputation in Ireland by mentioning that his ability to speak English was well known, a comment 'at which he [Carnot] did not seem displeased.'[32] While bilingualism may not have been as important an asset as a pro-Irish war strategy, Tone nevertheless emphasised its importance.

Tone's account of his lengthy conversations with Delacroix repeats this pattern, and one specific passage has attracted some attention from scholars. In editing his father's writings for the first (1826) edition, William Tone deleted a short phrase which he appears to have misinterpreted as an admission by his father that he only understood the drift of Delacroix's words (one of the many passages restored by Thomas Bartlett in the 1998 edition of the *Life*). William had consistently corrected and 'gentrified' his father's French, preferring – for example – the image of his father 'strolling' through the bookstalls of Paris to that of him 'lounging about' in them.[33]

In dealing with Delacroix, Tone again resorted to the stratagem which had worked so well on Carnot, and humoured the minister. He set the mood of an exchange between unequal figures by opening with an (un-necessary) apology: 'I *began* with telling the Minister that tho' I spoke execrable French, I would, with his permission, put his patience to a short trial.'[34] Intriguingly, William did not censor the following testimony to his father's unashamedly crafty side:

> The Minister then asked me … what quantity of … arms ammunition and money … would I think sufficient [for a French invasion of

[32] Ibid., 78.

[33] Other entertaining anecdotes of filial censorship which also signal how these numerous omissions had distorted Tone's history are provided in Bartlett (ed.), *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, xli–xlv.

[34] Tone, *Writings*, II, 83. The emphasis is my own.

> Ireland]? … I therefore *took advantage of my bad French* and mentioned that I doubted my being able sufficiently to explain myself in conversation, but that he would find my opinions … in the two [written] memorials I had prepared.[35]

In contrast with the aforementioned encounter of Macartney with the Emperor of China, Tone shared with his French counterparts the same Western European cultural customs and educational background, and most importantly Latin, Greek and disputation. Well-to-do students received instruction in rhetoric from a young age in order to develop the art of persuasion in public oratory, and its mechanics, honed through hours of student and political debating, was easy to transfer from one language to another. As a trained lawyer, Tone was also skilled at the parry and thrust of courtroom exchanges. Leonard MacNally, a government informer and fellow barrister, admired Tone's ability to argue 'with plausibility and cunning'.[36]

Apart from his occasional posing, there is no indication in the record of these conversations that Tone's French was a hindrance. In delving through French administrative and military archives, and the astonishing amount of material linked to the Irish question throughout the 1790s, there are sufficient traces of Tone's written French to demolish the pose he himself had adopted, as they are totally at odds with what he called his 'execrable jargon'.[37] Yet he would not be the first traveller to discover that speaking and writing a foreign language are distinct skills presenting different challenges. Initially random and minor grammatical errors, typical of an English speaker, prove that he did not always ask a native speaker for assistance, yet rapidly his written French became quite eloquent. The first known letter by him closes, unnecessarily, with an affected apology, 'Ayez la bonté d'excuser mon détestable françois' (please pardon my detestable French).[38] Internal French memos demonstrate that the wily Tone was well thought of, and we are not surprised that Carnot

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[35] Ibid., 85. The emphasis is my own.

[36] Leonard MacNally to Thomas Pelham, 17 September 1795, National Archives of Ireland, Rebellion Papers, NAI/620/10/121/29.

[37] *Inter alia*, those reprinted in Tone's *Writings*, II & III; his military file at Service historique de la Défense (Vincennes), Archives de la Défense, Fonds de l'armée de Terre, 17 Yd 14; misc. items in the Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères (Paris), Correspondance Politique, Angleterre, 589, 592; Archives nationales (France), Archives du pouvoir exécutif (1789–1815), AF/III and AF/IV; and Archives nationales (France), Police générale, F7.

[38] Tone, *Writings*, II, 180.

commented to Delacroix that the Directory intended making good use in their war strategy against Britain of 'cet irlandois qui a beaucoup d'esprit.'[39]

When the French expedition to Ireland became reality, Tone enlisted in the army but was somewhat self-conscious about his lack of military experience. He had once suggested to Nicholas Madgett, the Irish-born head of Delacroix's translation bureau and an *ad hoc* advisor on Irish affairs, that 'speaking a little French', he could 'be of use after the French landing in Ireland … [to] interpret between him and the natives.'[40] Like many lesser-known Irish officers in the French army, Tone did indeed make good use of his command of the English language by translating documents and acting as a liaison interpreter. His papers, scattered in various archives, demonstrate that his bilingualism was a useful skill, and after his enlistment the histrionic quips about his poor French became scarce.

III. A Chronicler of French History

Tone's powers of observation and his frank transcription of his impressions give a certain quality to his narrative which distinguishes it from others of the revolutionary decade. Significantly, he was aware that he had become a chronicler of French history: 'I am now a little used to see great men, and great statesmen, and great generals … Yet, after all, it is a droll thing that I should become acquainted with Buonaparte … the greatest man in Europe.'[41] Despite being written before the age of communication technology, the immediacy of Tone's diary entries makes them as effortless to read as a well-crafted blog. Here we look at his experience of republican secular ceremonies, inspired by Ancient Greco-Roman pomp. With time, he would learn that the French public had become apathetic to these displays, but as a sympathiser just arrived in his country of asylum, his reactions were understandably intense. He attended a civic *Fête de la Jeunesse* in the Church of St Roch (where Denis Diderot's remains lie), and one must picture the former house of worship as he saw it, stripped of its religious works of art and with its Catholic iconography supplanted by republican imagery. The male youths of the district who had reached the age of sixteen were presented to the Municipal officials to receive their arms,

[39] Carnot to Delacroix, 28 May 1796, Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères (Paris), Correspondance Politique, Angleterre, 589, 260^{r}–261^{r}, 260^{v}.

[40] Tone, *Writings*, II, 142.

[41] Tone, *Writings*, III, 186.

and their twenty-one year old counterparts were enrolled as citizens and thus registered to vote:

> The church was decorated with the national colours and a statue of liberty with an altar blazing before her … the procession … consisted of the … National Guard under arms … officers and the young men to be presented … there was a great pile of musquets and sabres before the Municipality.[42]

Following speeches on the citizen's duty and the honour of bearing arms in the defence of France, the arms were distributed by the officials, and the young men congratulated by their loved ones. Tone confessed: 'I was in an enthusiasm. I do not at all wonder at the miracles which the French army has wrought in the contest for their liberties.'[43]

On 22 September 1797 (the anniversary of the establishment of the French republic), he was in Bonn with the French Armée de Sambre et Meuse and marched in the procession to celebrate the proclamation of the République cis-Rhénane, that is, the part of Germany between the Meuse and the Rhine annexed by France. A tree of liberty was planted, then he dined in state with the Municipality and 'drank sundry and loyal toasts', but 'not too many', as he proudly recorded in his journal that night.[44] The French administration had put on hold plans for another invasion of Ireland, and he must have wondered if he would ever witness the planting of a Tree of Liberty on Irish soil.

The theatre was a nightly refuge for Tone, and from Le Havre to Paris, from Rennes to Brest and from Cologne to The Hague, he attended plays, opera and ballet, and commented on stage sets, costume, character, plot, performance and music. Once again, this is typical of an eighteenth-century narrative, but Tone consciously contextualised the performing arts under the Directory as a state-subsidised propaganda exercise. In Le Havre, he commented on the characters and dénouement of *Les Rigueurs du cloître* (1790), a play with a romanticised political message. The plot revolves around the storming of a convent by the National Guards, leading to the liberation of the young ladies by the valiant soldiers and the requisitioning of the property for the nation.[45] In his second night in Paris, he attended a ballet called *L'offrande*

[42] Tone, *Writings*, II, 136.
[43] Ibid., 136.
[44] Tone, *Writings*, III, 152.
[45] Tone, *Writings*, II, 42.

à la liberté, which like the secular ritual in St Roch adopted the symbolism of Antiquity. A statue of Liberty, centre-stage, was surrounded by characters in beautiful Grecian habits. The audience received the civic air, *Veillons au salut de l'Empire*, 'with transport', and:

> Whenever the word *esclavage* [slavery] was uttered, it operated like an electric shock. The Marseilles Hymn was next sung and produced still greater enthusiasm; at the words *aux armes Citoyens*! all the performers drew their swords and the females turned to them, encouraging them. Then children lay baskets of flowers before the altar of the goddess Liberty, females with torches lit tripods … chanting *Liberté, Liberté chérie* … all this executed … with a grace beyond description … at once pathetic and sublime … it affected me most powerfully.[46]

Managers were compelled to play patriotic songs and all performances closed with the Marseillaise, the National Guards often parading on stage. Tone also recorded the reaction of the audience, following reports of the 'esprit public' just as the police were monitoring the public mood.[47] French historians have still to acknowledge Tone's insights into the *mentalités* of the period.

Since boyhood, Tone had nurtured an untameable desire to become a soldier, and each day in Paris he walked down to watch the changing of the guards in the Tuileries gardens. He frequently commented on the various ways in which militarism, including these staged displays, had captured the French public imagination. But the soldier had been a stock character in European entertainment throughout the eighteenth century, and when Tone saw a performance of *Le Déserteur* (1781), it is clear he had already seen the play performed in English and that he was familiar with the famous character of Montauciel, the drunken brigadier who stumbles around the stage singing '*Je ne déserterai jamais*'. Tone was not impressed with the actor, who could not act drunk. This failing was understandable, he said, because the French never 'drink hard' and so had no archetype on which to model the character of a drunk. Tone maintained that had the actor been given the opportunity of spending 'two or three afternoons with P.P. [i.e. Thomas Russell, his closest friend and a leading United Irishman], and another person who shall be namelesss [himself]', he would have been able to 'enlarge and improve' his

[46] Ibid., 50.

[47] See A. Aulard, *Paris pendant la réaction thermidorienne et sous le Directoire*, II & III (5 vols, Paris, 1898–1902).

manner of acting Montauciel.[48] Tone was candid about his intake of alcohol, at times 'confessing' to his diary that he must retrench his intake. However, there are many indications that he overindulged at times, such as the evening when he 'drank *rather enough*' and watched soldiers dancing under the trees with their wives and mistresses on the Champs Elysées:

> with near two bottles of Burgundy in my head … judge … whether I did not enjoy the spectacle … Returned to the *cabaret* and indeed drank another bottle of wine, which made three, and walked home in a state of considerable elevation, having several delightful visions before my eyes. Well '*Wine does wonders, does wonders every day, makes the heavy light and gay*.'[49]

He often regretted the absence of Thomas Russell, as he would have welcomed his valued advice on how to go about his mission. They could even have enjoyed a bottle or two of 'diplomatic burgundy'. Yet despite his inner doubts, exaggerated because of the journalising exercise, he ultimately succeeded in his undertaking.

IV. The Accidental Tourist

During his initial stay in Paris, and then as a French officer travelling through France, Germany and French-occupied Holland, Tone was conscious that his mission had turned him into an accidental tourist. Born into the golden age of travel writing, in the very decade in which Tobias Smollett and Laurence Sterne published their seminal works, he had also become enthralled as a youth by tales of buccaneering and James Cook's voyages. He once commented that his family possessed an inexplicable spirit of adventure, and his mission to France allowed him to confront it. On the road from Cologne to Amsterdam he observed that by the time his voyaging was over, he would have made 'a pretty handsome tour of it.'[50]

Tone's animated retelling of his first hours in the seaport of Le Havre owes more to picaresque adventures and stage farces than to typical narratives of the grand tour. Note the staccato pace, as if the protagonist were whispering to the reader:

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[48] Tone, *Writings*, II, 149–50.

[49] Ibid., 158.

[50] Tone, *Writings*, III, 54.

> A swindler in the Hotel; wishes to take me in; wants to travel with me to Paris; says he is an American and calls me Captain; is sure he has seen me somewhere; tell him perhaps it was Spain … He tries his wily arts on an old Frenchman and to my great surprise tricks him of about a guinea … this was the first adventure![51]

Tone's description of his journey to Paris reads more like classic travel literature, tempered as it is by the pace of the horse-drawn vehicle, which allowed him to savour the countryside.[52] He thus admired some of France's celebrated beauty spots: 'A hill immediately over Rouen of immense height and so steep that the road is cut in traverses. When at the top, a most magnificent prospect to look back over Normandie, with Rouen at your feet, and the Seine winding beautifully thro' the landscape.'[53] All his subsequent trips to Brittany, Germany, Holland, Normandie and Brittany would be as a privileged French officer, seeing parts of Western Europe closed to the grand tourist, but involved virtually no genuine combat. He regularly commented on landscape, agriculture, roads, and in cities always took in some of the local sites.

Several decades before Baudelaire coined the seminal concept, Tone embarked on what can only be described as Parisian *flâneries*. Having spent two years in London studying law, he had already experienced urban life in an idle and luxurious capital and – despite bouts of loneliness and homesickness – he appeared comfortable in Paris. 'Walked about Paris diverting myself innocently … I wish I could once more see the green sod of Ireland! Yet Paris is delightful!'[54] His first hotel was very near the infamous Palais Royal (renamed Palais Egalité) where prostitutes and money speculators plied their trade, and its numerous bookstalls became a favourite haunt. Many of his idle wanderings doubled as tourism, and with du Petit Thouars he had spent an entire day visiting the sites of the capital. They saw the Jardin des Plantes and its 'vast collection of curious exotics', the place where the Bastille once stood, and the Temple where Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette had been imprisoned. Its gloomy appearance made him melancholy.[55]

Though raised as an Anglican, and paradoxically for one assumed by posterity to be agnostic (and possibly atheist), Catholic churches were a

[51] Tone, *Writings*, II, 41.

[52] As noted by Christopher J. Woods, 'Irish Travel Writings as Source Materials', *Irish Historical Studies*, 28 (1992), 171–83.

[53] Tone, *Writings*, II, 45.

[54] Ibid., 158.

[55] Ibid., 102–3.

favourite haunt. Though he appears to have found them a peaceful retreat, he also admired the paintings and statuary, deeming himself competent to air opinions on such matters. Despite having seen Notre Dame, he preferred the inside of Rouen cathedral, but this entertaining vignette on architecture perfectly illustrates Tone's self-mockery:

> The cathedral is a beautiful relic of Gothic architecture … It is a magnificent *coup d'œil*. But, what is provoking, between the body of the church and the choir, some pious archbishop, who had more money than taste, has thrown a very spruce colonnade of pure Corinthian architecture, which totally destroys the harmony of the building … This little specimen of Grecian architecture is more truly Gothic than all the rest of the edifice.[56]

Tone returned two days later, as something was troubling him. On his second inspection of the cathedral, he found that 'the Corinthian colonnade, described in terms of such just indignation in yesterday's journal, turns out to be Ionic'. But Tone laid the blame for his aesthetic error elsewhere. 'The archbishop I still hold to be a blockhead in all the dialects of Greece, and orders of architecture, and moreover, he is a fellow of no taste.'[57]

Typical of the emotional meanderings of the diary, this anecdote leads us to an episode that is both comic and tragically revealing of Tone's emotional turmoil. The day after the 'lesson' in architecture, he attended Easter Mass in Rouen cathedral, noting there were very few men, but being surrounded by women may have been a welcome occurrence, particularly as he was in his dashing French officer's uniform.

> Heard part of a sermon, this being Easter Sunday. Sad trash! A long parallel which I thought would never end, between Jesus and Joseph, followed by a second, equally edifying, comparing him with the prophet Jonas, showing how one lays three nights in the tomb, and the other three nights in the belly of a great fish, etc., etc. … I wonder how people can listen to such abominable nonsense.[58]

Despite the caustic tone of Tone's mockery of religious ritual, this episode

[56] Tone, *Writings*, III, 229.
[57] Ibid., 229.
[58] Ibid.

merits further consideration as in effect he had visited the cathedral on the most important days of the Christian calendar. The discovery of the 'truly gothic' colonnade was on Good Friday, and he returned (ostensibly to confirm the archbishop's poor taste) on Easter Sunday, 8 April 1798. An earlier journal entry for 26 March indicates, however, that he may have been experiencing a genuine crisis, having realised (correctly, as fate would have it) that this could well be his last Easter. From the English papers he had learned 'news of the most disastrous and afflicting kind', namely that a fatal swoop by government forces on Oliver Bond's house had led to the arrest of almost every man he knew and esteemed in Dublin. This dealt a crushing blow to the United Irish organisation, with disastrous implications for both him and his cause.[59] As the government had now 'drawn the sword', his mind was 'growing every hour more and more savage', and violent revolutionary measures, which he would have regarded with horror six months ago, now seemed justified by necessity.

On a less sombre note, Tone's exploration of Irishness in exile allows us to draw a comparison with another witty Irish writer, George Bernard Shaw, who shared Tone's love of the arts and theatre, as well as his tendency to ponder the complexities of birth on John Bull's other island. Shaw once commented that the peaceful rooms of the National Gallery of Ireland in Merrion Square had become his 'cherished asylum', and Tone much enjoyed his visits to the Louvre, then known as the Muséum central des Arts. Opened in 1793 to make the royal collections accessible to the public, its galleries quickly filled with works seized from the Church and fleeing émigrés, as well as war trophies brought home by the Republic's triumphant armies. The Museum was closed when Tone first visited it, but he was nevertheless allowed in after stating that he was a foreigner, to whom admission was free. While there, he admired paintings by Guido Reni, Rembrandt, Raphael and Van Dyck. He seemed familiar with their work, having presumably already encountered it in London and in private collections in Ireland. Some of the works he saw may have been part of the 1794 booty 'appropriated' for the French people by the armies of the North and Sambre et Meuse. Later, while acting as a French officer in Cologne, he confirmed an awareness of plunder in a casual comment after attending Easter Mass in the cathedral: 'I fancy they have concealed their plate and ornaments for fear of us, and they are much right in that.'[60] The *Mona Lisa* was still in Versailles where he may well have seen it, but the small canvas had not yet achieved its current iconic status, and he did not comment on it.

[59] Ibid., 220–1. The 'fatal swoop' took place on 12 March 1798.

[60] Ibid., 52.

Tone was drawn to one painting in particular, and though Frank MacDermot found his preference 'perplexing to modern taste', it is likely there was some hidden personal significance in the Irish revolutionary's rapture in front of a full-length portrait of *The Penitent Magdalen* by the great Baroque painter, Charles le Brun.[61] An opulent testimony to Counter-Reformation art, painted around 1655, its almost theatrical intensity would have appealed to late eighteenth-century tastes for sentimentalist depictions. She dramatically looks to heaven, her ill-begotten jewels strewn at her feet:

> The *Magdalen* of LeBrun is in my mind, worth the whole collection. I never saw anything in the way of painting which came near it. I am no artist, but it requires no previous instruction to be struck with the numberless beauties of this most enchanting piece. It is a production of consummate genius.[62]

Tone returned a second time to admire this work, and claimed he spent close to an hour staring at it. Black and white reproductions only tell part of the story, as the Magdalene is draped in luscious silks of blue, white and red, an incongruous reflection of the French tricolour.[63]

V. Tone's Place in the Irish Pantheon

It seems likely that the Young Irelanders and Fenians who found themselves organising and agitating for Irish freedom in Paris during the course of the nineteenth century would have read Tone's European diary and empathised with his isolation. So too would the celebrated literary exiles of the next century such as Samuel Beckett and James Joyce, though Tone has never been associated with them. If Tone experienced panic during his first weeks in France, he masked it with humour in his diary by emulating the adventures of protagonists in the rollicking but realistic novels of Tobias Smollett, which he frequently quoted. It is not impossible that Anthony Cronin had Tone's own adventures in the back of his mind when he embarked on his 'road

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[61] Frank MacDermot, *Theobald Wolfe Tone* (London, 1939), 195. Inventaire du Louvre no. 2890. This work had been commissioned for the church of the Carmelite convent in Paris, from which it had been seized.

[62] Tone, *Writings*, II, 100.

[63] MacDermot, *Theobald Wolfe Tone*, facing 196.

trip' through France with Brendan Behan, recounted with humour and self-deprecation in *Dead as Doornails*.[64] Yet Tone's experience was also a typical eighteenth-century narrative of happiness and misfortune, and circumstances meant that he could easily cast himself as a victim. His anonymity in Paris was compounded by the fact that his wife and children were still in America, and this led to many bouts of loneliness and the '*blue devils*'. Idleness, the uncertainty of his fate and weariness from 'floating about at the mercy of events', meant that he frequently despaired – despite admitting the absurdity of this state of mind in such a beautiful environment as Paris.[65] One July day he scaled the heights of Montmartre, '*all alone*' he emphasised, 'and had a magnificent view of Paris at my feet; but it is terrible to have nobody to speak to, or to communicate the million of observations which "*rise and shine, evaporate and fall*" in my mind.'[66] The literary merits of Tone's journal have been praised by Declan Kiberd, who astutely remarks that readers feel 'the poignant vulnerability of the writer in every line', knowing how the tale will end.[67] Tone's humanity has a universal appeal, but – for the Irish reader in particular – the sustained and sorrowful exploration of Irishness in exile had a major impact on the collective imagination. The contrast with other cultures led to a reinforcement of Tone's own identity, and repeatedly he wrote with affection of 'this little island of our own … a country worth struggling for, whose value I never knew until I had lost it.'[68]

As a result, generations of Irish readers, from the well-intended armchair patriot to the inveterate republican militant seeking to justify the armed struggle in Tone's 'gospel', have been drawn into a virtual journey by his skilful eighteenth-century pen, enriched and enlightened by the adventures they have experienced vicariously through reading. In looking to this legacy for inspiration, they also found solace in his inimitable fusion of light-hearted wit and determination never to despair. A recent testimony to his grip on the Irish imagination surfaced in a diary kept by a female prisoner in Kilmainham gaol in 1916. On Sunday, 7 May, Madeleine ffrench-Mullen noted the silence as no volleys signalled executions, her outrage at not being able to attend Mass, and indignation at being fobbed off with a 'tea' which consisted of stirabout and dry bread. However, she added, "'*tis in vain for soldiers to complain*" as a

[64] Anthony Cronin, *Dead as Doornails: A Memoir* (Dublin, 1976).

[65] Tone, *Writings*, II, 190.

[66] Ibid, 229. Tone is quoting Samuel Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749).

[67] Declan Kiberd, 'Republican Self-Fashioning: The Journals of Wolfe Tone' in *Irish Classics* (London, 2000), 221.

[68] Tone, *Writings*, III, 17.

good Irishman has already said'.[69] The ditty was Tone's favourite refrain from a drinking song.

There was nothing paradoxical about the friendship that grew between Tone and du Petit Thouars, both of whom shared a common thirst for adventure. Admiral Bergasse du Petit Thouars, du Petit Thouars' descendent and editor of his letters, described his ancestor as a quintessential man of the last decades of the eighteenth century, an engaging figure infused with the sensibility, enthusiasm and anxiety of his times, possessing an incessant imagination and a mind broadened by a combination of reading and travel.[70] Nothing better captures the essence of Theobald Wolfe Tone, who as a commoner was able to become a French officer and equal to his French companion. Neither man survived the year 1798, du Petit Thouars having perished defending his ship against the British at Aboukir on 3 August. But had they done so, both might have eventually reached the same status, as in the French army Tone could have risen through the ranks on talent and merit. Like many an archetypal hero, Tone had to leave the land of his birth and face insurmountable challenges in order to achieve heroic status. His life had been riddled with paradoxes and contradictions, not least that by the age of twenty he had already been cast as a doomed hero in an eighteenth-century tragic national narrative, albeit in the Galway stage production of John Home's Scottish play *Douglas* (1756): 'With the benefit of hindsight, there is something both prophetic and ironic in the image of Wolfe Tone standing on stage in full battle dress', reassuring his wife that 'Free is his heart who for his country fights.'[71]

The greatest paradox was Tone's mere presence that crisp March day in the Panthéon, as after his death this relatively modest man came to be venerated among Irish nationalists in a phenomenon the French came to call *panthéonisation*. In Tone's case, it is only metaphorical, as no physical monument houses his remains or indeed those of other United Irishmen. It is not by coincidence that the review by Tom Dunne of the 1998 Lilliput edition of Tone's *Life* concluded with that episode.[72] The Irish patriot had not missed the

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[69] Diary of Madeleine ffrench-Mullen, Kilmainham and Mountjoy Jails, 5–20 May 1916, Allen Library (Edmund Rice House, Dublin), 201/File B. I am grateful to Darragh O'Donoghue for providing me with his transcript.

[70] See Bergasse du Petit Thouars (ed.), *Aristide Aubert Du Petit Thouars*, ix.

[71] As highlighted by Christopher Morash in his *A History of the Irish Theatre 1601–2000* (Cambridge, 2002), 70.

[72] Tom Dunne, review of Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *Theobald Wolfe Tone* (Dundalk, 1997) and idem (ed.), *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone* (Dublin, 1998), *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 14 (1999), 163–5.

opportunity to project how a civic temple could honour the deserving men of Ireland, possibly fearing the likelihood of bloodshed while not imagining his own fate: 'If we have a republic in Ireland, we must build a Pantheon, but we must not, like the French, be in too great a hurry to people it.'[73]

If in 1796 Ireland had not yet achieved her independence and 'fixed her rank among the nations of the earth', Tone's written legacy proves that, as remains true today, Ireland was an outward-looking society. As this article has attempted to demonstrate, Tone deserves greater recognition as a European writer and as one of Ireland's greatest cultural and literary assets. 'Aux grands hommes, la Patrie reconnaissante.'[74]

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[73] Tone, *Writings*, II, 102.

[74] The famous inscription which graces the pediment of the Panthéon.