<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Speaking of '98: Young Ireland and Republican Memory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Ryder, Sean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication Date</strong></td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link to publisher's version</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.iaci-usa.org/publications.html">http://www.iaci-usa.org/publications.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Item record</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/4740">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/4740</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Downloaded 2020-10-02T20:23:56Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.
SPEAKING OF ’98: YOUNG IRELAND AND REPUBLICAN MEMORY

Sean Ryder

[QB: This is a pre-publication version. To cite, please use published version: Ryder, Sean. ‘Speaking of ’98: Young Ireland and Republican Memory.’ Éire - Ireland 34.2 (1999), pp. 51-69.]

On 1 April 1843 The Nation published what was to become its most popular and notorious ballad, “The Memory of the Dead”, with its famous opening line, “Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight?” The song defiantly denounces the silence, embarrassment and denial which, according to the poet, afflict the contemporary memory of the United Irishmen:

Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight?
Who blushes at the name?
When cowards mock the patriots’ fate,
Who hangs his head for shame?1

The singer laments the fate of the rebels, whose noble cause was rewarded by death, exile or, even worse, popular disavowal – but whose heroic gesture has nevertheless “kindled here a living blaze / That nothing shall withstand.” The (male) listener is encouraged to become a “true man” by joining the faithful band who continue to admire and remember the United men, who drink to their memory, and who hope someday to “act as brave a part.”

For several reasons, this song seems an apt introduction to the complex meanings of “1798” within the nationalist culture of the 1840s. It illustrates the kinds of ambivalence that arise within the discourse of nineteenth-century nationalism, as well as illustrating the impact of actual political exigencies on the interpretation and political significance of such texts.

At one level, the song argues for the existence of a political continuity between the United Irishmen and the Repeal / Young Ireland movements, even to the point of hinting vaguely at the possible necessity for violent struggle in the future:

Through good and ill, be Ireland’s still
Though sad as theirs your fate;
And true men, be you, men,
Like those of Ninety-Eight.

Indeed the very popularity of the song throughout the nineteenth century seems to testify to strong residual sympathies for the republican tradition in post-1798 Ireland, in spite of the song’s premise that such sympathies had all but disappeared.

On the other hand, though, certain rhetorical features in the ballad imply an ambivalence towards the United Irish rebellion. The song carefully avoids making a direct call to arms or advocating republican ideals, for example, and in contrast to 1798 ballads from the populist broadside tradition, like “Dunlavin Green” or “The Wearing of the Green,” “The Memory of the Dead” does not detail the gruesome atrocities of the rebellion, or

1 The Nation, 1 April 1843, p. 393.
demand vengeful “satisfaction”, or threaten to plant the Tree of Liberty. Rather, its energies are directed towards producing a national, heroic memory, of a kind which distances the heroes of the past even as it re-presents them. The call to toast the rebel dead which concludes each stanza is indeed a gesture of solidarity, but it is also a sign of distance, since it places the “present” of the song at a clear remove from the events of the rebellion itself, and makes it easier for John Kells Ingram, the poem’s author, to avoid the expression of outright sedition. Ingram’s poem does construct a political genealogy which links the United Irishmen with a later generation, but this genealogy is highly moral and spiritual, and therefore vague in nature. The historically-specific personalities and events of the rebellion are represented merely as nameless exiles and ghostly dead; shades whose physical and individual existence is less important than their symbolic and sacrificial death. The particular causes for which they fought – be they republican principles or sectarian redress – are not recognised by the ballad. Instead the rebels’ cause is generalised into a more mythic kind of heroic gesture, disengaged from any ideological programme.

The all-important discursive shift from the radical Enlightenment republicanism of the 1790s to the romantic nationalism of the early nineteenth century is reflected here: a shift from the conception of the state based on rational, universal principles, to a conception of the state based on organic tradition, cultural specificity and heroic lineage. United Irish principles, in common with French revolutionary discourse, tended to imply the necessity for jettisoning the past in order to build a more rational and just future, while romantic nationalism, in a contrasting gesture, sought a very definite communion with the past – the heroic past, that is, which manifests national culture. Where the revolutionary ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity were understood to transcend historical contingency, the romantic political ideas of national autonomy and uniqueness were very much rooted in the historical – albeit a history which was highly constructed or selective. “Heroic memory” thus becomes crucially important for nineteenth-century nationalist politics, since it appears to be a way of connecting the individual political subject to the deep-rooted historic identity which grounds of the authentic nation-state.

John Kells Ingram’s own comments about his song, written for the preface to his Sonnets (1900) nearly sixty years after penning “The Memory of the Dead,” repeated this validation of heroic memory, and showed the way in which it could be used to detach the present from the more unpleasant or disturbing features which memory is likely to cast up. More exactly, it allows Ingram to celebrate the United Irishmen in the same breath as he disavows their rebellion:

I think the Irish race should be grateful to the men who in other times, however mistaken may have been their policy, gave their lives for their country. But I have no sympathy with those who preach sedition in our own day when all the circumstances are radically altered. In my opinion no real popular interest can be furthered by violence. To admire them for their death, but reject the cause for which they died, is a rhetorical turn which tries to detach action from context, and to prioritise abstract moral significance over concrete material and political meaning. Heroic memory in a sense transforms history into myth.

The meaning of “The Memory of the Dead” was contested in a lively way in the State Trials of 1844, during which it was produced as a significant piece of evidence by the Crown.

---


Indeed the trials, at which Daniel O’Connell and six other “traversers” were tried and convicted of seditious conspiracy, demonstrated that indeed there were good reasons for “fearing to speak” of ’98, even as late as 1843. One of the traversers was The Nation’s editor Charles Gavan Duffy, who, having published “The Memory of the Dead” sixteen months earlier, found the state prosecution using the song as evidence of his treasonable sympathies. On 26 January 1844, a great deal of the day’s legal proceedings were taken up with reading out suspect journalistic pieces from Duffy’s paper to the court, at the request of the state prosecutors. As The Nation reports it,

Mr Vernon [the state’s registrar of newspapers] then read the now widely-celebrated song, commencing with the words, “Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight.” ...

At this point, the defence embarked on a kind of literary-theoretical foray, seeking to imply that verse ought not be mistaken for political doctrine:

Several extracts from the same paper, relative to the proceedings of the Repeal Association, were next read; after which, at the desire of Mr McDonagh [the traversers’ defence attorney], the following lines in the same paper were read by Mr Vernon:

I have watch’d in delight the fire that flies
In the lightning flash of thy night, black eyes;
As they sparked in joyous merriment, caught
From the passing jest, or the brilliant thought,
My beautiful – mine own.

Six equally uninspiring stanzas follow, after which the paper records:

The reading of these verses caused considerable merriment in the court, and it is supposed that Mr McDonagh had this object only in view when he requested them to be read, for they have not the most remote connexion with the subject before the court.4

The defence was clearly treating the state trial as a farce, and attempting to challenge the legitimacy of the criminal charges and the legal process, but was also perhaps attempting to defuse the potential for reading Ingram’s song politically by implying that poems and politics belong to separate spheres. In his defence of Gavan Duffy the following week, the traversers’ counsel Mr Whiteside returned to the song “The Memory of the Dead.” He pointed out to the court that

Mr Duffy stood charged with the insertion of speeches and certain original matter in his paper. Of the latter the Attorney-General had only read three or four extracts and a song. The song appeared on the 1st of April (a laugh). ... The song was placed in the indictment, but without connexion or concord. Now in a criminal prosecution they were entitled to have the strictest evidence. What “Ninety-Eight” was alluded to in that song? It might be 98 years or 98 horses. If a date, it might be 1698 or 1798, how are they to ascertain whether or not [it] applied to the rebellion of 1798.5

5 The Nation, 3 February 1844, p. 269.
This was facetiousness with a serious purpose, for it sought to undermine the state’s claim to “read” correctly, foregrounding the unstable relation between signifier and signified. Such an argument fundamentally challenges the law’s demand for the “strictest evidence,” in which there is no gap between signifier and signified – the legal process is very much based on a positivist view of language. Such humour and proto-structuralism as Mr Whiteside offered had little actual effect on the verdict in any case. The prosecution continued to argue that the poem was treacherously seditious, focusing on the lines

Alas! that Might can vanish Right—

They fell and passed away;

But true men, like you, men,

Are plenty here to-day.\(^6\)

These lines, according to the Crown, slandered her Majesty’s government and encouraged disrespect towards the state, charges serious enough for O’Connell to worry privately that he might be found guilty of high treason, a crime which carried the death penalty.\(^7\) As it was, O’Connell was sentenced to a year in prison, while Gavan Duffy too was found guilty and sentenced to nine months imprisonment. O’Connell himself knew that remembering the 1798 dead could have inflammatory consequences, and in his defence at the 1844 trials, he reminded the court \textit{ad nauseum} of his many public condemnations of violent methods and oath-bound organisations. Foreclosing the gap between signifier and signified for its own purposes this time, the traversers’ attorney argued that when O’Connell told the Irish people to “remember 98” at Repeal meetings, he did not mean to remember its heroic deeds but “to remember its misdoings, and to avoid them.”\(^8\)

The example of “The Memory of the Dead” touches on most of the general issues which arise when we consider the way Young Ireland remembered 1798. For several reasons it was clearly difficult, unwise or impolitic to commemorate the United Irishmen in the political context of the 1840s. The situation was complex and sometimes contradictory; having implied by publishing Ingram’s poem in 1843 that one ought \textit{not} to fear speaking of Ninety-Eight, for instance, we find \textit{The Nation} appearing to argue the direct opposite case in 1846:

we are treading on dangerous ground; we have no wish to rake up the smouldering ashes of party discord. \textit{We fear to speak of Ninety-eight} [italics original]. Ours be the more pleasing task of counselling union and good feeling now among the descendants of the Orangemen and the Defender – the Saxon and the Celt. We allude to them only as part of our history which must be read, but all of which should not be remembered.\(^9\)

It is possible, however, to discern certain recurring patterns of response on the part of nationalists towards 1798, and to find explanations for them beyond mere cowardice or loss of memory. Silence on the issue of ’98 was one such response, as theorised and justified by the preceding quotation – the memory of ’98 was likely to seriously impede nationalist political progress. O’Connell’s comments about the misdeeds of ’98 illustrate another way of

---

\(^6\) \textit{The Nation}, 10 February 1844, p. 279.


\(^8\) \textit{The Nation}, 3 February 1844, p. 260.

\(^9\) \textit{The Nation}, 14 February 1846, p. 282.
remembering it: that is, a way which does agree to speak of the rebellion, but only in order to
deny its morality or political efficacy. But for those within the movement who wished in
some way to remember 1798 more positively, without identifying entirely with the ideology
or practice of the United Irishmen, two other options remained. The first was to re-interpret
the events of the rising in a sympathetic way, based upon a representation of the “true facts”
as opposed to the lies and distortions recorded by pro-government historiography. This
argument, often conducted in the review pages of *The Nation*, managed to raise important
political issues, while carefully avoiding the open expression of admiration for
republicanism. It involved the production of “corrective” reviews of existing historical
accounts of the rebellion, such as Thomas Davis’s attack on the *Dublin University Review*’s
interpretation of 1798, or the issuing of historical volumes like the “Library of Ireland” series
which included reprints of works such as Hay’s *History of the Insurrection of 1798* (1803),
and was intended to include new revisionist works such as Davis’s *Life of Tone*, Thomas
Devin Reilly’s *Biographies of the United Irishmen* or M.J. Barry’s *Military History of ‘98*
(none of which was actually completed). All of these were intended to revise and challenge
texts like Richard Musgrave’s *Memoirs of the Various Rebellions in Ireland* (1801). Even in
this discourse, there is sometimes an element of looking over one’s shoulder towards the
watchful government. In Gavan Duffy’s brief editorial entitled “Did the Government Foster
the Insurrection of 98?”, for example, the *Dublin University Magazine*’s rebuttal of the
O’Connell’s charge that the government policy was largely to blame for the is itself rebutted
by quoting from the work of one of the *DUM*’s own contributors. The article is written in the
form of a court proceeding, which is playful and humorous, but also provides a legalistic
frame to give the strategically vital impression of objectivity –

EDITOR – Mr Maxwell, does the following passage appear in your novel, entitled,
*My Life*, at page 66, in the “Standard Novels” edition, and does it refer to the
insurrection of ’98—viz., “He resolved to remain a quiet spectator of a popular
commotion, that he felt he had been fostered for sinister purposes by those in power,
who had ample means of suppression in their hands, as soon as the political objects
for which the storm was raised should be effected?”

WITNESS – I believe I must answer both questions in the affirmative.

EDITOR – Very good, sir; very good, indeed. You may go down, Mr Maxwell.10

The second option available to those who wished to register sympathy for the United
Irishmen without becoming seditious was the one adopted by “The Memory of the Dead”, as
we have already seen. This involved “de-republicanising” and “de-sectarianising” the
rebellion, using a version of heroic memory which redefined the leaders of the rebellion as
embodiments of moral virtue and culturally-specific nationality, and the combatants as
national subjects abstracted from class or religious contexts. The national culture constructed
by this memory could be conceived without reference to the French ideas of fifty years
earlier; or at least with reference only to a selected set of them, such as the reconciliation of
religious divisions. It could also evoke a heroism so vague as to detach itself from any actual
military engagement, thus removing it from the taint of violent excess and shameful
sectarianism which still attached to the popular memory of 1798.

Before looking in more detail at the use of this discourse in *The Nation*, it ought to be
noted that identifying the exact nature of popular political feeling at a particular moment is
notoriously difficult. In terms of popular politics, for example, it is easy to make the
generalisation that the Jacobin, republican political tradition which produced the United Irish

---

and Emmet rebellions in Ireland underwent a chronic decline during the sixty years which followed those insurrections, but it needs also to be recognised that the trajectory of this decline was not straightforward. Geographically speaking, for example, it appears that the decline varied considerably among the nationalist populations of Ireland, Britain and the United States. In Ireland the O’Connellite politics of Catholic Emancipation and Repeal which dominated nationalism from the 1820s to the 1840s deliberately aimed to discredit the revolutionary ideology of the 1790s. Similarly, in Britain, the nationalist agenda among radicals and Irish immigrants became largely absorbed into the constitutional agitation of Chartism, which included repeal of the Union among its objectives, and like O’Connellism insisted on “moral force” reform rather than revolution. In the United States, however, a large number of politicised Irish immigrants, adopting the rhetoric of American republicanism, articulated a revolutionary programme which openly heroised the United Irishmen in a fashion impossible to do at home. This American republican discourse often deliberately challenged Repeal constitutionalism during the late 1840s, only declining after the humiliating failure of the 1848 rising (in fact the failure of the 1848 European revolutions in general proved an irrevocable turning point in the history of the Irish republican legacy; even the physical-force Fenian movement of later decades declined to invoke the internationalist republican rhetoric of its 1840s Irish-American forebears).

However, these differences of perspective do raise the possibility that at any particular historical moment in the 1840s, a variety of texts produced by these differing communities – Irish nationalist, English radical, and American republican – were in circulation in Ireland, making for an uneven and heterogeneous register of Irish public opinion. A further complicating factor is the existence of asymmetry between the discourses of popular nationalist culture and the officially-sanctioned discourse of the nationalist leadership. This is especially evident when popular ballads and populist historiography are compared with the poetry and more scholarly history texts associated with the bourgeois culture of the Young Irishers themselves. The latter complained about the continued proliferation and circulation of street ballads, for instance, with their bawdiness, sectarianism and sometime violent sentiments – and it sought to replace such popular discourse with more polite, morally-uplifting and historically-accurate texts. And to go even further, it is of course possible to see uncertainty and ambivalence even within the elite discourse of The Nation itself, ambivalence which is often a reflection of the differing opinions within the leadership throughout the 1840s, and the differing strategic or political exigencies which arose at particular moments during those years. It is chiefly this discourse at it appears in the pages of The Nation which I want to examine in the remainder of this essay.

Let us return therefore to the first type of response to 1798 listed above – that of silence. In fact the most striking thing about the references to 1798 in the pages of The Nation is their relative scarcity. On first glance, this seems ironic, given the strong personal links that many of its major writers had with the generation of United Irishmen. John Blake Dillon’s father had possibly been a United Irishman. John Mitchel’s father was a Unitarian minister who had also been a United Irishman. Charles Gavan Duffy, in his memoirs, records that his most formative political influences included the United Irishmen Charles Hamilton Teeling and Mat Trumble, whom he knew as a young man. He also notes that his earliest
A recollection of verse included ballads of 1798, and that his very first political impulse came from a neighbour, the United Irishman John Sloan, who told the boy that “In ’98 we spouted Gallic sentiments and sang the ‘Marsellaise’ and the ‘Shan Van Vocht’ over our grog; but all that was folly.” Sloan’s comments in fact seems similar to one of the common strands of later nationalist reaction against 1798, viewing the rebellion as misguided and wasteful (in actuality Sloan’s criticism was that the revolutionary programme was not radical enough – “we ought to have borrowed from France … their sagacious idea of bundling the landlords out of doors and putting the tenants in their shoes,” Duffy records him as saying). A common reaction against 1798 was one which emphasised the scale of the rebellion’s bloodshed, the destructive effects of the accompanying government repression and the renewed sectarianism which emerged in the aftermath of 1798. This perspective was frequently taken up by O’Connell during the Repeal agitation, but dates back to the period of the campaign for Catholic Emancipation, when, for strategic reasons, there was a deliberate effort on the part of the campaign leaders to avoid the controversial topic of the rebellion. Indeed the success of O’Connell’s campaign for Emancipation meant that the path of political moderation and constitutional agitation was difficult to challenge, and its acceptability and respectability were reinforced by a the continual demonisation of the violent methods and revolutionary republicanism of 1798.

From the outset, in October 1842, The Nation was keen to display its allegiance to O’Connell’s principle of moral rather than physical force. The paper’s first issue features a pacifist song entitled ‘We Want No Swords’, which appeals to what “MIND” can do, rather than physical violence; and also James Clarence Mangan’s poetic tribute to the new paper, which includes the lines:

We announce a New Era –
While the Ark of a bloodless yet mighty Reform
Shall emerge from the flood of the Popular Storm!  

This desire to remain within the bounds of O’Connellism demanded that the political models to be commemorated must be either models of constitutional agitation, or else examples of physical force which were safely distanced by several generations. For this reason, when the writers of The Nation looked for heroic figures from the two preceding generations, they tended to bypass Wolfe Tone, Edward Fitzgerald and the United Irishmen and looked instead for a direct line to Grattan, Flood and the 1782 Volunteers. Invoking the Volunteers was no guarantee of freedom from state prosecution, as it happens, since at the 1844 State Trials the prosecution argued that “the whole machinery of this [Repeal] association appears to have been constructed with a view to the proceedings of the Volunteers of 1782” – what was specifically reprehensible about this was the likelihood that it would lead to “a powerful demonstration of physical force, and of sowing dissension among the different classes of her majesty’s subjects.” Nevertheless, the threat of force represented by the Volunteers was quite a different matter to the actual force employed by the United Irishmen. It remained acceptable within Repeal politics by being defined as a last resort, a violence sublimated and subject to civilised restraint in all but the most extreme scenario. From the point of view of the Young Irelanders, many of whom, like Mitchel, were less patient with O’Connell’s

16 The Nation, 15 October 1842, p. 10.
17 ibid., p. 9.
18 The Nation, 10 February 1844, p. 278.
pacifism, the “physical force” dimension of the Volunteers at least maintained the possibility that “this country would negotiate best, as it had done under Grattan and Charlemont, with arms in hand.”

Other aspects of the 1780s “patriot ascendancy” were invoked by Young Ireland in preference to the United Irishmen. When it came to finding distinguished historical precedents for practitioners of seditious libel against the British government, The Nation pointed to eighteenth-century pamphleteers like Swift, Molyneaux and Lucas rather than to the editors and contributors to the United Irish newspapers like The Press and The Northern Star, which in many ways offered better analogies to The Nation itself. The symbols and slogans of the 1782 movement were also appropriated, most obviously in the speeches of O’Connell and in iconic forms of discourse such as the Repeal membership card. Indeed the new membership card which was unveiled at a Repeal Association meeting in March 1843, and reproduced in The Nation provides an interesting illustration of Repeal attitudes to ’98.

Part of the function of the card was to show the Repeal movement as the culminating point of a long heroic nationalist lineage, but because heroism tends to find its definition through military action, the card needed somehow to register both a celebration of violence in the past, and a disavowal of it in the present. This problem was negotiated in a fashion which was typical – on the four corners of the card are the names of Irish military victories: Brian Boru’s victory over the Danes at Clontarf (1014), Hugh O’Neill’s victory at the Yellow Ford (1598), Owen Roe O’Neill’s defeat of General Munro at Benburb (1646) and the defence of Limerick in 1690 (described as “the last triumph of Ireland”). The striking thing about this heroic canon is the historical distance of the battles. All date from the seventeenth century or earlier: there is no mention of rebel victories from the 1798 period: Oulart, Wexford, or Castlebar (battles which were, significantly, often celebrated in popular ballads and broadsides).

The other agenda at work in this litany was the rebuttal of the charge that the Irish were incompetent militarily, at least when fighting at home – a charge which had been made by Voltaire among others. This particular accusation caused remarkable anxiety to Irish nationalists in the nineteenth century. John Cornelius O’Callaghan, the designer of the Repeal card, was himself the author of various historical texts which argued that in fact the Irish had demonstrated exemplary military prowess over the centuries, not only in the continental brigades of the Catholic monarchs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also in various heroic engagements at home in the wars of the same period. O’Callaghan’s texts, such as The Green Book (1841) were valued among the Young Irelanders as instruments for re-educating the Irish people against the slanderous accounts of anti-Irish historians, but the focus on military heroism and skill also served to bolster the image of the Irish patriot as brave, masculine and controlled rather than cowardly, feminine and undisciplined; the latter stereotype being especially problematic within the bourgeois culture of Young Ireland nationalism.

The card also features a shamrock inscribed with ‘Catholic, Dissenter, Protestant’ on its leaves, a symbolic image which evokes Tone’s advocacy of the “common name of Irishman” without naming him. More prominent, however is a quotation from the Dungannon Volunteers that reflects, in O’Callaghan’s commentary on the card, “the united elements of the old regal, aristocratic, and democratic constitution of Ireland … to the exclusion of anything like ‘separation.’” Yet in a final attempt to retain some sense of the value of violent

---

19 The Nation, 18 July 1846, p. 632.
20 The Nation, 10 January 1846, p. 200.
21 The Nation, 18 March 1843, p. 364.
action in Ireland’s struggle for its rights, without in any way identifying with the violence of 1798, O’Callaghan remarks: “Such were the noble achievements of Irish prowess on Irish ground, when physical and not moral force alone, as at present, constituted the medium of defending Irish liberty.” While insisting on the absolute propriety of the “bloodless” tactics of O’Connell, he maintains nonetheless that there is “no less reason to honor the memory of those gallant men, who acted upon the sacred principle of Roman patriotism – ‘Dulce at decorum est pro patria mori’.”

The card represents, as it were, the “official” nationalist memory of armed struggle in Ireland. A similarly selective canon of Irish patriots is represented by another Repeal membership card, this time explicitly describing itself as “Volunteers of 1782 Revived.” On this card the frame consists of a series of portraits. At the apex is O’Connell, flanked by Grattan and Flood. On the pillars along the sides are the pre-Christian figures of the Ollamh Fodhla, Ireland’s mythical first historian, and King Daithi, who allegedly defeated a Roman army in the Alps, having embarked on a rare enough phenomenon: an Irish imperialist foray on the Continent. Brian Boru, Hugh O’Neill, Owen Roe O’Neill and Patrick Sarsfield are here too, thus canonising the same military events named on the other card. Again there is no room for Tone, Fitzgerald, Russell or Emmet.

The political rhetoric of The Nation often simply repeats standard Repeal rhetoric: for example, an editorial written just three weeks after the publication of “The Memory of the Dead”, and designed, like the Repeal cards, to remind the Irish of their past political achievements, skips from the Volunteer period of 1779-83 to 1793 (the Toleration Act) to the Emancipation Act of 1829, making no reference at all to anything from the period 1796 to 1803. Even Thomas Francis Meagher – he “of the Sword” – avoided reference to 1798 at the inaugural meeting of the Confederation, which had broken away from the Repeal Association in January 1847. Meagher’s speech demanded: “Be true to the principles of 1782 – be true to the resolutions of 1843 – be true to the vow of 1845” rather than, for example, the vow of Tone and Russell on Cave Hill. In an interesting conflation whereby both rebellion and Union are portrayed equally as the enemies of the Irish people, O’Connell himself writes of the prosperity established by the 1782 parliament being “disturbed by the rebellion of 1798, and then by the Union” in his “Repeal Catechism” which was published in The Nation in 1842.

Similar strategies are often at work in the famous ballads and songs of the Young Irelanders. In these texts martial images and narratives are popular and powerful, but tend to be drawn from periods safely remote from the present. Thus, in the popular collection The Spirit of the Nation (1845), only two of the 146 songs concern 1798 (“The Memory of the Dead” and “Tone’s Grave”), one refers to Robert Emmet (“Emmet’s Death”), while three deal with the Irish Volunteers and 1782 patriots, five with the wars of the seventeenth century, five with the continental Irish Brigade of the eighteenth century, and seven with the wars of the sixteenth century. In an interesting and significant appropriation of the sentiments of “The Memory of the Dead”, M.J. Barry applies the same rhetoric to the memory of the Volunteers in his poem on “The Arms of Eighty-Two:”

Time-honoured comrades of the brave–
Fond relics of their fame,

23 The Nation, 18 March 1843, p. 364.
25 The Nation, 29 April 1843, p. 456.
26 The Nation, 20 February 1847, p. 311.
27 The Nation, 5 November 1842, p. 57.
Does Ireland hold one coward slave
Would yield you up to shame?
One dastard who would tamely view
The alien’s hand
Insulting brand
The Arms of “Eighty-two”?  

Partly this kind of appropriation is simply an attempt to keep positive images of military force before the Irish people without appearing seditious. Using the example of the Volunteers rather than the United Irishmen at least enables the Young Irishers to display martial images in terms of ‘a proud and solemn sight’ of purposeful military organisation – a contrast to the images of chaos and excess which had become associated with the military struggle of 1798.

Of course, The Nation’s position on physical force is not always consistent. During the State Trials (no doubt strategically) the paper came out strongly against violence as a political weapon in an article entitled ‘The Theory of Moral Force’:

Can anything be more precarious than the success of revolutions brought about by physical force? Does not the history of the world prove to us what paltry, unpremeditated, contemptible stratagems, conjurings, accidents, and tricks, determine the fates of nations fighting for their liberties. [...] Upon such like chances [...] depends whether a struggle for freedom by the sword shall be called revolution or rebellion, and whether the agents shall be patriots and heroes, or rebels and traitors. [...] Again, looking to the permanency of the liberties achieved, or rather of the revolutions brought about by the shedding of human blood, do we not find that fighting is the father of fighting, that battling brings battling, and shedding of blood more shedding of blood. [...] These bloody Revolutions are, no doubt, fine times for the Cromwells, Monks, Louis Phillipes, and the other stock-jobbers; [...] in all ages blood-shedding has been the favorite recreation of the most despicable tyrants and the meanest kings, and it is an amusement worthy them.  

But in a review of O’Connell’s published speeches in 1846, however, The Nation sets about explaining the reasons for O’Connell’s adoption of the moral force doctrine in historicist rather than simply moral terms, and then goes on to questions its universal validity in direct contradiction to the article cited above.

We speak of the theory of moral force. [...] The unsuccessful Insurrection had left a permanent desolation behind it, moral and physical. It had made actual war impossible. Families decimated by the sword or the law – multitudes banished, imprisoned or outlawed – frightful scenes of murder and burning familiar to the imagination – that insane suspicion of men’s faith and honor, that stabs deadlier than the sword, become common from the treachery of informers and the wholesale corruptions of the Union – the memory still fresh of martial laws, of torture, and of the black reign of terror under a ferocious yeomanry. These recollections weighed on the heart of the country, and made the very name of insurrection a terror, especially to the middle classes. [...] Thus O’Connell] separated the new agitators from the United Irishmen by the broadest distinctions. His peace principles could not be confounded

---

29 The Nation, 24 February 1844, p. 312.
with the aspirations of Wolfe Tone by the stupidest alderman of Skinner’s-row. […] This needful policy often ran into extremes, and was unjust to the men who gave to Ireland more than peaceful agitators ever can give – their lives – […] Greece [was] freed by the sword – Belgium freed by the sword – France, in her second (spotless) Revolution, freed by the sword – […] Surely – yes; there will still be occasions in which men will go forth to shed their blood as freely and as virtuously as the holy martyrs themselves. There will be compacts which will need, like Charlemagne’s treaties, to be sealed and stamped with the sword’s hilt.30

The rehabilitation of 1798 in and for itself, and as a source of national pride, was initially a personal project of Thomas Davis’s. From the earliest weeks of The Nation, he made it clear that he admired Wolfe Tone above any other Irish political leader – a courageous and unusual position to take in public. Writing, for instance, of the recent constitutional crisis in Canada, Davis digresses to proclaim that “a better ruler for Ireland [than Tone] never lived.”31 The reasons are made clear in the poem “Tone’s Grave” which Davis published in March 1843. The poem sums up Tone’s personal character in remarkably classical terms, stressing his moral virtue and harmonious combination of feminine emotion and masculine rationality:

For in him the heart of a woman combined
With a heroic life and a governing mind –
A martyr for Ireland – his grave has no stone –
His name seldom named, and his virtues unknown.32

The appeal of Tone for Davis has several facets. For one thing, he seemed to offer a model of the politically engaged intellectual, a role Davis himself wished to assume for his own generation. By emphasising Tone’s moral character, Davis also illustrates vividly the same process of heroic memorialisation already noted in “The Memory of the Dead.” There is little discussion in The Nation of the political doctrine of Tone’s republicanism, but much about his personal character and courage. Similar exercises are visible in the biographical accounts of United Irishmen began appearing in series such as “Illustrations of Irish History,” where the lives, and especially deaths, of William Orr, Thomas Russell, Robert Emmet and others were subjected to the same heroic reconstruction. What is noteworthy about the rhetoric used in these accounts is that it defines heroism in terms of the eighteenth-century and classical language of “patriotism” and individual virtue, generally avoiding ideological or doctrinal analysis. It also draws upon more romantic notions of the organic relation between the representative heroic subject and the nation itself. Thus in a review of R.R. Madden’s much-admired The United Irishman: Their Lives and Times in 1846, The Nation comments that

The biographies of the former are the narratives of the latter. […] The grandest effort ever made to unite all Irishmen for that nationality, was that of which Tone is the soul, and Robert Emmet the epitaph.33

30 The Nation, 11 April 1846, p. 410.
33 The Nation, 18 July 1846, p. 634.
The romantic-heroic mode finds its purest expression in such a passage, and provides a clear illustration of the process of national subject formation in bourgeois nationalist discourse.\(^{34}\) The identity of the ideal national subject is submerged in the unifying spiritual identity of the nation itself, to the degree that the most heroic of Irishmen are those whose identity actually transcends material history and become pure soul or pure signifier. Both nation and “great men” are transformed to essences which turn out to be identical.

Nevertheless, in the writings of John Mitchel in the spring of 1848 the commemoration of 1798 takes a significant turn, retaining a good deal of the romantic-heroic rhetoric, but also becoming more explicitly politicised. Mitchel even openly acknowledges the republican revolutionary dimension of the rebellion. The Irish political context had changed considerably during the winter of 1847 and spring of 1848; the Repeal movement had fragmented, famine was devastating the poorer classes, and revolutionary rhetoric was high throughout Europe. In this atmosphere, Mitchel boldly titled his radical newspaper *The United Irishman*, and in his first editorial proclaims:

> Exactly half a century has passed away since the last Holy War waged in this island, to sweep it clear of the English name and nation. And we differ from the illustrious conspirators of Ninety-Eight, not in principle – no, not an iota – but as I shall presently shew you, materially as to the mode of action. Theirs was a secret conspiracy, – ours is a public one.\(^{35}\)

Admiring the United Irishmen for their political principles rather than just their heroic and moral characters is a major shift of attitude; at the same time, Mitchel does not abandon the romantic-heroic interpretation either. The following week he works a series of emotive and more directly exhortative variations on “The Memory of the Dead:”

> Above all, let no man henceforth dare to utter or listen to a calumny against them. Blush for the coward shame which held you silent so long; but be silent, or hypocritical, or cowardly no more. You *do* love these glorious predecessors of ours; your heart does warm to their memories; you do admire their acts. Avow it, without shame, or fear, in the morn, or even, or midnight; in the street or the closet. America has raised over some of them columns of stone; France has given others mausoleums; – the names of hundreds decorate the battlefields of Europe; even in distant Venezuela a young Republic tends the graves of the United Irish; – shall home be the only spot of earth ungrateful?

> And that you may know them and their times, their aims and their sacrifices, we mean to set forth in order a relation of what they strove for, and how they failed; to the end that you may strive and not fail – that you may be strengthened from their failure, and having learned to trust only to the weapons they used, whet them sharp upon the few slabs that cover them; and so trusting in God, in Right, Freedom, and our Swords, that we, this Irish nation, may meet, once more, their enemy and ours.\(^{36}\)

In Mitchel’s newspaper the memory of 1798 becomes much more of a call to arms than is the case in earlier Young Ireland discourse, not only because Mitchel himself evokes the republican slogans of the French Revolution (“Liberty – Equality – Fraternity” is printed across every title page of his paper after the rebellion in Paris in February 1848), but also

---


\(^{35}\) *The United Irishman*, 12 February 1848, p. 8.

\(^{36}\) *The United Irishman*, 26 February 1848, p. 42.
because his paper juxtaposes the memory of 1798 with articles like “How to Make Gunpowder” or discussions of the military efficacy of chimney-pots and brick-bats. Mitchel’s paper too avails of the romantic-heroic mode by identifying the imprisoned Mitchel himself with the martyr figure of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, unabashedly adding a sacral and scriptural dimension to the discourse of national identity:

And now, on this same 20th May, in a cell beside that where, fifty years ago, Lord Edward was abandoned to death – beside that whose walls still ring with the cry of defiance to which he gave his last spasm of life. “Come on, come on – damn you, come on!” – there another man sits a prisoner, for the same holy cause of Irish liberty – one more true Irish felon, JOHN MITCHEL. Yes! into the same dungeons – the graves of the United Irishmen of old – where the old man was murdered, and the loving brothers hanged, the hand of God has led back their spirit and their name, to test this generation too.

In conclusion, it may be argued that what the poems and prose of Ingram, Davis, Mitchel and other Young Irelanders attempt to do is to bestow a new dignity upon the memory of 1798: to memorialise it into a patriotic event. Looking at the rhetoric and methods through which this is done we see both the range of opinion within Young Ireland nationalism, but also the impact of repressive sedition and libel laws, which are always a determining factor in the cultural production of the time. Given these complicating contexts, certain common patterns and ideas do become visible. In a general way, it appears that in contrast to the treatment of 1798 later in the nineteenth century, which Kevin Whelan has shown to involve a fundamental appropriation of the memory of ’98 by Catholic nationalism, Young Ireland nationalism in the 1840s was concerned to de-sectarianise the memory of the rebellion; which in part meant actually rescuing it from what was then a powerful Catholic, O’Connellite demonisation of the United Irishmen. But lifting the rebellion out of the sectarian associations with which it had become associated, and projecting it into a more mythic and nationalist frame also involved using a rhetoric of patriotism and heroic memory – which in turn had the effect of obscuring the republican political programme of the rebels, and making their memory amenable to the constitutional politics which dominated the discourse of the time. As the whole history of the memory of the rebellion suggests, it seems that speaking of ’98 has always meant speaking about one’s present, too.

37 The United Irishman, 8 April, p. 137; 4 March 1848, p. 57.
38 The United Irishman, 20 May 1848, p. 225.