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Young Ireland and the 1798 rebellion¹

SEÁN RYDER

The memory of the dead

On 1 April 1843 the *Nation* published what was to become its most popular and notorious ballad, 'The Memory of the Dead'. Written by John Kells Ingram, but published anonymously, the song defiantly denounced those whose silence, embarrassment or denial had betrayed the 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?²

The song laments the fate of the United Irish 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 and contradictory meanings of '1798' within the nationalist culture of the 1840s. At one level, the song argues for the existence of a political continuity between the United Irish and the Young Ireland movements:

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. Yet alongside this celebration of '98, a certain discontinuity or distance is also implied, exemplified in the effective de-politicisation, de-militarisation and de-sectarianisation of the causes for which the rebellion was fought. The song

¹ The author wishes to thank the editors of *Éire-Ireland* for permission to republish this essay in a revised version.

carefully avoids making a direct call to arms, for instance, or explicitly advocating republican ideals as a model for the present generation. 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 demand sectarian 'satisfaction', or threaten to plant the Tree of Liberty.³ The memories of specific historical events are edited out of this version of 1798. Actual personalities 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 historically-specific 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 actual ideological programme.

This ambivalence regarding the rebellion is one of a range of responses to 1798 to be found among Irish nationalists in the 1840s, a range that illustrates the complicated and transitional character of nationalist politics in the period. Views of 1798 ranged from the outright hostility expressed by the O'Connellites, to the open celebration of United Irish military principles by John Mitchel in the spring of 1848. Most striking of all, perhaps, is the 'silent response' to the memory of 1798 in *Young Ireland* – a confirmation, perhaps, of the sentiments of Ingram's song. References to 1798 are scarce in both the poetry and prose of the *Nation*, especially when compared with the paper's numerous references to the Irish parliament of 1782 and the Volunteers, or to earlier rebellions in Ireland. On first glance, this seems ironic, given the strong personal links that many of the *Nation's* major writers had with the generation of United Irishmen. John Blake Dillon's father was probably a United Irishman.⁴ John Mitchel's father was a Unitarian minister who had also been a United Irishman.⁵ 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. Duffy also notes that his earliest 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.'⁶ Sloan's comments seem similar to the stock O'Connellite reaction against 1798, viewing the rebellion as misguided and wasteful – but in actuality Sloan's criticism was that the revolutionary programme was not radical enough: Duffy records him saying, 'we ought to have borrowed from France . . . their sagacious idea of bundling the landlords out of doors and putting the tenants in their shoes'.

² *Nation*, 1 April 1843, p. 393. ³ See texts for both songs in Georges-Denis Zimmerman, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs 1780-1900* (Dublin, 1967), pp. 140-1, 167-9. ⁴ Brendan O'Cathaoir, *John Blake Dillon, Young Irelander* (Dublin, 1990), p. 6. ⁵ T.F. O'Sullivan, *The Young Irelanders* (Tralee, 1944), p. 133. ⁶ Charles Gavan Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres* (London, 1898), vol. 1, pp. 11, 16, 19-22.

It is possible to interpret this general silence about '98 in several ways. Ingram's poem explains it in terms of cowardice; it might also be related to the psychological need to repress the traumatic memories of a very slaughterous and divisive series of events. There are also more political and ideological explanations. To some extent, the simple fear of prosecution explains much of the public silence about '98. At the State Trials of 1844, during which Daniel O'Connell and six other 'traversers' were tried and convicted of seditious conspiracy, 'The Memory of the Dead' was produced as evidence of treasonable sympathies against Gavan Duffy, editor of the *Nation*, a fact that demonstrated that there were good reasons for 'fearing to speak' of '98, even as late as 1843. In the course of the trial, the traversers' defence ridiculed the state's use of Ingram's poem – Duffy's defence counsel 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 1798.⁷

But such public levity on the part of the defendants did not prevent O'Connell from worrying privately that he might be found guilty of high treason, a crime that carried the death penalty.⁸ 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 *ad nauseum* of his many public condemnations of violent methods and oath-bound organisations. 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'.⁹

Yet the silence is not solely a strategic response to the pressures of state vigilance. Young Ireland also found ideological reasons for avoiding the topic of the rebellion. Having implied, with the publication of 'The Memory of the Dead' in April 1843, that one ought not to fear to speak of Ninety-Eight, we find the *Nation* appearing to argue the very opposite case three years later:

We are treading on dangerous ground; we have no wish to rake up the smouldering ashes of party discord. *We fear to speak of Ninety-eight* [italics in

⁷ *Nation*, 3 February 1844, p. 269. ⁸ Oliver MacDonagh, *O'Connell: The Life of Daniel O'Connell 1775-1847* (London, 1991), p. 526. ⁹ *Nation*, 3 February 1844, p. 260.

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.¹⁰

John Kells Ingram's own retrospective comments about 'The Memory of the Dead', written for the preface to his *Sonnets* in 1900, follow a similar line:

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.¹¹

These comments show how carefully-managed the memory of '98 had to be for 1840s nationalism, and how a text about 1798 could celebrate the United Irishmen in almost the same breath as it disavowed their rebellion. Such strategies were a necessary part of the attempt to steer nationalist politics away from association with revolutionary republicanism, especially in a political climate where republicanism was accused of having hindered rather than advanced the reconciliation of Orange and Green.

1798, the Nation, and the discourse of repeal

This de-republicanising trend is part of the larger ideological context of the 1840s and is particularly linked to the progress of O'Connell's Repeal campaign. The view of 1798 which emphasised the scale of the rebellion's bloodshed, the destructive effects of the accompanying government repression, and the renewed sectarianism that emerged in the rebellion's aftermath was a feature of O'Connell's rhetoric throughout the 1840s. It dates back to the period of the campaign for Catholic Emancipation, when there was a deliberate effort on the part of the Catholic leaders to avoid the controversial topic of the rising.¹² 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 the continual demonisation of the violent methods and revolutionary republicanism of 1798 was an effective tool for reinforcing the acceptability and respectability of the constitutional path. From the outset, the *Nation* was keen to display its allegiance to O'Connell's principle of moral rather than physical force; even the paper's first

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 February 1846, p. 282. ¹¹ Cited in O'Sullivan, *The Young Irishmen*, p. 300.

¹² Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity 1760-1830* (Cork, 1996), p.167.

issue featured a pacifist song entitled 'We Want No Swords', which appeals to what 'MIND' can do, rather than physical violence.¹³ It also printed 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!¹⁴

The pressure of O'Connellism also explains the choice of political heroes which most frequently populate the writing of the *Nation*. When the writers of the *Nation* looked for heroic figures from the two preceding generations, they almost inevitably bypassed Wolfe Tone, Edward Fitzgerald and the United Irishmen, and looked instead to the more constitutional line of Grattan, Flood and the 1782 Volunteers. However, invoking the Volunteers was no guarantee of freedom from state prosecution. 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' – the specifically reprehensible aspect of this being 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'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the threat of force represented by the Volunteers was quite a different matter to the actual force employed by the United Irishmen. The threat of force 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 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'.¹⁶

Other aspects of the eighteenth-century 'patriot ascendancy' were invoked by Young Ireland in preference to the politics of 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, Molyneux 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.¹⁷ 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 cards. Indeed, the design of the new membership card which was unveiled at a Repeal Association meeting in March 1843, and reproduced in the *Nation*, provides an

¹³ *Nation*, 15 October 1842, p. 10. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10 February 1844, p. 278.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18 July 1846, p. 632. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10 January 1846, p. 200.

interesting illustration of Repeal attitudes to '98.¹⁸ Part of the function of the card was to prove that the Repeal movement was the culmination of a long lineage of national struggle, but to maintain its constitutionalist credentials, 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 proved typical for the Repeal movement. 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 that were 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 allegedly 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 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, and for bolstering the image of the Irish patriot as a brave, masculine and militarily-disciplined figure. The 'manliness' of the Irish national subject was a particularly important issue for Young Ireland: 'femininity' is continually associated with cowardice and lack of power or control in Young Ireland discourse, just as it is in Victorian discourse generally.¹⁹

The Repeal card also features a shamrock inscribed with 'Catholic, Dissenter, Protestant' on its leaves, a symbolic image that 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 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

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18 March 1843, p. 364. ¹⁹ See further discussion of such gender anxieties in Seán Ryder, 'Gender and the Discourse of Young Ireland Cultural Nationalism' in T.P. Foley et al. (eds), *Gender and Colonialism* (Galway, 1995), pp. 210–24.

defending Irish liberty'. While insisting on the absolute propriety of the 'bloodless' tactics of O'Connell, he maintains that there is 'no less reason to honor the memory of those gallant men, who acted upon the sacred principle of Roman patriotism – "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori!"'²⁰

The card represents, as it were, the constitutional 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'.²¹ 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 that 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 the conventional discourse of Repeal. For example, in an editorial written just three weeks after the publication of 'The Memory of the Dead', and intended to remind the Irish people of their political achievements to date, the historical chronicle of Irish patriotism 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 1803.²² So too, Thomas Francis Meagher – he 'of the Sword', ironically – avoided making direct reference to 1798 at the inaugural meeting of the Irish Confederation 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', the latter being a telling alternative to the vow of Tone and Russell on Cave Hill.²³ In a yet more striking rhetorical conflation, whereby both rebellion and Union are portrayed as equivalent enemies of the Irish people, O'Connell himself writes of the prosperity established by the 1782 parliament having been 'disturbed by the rebellion of 1798, and then by the Union' in his 'Repeal Catechism' which was published in the *Nation* in 1842.²⁴

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

²⁰ *Nation*, 18 March 1843, p. 364. ²¹ Reproduced in Jeanne Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past: The Celtic Revival 1830-1930* (London, 1980), p. 28. ²² *Nation*, 29 April 1843, p. 456. ²³ *Ibid.*, 20 February 1847, p. 311. ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 November 1842, p. 57.

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,
 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?²⁵

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 Irelanders 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 that had become associated with the military struggle of 1798.

Of course, the *Nation's* position on physical force is not always consistent. During the 1844 State Trials, the paper, no doubt strategically, argued strongly against the use of violence 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 . . . 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 Phillippes, 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 [of] them.²⁶

Yet in 1846 the *Nation* took a very different position, explaining the reasons for O'Connell's adoption of the moral force doctrine in historicist rather than simply moral terms, then questioning the universal validity of such a doctrine:

²⁵ *The Spirit of the Nation*, de luxe ed. (Dublin, 1845), p. 7. ²⁶ *Nation*, 24 February 1844, p. 312.

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 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.²⁷

Davis, Tone and romantic-heroic memory

Yet a more unambiguous rehabilitation of 1798 as a source of national pride also runs alongside the complex discourse outlined above. It is especially associated with Thomas Davis, and appears to have derived to a large extent from Davis' personal devotion to the figure of Wolfe Tone. From the earliest weeks of the *Nation*, Davis made it clear that he admired 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'.²⁸ 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.²⁹

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 April 1846, p. 410. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22 October 1842, p. 24. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25 November 1843, p. 104.

The appeal of Tone for Davis had 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 that 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 supposed organic relation between the representative heroic subject and the nation itself. Thus in an 1846 review of R.R. Madden's much-admired *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times*, the *Nation* comments that

The history of every land is a history of its great men, or of its revolutions . . . 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.³⁰

The romantic-heroic mode of memory finds its purest expression in such a passage, and provides a clear illustration of the process of national subject formation in bourgeois nationalist discourse.³¹ 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 identities actually transcend political history and become pure soul, like Tone, or an unambiguous signifier of that soul, like Emmet. Both nation and 'great men' are transformed into essences, that turn out to be merely variations of a single, national essence. This heroic memory, which defined the leaders of the 1798 as embodiments of moral virtue and culturally-specific nationality, was politically safe in spite of its invocation of the dangerous name of Tone. As Davis constructs it, the 'national' culture associated with the United Irishmen is largely stripped of reference to the French ideas of fifty years earlier; or refers only to a selected set of them, such as the reconciliation of religious divisions. It tends to 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 that still attached to the popular memory of 1798.

Davis was also the inspiration behind the historiographical rehabilitation of 1798 within Young Ireland writing. This involved re-interpreting the events of the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18 July 1846, p. 634. ³¹ See David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 49-77.

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, while stopping short of subscribing to the ideals or methods of the United Irishmen. It involved the production of 'corrective' reviews of existing historical accounts of the rebellion, and was exemplified by Thomas Davis' 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). Among the revisionist volumes planned for the 'Library of Ireland' were Davis' *Life of Tone*, Thomas Devin Reilly's *Biographies of the United Irishmen* or M.J. Barry's *Military History of '98*, though none 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), by indicating, among other things, that the United Irishmen had been deliberately provoked into rebellion by a devious and despotic government.

John Mitchel and republican revival

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 acknowledges openly the republican revolutionary dimension of the rebellion. Of course, the Irish political context had changed considerably during the winter of 1847 and spring of 1848 – the Repeal movement had fragmented, famine and fever were devastating the poor, and revolutionary rhetoric was high throughout Europe. The resurgence of republicanism in France and elsewhere made the republicanism of the United Irishmen seem suddenly contemporary and appropriate. In this atmosphere, Mitchel boldly titled his radical newspaper the *United Irishman*, and in his first editorial proclaimed:

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.³²

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

³² *United Irishman*, 12 February 1848, p. 8.

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.³³

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), but also 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.³⁴ 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 scriptural layer 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.³⁵

Thus it is clear that while the representation and interpretation of 1798 varied considerably in the Young Ireland writings of figures like Ingram, Davis and Mitchel, each at some level attempted to rescue the memory of the rebellion from

³³ *Ibid.*, 26 February 1848, p. 42. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8 April, p. 137; 4 March 1848, p. 57. ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20 May 1848, p. 225.

obscurity or calumny. In doing so, Young Ireland challenged O'Connellite as well as British establishment orthodoxy. Yet, apart from John Mitchel's brief revival of republican rhetoric in 1848, the challenge as a whole was a cautious and constrained one that remembered the rebellion in a largely de-politicised way. Lifting the rebellion out of the sectarian and revolutionary associations with which it had become associated by both the British government and the Repealers, and projecting it into a more mythic and romantic nationalist frame, inevitably meant obscuring the specifically republican politics of the rebels. Ironically, the intention of the Young Irelanders' recovery of 1798 was to foster political and sectarian reconciliation – a strategy which had also been central to the very republicanism that was being obscured. In remembering 1798, then, the Young Irelanders were essentially pragmatic rather than systematic or consistent. Their memory of 1798 was shaped in the image of their own ideological, tactical (and sometimes contradictory) needs.