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THE MEN OF NO PROPERTY: Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century

The Men of No Property

**Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the
Late Eighteenth Century**

Jim Smyth

Associate Professor of Irish and British History

University of Notre Dame

Indiana





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Contents

<i>Preface to the 1998 Reprint</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>A Note on the Title</i>	x
<i>Map of Ireland</i>	xii
INTRODUCTION	1
1 EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY IRELAND: POLITICS, ECONOMY, SOCIETY	10
Political structures and ideology	11
Popular culture and modernisation	23
2 AGRARIAN REBELS, SECRET SOCIETIES AND DEFENDERS, 1761–91	33
Whiteboyism: a pattern established	33
The peculiarities of the Irish	37
The origins of the Defenders	45
3 ‘RUMOURS OF WAR’: THE CATHOLIC AGITATION, 1791–3	52
Catholic revival	53
Defenderism and ‘more general politics’	66
A ‘popish parliament’: the impact of the Catholic Convention	70
4 RADICAL IDEOLOGY, POPULAR POLITICS AND PARLIAMENTARY REFORM	79
The sources of radical ideology	80
Ireland and the French revolution: popular mobilisation and reform	91

5	THE RISE OF THE DEFENDERS, 1793–5	100
	‘Beat[ing] the people into another opinion’: the ascendancy backlash	101
	Ideology, organisation, leadership	112
6	FROM PRE-INDUSTRIAL CROWD TO REVOLUTIONARY UNDERGROUND: DUBLIN’S STREET POLITICS, 1759–97	121
	‘Unlawful assemblies and riotous combinations’	122
	Dublin in the age of revolution	139
	‘The Marats of Pill Lane’: United Irish organisation before the rebellion	150
7	THE POLITICS OF DISAFFECTION, 1795–9	157
	Building the revolutionary movement	157
	‘Levelling principles’: United Irish propaganda	161
	Reaction	170
	Rebellion and defeat	173
	CONCLUSION	182
	<i>Notes</i>	184
	<i>Select Bibliography</i>	228
	<i>Index</i>	242

Preface to the 1998 Reprint

I began this book, which was first published in 1992, by arguing that while much of Ireland in the 1790s has been scrutinized and rescrutinized, it nonetheless remained a largely undiscovered country. Two years later another historian characterized late eighteenth-century Irish politics as a field that ‘ – despite some significant recent publications – [is] perhaps thirty years behind its English counterpart in terms of intensity of cultivation’. Happily, as the addendum to the bibliography in this edition shows, significant publication has continued (and looks set to continue) steadily. And if there is a broad trend to 1990s versions of the 1790s it is surely to do with the investigation of popular politics, both radical and conservative; although no one, I think, would suggest that enough is known about ‘high politics’, and in particular the history of the Irish parliament, to justify their neglect.

This is a corrected not a revised edition. A revised edition would certainly have different emphases. It would for example, pay greater attention to those men of no property who were also men of no popery, that is to the militant loyalism, or ‘vulgar conservatism’, of the early Orange Order. It would also have to take into account Sean Connolly’s powerful argument in *Religion, law and power, the making of protestant Ireland, 1660–1760* (Oxford, 1992) that eighteenth-century Irish society enjoyed a political and social stability which conformed to European patterns. Ireland, according to Connolly, was not exceptional. I agree that it was less exceptionable than I argue here, but in its sectarian divisions and in the divisive force of a contested past in its politics, it was exceptional nonetheless. I have decided therefore to let the argument stand.

NOTRE DAME, 1997

Acknowledgements

I have incurred many debts of gratitude in writing this book and the Ph.D. dissertation on which it is based. Firstly, I must thank Dr Brendan Bradshaw who supervised my dissertation and who kept a practiced eye on the development of the book. I can only marvel at his patience. Professor Louis Cullen kindled my interest in this period of Irish history and his work on this subject continues to inspire. Dr David Dickson introduced me – in the appropriate setting of Trinity College – to the fascinations and specific pleasures of that ‘unruly town’, eighteenth-century Dublin. I am grateful too, to those historians who read and commented upon all or part of earlier drafts of the manuscript: Dr Tom Bartlett, Dr Sean Connolly, Dr Jacqueline Hill, Dr Gareth Stedman Jones and Dr Jonathan Steinberg. Any errors or infelicities which remain in the text are, as they say, all my own.

The professional staffs of the following libraries and archives were unfailingly helpful and courteous: the Linen Hall library and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast, the National Library of Ireland, the library of Trinity College Dublin, the State Paper Office and the Public Record Office of Ireland, Dublin, the Public Record Office, Kew, and the University Library, Cambridge. I was also given kind permission to consult the records of the Irish Grand Lodge of Free Masons.

In practical, but no less important, terms, Liam Lynch and Hamish Park dug me out of the word-processing morasses into which I wandered more than once, while Jim Burgess saved me more time and trouble than he perhaps realises. I was also assisted at a practical, as well as an intellectual, level by Professor R. H. Buchannan and the fellows of the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University, Belfast, where I started to write this book. It was completed in the serene *environs* of Trinity Hall. I cannot imagine more stimulating and congenial conditions in which to pursue scholarship of any kind, than those sustained by the Master and fellows of this ancient college.

Finally, I owe a great deal personally, to Colin Wisdom and, of course, to my mother. But a special word of appreciation must go to my sternest critic, editor and encourager-in-chief, my wife Mary. This book is for her.

JIM SMYTH

List of Abbreviations

<i>B.N.L</i>	<i>Belfast Newsletter</i>
<i>D.E.P</i>	<i>Dublin Evening Post</i>
<i>Dub.Soc.</i>	<i>The Dublin Society of United Irishmen (Dublin, 1794)</i>
<i>F.D.J</i>	<i>Faulkners Dublin Journal</i>
<i>H.M.C</i>	<i>Historical Manuscripts Commission</i>
<i>Hib. Jrnl.</i>	<i>Hibernian Journal</i>
<i>I.H.S</i>	<i>Irish Historical Studies</i>
<i>I.S.P.O.*</i>	<i>Irish State Paper Office</i>
<i>J.H.C.</i>	<i>Journal of the House of Commons</i>
Lecky	W. E. H. Lecky, <i>A history of Ireland in the eighteenth century</i> (London, 1892) 5 vols
McDowell, Age	R. B. McDowell, <i>Ireland in the age of imperialism and revolution</i> (Oxford, 1979)
Musgrave	Sir Richard Musgrave, <i>Memoirs of the different rebellions in Ireland</i> (Dublin, 1801)
<i>N.E.S.</i>	<i>National Evening Star</i>
<i>N.L.I.</i>	<i>National Library of Ireland</i>
<i>N.S.</i>	<i>Northern Star</i>
<i>Parl. reg.</i>	<i>Parliamentary register</i>
<i>P.R.O.</i>	<i>Public Record Office</i>
<i>P.R.O.I.</i>	<i>Public Record Office of Ireland</i>
<i>P.R.O.N.I.</i>	<i>Public Record Office of Northern Ireland</i>
Reb. papers	Rebellion papers
<i>S.N.L.</i>	<i>Saunders Newsletter</i>
<i>S.O.C.P.</i>	<i>State of the Country papers</i>
<i>S.P.P.</i>	<i>State Prisoners Petitions</i>
<i>T.C.D.</i>	<i>Trinity College, Dublin</i>

* Now deposited at the National Archives of Ireland

A Note on the Title

Irish readers (and others) will recognise the phrase ‘the men of no property’ as a quotation from the journals of Theobald Wolfe Tone. The passage from which it is taken was written by Tone on 11 March, 1796, when he was in Paris negotiating for a French invasion of Ireland. ‘My life is of little consequence . . .’, he wrote,

Our independence must be had at all hazards, if the men of property will not support us, they must fall: we can support ourselves by the aid of that numerous and respectable class of the community, *the men of no property*.¹

In the politics of historical quotation this passage is rivalled only by Tone’s other celebrated statement about uniting catholic, protestant and dissenter under the common name of Irishman. The Young Irelander, John Mitchel, adopted this phrase as the motto for his paper, *The United Irishman*, in 1848. To Patrick Pearse in 1916 these words revealed his hero as ‘the greatest of modern Irish democrats’. Four years later during the civil war, Liam Mellows wrote from his cell in Mountjoy prison, ‘We are back to Tone – and it is just as well – relying on that great body “the men of no property”. The “stake in the country” people were never with the Republic.’² And since Mellows’s time a number of left-wing writers, notably T. A. Jackson, Peter Berrisford Ellis and Sean Cronin, have used the phrase to emphasise the social-radical character of Tone and the United Irishmen.³ Moreover, its use, we have been warned, ‘is on the increase’.⁴

It was inevitable, perhaps, that sooner or later the professional historians would get around to ‘demythologizing’ such a well-known quotation. Thus it has been argued that the passage did not reflect Tone’s true sentiments so much as his political desperation by 1796, and that the phrase ‘men of no property’ has been misunderstood. According to the first argument, Tone, despairing of support from the country’s ‘natural leaders’, turned to the poor as a last resort. According to the second argument he didn’t turn to the poor at all, that by ‘property’ he meant, in typical eighteenth-century fashion, ‘landed property’, and by ‘men of no property’ the middle class.⁵ According to both views the quotation has been wrenched from its historical context and put to work for later polemical purposes.

Is it still permissible, then, to use Tone’s phrase in the straightforward,

pre-revisionist, sense in which it was used by Mellows or by C. S. Andrews?⁶ Two points should be made here. Firstly, the revisionist interpretations may be more thoughtful than the older 'populist' one, but, as the existence of alternative readings demonstrates, they cannot be considered definitive. Secondly, irrespective of what Tone did or did not intend, his words have subsequently assumed a life and a commonly-understood meaning independent of their author. That commonly-understood meaning *might* be a popular misconception, and as such may irritate austere historians, but, whether they like it or not, that meaning is now contained in tradition. Irish readers will not only recognise 'the men of no property' as a quotation from Tone, they will also almost certainly read it as a reference to the propertyless, the poor, the common people. And these are, indeed, the people to whom the title refers.



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