

1798

THE YEAR OF REVOLUTION

Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen



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Introduction

One hundred years after the rise of the United Irishmen, James Connolly wrote:

"Few moments in history have been more consistently misrepresented both by open enemies and professed admirers than that of the United Irishmen."¹

Connolly was writing as the first centenary of the rebellion in 1898 was dominated by the rising nationalist movement. The United Irishmen were portrayed as a mainly Catholic force with a few Protestants that "came over to our side". Many of the songs and poems about figures such as Father Murphy reflected this. The fact that the United Irishmen were inspired by the French Revolution which was vigorously opposed by the Bishops was well nigh forgotten.

The confusion about Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen has not diminished over the century.

Today for example, Fianna Fail, claims to stand in Tone's tradition and marches to his grave in Bodenstown every year. But the same party has given the Catholic Church the right to control education and to sit on the governing boards of hospitals. Until they were challenged in recent years Fianna Fail worked actively to build a Catholic state for a Catholic people in the South. Far from embodying the ideal of a unity between Catholic Protestant and dissenter, they have bequeathed this country a constitution that was drafted by the right wing cleric, John Charles McQuaid.

Such is the distortion of the United Irishmen that to understand their significance we have to cut through a fog of myths and untruths. The United Irishmen arose from specific Irish circumstances under British colonial rule and in a context of international revolution. Far from being a justification for the status quo in Irish politics today, the nature of the 1798 rising actually challenges it. The rebellion marks one of the high points of the Irish revolutionary tradition and remains an outstanding inspiration for those who want to change society today.

1. Ireland in the 18th Century

Ireland was colonised in the mid seventeenth century by Cromwell and his armies. Ownership of the land moved into the hands of the colonisers who were supported by a system of oppressive Penal Laws backed by military force. Irish society throughout the next century was dominated by a rich landed aristocracy—mainly descendants of the English gentry who had seized the land during the plantation. This Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy enjoyed immense privilege and wealth but found their rule being questioned by other classes.

One group were the urban poor—peasants who had recently left the land to seek work, mainly in artisan jobs such as weaving. Their numbers were small but growing and they were beginning to articulate ideas of collective action. In the eighteenth century the first combinations of working men began to appear and it is estimated that between 1728 and 1758 they organised at least sixteen strikes. Soon their disaffection assumed a political form as the 'mob' in Dublin gave support to a radical apothecary, Charles Lucas, who denounced the privileged elite in the city. Lucas published the first radical newspaper, *The Censor*, and numerous pamphlets.

A contemporary writer noted the growing politicisation of the Dublin crowd:

"From this time you hear the lowest tradesman call themselves free citizens ... [they] have been so wrong headed as to talk of national rights, of liberty or worthy representatives... they now read newspapers and even the votes of the commons, and have been more than once audacious enough to crowd the streets about the parliament house."²

However disaffection was not confined to the poor. In many ways it was the demands of the rising business class that triggered the 1798 rebellion.

The merchants, bankers and factory owners, were in the North largely Presbyterian while in the South there were small but increasing numbers of Catholics. This class was frustrated by the backwardness of the Irish economy and the lack of access to political power.

Since the 1750's, with the easing of British trade controls and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, Irish industry had expanded and by the 1770's Irish exports accounted for 10% of British trade. Demand for linen, cattle and wool intensified during the American Revolution and those who benefited were the new business class.

A small number of very wealthy Catholics who were denied owner-

ship of land, used their wealth, despite the Penal Laws, to develop industry. In this manner the Catholic merchant became a key player in the growing market system. The Teeling family were a typical example. Their lands had been confiscated in the 17th century but by the 18th century the family were successful linen merchants. Some of these Catholic businessmen were to become major figures in the United Irishmen.

However English restrictions to trade still remained and became more of a bone of contention when the economy went into crisis, hitting in particular the banks and the linen industry. That the "Mother Country" could decide which goods could be exported and then impose crippling taxes on those goods that threatened English ones became an increasing source of irritation.

At the same time massive amounts of money were sucked out of Ireland in the form of rents to absentee landlords. This was capital that could have been used to further develop the Irish economy. Ireland was a "colonial farmyard supplying beef, butter, grain and cheap labour to England".³

Alongside these economic grievances the American Revolution of 1776 inspired a new interest in democratic reform. Here, after all, were settlers—many of whom who had originally gone to Ulster—demanding the right to representation and liberty. The political domination of the older landed gentry was all the more poignantly felt.

The Irish Houses of Parliament were filled with the big Irish landlords and members of the aristocracy, all belonging to the Anglican church. Seats in the Government were mostly bought and sold by auction with the highest bidder taking the seat.

The right to vote was limited to literally a handful of people. In 1782 for example the City of Belfast had a population of 15,000 yet just thirteen people had the right to vote!⁴

The Volunteers—who were originally formed to protect Ireland from a French invasion—used their strength to extract some limited reforms in 1782. But the British ruling class could effectively bully or bribe the Irish Parliament to pursue its interests even after these reforms.

Ultimately, the British Administration situated in Dublin Castle dealt with the most important questions of power. Ireland's relationship to Britain was described in a letter from the Lord Lieutenant, Westmoreland, to the British Prime Minister William Pitt:

"The present frame of Irish Government ... is particularly well calculated for our purpose. That frame is a Protestant garrison ... in possession of the land, magistracy and power of the country; holding that property under the tenure of British power and supremacy, and ready at every instant to crush the rising of

the conquered."⁵

The growth of the economy in the second half of the 18th Century led to a corresponding growth in the population. From an estimated population of 2.5 million in 1753 the Irish population by the end of the century was about five million. This compares with a figure of 10.5 million for Britain in 1801. Clearly Ireland was a serious competitor in terms of its developing commercial base. This was a major factor in propelling the Irish bourgeoisie towards a fight over British limitations to growth. Tone identified the problem when he declared that "England chokes our rising commerce at every turn".⁶

The peasantry

The largest class in Ireland throughout the 1700's was the peasantry. In 1787 John Fitzgibbon, the Attorney General, described the peasants of Munster as "being in a state of oppression, abject poverty, sloth, dirt and misery not to be equalled in any part of the world".⁷ The Viceroy of Ireland put their condition down to "the rapaciousness of their unfeeling landlords and the restrictions on their trade".⁸ Arthur Young, who toured Ireland in the 1770's and wrote down his observations was shocked to see how the landlords maintained their rule:

"A landlord in Ireland can scarcely invent an order which a servant, labourer or cottier dares to refuse to execute... Disrespect or anything tending towards sauciness he may punish with his cane or his horsewhip with the most perfect security, a poor man would have his bones broke if he offered to lift a hand in his own defence... Landlords ... have assured me that many of their cottiers would think themselves honoured by having their wives or daughters sent for to the bed of their master, a mark of slavery that proves the oppression under which such people must live."⁹

Not surprisingly the peasantry fought such miserable conditions. Prior to the 1790's peasants organised secret societies to participate in outbreaks of violence usually centred around local grievances and directed against the landlords. These took the form of opposition to rent rises and tithes—a tax to the Anglican Church which all had to pay irrespective of religion. The secret societies varied from region to region and took different names: Whiteboys, Oakboys, Steelboys and Rightboys.

The Whiteboys of Munster, for example, called a mass meeting in 1786 from which they issued a manifesto listing the maximum prices

they would pay to the Church and resolved to "continue to oppose our oppressors by the most justifiable means in our power, either until they are glutted with our blood or until humanity raises her angry voice."¹⁰

In the North these societies took on sectarian forms due to fierce competition over land—the Protestant Peep O'Day Boys and the Catholic Defenders. This was not surprising given that Anglican landlords played off Catholic tenants against Protestant. The secret societies remained separated and unconnected. Amongst the peasantry there existed no national movement or a longing to return to an idyllic Gaelic past. Though courageously fighting against degrading conditions, their more local horizons meant that they were unable to develop a coherent political outlook that could offer a real alternative. But their resistance to oppression was ripe for direction and articulation by a class suffering its own restrictions—the rising industrialists.

2. The emergence of the United Irishmen

There had been no revolt in Ireland for a hundred years—yet all this changed with the French Revolution.

"The greatest event in human annals. Twenty six millions of our fellow creatures ... bursting their chains, and throwing off in an instant, the degrading yoke of slavery—it is a scene so new, interesting, and sublime, that the heart which cannot participate in the triumph, must either have been vitiated by illiberal politics or naturally depraved."¹¹

This is how the *Belfast NewsLetter* described the French Revolution and it was no exaggeration. The country had been literally turned upside down. Peasant uprisings, and the revolt of the urban masses resulted in the aristocracy and monarchy being swept from power. In Paris the Bastille—state prison and stronghold of the Royal Army—was stormed by the mob and prisoners were freed. A republic was declared, male universal suffrage was brought in and religious liberty extended to Jews—until then one of the most persecuted groups in Europe. The influence of the revolution was felt across most of Europe and beyond. Poland, Hungary, England, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany all felt the impact as reformers took inspiration and rulers trembled. In Haiti the slaves revolted and fought off repeated attempts to re-colonise the island.

Of particular relevance to Ireland was the fate of the Catholic Church. Prior to the revolution it was tied up with the old rulers, paid no taxes and had considerable wealth—owning between one fifth and one half of the land in each province. The Revolution not only broke the grip of the Church and separated it from control of the state, it finally buried its ideological grip. The Church had been central in spreading the ideas that supported the old feudal system. Through the pulpit it perpetuated the view the idea that the king was directly appointed by God and he in turn had shaped society according to the will of God. The power and wealth of church and nobility was natural whilst peasants were born to always till the land.

Ideas attacking this world view had been developing for 200 years with the expanding trade system leading to a growing understanding of the world and different cultures. This process—the Enlightenment—culminated with a group of French philosophers including Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau who applied "rational and scientific principles to social

and political questions".¹² They challenged the view that there was a divine plan to enshrine and privilege inequality and argued that 'natural law' meant all people were born equal. When crisis hit the old French order, they had already been fatally weakened by the Enlightenment.

The French Revolution—though not always led directly by the capitalist class—was a bourgeois revolution. Under the slogans of liberty, equality and fraternity it was this class that ultimately took power. It needed the support of the 'mob', who identified with the cry of liberty, to win. But in practice the new world order was defined along capitalist lines—liberty came to mean freedom to trade without restrictions; equality merely amounted to same treatment before the law irrespective of title; fraternity became the forging of the French nation. The destruction of the feudal system, the sweeping from power of monarchy, landlords and Catholic Church became a major inspiration for revolt in Ireland.

The winds of change were in evidence even before the French Revolution began. The American War of Independence (1776-83), which ended English colonial domination meant that British forces were mainly deployed overseas. To ward off the threat of French invasion an armed Irish Volunteer movement numbering 80,000 was established in 1778. It was led by the Protestant ascendancy but the lower orders also began to make their grievances known. Using military mobilisations the Volunteers pushed the following demands on the British state: free trade, universal suffrage and scrapping the Penal Laws. But having won the demand for free trade, Volunteer leaders like Grattan, Flood and Lord Charlemont denounced the Volunteer conventions which then fell apart in confusion. As Connolly wrote, the rank and file "had elected aristocrats, glib-tongued lawyers, professional patriots to be their officers and all the higher ranks betrayed them in their hour of need."¹³

The French Revolution however was the lightening conductor that transformed the timidity of former Volunteer supporters. Within two years of the storming of the Bastille the Society of United Irishmen was launched in Belfast in October 1791 and in Dublin shortly afterwards. Their founding statement of aims declared:

"We have no national Government; we are ruled by Englishmen, and the servants of Englishmen, whose object is the interest of another country, whose instrument is corruption, and whose strength is the weakness of Ireland... Such an extrinsic power ... can be resisted with effect solely by unanimity, decision and spirit in the people."¹⁴

Today it is sometimes imagined that founders of the United Irishmen were primarily 'the men of no property', but the picture was more com-

plicated. It is true that thousands of peasants and urban poor were inspired by the ideas of United Irishmen. But what was equally remarkable was the numbers of leading United Irishmen who were wealthy merchants and industrialists. During the French Revolution, the new capitalist class supported the change but the direct leadership was often assumed by middle class figures such as the barrister Robespierre. In Ireland, however, the industrialists themselves stepped into the breach.

For example Samuel Neilson owned a wool drapers business, John Campbell an apothecary (chemist) and Henry Jackson an iron foundry. Oliver Bond was a woollen merchant, Charles Teeling was a merchant and the McCracken family owned a calico printing firm. All were leading United Irishmen. One study of the 400 supporters and 200 active members of the Dublin Society found 30 attorneys, 26 barristers, 24 physicians and apothecaries, over 100 merchants, a number of printers and a sprinkling of aristocrats.¹⁵

But alongside these more respectable elements, there was a conscious attempt to open up the movement. The businessmen were joined by artisans like Jemmy Hope the weaver from Templepatrick, schoolmasters, and lower order clergy to the poor. In Dublin many underground lower class clubs joined up with the United Irishmen.

At first their demands were tame, limited to a radical reform of parliament and Catholic emancipation—the unfinished business of the Volunteer movement. There was no talk of changing social conditions such as re-distribution of land and at first the movement was even pro-monarchy and cautious about popular mobilisations. Nevertheless the British response to mild reform and the politicisation of the peasantry shifted the movement to a more radical path from 1795.

3. Tone and the politics of the United Irishmen

It was above all Theobald Wolfe Tone, who came from a Protestant middle class background who articulated the aims of the organisation. He was born in Dublin in 1763, the son of a coach builder. In 1781 he attended Trinity College and trained to be a barrister. He joined the College Historical Society—a very respectable institution attended by Irish MPs which although a debating society was thoroughly conservative. At first Tone was a moderate, who defended the activities of the Volunteers in the 1780s.¹⁶ He identified with the Whig opposition in the Irish Parliament when they argued against government corruption and for internal parliamentary reform. However, he had also opened up a dialogue with radical thinkers like Thomas Russell, who was connected to the remnants of the Volunteer movement, when the French Revolution took place.

Tone referred to the Revolution as “the morning star of liberty”.¹⁷ He was one of the first leaders to argue that the corruption of the political system in Ireland was the direct result of England’s colonial grip. He understood that it was only in the process of opposition to this state of affairs that a unity between the different religions could be forged.

Tone believed that for the commercial and professional class to achieve freedom in a free Ireland, reform was needed. However in a population of five million, the small number of Presbyterians were too weak to achieve this on their own. They had to ally themselves with Catholics and espouse their rights. Even though some of the more horrific parts of the Penal Laws had been repealed, Catholics still did not have full emancipation.

Tone’s argument was brilliant. Unity of the sects was not a moral question. Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter (Presbyterian) could only unite if to do so would lead to gains for each. In this sense, the fight for Catholic rights was not a liberal position for Presbyterians to take, but a necessary one if they were to advance their own interests in the face of the British controlled aristocracy. Initially Tone was only concerned with reforming parliament and using ‘the strength of the people’ to ‘counter-act’ the influence of Britain. These arguments were taken up in a widely distributed pamphlet titled *An Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*.

Tone’s call for unity did not mean that he dropped his criticism of the Catholic Church. He saw it as a relic of the old feudal order representing bigotry and superstition. He believed however that Catholics

would lose their attachment to the bishops and priests when persecution was ended. The lack of rights for Catholics was the one thing that cemented them to their faith. If the French Catholic peasants during the Revolution were capable of ditching their priests and electing a Protestant—Saint-Andre—to the National Assembly, then so could the Irish.

“I do believe the Pope has now more power in Ireland than in some Catholic countries, or than he perhaps ought to have. But I confess, I look on his power with little apprehension, because I cannot see to what evil purpose it could be exerted; and with the less apprehension, as every liberal extension of property or franchise to Catholics will tend to diminish it.

“Persecution will keep alive the foolish bigotry and superstition of any sect, as the experience of 5000 years has demonstrated. Persecution bound the Irish Catholic to his priest, and the priest to the Pope; the bond of union is drawn tighter by oppression; relaxation will undo it”¹⁸

Tone backs up this view by paraphrasing Shakespeare to show that Catholics had rights too:

“Hath not a Catholic hands; hath not a Catholic eyes, dimensions, organs, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt by the same weapons, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the summer and winter, as a Protestant is? If ye prick us, do we not bleed? If ye tickle us, do we not laugh? If ye poison us, do we not die? And if ye injure us, shall we not revenge?”¹⁹

In 1791 Tone was still stressing reform but his methods of achieving this were absolutely radical. The effect of his pamphlet was to move large numbers of Presbyterians and Protestants to seeing Catholics as their allies. But the pamphlet also helped to split the leadership of Catholics between those who wanted to appease the Castle Administration and those who sought more radical change. Founded in 1757, the Catholic Committee was originally an extremely moderate organisation led by aristocrats like Lord Kenmare and Lord Fingal. But as it broadened out its base and established a more representative structure, the merchants and professional Catholic came to the fore.

Tone’s pamphlet had a particular appeal to this grouping.

They ousted Lord Kenmare and gave the leadership to John Keogh, a Dublin merchant and Wolfe Tone who was appointed secretary. Under Tone’s influence the Committee sent out members to win over the lower echelons of the clergy to the ideas of the United Irishmen.

In early nineties Tone had emerged as a conscious revolutionary. By this time two Catholic reform bills had been rejected and the British administration had recalled the Lord Lieutenant Fitzwilliam, who was seen as too favourable to Catholics, and were preparing for a military crack-down in Ireland. Under his leadership, the United Irishmen now engaged in militant revolutionary propaganda which appealed to the majority of the population. One of the most radical figures was Thomas Russell. "Property" he once noted "must be altered in some measure—he who knew the recesses of the heart loved not the rich".²⁰

A special pamphlet was produced in the form of a catechism that appealed for the support of the poor. Entitled *The Union Doctrine—or Poor Man's Catechism*, it advocated very different articles of faith to those of the church.

"I believe in a revolution founded on the rights of man, in the natural and inprescriptable right of all citizens to all land. I believe the soil, nor any part of it, cannot be transferred without the consent of the people, or their representatives, convened and authorised, by the votes of every man at the age of twenty one years.

Q. As an Irishman, what do you hope for?

A. The emancipation of my country, an equality of rights, a fair division of land, an abolition of religious establishments, and a representative government.

Q. What good could a fair division of land be to Ireland?

A. As the land and its produce was intended for the use of man 'tis unfair for fifty or a hundred men to possess what is for the subsistence of near five millions ... the almighty intended all mankind to lord the soil."²¹

However, there were also limits to this radical rhetoric. For one thing the attacks on property were confined to landed property which was the base of the old aristocracy rather than new forms of capitalist property built on workshops and factories. Tone also reassured Protestant businessmen that the Catholic capitalists would be strong enough to prevent the Catholic lower orders upsetting property relations. In his pamphlet he indicated that since voting would still be tied to property ownership, Catholic emancipation would not necessarily equal a Catholic Government.²² In 1792 the paper of the United Irishmen, the *Northern Star*, attacked demonstrations by weavers in Belfast and Antrim for higher wages as the work of "a handful of idle and wicked men". The limitations of the movement were spelt out even more clearly by the paper in the same year.

"By Liberty we never understood unlimited freedom, nor by Equality the levelling of property or the destruction of subordination."²³

Tone stands out as a leader ever willing to widen the forces for radical change. At the time a bourgeois revolution was the only feasible project as the working class had not emerged as an independent class. Such a revolt can contain a tremendous radical promise but often the rhetoric vastly outstrips the degree of social change that is aimed at. The fact that the movement is also built on different classes means that there were also many contradictions and tensions within it. Tone's eventual appeals for French military assistance has therefore a dual purpose. He wanted assistance to take on the greatest power of the age but he also wanted a force that could impose discipline and unity on his radical supporters among the Irish poor.

4. The Tactics of the United Irishmen

Within three years of forming the United Irishmen were driven underground. As a result they had to adopt different methods and spread their influence in imaginative ways. They met in secrecy in taverns and barns. Various front societies with names such as Real United Traders, Struggles, The Union and The States were used to cover the meetings.

They used their paper, the *Northern Star*, to agitate and educate whole sections of the population and increase their membership. The *Star* was Ireland's first radical newspaper and reached a circulation of over four thousand spread across 100 towns. This can be compared to the only other newspaper at the time, the *Newsletter*, which sold 2,000 copies. The British establishment described it as "the principal and most powerful of all the instruments used for agitating the minds of the people."²⁴

French tracts that had inspired the mob to revolt were translated and distributed. Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* and Wolfe Tone's *An Argument on behalf of Catholics* were printed and circulated in their tens of thousands. Paine's pamphlet was written in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* which attacked the revolution.

Paine's reply was a devastating attack on the corrupt English establishment which Burke defended and was a strident call for a Republic. Paine attacks the hereditary system of monarchy and aristocratic government. "Kings succeed each other, not as rational but as animals".²⁵ He slates the pomp and privilege they surrounded themselves with, most notably the Lords who:

"can find as many reasons for monarchy as their salaries paid at the expense of the country [even though] if I ask the farmer, the manufacturer, the merchant, the tradesman, the common labourer, what service monarchy is to him, he can give me no answer"²⁶

The landed gentry were denounced as parasites—"mere consumers of the rent". Paine connected this unearned wealth with the miserable conditions of the poor. He called for an end to the poor laws and the situation that breed crime, the "offspring of distress and poverty" and also made children an economic burdens on their parents.

Not surprisingly Paine's ideas had a strong resonance both amongst the poor and the rising middle class. Within three months of being pub-

lished in Ireland in 1791, all 10,000 copies of the Dublin editions were sold out and it was serialised in four newspapers.²⁷

Supporters of the United Irishmen wrote songs and performed plays supporting the themes of freedom, liberty and equality. They posterred, leafleted and circulated countless pamphlets. An example of this approach was written about the poor in Dublin in 1796,

"The east part of the capital indeed displays some grandeur in palaces, public buildings and works which instead of disguising rather makes more glaring the huge poverty, the gigantic misery that fills this great city...

"It is an insult to us in our poverty to withdraw so large a portion of our scanty circulation from the more useful channels in order to rival in the pomp of buildings the opulence of London or Amsterdam...Your colossal edifices are propped on our mud cabins."²⁸

Sports matches were arranged as an excuse for meetings where ideas and instructions were passed from area to area. The hedge schools—the only education available to most peasants, provided the forum where schoolmasters could read from the United Irishmen papers and publications to whole villages.

Above all the United Irishmen developed a culture of revolt which was very anti-Royalist. The most fashionable hair-style was cropped, in the manner in which the French Revolutionaries—the Jacobins—wore theirs. (Hence the origin of the term 'Croppies'). As an alternative to the annual sectarian 12th July parade, a demonstration was held on the 14th July in Belfast to celebrate the third anniversary of the storming of the Bastille in Paris. Up to 6,000 people marched to a meeting where toasts were made to Tom Paine, the French Revolution and America's independence.²⁹ A year later the population of Belfast enjoyed a fireworks display in recognition of King Louis XVI losing his head. In Dublin a play about the fall of the Bastille was performed in two theatres and was extremely popular at the time.

Throughout the North the United Irishmen set out to unite Protestants and Catholics particularly in areas where fierce sectarianism existed. This is how Jemmy Hope, probably the only working class leader of the United Irishmen described their work:

"The influence of the union soon began to be felt at all public places, fairs, markets and social meetings, extending to all the counties of Ulster, for no man of an enlightened mind had intercourse with Belfast, who did not return home determined

on disseminating the principles of the union among his neighbours. Strife and quarrelling ceased in all public places, and even intoxication.

"The Break-of-day boys, and Defenders, lamented their past indiscretions on both sides, and tracing them to their legitimate source, resolved to avoid the causes which led to them. In short, for a little time, Ulster seemed one united family, the members of which lived together in harmony and peace."³⁰

Members of the United Irishmen were sent to areas of the North where sectarianism was particularly intense to argue the case for unity. In August 1792 Wolfe Tone, Samuel Neilson and John Keogh toured Ulster explaining how Catholic emancipation was to come about and establishing contacts with organised peasant groups like the Defenders.

The United Irishmen were also active in local grievances all the time drawing out political lessons for those involved. Food prices, taxes and tithes had often caused rioting in the past. However for the first time, the United Irishmen located the cause of the strife with the Ascendancy and British rule. Even though demonstrations were illegal the United Irishmen used many public occasions to display their strength and to boost membership. Mobilisations of hundreds and even thousands occurred at funerals, harvests, turf-cutting and festivals. For instance in April 1797 over 5,000 'well-drilled' men made up the Dublin procession at the funerals of Edward Dunn and an obscure millwright.³¹

Winning the Defenders

Once the attempt to land French forces at Bantry Bay, Co. Cork in 1796 had failed the United Irishmen had no option but to build a mass base amongst the peasantry. They did this by forging an alliance with the Defenders. Though the Defenders had their origins in sectarian struggles over land, their target was the gentry and had begun to arm by raiding the aristocrats' mansions. The Defenders were organised as a secret oath bound society which already had an underground structure in place. The political crisis at the top of society—the weakness of the Catholic Relief bills, the recall of Fitzwilliam, and the radicalising of the Catholic Committee—led to the spreading of Defenderism and the politicisation of the peasant movement.

The Defenders reflected all the confusions and mixture of ideas which characterised the Catholic peasantry at the time. But it would be wrong to see them as simply a sectarian organisation. In 1793, for example, when priests were involved in compiling lists of local people who

had to serve in the militia, they were attacked by the Defenders. Chapel doors were nailed up and in Athlone a priest was manhandled almost to death.³² Although a body set up in the interests of Catholic peasants, most of the Defender leadership were artisans and schoolmasters, many of whom had welcomed the French Revolution.

There was already an overlapping of membership between the two organisations before 1796. For instance the Teelings, the Catholic family from Lisburn were related to John Magennis, the leader of the County Down Defenders and also a linen merchant.³³ That the most vocal leaders of the Catholic Committee, John Keogh, Richard McCormick and Edward Lewins, were also United Irishmen would have also aided the transition of the Defenders to their organisation.

The pivotal moment, however, when Defenderism moved in block behind the revolutionary movement was in 1796 when the Orange Societies were enlisted into the yeomanry—part of the British establishment's locally recruited forces. What was simply a sectarian squabble for land became undeniably connected to the rule of landlords with the backing of Britain.

Such was the success of their general methods and propaganda, together with the recruitment of the Defenders, that by 1797 the United Irishmen had built an organisation of over half a million volunteers.

5. Reaction

The British rulers were terrified of the proposal to unite the different sects in Ireland. The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland Westmoreland wrote to Pitt the British Prime Minister:

"I cannot help feeling a very great anxiety that such measures may be taken as may effectually counteract the union between the Catholics and Dissenters, at which the latter are evidently aiming. I may be a false prophet, but there is no evil that I would not prophesy if that union takes place in the present moment..."³⁴

The British adopted a three fold strategy to dealing with the threatened rebellion. They attempted to intensify sectarianism, win the Catholic Church onto its side and impose repression.

The use of sectarianism was a blunt tool that the British regime had relied on ever since the plantations. The landed gentry had used it to great effect throughout much of the North. They played Protestant against Catholic peasants in an attempt to force as much value from rents and taxes.

As the technology of the industrial revolution destroyed the livelihoods of domestic weavers, competition for land became even more fierce. This was particularly the case in Armagh, the county at the centre of the linen industry.

With backing from the landlords the Protestant peasants and artisans began to re-activate the sectarian Peep O' Day boys. They used burnings and shootings to force Catholics to flee their homes. As most attacks occurred in the dead of night and since Protestants could legally bear arms, few charges were brought. Even where they were the local magistrate would either be a landlord or one of his nominees. In this manner this sectarian organisation had the blessing of the authorities. Catholic peasants and labourers responded by joining the Defenders who had no right to carry arms.

The outbreak of war between France and Britain in 1793 caused a sharp increase in food and linen prices and this led to further tensions. The result was bitter sectarian rivalry. With the threat of the United Irishmen and the spreading of the Defender movement, the landed gentry throughout Armagh and beyond wanted to establish the Peep O' Day Boys on a more legitimate footing.

This was done by renaming them Orange Societies. William Blacker, a member of the landed gentry who became the first Grand Master of the

Orange Order described the first meeting of his lodge:

"A determination was expressed of driving from this quarter of the county the entire of its Roman Catholic population...A written notice was thrown into or posted upon the door of a house warning the inmates in the words of Oliver Cromwell, to betake themselves 'to Hell or Connaught'..."³⁵

Within two months 7,000 Catholic families were driven from Armagh.³⁶ This had the effect of strengthening and spreading Defenderism to other parts of Ireland.

The Armagh expulsions however, proved the worth of Orangeism in the eyes of the British state. In June 1796 the Orange societies were fully incorporated into the yeomanry. It was a strategy the British establishment were quite clear about. The British General Knox confessed:

"I proposed some time ago that the Orangemen might be armed and added to some of the loyal corps as supplementary yeoman ... They are bigots and will resist Catholic Emancipation..."³⁷

Knox outlined his strategy of using the Orange Order when searching for illegal weapons in mainly Catholic areas:

"I have approved a plan to scour a district full of unregistered arms: this I do, not so much with a hope to succeed to any extent as to increase the animosity between the Orangemen and United Irishmen. Upon that animosity depends the safety of the centre counties of the North..."³⁸

The Commander-in-Chief of British forces in the North, General Lake gave his personal approval to these "bigots" when he and his officers attended the 2,000 strong 12th of July Commemoration in Lurgan in 1797. Once the Orange Order had proved its usefulness in the North the establishment began to widen its influence. By 1797 the Orange Order was active in Kildare, Wicklow, Carlow and Wexford, and in June of that year the Dublin Grand Lodge was formed headed by the Munster gentry.

The Orange Order came into being then in 1795, not for any fight for religious and civil liberties as its supporters still claim, but to undercut a movement that attempted to unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter. Those who attack the 1798 rising today often refer to sectarian 'atrocities' carried out against Protestants in parts of Wexford, during 1798. But the reality is that sectarianism was first used by landlords to divide the peasantry and force them to compete with each other. It destroyed the United Irishmen. Knox admitted five years after the rising

that the Orange Order was then adopted by the British State:

“which I am convinced by opposing the United Irishmen in the North saved us at one time from a general overthrow but which excited the religious feud which broke out in so sanguinary a manner in the south”³⁹

The oath of the Orange Order stated “I do declare that I am not, nor ever was, a Roman Catholic or papist, that I was not, am not, or ever will be, a member of the society called ‘United Irishmen’.”⁴⁰

These are the origins of this thoroughly sectarian and bigoted organisation which still demands its right to march into areas mainly populated by Catholics.

However the British administration did not rely on the Orange Order alone. It also placed a considerable emphasis on calling on the Catholic Church to denounce the organisers of rebellion.

There were two reasons for this. Firstly Catholic peasants made up the majority of the government’s militias. But the United Irishmen had succeeded in infiltrating the militias and winning significant numbers of recruits. The British wanted to ensure the loyalty of the Catholic peasants who formed the foot soldiers of the militias. Secondly the establishment hoped to split the rich Catholic leaders. The Catholic Church were instinctively terrified of rebellion. They had learned from France that revolution had weakened the hold of its ideas over the peasants. In February 1797 the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, John Troy spelt out the Church’s aversion to the “French Disease”:

“Do not then approach the rotten tree of French liberty, if you desire to live. It bears forbidden fruit, fair to the eye but deadly to those who taste it. Rooted in corruption, it vegetates only to destroy. Evils innumerable lie concealed under its branches and shining foliage, bending under an exuberant weight of crimes.”⁴¹

In 1793 the Church was awarded a grant to fund the building and running of Maynooth College. The aim was provide an alternative training venue for priests who were being politicised in the radicalised colleges throughout Europe.

By excommunicating Catholics who had joined the Defenders at a time when they were moving close to the ideas of the United Irishmen, Troy gave meaning to the term “Castle Catholic”—those Catholics subservient to the British Garrison in Dublin Castle.

Likewise when Britain declared war on France in 1793 and brought

in the Militia Act, it was local priests who helped compile lists of peasants to go forward as “recruits”. Since this involved taking the main breadwinner away from working the land, anti-militia riots broke out often directed against the priests and church property. Militia regiments were assigned to different counties from where they originated indicating that their use was more for internal security than defence from French attack.

Although two Catholic Relief Acts were passed in 1792 and 1793 they both fell far short of Catholic emancipation. Their aim, like the setting up of the militia and the Orange Order together with the use of the Catholic Church, to split the developing Catholic-Protestant alliance. However loyalist elements within the political establishment ensured that these acts were minimal in their effects.

Sectarianism and the implicit support of sections of the Catholic hierarchy however was not enough. The British needed brutal repression to break the rebellion.

The outbreak of war between France and Britain in February 1793, gave the authorities the excuse to further suppress secret organisations and tighten its military control. At the start of the troubles there were 18,000 regular British troops in Ireland. Up to 16,000 peasants were then enrolled into Government militias. Together with the regulars they could be deployed anywhere in the country. In local areas the British set up the Yeomanry who were 30,000 strong. These forces were used to try and brutally smash the organisation of the United Irishmen.

Using various methods of torture such as pitch-capping (pouring hot tar on a person’s head) and severe whippings they attempted to find the locations of members and activists. In particular, every blacksmith would be arrested and tortured in this way until they handed over the names of leaders of the United Irishmen. The blacksmiths were central to producing the pikes—the long wooden spears with sharp metal points. Carpenters who produced the pike handles and owners of taverns—where meetings may have took place, were shown the same brutality. Families suspected of having United Irishmen sympathies were burnt out of their homes.

The death penalty was then introduced for recruiting a person to the United Irishmen simply by administering the oath. The word of an informer was sufficient to obtain a “secure conviction”. The military used collective punishment of whole areas such as free quartering. This meant that soldiers helped themselves to all the provisions and possessions that a village might have had unless they gave up sizeable numbers of weapons. Lord Wycombe an Irish landlord boasted to an English counterpart of the success of free quartering:

“His Majesty’s forces have obtained the most decisive advan-

tage over the domestic enemy, which in truth is reduced to its last shift. I wish I could send you some of the fat sheep, the good wine, and the greasy pigs that have rewarded the valour of the troops."⁴²

In 1794 one Dublin newspaper complained "of the most atrocious acts committed by the soldiery on the poor unoffending peasants".⁴³ In a completely illegal operation in October of that year 1,300 Defenders were arrested without charge or trial and pressed into service in the British fleet. On many occasions the troops were encouraged to go on the rampage. This they did in Belfast in 1793 when the cavalry ransacked the public bars that displayed symbols or paintings associated with the French Revolution.

As 1798 approached the violent approach of the British state forces intensified. Although many pikes and guns were handed in—a sizeable portion broken and unable to be used—the methods of torture and collective punishment drove many peasants to the hills to join the revolutionaries.

As the influence of the United Irishmen spread and the insurrection looked imminent the British moved brutally to crush the movement in the North. In the first four months of 1797 the membership had doubled. The North represented the crux of what the United Irishmen stood for—unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. A successful crackdown there had the potential to drive home a wedge to fatally split the organisation.

When it came the crackdown was bloody. Fifty members of the United Irishmen were publicly executed throughout the year. They included four members of the Monaghan militia as an example to would-be deserters. A leading member William Orr was hung in Carrickfergus simply on the word of an informer. The whole of the Northern leadership remained in jail for most of that year after being locked up in September 1796, and over 500 members were arrested. The presses of the crucial *Northern Star* in Belfast were smashed by the Monaghan Militia, forcing it out of existence. Military law was declared in the North and each household was searched and 5,000 guns seized.

The Northern leadership of the United Irishmen suffered a huge blow from this attack which added to its indecision when the rising finally took place. But the organisation was still intact and a new layer of leaders were pushed to the fore.

By using severe repression, the sectarian thugs of the Orange Societies and encouraging support from the Catholic Bishops who feared the "French disease", the British establishment succeeded in weakening the revolutionaries. But they could not entirely crush the flame of rebellion.

6. The United Irish Rising

In December 1796 Tone finally succeeded in obtaining from the French Government a significant force of 15,000 troops and 40,000 weapons which set sail for Ireland. But appalling weather conditions led to the eventual abandonment of the mission. However the fleet had been spotted in Bantry Bay and this was taken as proof that France was ready to intervene in the uprising.

However at this point indecision and divisions crept into the ranks of the United Irishmen's leadership. The Leinster leadership—responsible for Dublin—were split over French intervention. In 1796 during growth in membership, the two Irish MPs Arthur O'Connor and Lord Edward Fitzgerald joined the United Irishmen. These two pushed for an immediate rising "with or without" French help. They were opposed by Thomas Addis Emmet and William McNevin amongst others.

This split led to indecision and paralysis at the top of the organisation and allowed the initiative to pass to the British. On 12th March 1798 they finally arrested the Southern leadership at a meeting in the house of the woollen merchant Oliver Bond. Only Fitzgerald escaped and went into hiding. They released the Northern leaders confident they had broken the back of the movement there.

A newly constituted leadership met hurriedly on the 17th May. It consisted of John and Henry Sheares and Samuel Neilson. All were in favour of an immediate rising and were guaranteed of support throughout Leinster, eastern Munster and eastern Ulster. The day for the rising was named. Despite the arrest of the Sheares, and the inability of Neilson to take a leading role, the rising began on 23rd May 1798 when thousands of badly armed peasants mobilised to take on the world's strongest imperial power.

The rebellion began in the counties surrounding Dublin. The signal for the rising was to be the stopping and burning of the five mail coaches that travelled from Dublin to the rest of the country. In the event only two were stopped by the United Irish forces and so the attempted revolution lacked a co-ordinated beginning.

Kildare, Wicklow, Carlow and Wexford were the first to rise. Armed mostly with pikes, a few guns and no heavy cannon whatsoever, the revolutionary armies made assaults on the heavily fortified bases of the British. Success was patchy in all but Wexford. The reaction of the British forces was brutal and markedly sectarian. On the first day of the rising the commander at Dunlavin, Co. Wicklow shot 28 Catholics in his own militia as a warning to others who might mutiny. In the same county the

next day, the commander in Carnew shot 30 prisoners—suspected United Irish rebels. On the 29th May near Kildare town, several thousand rebels surrendered and were disarmed. The Limerick militia under the command of General Duff slaughtered the helpless United Irishmen and over 350 were killed.⁴⁴

Wexford, however, was the exception. With a strong United Irish presence, the rebels succeeded in winning most of the county. Two victorious battles at Oulart and Enniscorthy led to huge numbers of wavering peasants joining the movement, creating a force of 10,000 strong. A week later the United Irish took the town of Wexford itself forcing the 1,200 strong garrison to flee. A Republic was declared and a committee consisting of equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants was set up. They immediately put an end to looting and random assassinations of loyalists. These had taken place in revenge for the atrocities by troops in the area prior to the rising.

Food and provisions were distributed, defences were reinforced and a communications system created. Money disappeared, the running of the republic was put in the hands of the artisans. One of their catechisms proclaimed:

“What have you got in your hand?”

A green bough.

Where did it first grow?

In America

Where did it bud?

In France

Where are you going to plant it?

In the crown of Great Britain.”⁴⁵

The Wexford Republic signified a social transformation that some of the United Irish leaders throughout most of the country had played down. The armies of the new republic made valiant attempts to spread the rising into neighbouring counties. Had they succeeded to the North—unstable Dublin was in easy reach whilst to the west Waterford and Cork could have ignited. However the British forces had crushed Kildare and with re-enforcement's from England, they concentrated their numbers and prevented the Wexford rebels from breaking out.

Nearly two weeks after the start of the rebellion the Northern United Irishmen did finally rise. It began with an aborted attempt to seize Antrim town, under the leadership of Henry Joy McCracken, and a number of small towns and villages were won. Two days later a second rebel

army led by Henry Munro seized most of North Down but were badly defeated at Ballynahinch. The Northern United Irish forces were up against terrible odds when they faced an army with plentiful supplies of muskets and cannon. For a week they had fought and took the pressure off their Wexford comrades.

Left isolated and with still no sign of French assistance, the Republic of Wexford finally fell just over a week later. Despite several weak attempts to re-ignite the rebellion throughout Leinster, and two unsuccessful French landings, the last involving Tone, the fall of Wexford meant the end of the United Irish rising.

The British forces smothered any flickerings of further resistance in blood. On seizing Wexford town, a frenzy of killings was unleashed against the rebels, inhabitants not involved and even local loyalists was carried out. The hospital was burnt down and with everyone inside perishing. The orgy of violence was carried into neighbouring areas. As the months following the end of the rebellion went by, the shoot-to-kill policy of the troops was maintained. Meanwhile leaders of the rebellion were hanged and Catholic churches were systematically burned.

Over 30,000 people were killed in the attempted revolution with 27,000 on the side of the United Irish side. This puts all the claims about the atrocities supposedly committed by the United Irishmen in Wexford into sharp relief.

Why did the revolution fail?

The bravery of the revolutionaries in the 1798 rising is beyond doubt. However the question of why the revolution failed is important. Despite overwhelming odds it was not bound to end in defeat. Here we need to look at the tensions and contradictions that arose from the bourgeois limits of the revolution.

The merchants who played a leading role in the United Irishmen wanted to remove the chains of England which stunted their commerce and deprived them of democracy. But they were also terrified of “unleashing” the country peasants and the urban “mob”. They had to relate to the conditions of poverty and questions of ownership of land and this sometimes led to a very radical rhetoric. But the rhetoric was often not matched by a direct call to seize the land and distribute it more equally.

The Wexford Republic achieved some measure of success because the peasants understood they were fighting for something different. Yet this was not repeated elsewhere. By promising a redistribution of the land the United Irishmen could have unleashed the peasantry and fatally split the militia. But there were two reasons why the leadership would

not stomach a land war.

Firstly many of the Presbyterian families of the North had been brought up on stories of the 1641 massacre—the last time the peasantry rose. During Cromwell's conquest they resisted land seizures by killing Protestants from earlier plantations. Secondly the merchants and new business class were terrified that a movement from below could eradicate structures useful to them and present demands that they could not satisfy.

Throughout the whole rising Dublin as well as Belfast remained almost completely passive. Prior to 1798 the second largest city in the Empire had a population of 180,000. The United Irishmen numbered 10,000 and there was many underground clubs where the poor gathered. In particular the artisans formed combinations—forerunners of trade unions to fight to improve their conditions. As a result anti-combination legislation was passed on three occasions between 1750 and 1775. By the 1780's large meetings of combinations took place and in response to the threat from below, a Police Bill was passed in 1786. The result was to create the first professional, centralised and armed police force in the British Isles.⁴⁶ Quite clearly the Dublin "mob" was a threat.

The Paris "mob" had been the engine behind the French Revolution—constantly pressurising their representatives to adopt more radical measures. Yet people in Dublin played no major role in the rebellion. The arrest of the Leinster leadership had the effect in weakening the Dublin organisation as membership lists were seized. But the indecision and divisions in the Dublin leadership also played an important role.

The only avenue that sections of the United Irish leadership would contemplate, if they were to conduct a popular controlled rebellion, was to appeal to France for military assistance. They thought that what was needed was a disciplined army of men who could lead "the mob" without upsetting property relations.

This was the urgent task given to Tone when he travelled to Paris in 1796 to urge French intervention to trigger the Irish rebellion. However French intervention was not based on the rhythms of the Irish rebellion. It was connected to its war strategy against England and depended on the tactics and forces it was engaging throughout the world in pursuit of victory. The intervention in Ireland, for example, was finally agreed only after Britain gave support to an uprising in France. The reliance on France meant that the leadership of the United Irishmen held off the rebellion until the last moment, allowing the British to crackdown and decapitate the movement.

Henry Joy was indeed right to declare that "the rich always betray the poor".

7. Conclusion

Two hundred years after the 1798 rebellion we are still living with the legacy of its failure.

The Orange Order which was created to suppress the rising, is still a source of division and sectarianism. It insists on marching through nationalist areas like the Garvaghy Road to assert its claim to supremacy. Its talk about "civil and religious liberty" has as much credibility as the Ku Klux Klan claiming they have a right to march through Harlem.

But the Orange Order is not just directed at Catholics. It is an institution that attempts to suppress left wing ideas among Protestants—to pressurise those who want change to fall into line behind their Unionist leaders. In the past the Unionist fur coat brigade claimed that they could offer Protestant workers jobs and houses—but now all they have to give is the bowler hat. The Orange marches stoke up sectarian divisions so that Protestant workers continue to be represented by Tories like Trimble and Paisley.

The history of the 1798 rebellion shows why Orangeism cannot be equated with Protestant culture. Today it has become fashionable for right wingers everywhere to frame their argument in terms of defending culture. Racists, for example, rarely talk of their biological superiority but argue that they do not want black people "swamping their culture".

But nobody should be fooled by this shift in rhetoric. The reality is that the Orange Order was built in opposition to the most progressive and democratic instincts of Protestant revolutionaries. Far from being the expression of a Protestant identity, it has re-written history to define Protestants as monarchists and Tories. Accepting the Orange Order as the main expression of Protestant culture is an insult not only to the founders of the United Irishmen but to thousands of Protestant workers today.

The political establishment believe that they have found a means of resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland through the Belfast Agreement that was concluded in April 1998. They claim that the structures of power sharing and a North-South strand create the possibilities for people to overcome their tribal hatreds and misunderstandings. In this scenario the Irish and British governments are supposed to be disinterested referees guiding the two communities to a more rational accommodation.

Yet this is a complete misreading of the situation. The failure of the United Irishmen's rebellion led to the emergence of two wings of the Irish capitalist class with divergent interests. Daniel O'Connell, who helped to suppress the United Irishmen rebellion, laid the basis for a constitutional nationalism that eventually sought an independent state

surrounded by tariff barriers to protect their industries. Unionism emerged in the North to keep open the links between its more developed industrial base and the British Empire. The underdevelopment and unevenness of the Irish economy—which was an important outcome of the failure of the bourgeois revolution of 1798—laid the basis for new sectarian conflicts. British intervention used these divisions to produce two states which mirrored each other in what Connolly called a “carnival of reaction”.

The real source of sectarianism in Northern Ireland is not simply tribal cultures. It is rather the Northern state that was built on discrimination and repression. The Belfast Agreement does nothing to dismantle the structures of that state. It promises only that there will be a commission to examine the RUC. It ignores the role that forces such as M15 played in directing loyalist murder gangs. It seeks only to modernise the sectarian divisions so that Northern politics will be organised on communal lines for decades to come. Through a system of ‘parallel consent’ decisions must be screened to see if they have Unionist or nationalist support. The notion that there could be a class-based opposition that cut across the communal blocks is effectively ruled out.

Far from being a settlement to the Northern conflict this is simply an arrangement to suit the business and political establishment. They want the stability to make profits—while keeping the sectarian divisions that guarantee low wages, poor conditions and the domination of right wing politics.

A unity of Catholic and Protestant workers will have to be forged from below against this arrangement. The ingredients for such a common struggle are already there. Northern Ireland is a low pay black spot with wages that are 10% below the British rate. One fifth of households have to depend on social security. From this common suffering and exploitation, there is a basis for strong class struggle.

But struggle on economic issue alone will not suffice to bring lasting unity. There is a need for a set of politics which opposes loyalism and all its attendant notions of Protestant supremacy. That politics also has to challenge the dead-end that republicanism has led to. After nearly thirty years of struggle its leadership are entering the world of conventional politics where they will present themselves as representatives of the “nationalist community.” Despite claiming a direct line of descent from Wolfe Tone, modern republicanism can only pour scorn on the possibility of a unity between Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. Instead it demands that “labour must wait” until a pan nationalist alliance that stretches from the unemployed youth of the Bogside to the right wing Irish American businessmen sorts out “the national question”. Against all these failed notions there is a need for open socialist politics which sees class as the

main division and seeks a revolution to overturn the two reactionary states in Ireland.

Some claim that seeking a common class unity between Catholics and Protestants is unrealistic. But the United Irishmen showed that genuine unity could be forged in revolutionary conditions. They brought together the most democratic elements of Presbyterian Belfast with the peasantry of Wexford because they dared to challenge a world where princes and aristocrats had a natural right to rule. If it had succeed this Irish installment of the ideals of the French Revolution would undoubtedly have led to a more modern capitalist system in Ireland. Nevertheless it is their revolutionary spirit which stands out. Today it is only socialists who can achieve the ideal of a unity between Catholic, Protestant and dissenter—because they alone point to the common interests of all workers in smashing exploitation.

Notes:

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- 6 Wolfe Tone, *An Argument on behalf of Catholics in Ireland* Reprint Athol Books.
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- 17 Whelan p 100.
- 18 Tone, p 23
- 19 Tone p 27.
- 20 Smyth p 165
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- 33 Smyth p 119, Whelan p 41.
- 34 Curtis p 8.
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