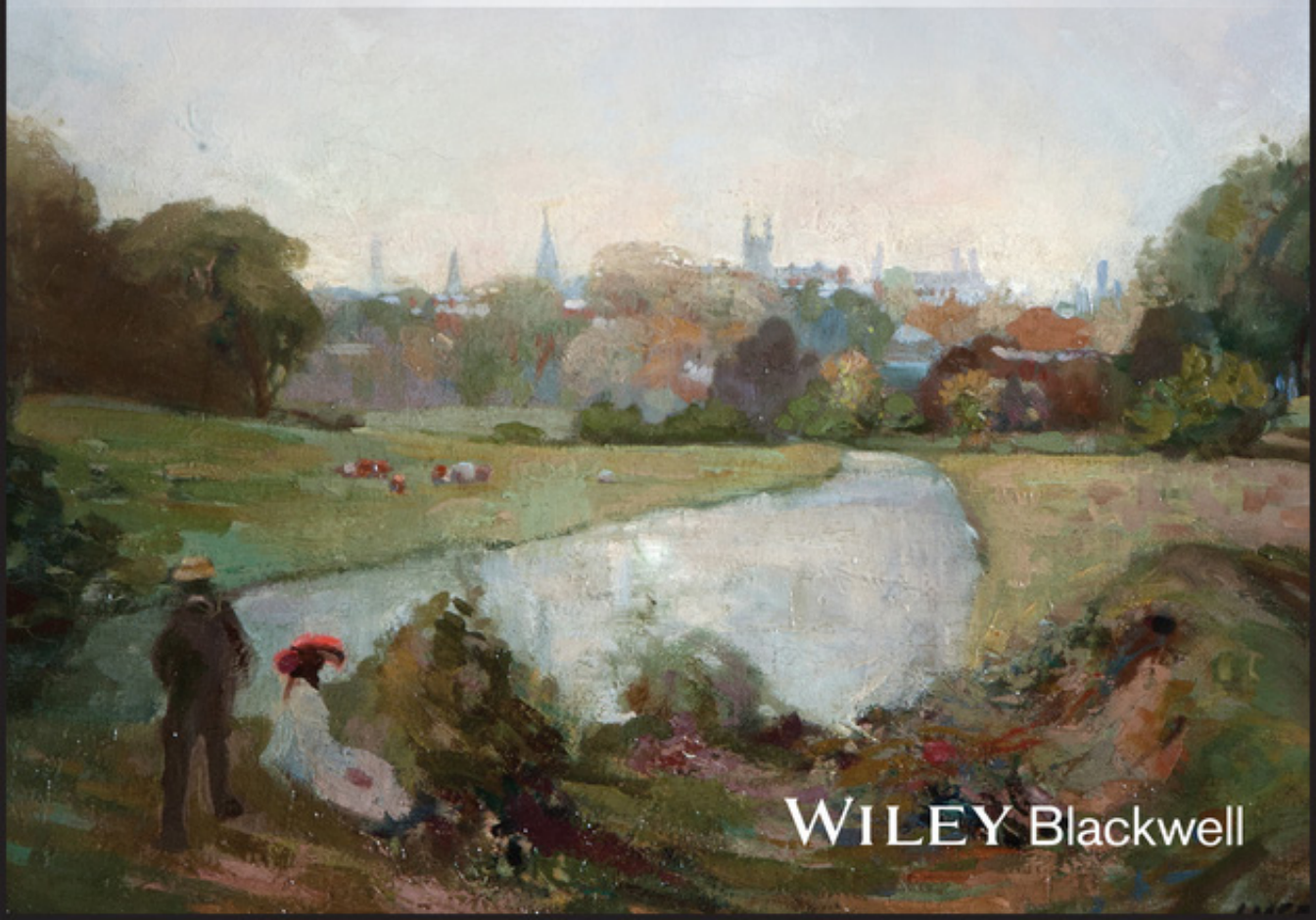
THIRD EDITION

IRELAND

1798-1998:

WAR, PEACE AND BEYOND

ALVIN JACKSON



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Third Edition

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1798–1998: War, Peace and Beyond

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Alvin Jackson
July 2024

List of Abbreviations

ACA	Army Comrades' Association
AIA	Anglo-Irish Agreement
AOH	Ancient Order of Hibernians
APL	Anti-Partition League
BEPS	Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (Accounting)
CBS	Christian Brothers' School
CSJ	Campaign for Social Justice
DFM	Deputy First Minister
DHAC	Derry Housing Action Committee
DMP	Dublin Metropolitan Police
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
FF	Fianna Fáil
FG	Fine Gael
FM	First Minister
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
GOC	General Officer Commanding
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
IDA	Industrial Development Authority
IFS	Irish Free State
ILPU	Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army
INTS	Irish National Theatre Society
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRAO	Irish Republican Army Organization

IRB	Irish Republican Brotherhood
ITGWU	Irish Transport and General Workers' Union
IUA	Irish Unionist Alliance
IWFL	Irish Women's Franchise League
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly (N. Ireland)
NI	Northern Ireland
NICRA	Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association
NIHE	National Institute for Higher Education
NILP	Northern Ireland Labour Party
NIO	Northern Ireland Office
PD	People's Democracy/ Progressive Democrats
PM	Prime Minister
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
PUP	Progressive Unionist Party
RHI	Renewable Heat Initiative
RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
ROI	Republic of Ireland
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SAS	Special Air Service
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SF	Sinn Féin
TD	Teachta Dála (Deputy to the Dáil)
TUV	Traditional Unionist Voice
UCD	University College Dublin
UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UDP	Ulster Democratic Party
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment
UFF	Ulster Freedom Fighters
UIL	United Irish League
UPNI	Unionist Party of Northern Ireland
USC	Ulster Special Constabulary
UUC	Ulster Unionist Council
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
UWUC	Ulster Women's Unionist Council
YIB	Young Ireland Branch of the UIL

1

Introduction

We are trying to make ourselves heard
Like the lover who mouths obscenities
In his passion, like the condemned man
Who makes a last-minute confession
Like the child who cries out in the dark.
Michael Longley[1]

1.1 Ends of the Century

Irish history, it has been observed, is often written as a morality tale, with a preformulated structure and established patterns of triumph and travail.[2] Written in the aftermath of the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 and 1997, revised in the wake of the St Andrews Agreement of 2006, and revised once again in the (relative) calm after the storms of Brexit and COVID, this story of Ireland might easily assume some of the characteristics of its predecessors in the field: a narrative of heroism and villainy with a happy resolution. The quality of the fairy-tale ending may not be fully perceived for some years yet, and the interaction of the book's themes may not coincide with the typology of other stories of Ireland. Yet the period under consideration here does appear to represent a discrete phase within Irish political history: while the book lacks the robust predestinarianism of earlier stories, it may at least boast a shadowy symmetry.

The book begins and ends with the turn of a century. The book begins with the creation of militant republicanism and militant loyalism in the 1790s – in the essential context both of European revolution and of a great international conflict: 'the events of 1793–4, in their total effect, marked a turning point in the history of the protestant ascendancy', J.C. Beckett has noted; Thomas Bartlett has called the 1790s 'the crucible of modern Ireland when separatism, republicanism, unionism and Orangeism captured

Ireland 1798–1998: War, Peace and Beyond, Third Edition. Alvin Jackson.

the Irish political agenda for generations to come'.[3] The book closes with, if not the demise, then at least the modification of militant republicanism and militant loyalism in the 1990s and after. Again, the dual context for this development has been the European Revolution and the apparent resolution of a great international rivalry. America and France fired Irish republican zeal in the early 1790s: the French wars indirectly brought about the militarization of this republican enthusiasm after 1793. The fall of the Soviet empire in the late 1980s and the radical recalibration of the ideological and material conflicts between communism and capitalism have affected Ireland no less than the seismic political shifts of the 1790s. Militant republicanism can no longer appeal, even indirectly, to the resources of the Eastern Bloc; the British government no longer finds a wholly compliant partner in the United States (if ever it did).

Moreover, in both the 1790s and the 1990s, social and economic developments broke through their constitutional constraints. The end of the eighteenth century was characterized by the consolidation of the Catholic propertied interest and by its increasingly vocal opposition to a constitution that recognized property, but not Catholicism. The Irish Protestant constitution (even – especially – when revamped in 1782–3) proved unable to accommodate this newly arisen interest and was abolished by the British government through the Act of Union (1800). The end of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first in Northern Ireland have been characterized by the proportionate growth of the Catholic population and their increasing political and cultural confidence: the Protestant-dominated constitutional arrangements of the period 1920–72 proved unable to accommodate Catholic aspirations, and, after the Second World War, increasing Catholic political and economic strength. The constitutional development of Northern Ireland after 1972 has involved a spasmodic retreat from effectively Protestant institutions, as Unionism has splintered and the political and cultural confidence of northern Protestants has waned. There is, however, some scattered evidence to suggest that this process was temporarily halted – at least in the years up to 2016. It would seem that 25 years of violence (1969–94) have brought not only some belated Catholic political victories, but (at least for a time) a more critical self-awareness and reorientation on the part of Ulster Protestants.

All this broaches the characteristic *fin-de-siècle* theme of decadence. The late eighteenth century witnessed the first symptoms of the decay of Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, albeit a decay well screened by a luxuriant social and political culture: the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed the formal decay of Protestant predominance in Northern Ireland (screened again by an exotic political culture). Whether the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have also witnessed the final departure of what has been euphemistically labelled the 'physical force' traditions of loyalism and republicanism is similarly uncertain. If there is, arguably, a symmetry in this story of Ireland, then its lines necessarily remain blurred.

1.2 Modes and Frameworks of Interpretation

Until recently the most common framework applied to modern Irish history has been that associated with the varieties of Irish nationalism. Work written in this broad tradition has become less common, given the steady professionalization of Irish history

writing since the 1930s, but some of its features live on. The Irish history profession evolved alongside the development, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of the Irish Revolution, and there was an inevitable overlap or exchange. In 1886, at the time of the first Home Rule Bill, historians from several traditions debated the achievement of Grattan's parliament, the assembly abolished in 1800 through the Act of Union: nationalist commentators saw an economic and cultural flowering in Ireland as a result of legislative independence, while unionist commentators stressed the merits of Union. Heroes of the campaign to repeal the Union, such as Thomas Davis, were lauded in celebratory biographies (Charles Gavan Duffy, *Thomas Davis* (1890)). General histories of Ireland (such as that by Mary Hayden) deployed a straightforward morality, emphasizing the benefits of self-rule and the brutality of British imperial government. This work has supplied several starting points even for some contemporary Irish historiography: an emphasis on the nobility of nationalist endeavour, on the suffering of the Irish people under British rule, and on the inevitable success of the national struggle. Such work, in its most direct expression, fell victim to the popularization of a more 'scientific' historical methodology with the creation, in 1938, of the influential journal *Irish Historical Studies*; intellectual proponents of an uncritical militant nationalism were also embarrassed by the bloodier aspects of the IRA campaigns after 1969. The paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 and 1997 have, however, permitted the renewal of a nationalist historical perspective on modern Irish history.

An alternative and, since the mid-1960s, a highly influential interpretative approach has been labelled as 'liberal'. Such work has its origins as a reaction against the most elaborate and unconvincing nationalist rhetoric, and – certainly in the view of critics such as Bradshaw – has substituted a rationalist aridity for nationalist floridity.[4] The characteristics of this work tend to be an intolerance of intolerance – a disdainful attitude towards popular political institutions and culture – combined with a much more sensitive approach to the diversity of modern Ireland than that adopted by the traditionalists. Nationalists tend to see Ireland as an ethnic nation subjugated by a neighbouring imperial power (Britain); 'liberals' place greater emphasis on the 'varieties of Irishness' and are warier about the crude application of national labels.[5] 'Liberals' tend not to accept that Ireland was bound by a simple colonial relationship with Britain.

The counter-revisionist critics of this dominant tendency within Irish historical scholarship fall into a variety of camps (not all of which are discrete). Counter-revisionism may at once be a reassertion of patriotic certainties: in this sense, counter-revisionism may be seen as an Irish expression of the historiography of the radical right prevalent in the 1980s and after. By extension, counter-revisionism may be seen as part of the broader 'greening' of Irish society at this time, as evidenced by the election of Mary McAleese as President of Ireland (in 1997), and – in terms of popular culture – by the phenomenal success of Neil Jordan's film *Michael Collins* (1996) and Michael Flatley's *Riverdance* (Flatley appeared on posters clad in the national colours, and the pounding rhythms of his dancers suggested a militant Celticism to some – friendly – critics). However, the counter-revisionist tendency is as sophisticated as the revisionism that it seeks to subvert, and it is also arguable that counter-revisionism represents a post-modernist assault on the enlightenment verities of mainstream Irish history. In this interpretation, revisionism is a liberal construction, and therefore as flawed and as dangerous as other constructionist readings. Indeed, just as some crusading post-modernists have seen the

Holocaust as a bloody and perverted expression of the Enlightenment, so some 'green' post-modernists have seen 'enlightened' revisionists apologizing for what is occasionally described as the Irish holocaust – the Great Famine of 1845–51.[6]

Marxian interpretations of modern Irish history stem from the Irish commentaries of Marx himself, or – more frequently – the work of the socialist James Connolly, especially *Labour in Irish History* (1910) or *The Reconquest of Ireland* (1915). This work, predictably enough, is to be differentiated from mainstream nationalist commentary by its emphasis on class, and hostility towards organized Catholicism. It lays emphasis on the revolutionary potential of the Irish working class, seeing capitalism as an imperialist importation, and the middle classes as hopelessly corrupted: 'the middle class . . . have now also bowed the knee to Baal, and have a thousand economic strings binding them to English capitalism as against every sentimental or historic attachment drawing them towards Irish patriotism'.[7] The ineluctable problem that this work continually encounters is that of the Unionist working class in Belfast, a theoretical irritant (like the Tory working man or woman in Victorian England) as well as an apparently practical obstacle to the socialist millennium. Connolly saw the Catholics and Presbyterians of eighteenth-century Ireland as united through their legal disabilities; he saw Presbyterians won to the cause of the Anglican 'master class' in the nineteenth century and bound into an Orange working class whose servility was rooted in marginal superiority over Catholic unskilled labour. The influence of this model of sectarian and political relations in the north of Ireland since the late eighteenth century has been immense. Connolly's arguments have stimulated a continuous reappraisal, and even though his view of the servile Orange worker and rebel Catholic counterpart has been found to be oversimplistic, his rhetoric and assumptions continue to inform even highly respected contemporary portrayals of the north of Ireland in the nineteenth century.

This volume is not exclusively a part of any of these traditions. It is not neo-nationalist because while the value of free-ranging historical sympathy and empathy is warmly embraced here, historical determinism forms no part of the critical approach. For much the same reasons, the volume, though occasionally influenced by some Marxist scholarship on Ulster labour, is neither a socialist text nor a call to arms such as Michael Farrell's *Northern Ireland: The Orange State* (1976).[8] Similarly, while it shares the inclusivist vision of Irish identity explored in Foster's *Modern Ireland* (1988), the book is not a liberal document. It has been the recurrent fate of Ireland's liberal historians – Lecky, Beckett, Lyons – to see their rationalist faith in the power of scholarship smashed by popular political emotion: Beckett's optimistic projections of the political outlook in his *The Making of Modern Ireland* (1966) were soon shown to be ill-founded, while the mild, generous, confident nationalism of F.S.L. Lyons's *Ireland since the Famine* (1971) was swiftly replaced by the bleaker tone of his last work, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland* (1979). Written with this evidence of wrecked aspirations, and after 25 years of a low-grade but vicious civil war in Northern Ireland (not to mention the political passions enflamed through the fallout from Brexit), this volume could not consciously be imbued with any Whiggish agenda, however subtle or artless.

Nevertheless, if post-modernist writing is a by-product of an age of crisis, then we in Ireland, and especially in Northern Ireland, are all post-modernists now. This book was written against a backdrop of political and social fluidity, with the ostensibly marmoreal political attitudes and institutions of Northern Ireland in flux: the book was begun in a

post-ceasefire Ulster, pursued in a post-nationalist Ireland, completed in a post-industrial United States and revised twice (for different editions) in a post-unionist and post-Brexit Scotland. In common with much recent historiography, the volume addresses some of the contemporary predicaments of Northern Ireland and the island as a whole; there is no grand narrative, however, no 'Official Story', but rather an interest in what Richard Kearney has called an 'open plurality of stories'.[9] The work embodies no blind faith in the canonical 'facts' of Irish history. As Peter Novick has argued, the historian – and emphatically the Irish historian – can hope at best for plausibility.[10]

Readers, then, will not find here a universal narrative history, still less a history designed to serve as a basic introduction, or primer, for the subject. An analysis of Irish political parties, leaders, institutions and movements is sustained, and social, economic and cultural material relevant to the main political thrust is introduced and interwoven. Individual chapters highlight major political issues, and these are generally explored through the mapping of subsidiary themes or hypotheses: the material relevant to a given issue is often arranged thematically or within the context of a wider argument. This makes for a design that is intended to stimulate thought (or, indeed, to invite argument) about sometimes familiar historical issues or personalities: it is a design which (it is intended) will highlight some fresh conjunctions and configurations in the interpretation of modern Irish history. In addition, the design is meant to corral, not just the familiar hobby horses of students, but also some rarer creatures. An attempt has been made to give a place to some sections of Irish society that are not normally (or, at any rate, not adequately) represented within works such as this. Thus – once again – the volume is not conditioned exclusively by the contours of contemporary Irish life: the 'losers' of social, economic and political struggle are characterized as well as the 'winners'. There are Salieris here as well as Mozarts.

2

The Birth of Modern Irish Politics, 1790–8

We had the true faith, you see. Reason. The logical men. History was a dungeon. The people were locked into their separate compounds, full of stench and nightmare. But the dungeons couldn't stand against the force of rationalism. Let the people once unite, and we could burst open the doors, and they would flood out into the clean sunlight . . . all we've done, you see, is to reinforce the locks, cram the cells fuller than ever of mangled bodies crawling round in their own shite and lunacy, and the cycle just goes on, playing out the same demented comedy of terrors from generation to generation, trapped in the same malignant legend . . ..

Henry Joy McCracken, in Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* (1983)[1]

2.1 The Origins of the Crisis

Ireland in the 1790s was a separate but dependent kingdom, united to Great Britain only through sharing a monarch, George III: the theoretical constitutional position of Ireland was similar to that of Hungary after the *Ausgleich* of 1867. Ireland boasted a separate bicameral legislature, which sat in Edward Lovett Pearce's splendid Italianate parliament house in College Green, Dublin: after 1782–3, this assembly enjoyed, at least in name, full legislative independence. There was a distinct Irish executive, headed by a lord lieutenant, and based in a sprawling administrative complex at Dublin Castle. There was a theoretically separate Irish judiciary, housed in Dublin's Four Courts, on the northern bank of the river Liffey.

But behind these elaborate institutions, and behind the florid rhetoric of the Irish parliament's patriot interest, lay the reality of British influence. The Irish parliament had, indeed, won what it was pleased to call 'legislative independence' in 1782–3; but while the strategies that secured victory had an immense significance, the limits of this triumph were soon apparent – and particularly after 1789 when, with the French revolution, an

Ireland 1798–1998: War, Peace and Beyond, Third Edition. Alvin Jackson.

increasingly ambitious definition of parliamentary autonomy and authority gained currency.[2] In 1782, one of the keystones of the Irish constitution, Poynings' Law (1494), had been modified in order to award the Irish parliament sole rights over the introduction of legislation (the modifying legislation was known as Yelverton's Act): in addition an antique legislative irritant, the Declaratory Act (1720), which asserted the superior status of Westminster, was repealed and, in 1783, replaced by the Renunciation Act, a measure disavowing any British legislative ambition over Ireland. These tinkerings were hailed by Irish patriots as independence, but the chasm between this rhetoric and constitutional reality was wide, and ultimately dangerous.

The Irish political system in the 1790s was affected by British influence at almost every level. Though Yelverton's Act had emasculated the Irish privy council, its British counterpart still possessed a right to veto Irish legislation, and this meant that the British government could spike any offensive measures (though in reality it rarely did so). The constitutional settlement of 1782–3 did not directly alter the condition of the Irish executive, which remained firmly under the control of the British government. The chief executive, the lord lieutenant, was a British appointee, and was throughout the period 1782–1800 an Englishman; in the same period, the Chief Secretaries – in effect, the government managers in the Commons – were, bar one, Englishmen, and the unique Irish appointment, Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh, was deemed by his lord lieutenant in 1797 to be 'so very unlike an Irishman I think he has a clear claim to an exception in his favour'.[3] A triumvirate of powerful officeholders – John Foster, Speaker of the Commons, John Fitzgibbon, Earl of Clare, the Lord Chancellor, and John Beresford, Chief Commissioner of the Revenue – generally (though not uniformly) exercised their formidable political influence in the government interest.

The 'insistent treatment of Ireland as a British dependency' (as Nancy Curtin has described it) was made possible both by the British-controlled executive and by the peculiarly unrepresentative nature of the Irish parliament: strict British control over patronage combined with a narrowly based and therefore susceptible parliament to tarnish further the lustre of 'legislative independence'.[4] The Irish House of Commons at the end of the eighteenth century represented chiefly the Church of Ireland landed interest. Catholics were disfranchised between 1728 and 1793, and were excluded from parliament until the 'emancipation' of 1829; Presbyterians, while possessing the franchise, were in practice scarcely represented. Of 150 constituencies represented in the Irish House of Commons, 107 were 'close' – that is, under the control of an individual or a small group of patrons. By contemporary European standards, even limited parliamentary representation was a democratic luxury, and by contemporary British standards, a small and irregular electorate was unexceptional. In addition, A.P.W. Malcomson has warned against the uncritical assumption that close boroughs implied inefficient or unchallenged control.[5] What was unusual about Ireland was not that landed property should be overrepresented (however unevenly) or that there should be a religious dimension to political rights, but rather that the two principles should be combined in order to exclude two powerful and wealthy confessional communities from representative politics. This constitutional quirk was made all the more glaring, given the inflated libertarian rhetoric that had preceded the achievement of legislative independence in 1782. Legislative independence therefore raised dangerous expectations in two separate, but related, spheres: the campaign encouraged the assumption that, while the British

connection would remain, British influence would be constrained, and further, it underlined Catholic and Presbyterian exclusion. The Renunciation Act (1783) has been described as 'a mere decorative flourish for which the indirect price was out of all proportion to the benefit obtained': the same aphorism might be applied to the whole settlement (1782–3).[6] Legislative independence was a Pyrrhic victory for the ascendancy of parliament, bought at the price of long-term constitutional uncertainty.

Thomas Malthus, in a famous discussion of Irish demography, suggested that the political uncertainty of the 1790s was a product, not of this long-term constitutional instability, but rather of exceptional population growth.[7] In 1790, the Irish population stood at around 4 million, having doubled since the famine of 1740–1; by 1800, the population would be 5 million, an astonishing rate of growth by late eighteenth-century European standards. Explanations for this growth are never likely to be conclusive, but the widespread adoption of the potato through the eighteenth century, combined with the general economic buoyancy of the later part of the century, are clearly relevant factors. Early marriage, and (possibly) a falling mortality rate, were the immediate spurs to this population boom, but a political dimension has also been observed: the political exclusion of Catholics, an issue increasingly to the fore after legislative independence, and limited Catholic prospects for betterment, may have removed any social or economic restraint on marital fertility. It may well be that the political turmoil of the 1790s was simultaneously a cause and a result of this growth.

Economic growth, while related to the issue of population, clearly operated as an independent destabilizing influence. After the fluctuating, but generally depressed, conditions of the period 1691–1730, the Irish economy grew swiftly: agricultural output rose, trade with Britain and with North America prospered, new industries (such as cotton) and well-established industries (such as linen manufacture, brewing and distilling) all generally flourished (despite occasional, temporary downturns, such as at the end of the 1770s). It is difficult to be precise about the political implications of this growth. It may, however, be surmised that the political crisis of 1779–82, which resulted in the achievement of 'free trade' and legislative independence for Ireland, was related to contemporary economic conditions – a period of depression after sustained growth and the creation of an early 'crisis of expectations' (such as has been identified for the 1870s). The complex inter-relationship between economic growth and political protest may be further illustrated through the example of eighteenth-century Armagh. David Miller has argued that the rise of the linen industry in late eighteenth-century County Armagh encouraged some limited Catholic economic mobility and tended to destabilize well-established family structures within every confessional tradition: the profitability of handloom weaving permitted young men to establish their independence much earlier than was usual within small farmer society, and freed them from the restraints of the rigid, patriarchal family.[8] This social liberation combined with Catholic advance and with the rapid rise in population to stimulate the sectarian violence endemic in Armagh from the mid-1780s through to the mid-1790s.

However, economic growth was linked to other evolving forms of social and political interaction. Tom Bartlett has argued persuasively that in Ireland after *c.*1770 a new moral economy was developing in the Irish countryside, underpinned by the growing 'sociability' of community activity.[9] The mounting prosperity of the countryside was reflected in the rising number of fairs and markets, and in the gradual commercialization of rural

economic life. Relative prosperity therefore not only equipped many Irish people with new political and material aspirations, but also gave rise to increasing opportunities for communal mobilization and protest. Aside from the emergence of new political fora, older forms of public activity – sporting events, wakes, funerals and patterns – also now began to take on an additional significance: the politicization of funerals, for example, seems to have gathered pace in this era.

These processes of socialization were augmented and diverted by the increasing importance of military activity within everyday life: it has been calculated that between 1760 and 1820, perhaps as many as one in six Irishmen spent part of their lives in the ranks of one or other of the armed forces, and indeed it is possible that, given the stupendous demands of the Napoleonic wars, this proportion may have been higher.[10] For many, this involved a liberation from the shackles of the local community, and brought – perhaps for the first time – tighter definitions of nationality and religious identity. Indeed, it has been observed that this era also witnessed a spiralling sectarianism, or rather sectarianization, in part the by-product of these more communal forms of political expression and the mounting conflicts between Catholics and the Protestant state: the army, for example, may have been the first arena where many Irish Catholics experienced the reality of their religious subordination.

A related range of destabilizing influences may be located in the realm of ideology. Irish interest in the American and French revolutions was immense, and the ideological fall-out from these events was no less dramatic. The rationalist, libertarian and republican ideals of, especially, the French revolutionaries found an audience in Ireland already sensitive (for the reasons noted) to the issue of individual political rights and national sentiment. However, the direct influence of the great writers of the French Enlightenment is difficult to gauge: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau can have had only a very few, privileged readers in Ireland. Popular appreciation of the ideals and events of the French Revolution came, not from its intellectual architects, but rather from the press and from pamphlets. 'Illiteracy', as Nancy Curtin has observed, 'was no barrier to familiarising oneself with the polemics of a Paine or of a Tone': public readings from the newspapers and radical literature were quite common.[11] Nor was it necessary to follow difficult abstract argument: handbills hammered home a clear-cut political message, while ballads celebrated the French revolutionary achievement in a universally accessible fashion. Popular prophetic literature foretold the liberation of Ireland by the French. In Ireland, just as in France itself, popular political resentments were cultivated and directed by this literature. The tyranny of the Irish government was underlined by the experience of the French; moreover, the Irish oppressed had now an ally in the shape of a liberated French nation.

2.2 Constitutional Radicalism to Revolution, 1791–8

The two dominant Irish political issues of the early 1790s were certainly not spawned by the French revolution, but they were nurtured through revolutionary sympathy. Parliamentary reform had been a longstanding question, dating back to the late 1740s and the campaigns of the radical Dublin apothecary, Charles Lucas: although initially more concerned with Dublin corporation politics than with parliament, Lucas had

condemned the misgovernment of the Castle and its parliamentary allies, and – after his political comeback in 1761 – had supported a septennial bill in order to limit the duration of parliament. Lucas's views, as David Dickson has noted, 'were later to influence Catholic apologists arguing for a relaxation of the penal laws, and political radicals seeking parliamentary reform'.[12] The constitutional settlement of 1782–3 raised the issue of parliamentary reform in a more direct manner than had been done in the previous generation, with the Volunteers of Ulster attacking the power of the great borough owners, and a National Convention of the Volunteers, held in Dublin in November 1783, declaring in favour of a reform bill. This was presented to the House of Commons, and summarily rejected. A revival of the reform question in 1784–5 was spear-headed by a new coalition, largely urban, and embracing both Catholics (hitherto largely silent on the question) and dissenters. This fed off other resentments – the Dublin guilds wanted tariff protection, Catholics wanted the removal of disabilities – but soon fell victim to internal division (especially on the question of Catholic relief) and a ferocious and abusive press campaign orchestrated by the Castle. The rejection of William Pitt's proposals for reform of the British parliament, presented in 1785, confirmed the comprehensive failure of the Irish reformers.

In the later 1780s, the most conspicuous proponents of limited reform were the Whigs, who were bruised by their misjudgements during the Regency Crisis (they offered overhasty support for the Prince of Wales during George III's temporary incapacity in 1788–9) and who established a formal party in the Irish parliament in 1789: this supported place and pensions bills, a responsibility bill, and the disfranchisement of revenue officers. Even though Whig clubs were founded in Dublin, Belfast and other large towns to bolster the new grouping (the Northern Whig Club denounced corrupt boroughs), the new political challenge came to nothing: the elections of 1790 brought no sweeping Whig successes, and in fact served only to consolidate the parliamentary strength of the Castle. While the Whigs appear to have found some inspiration from France in the summer of 1789 (their manifesto was published a month after the fall of the Bastille), the revolution both directly and indirectly would prove to be disastrous for them. As the revolutionaries grew more radical and violent, so the Whigs grew ever more divided in their attitudes. Moreover, with the outbreak of war between Britain and France in 1793, the Castle sought to bolster support for the war effort by annexing and enacting some of the Whigs' policies (a Civil List Act, a Place Act, a Barren Land Act and a Hearth Tax Act). However, this conciliation was complemented – as so often in the history of Castle administration – with coercion, and three security measures were passed in the same parliamentary session of 1793: a Convention Act, a Gunpowder Act and a Militia Act. And neither the Castle nor – despite some equivocation – the Irish House of Commons was seriously interested in the prospect of parliamentary reform: a Whig reform bill, creating three-member county constituencies and a uniform, if elaborate, borough franchise, was easily rejected in March 1794, with the opponents of reform arguing that such moderation had spawned eventual anarchy in France. Denuded in certain areas of policy, and blocked in others, the Whigs lost credibility, and constitutional reform initiatives fell into alternative, ultimately less genteel, hands.

The only substantial reform of the franchise to be won in these years came in January 1793, with the admission of Catholic 40-shilling freeholders to the county vote through Hobart's relief bill (and even the importance of this can easily be overstated, given that

the Irish parliament was a borough-dominated assembly). The political leadership of the Catholic community before 1789 pursued a distinctively gradualist and (on the whole) loyalist agenda, couching limited demands for ministerial 'indulgence' in highly deferential language. The Catholic Committee, created in 1760, was the chief representative body for the Catholic community, and emerged as a mild and aristocratic institution: this went into abeyance in 1784, after the failure of the parliamentary reform initiative, but was revived in 1790–1 with the accession of new, bourgeois and radical, leaders. Eamon O'Flaherty has warned against treating the Catholic community in the late eighteenth century in crudely homogeneous terms, and indeed even the political attitudes of the Catholic clergy varied significantly: the French Revolution created divisions between the episcopate and the younger clergy, which foreshadowed similar tensions during the Irish land wars and revolutionary era.[13] Indeed, the lessons provided by France for Irish Catholics were ambiguous: the revolution simultaneously promoted the religious tolerance and equality which had for long been sought by Catholic representatives in Ireland, while involving an assault on the institutions and property of the Church. Revolutionary ideals therefore fired a demand for Catholic relief in Ireland, while disturbing many Catholic gentry and much of the episcopate.

By December 1791, the old aristocratic masters of the Catholic Committee had withdrawn, leaving the field to the middle-class radicals (notably John Keogh and Thomas Braughall). The deferential and loyal petitioning of Lord Kenmare, the aristocratic Catholic leader, was now replaced by the French-inspired language of right. In addition, Keogh and the new Committee complemented this radical assertiveness with strategic innovation. The Irish government and parliament were clearly unsympathetic to Catholic claims and were soon written out of the Committee's strategy (two relief petitions, submitted by the Committee to the Irish House of Commons in January and February 1792, were rejected amidst much anti-papist philosophizing). A highly tentative reform measure – sponsored by Sir Hercules Langrishe and dubbed therefore 'Langrishe's Act' (even though it had originated with the Castle) – did nothing to defuse Catholic protest: indeed, on the contrary, for as Tom Bartlett has argued, the significance of the measure 'lay in the debate it provoked (but did not resolve) on the nature of the Anglo-Irish connection, in the jealousies and suspicions it aroused concerning the British government's Catholic game, and in the fact that it was clearly incomplete'.[14] Moreover, the bill passed into law accompanied by the elaboration and enunciation of the new idea of 'Protestant ascendancy'. Even before these humiliations, the Catholic Committee had been prepared to sidestep the Irish parliament by exploiting close links with its supporters at Westminster (pre-eminently Edmund Burke) and establishing communication with the British government: Burke's son, Richard, was appointed English agent of the Committee in September 1791. The appointment of Theobald Wolfe Tone to the secretaryship of the Committee in July 1792 signalled a more defiant and radical approach, and this was confirmed by the national Catholic Convention, held in Dublin in December, which voted to petition the king for total legal equality. 'The real achievement of the Convention', O'Flaherty has argued, 'was that it succeeded in inducing Pitt to bring irresistible pressure on the Irish executive to grant the principal Catholic demand'.[15] Hobart's relief bill, admitting Catholic 40-shilling freeholders to the franchise, was the fruit of this simultaneously more assertive and subtle approach to the advocacy of Catholic rights: it was the highpoint of Catholic constitutional endeavour in the 1790s, indeed before the

'emancipation' (the term gained currency in 1792–3) of 1829. Thereafter Catholic constitutional pressure encountered an ascendancy interest increasingly concerned and defensive about the European war, and thus more in tune than hitherto with the British government. The Catholic Committee was forced to dissolve under the terms of the Convention Act (1793): Henry Grattan's Catholic Emancipation Bill (1795) was defeated in the Irish House of Commons, and Grattan's viceregal patron, Earl Fitzwilliam, was removed from office after a tenure of scarcely two months. Yet, though this half-cocked emancipation did not in fact herald a greater liberation, its significance should not be missed: Hobart called the enfranchisement 'a most important revolution in the political state of this country', and Tom Bartlett has convincingly stressed the long-term importance of the arguments and strategies which were pursued in the search for reform.[16] Ominously, the comparatively genteel power struggle that was underway in Dublin was underscored by a more naked sectarian conflict in south Ulster.

The crucial points of contact between the radical tradition of parliamentary reform and the campaign for Catholic relief came with the United Irish Society, founded in Belfast and Dublin in 1791, and with Wolfe Tone, 'mid-wife' of the Society and an influential sympathizer with the Catholic cause. The Society was at first a constitutional radical grouping, hostile to English interference in the government of Ireland, but urging the comprehensive reform of government rather than its overthrow. The 'Declaration and Resolutions of the Society of United Irishmen of Belfast', published in October 1791 and drafted by Tone, called for 'a complete and radical reform of the representation of the people in parliament', and the unity of all 'Irishmen' in order to pursue this end. The Society reflected Tone's dual enthusiasm for parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation (a combination most famously articulated in his *Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (1791)); and indeed, the Dublin United Irishmen, originally largely Protestant, soon attracted an influx of Catholics, including leading members of the Catholic Committee. The Dublin United Irishmen produced a reform plan early in 1794, which fleshed out the general ideals expressed in the original declaration: equal constituencies, universal male suffrage, annual parliaments and payment of members of parliament. The Belfast United Irishmen had produced a similarly moderate reform proposal early in 1793 – 'the last act of Ulster constitutional reformism', in Dickson's description.[17] But by this time, and certainly by the time the Dublin scheme appeared, the prospects for a radical reform of parliament, never bright, had been utterly extinguished. The war had undercut the popular Francophile radicalism of 1791–2, scaring many early enthusiasts. The government, sensitive to any prospect of sedition, had little difficulty in suppressing the Society in May 1794.

Many, especially northern, United Irishmen had fostered republican and revolutionary sympathies behind the cloak of constitutional radicalism (although Tone, in the opinion of Marianne Elliott, 'was not an active separatist until 1795').[18] Government suppression in 1793–4 combined with the apparent futility of a constitutional strategy to realize the latent militancy of the United Irish movement. Before 1794, the United Irishmen of Ulster were informally supervised by a committee of public welfare sitting in Belfast. But with a heightened militancy of purpose came the need for a more cohesive and secret organizational structure. A new constitution was therefore drafted late in 1794, and accepted in May 1795, in the wake of Fitzwilliam's recall, and the disappointment of constitutional reform aspirations: the new constitution created a rigid

committee structure, binding small towns and rural 'half-baronies' ultimately to the Ulster provincial committee. By the end of 1796, the Society had decided to create a parallel military structure, with elected sergeants, captains and more senior officers. At the same time – 1795–6 – the United Irishmen of the north (in contradistinction to their more cautious brethren in Dublin), using former members of the Catholic Committee as go-betweens, began to court the leaders of a popular Catholic secret society, the Defenders: Henry Joy McCracken and other United Irish leaders boasted in the summer of 1796 'that there had been a junction between the leaders of the United Irishmen and the Defenders . . . there was a complete union between the Defenders and the United Irishmen'. This (in Elliott's description) 'merger' underlined the numerical strength of the northern revolutionary conspiracy, creating a movement which, in the spring of 1797, boasted a membership of 118,000 and an armoury of 7,000 guns.

The union of the United Irishmen and the Defenders was once seen as the grafting of a politicized and coherent leadership onto a less sophisticated and less well-organized mass movement. This, however, is to misjudge the probably wholehearted nature of the union, as well as to underestimate the quality of Defenderism. The Defenders had their origins in Armagh in the mid-1780s, formed in the dual context of sectarian rivalry within the linen industry and competition for land within one of the most densely populated counties in Ireland. Increasing Catholic self-confidence, which found a particular expression in the bearing of arms, seems to have unsettled traditional sectarian relationships and to have fuelled Defenderism along with its Protestant rivals and antagonists (gangs such as the Nappagh Fleet or the Peep o'Day Boys). By 1790, the Defenders had become a secret society, organized – like the Peep o'Day Boys – along masonic lines and spreading from south Ulster into north Leinster. Defenderism eventually percolated into the poorest strata of Catholic Dublin. Recent scholarship has tended to stress the extent to which Defenderism not only outgrew its local and narrow origins, but may always in fact have had a degree of broader political awareness: it seems likely that (in Curtin's words) 'the further the Defenders were separated from Armagh, the more they lost their sectarian character'.[19] The French Revolution probably helped to change, if not some of the core economic motivation of the movement, then at least its language: Defender oaths and catechisms were larded with republicanism and French sympathies. There is some evidence to suggest contact between French emissaries and Defenders as early as 1792. It has been argued that the campaign for Catholic relief (1791–3) helped to further the politicization of the Defender movement to the extent that 'the Defenders came to see themselves as the armed wing of the Catholic Committee': Defender arms raids at this time appear to have been in preparation for a final assault on ascendancy power.[20] The movement gained confidence by the concession of Hobart's Relief Act in 1793, and it garnered further support from the government's decision to conscript Catholics, by ballot, into a new militia force in the summer of 1793. However, in September 1795, the Defenders, operating outside their normal boundaries, suffered a defeat at the Battle of the Diamond, near Loughgall in north Armagh, but the aggressive response of their Protestant victors (who organized themselves as the Orange Order) drove many Catholics out of the county and thereby helped to spread a newly embittered form of Defenderism, particularly into north Connacht. By 1795, Defenderism remained a movement that was partly motivated by economic grievances – the desire for cheap land, better-paid labour, the righting of ancient land confiscations – and partly by sectarian resentment. But it was

also a mass movement highly sympathetic to the French Revolution, hopeful of French aid, and influenced in organization and rhetoric by revolutionary precedents. Here, then, was the basis for cooperation with the United Irishmen.

The Castle responded to this developing seditious combination with an unusual ferocity. As has been noted, even the highpoint of the Castle's reform endeavour – the measures of 1793 – was characterized as much by repression as by concession. The prospect of French intervention was as frightening for the government as it was encouraging for the United Irishmen and the Defenders; and though ministers were anxious to secure broad-based Irish support for the war through a number of minor reforms, they were equally anxious to crush any latent hostility to this war effort. In fact, the government went some way to realizing its own worst fears: the disappearance of constitutional avenues to reform undoubtedly stimulated, if it did not create, the mass revolutionary conspiracy that was in place by 1796. In that year, the renewed prospect of a French invasion brought a further legislative reaction in the forms of the Indemnity Act (a measure designed to protect magistrates who, in pursuing Defenders, had acted illegally) and an Insurrection Act (a measure easing the application of a curfew in disturbed areas, and facilitating weapons searches and the arrest of suspects). In October 1796, the crown forces were augmented through the creation of the yeomanry, a body led by officially approved gentry and designed to police its own local patch: this would prove to be an important government resource during the 1798 rising, even though – as Allan Blackstock has shown – it soon became tinctured with Orangeism and progressively unruly.[21]

The much-vaunted French expedition set sail in December 1796, only to be dispersed by Atlantic gales rather than the Royal Navy, but the Castle was still shocked, for it had been ill-served by its intelligence networks. Although Lazare Hoche's French fleet had been aiming to land at Bantry Bay, in the south-west, the most likely area for a sympathetic uprising lay not in Munster but in Ulster, where the United Irish Society had established the most broadly based organization and it was therefore in Ulster that, in 1797, the Castle concentrated its military resources. In charge of the military operations in Ulster after the end of 1796 was General Gerard Lake, a forceful commander who was not over-sensitive to political and legal subtlety. Suspected radicals were imprisoned (between September 1796 and September 1797, perhaps 500–600 political prisoners were held); weapons searches began at the end of 1796 and were scaled up in March 1797 (by 1 July 1797, 6,200 firearms in working order, and 4,400 in unserviceable condition, had been seized by Lake's troops). The houses of suspects were burnt, and troops were quartered in areas where sedition and the secretion of weapons were thought to be rife. These techniques, perfected in Ulster, were applied to the south of Ireland in the winter of 1797–8. Martial law was declared in March 1798, but it had in fact existed in all but name for months before.

The bloody disarming of first the north and then the rest of the island had a number of consequences for the conspirators. The movement was simultaneously divided and fired: the militancy of the authorities combined with the evident impossibility of constitutional change (a last reform bill was thrown out by the House of Commons in May 1797) to cow some of the rebels while underpinning the militancy of others. Arrests of prominent United Irishmen from late 1796 deprived the conspiracy of perhaps the most talented section of its leadership, while others – fearing official retribution – fled during the summer of 1797. Riddled with informants, the conspiracy fell an easy prey to the