REHABILITATING “A FEW DISAFFECTED CHARACTERS”

IRELAND’S MEN OF ’98 FROM A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The Irish Rebellion of 1798 has generated a fraught legacy. Its history has been variously skewed by elitist and partisan accounts which overshadow more balanced scholarship. These works have proved crucial in the proliferation of a mythologised Ireland in which the Catholic is pitted against the Protestant; the Gaelic against the Anglo-Irish; the tyrant against the slave. This thesis unpacks such problematic binaries by tracing Ireland’s political prisoners of 1798 to colonial New South Wales. Much of the historiography is dated and sharply divided, portraying these rebels as perennially recalcitrant, or alternatively, as national heroes. This thesis presents an alternative reading by arguing that these transportees often fell short of their revolutionary reputations in exile, instead making significant contributions to the colony in its formative years. By examining Irish political prisoners in both Ireland and New South Wales, this thesis demonstrates the value of reassessing 1798 from a transnational perspective. History, like individual lives, crossed (and re-crossed) oceans – and was shaped by the journey.
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It is not the liberal past, the “facts” of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language – Brian Friel, *Translations*
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INTRODUCTION

During the 1790s the rumblings of discontent echoed throughout Ireland. The unrest may be located in the political, ideological and economic imbalances that dominated the decade and came to a head in the Irish Rebellion of 1798. For the ultra-Protestant Irishman from Waterford, Sir Richard Musgrave, however, the cause was far more sinister. Publishing in 1801 a comprehensive chronicle of the unrest, Musgrave made plain his view that 1798 was the latest in a long line of insults against Irish Protestants. The disturbance, as he saw it, was the result of distinctly Catholic machinations. ‘It was to be hoped and expected,’ he wrote in his ‘instant history’ of the rebellion, ‘that the concessions made to the Roman catholics, for above twenty years, would have attached them to the State, and would have united them, with their protestant fellow subjects, in the bonds of brotherly love and christian charity.’\(^1\) And yet, ‘not only the late rebellion, but incidents which daily occur, afford incontestable proofs, that the tenets of their religion, and the conduct of their priests, will always make it impracticable.’\(^2\) This highly polemical history, in its reliance on intractable stereotypes long familiar to Ireland, seemed a persuasive interpretation to much of its initial readership. Musgrave’s magnum opus proved to be an influential one: its first edition sold 1,250 copies in two months.\(^3\) By framing the seminal history in a vehement anti-Catholicism, Musgrave ensured its resonance in the years after the Acts of Union in 1800.\(^4\) The work seemed also to speak to the strengthening ultra-Protestant

\(^1\) Sir Richard Musgrave, Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland from the Arrival of the English: also, a Particular Detail of that which broke out the 23d of May, 1798; with the History of the Conspiracy which Preceded it, 1801, 4th ed., Steven W. Myers and Delores E. McKnight eds. (Indiana: Round Tower Books, 1995), xvii. All subsequent citations refer to this edition.

\(^2\) Musgrave, Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland, xvii-xviii.

\(^3\) See David Dickson, foreword to Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland, i.

movement in both Britain and Ireland, particularly in its opposition towards Catholic emancipation.⁵

For later observers, Musgrave’s text stands as a neat example of the way contemporary accounts have fed the historiography of 1798 Ireland with sectarian excesses and unqualified defences.⁶ In imagining Ireland in light of such problematic renderings, what then should be summoned from the shadowy halls of history? And which Ireland emerges from the gloom? In the late eighteenth century, the obvious rejoinder would be Ireland in its plural form. Certainly historians have fashioned a series of conceptual ‘Irelands’. Each version is never wholly compatible with its counterparts. The Ireland of the Gaelic-speaking Catholic poor was a world away from the comparatively privileged Protestant Anglo-Irish. Riven by divisions of class and creed, the Irish were at any one time an ambivalent people whose image has become the stuff of legend at home and in diaspora. Such a phenomenon is not necessarily dangerous on its own. It is only when fable overshadows serious scholarship that underlying bigotries and prejudices may emerge to distort our interpretation of events, people and places. Ireland and the Irish in light of 1798 have experienced such a distortion. This is hardly surprising; a rebellion of such ferocity was always bound to generate a fraught legacy. Even at its most basic level, the history of 1790s Ireland has been variously skewed by elitist and sectarian accounts like Musgrave’s which, deceptively, assumed a kind of authority. Like the participants in the rebellion and its suppression, many of the commentators could neither be accused of restraint nor impartiality. While Musgrave’s Memoirs portrayed the unrest as a Papist insurrection where the tenets of the Catholic faith became a vehicle for treason, other

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⁶ See Dickson’s discussion of the more recent evaluation of Musgrave’s work as a key text in the history of the development of a potent brand of ultra-Protestantism. Dickson, foreword to Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland, ii.
accounts offered opposing, yet likewise misleading interpretations. Edward Hay, born into a Catholic landed family in Wexford, offered a counterpart to Musgrave’s acrimonious diatribe. Educated in France and Germany, like many wealthy Catholics during this period, Hay returned to Ireland with a deeper sense of the subjugation of the Irish Catholic population. This propelled him into the radical politics of the 1790s. Hay’s involvement in the rebellion is difficult to determine. He maintained, however, that he had been coerced and that the ‘principle of retaliation’ had been the chief motivating factor for the disgruntled Irish. Hay’s Catholic apologia, *History of the Insurrection of the County of Wexford* was published two years after Musgrave’s work. Significantly, it minimised the role played by Protestant middle-class professionals involved in the Society of United Irishmen and instead focused on the role of the desperate peasantry. Like Musgrave’s account, Hay’s *History* was an initial success and sold over 3,000 copies. His finessing of the facts was part of a more widespread attempt to create distance between Catholic elites and the rebellion in order to legitimise calls for Catholic emancipation in Ireland in the wake of the Union.

Musgrave and Hay are emblematic of the set positions of partisanship that shaped subsequent historiography and popular understandings. The middle ground was staked out by subsequent commentators, and while less caustic, these accounts showed clear signs of underlying personal and political agendas. Later observers were certainly aware

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7 Hay’s time in Europe prior to the French Revolution, where Catholics had formed part of the ruling elite, made him more conscious of the collective grievances of Irish Catholics. He became ‘fully sensible of [his]...civil degradation as a Catholic.’ Margaret Ó hOgartaigh, “Edward Hay: Historian of 1798,” *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr* 13 (1998): 122.
8 Edward Hay, *History of the Irish Insurrection of 1798*, giving an authentic account of the various battles fought between the insurgents and the king’s army, and a genuine history of transactions preceding that event. With a valuable appendix (New York: O’Rourke, 1873), 121. Hay’s work was first published in Dublin, 1803, under title: *History of the Insurrection of the County of Wexford, A.D. 1798*.
of these seminal histories and drew on them to supplement their own accounts. In *History of the Irish Rebellion of 1798: A Personal Narrative and Sequel* (1828-32), Irish Catholic journalist and former United Irishman Charles Hamilton Teeling, portrayed 1798 as a national struggle against British tyranny, at a time when Catholic emancipation and reform were being realised. R.R. Madden’s seven-volume history of the United Irishmen, published from 1842 to 1846, fixed ‘the men of ’98 in the mould of heroic nationalism, nineteenth-century style.’ Father Patrick Kavanagh’s *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798* (1870) presented a clerically-approved history that held up as heroes the rebel Catholic priests and downplayed the role of republican secret societies in what was an overt attack against Fenianism. Alternatively, Unionist Alexander Donovan assumed a satirical position in his 1893 futuristic pamphlet, *The Irish Rebellion of 1898*, which anticipated a civil war in post-Home Rule Ireland and invoked bitter memories of the massacres of Wexford during 1798. The memory of rebellion was thus manipulated to suit a variety of religious and political positions. These works have also proved crucial in the proliferation and resilience of a mythologised Ireland in which the Catholic is pitted against the Protestant; the Gaelic against the Anglo-Irish; the tyrant against the slave.

The aim of this work is to address the inaccuracies and suppositions that have engulfed some of the chief actors of ’98 as a result of such problematic historiography. In a climate of national turbulence and sectarian antagonisms, the Irish rebels of 1798 have been painted with broad brushstrokes; their forms both general and indiscriminate. For

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Musgrave, the rebels were drawn from the ‘popish multitude.’\textsuperscript{14} The ‘mass of the Roman catholics in Dublin,’ Musgrave lamented, ‘harboured the most sanguinary designs against their protestant fellow-subjects, whom they meant ultimately to have extirpated.’\textsuperscript{15} Teeling, however, would later predict that these were the men ‘whose virtues will live when the names of their oppressors shall be forgotten.’\textsuperscript{16} Neither of these opposing historical renderings of the key players of 1798 are sensitive to the particularities of Ireland and the Irish at the turn of the century. Yet, for each side of the partisan divide, these Irish archetypes—the Popish insurgent and the heroic nationalist—have come to represent the many. In looking more closely at the lives of some of the chief actors of 1798, however, these images do not necessarily hold true. Protestant farmer and United Irishman ‘General’ Joseph Holt, for instance, was not admitted amongst the pantheon of Irish heroes despite his revolutionary exploits, having been overshadowed by figures like Catholic rebel Michael Dwyer. Additionally, neither individual entirely fits the mould of the recalcitrant rebel if judging them on their lives in exile.

Ill-balanced accounts and problematic binaries have thus taken their toll on historical renderings of eighteenth-century Ireland and the Irish. What has resulted is a widely held but false belief that Ireland’s history is easily explained if one only looks to the temperament of its people. ‘We are a savage, immoral, ill-mannered race...I well know such are the sentiments,’ wrote one pamphleteer of English antipathy towards the people of Ireland.\textsuperscript{17} On 23 January 1799, the Prime Minister of the day, William Pitt, confirmed this antagonism in the House of Commons: ‘Ireland is subject to great and deplorable evils which have a deep root, for they lie...in the present character, manners and habits of the

\textsuperscript{14} Musgrave, \textit{Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland}, 197.
\textsuperscript{15} Musgrave, \textit{Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland}, 196.
\textsuperscript{16} Teeling, \textit{History of the Irish Rebellion of 1798}, 1.
inhabitants – in their want of intelligence, or in other words their ignorance.’ Rebellion has thus become the Irish leitmotiv. And herein lies the historical problem: particularities have been overlooked in favour of a grand narrative built upon Irish oppositionism. It is this narrative that has pursued the Irish so persistently in their diaspora. The problem becomes particularly apparent when considering the transportation of some 400 Irish political prisoners to the fledgling colony of New South Wales in the aftermath of Ireland’s eighteenth-century unrest. Here, a reputation for subversion shaped their lives in crucial ways. Yet what remains obscured are the nuances of the colonial situation; most notably, the way in which New South Wales offered a diversity of experience for the Irish state prisoners who, for the most part, fashioned for themselves an existence contrary to the prevailing image that branded them as seditious. The portrayal of these Irish transportees in such a light held particular resonance for a variety of agendas in New South Wales, just as it had done in Ireland. Colonial vitriol towards these individuals allowed for the extension of deeply entrenched prejudices to the fledgling colony, while their status as diehard rebels suited a nationalist historiography of the Irish as opponents of British tyranny. And despite some of the more sensitive approaches to these individuals by the likes of Patrick O’Farrell and Anne-Maree Whitaker, this image of the Irish rebel has eclipsed all other historiographical interpretations.

The discussion of these Irish political transportees falls into three parts: Chapter One addresses the inaccuracies of this stereotype within its Irish context and presents ‘General’ Joseph Holt as a key participant who challenges this Irish rebel archetype; Chapter Two discusses its transfer to the colonial setting where the disjunction between myth and reality becomes all the more apparent; and Chapter Three highlights the impact

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these Irish transportees had and the contributions they made to their home in exile. Overall it will be argued that the Irish political prisoners brought far more than grievance and sedition, and that New South Wales was not simply a new location upon which centuries-old animosities were continued. These transportees not only fell short of their revolutionary reputations, but were to become integral to the development of New South Wales from penal settlement to prospering colony despite their historiographical portrayals.

The details of the 1798 rebellion and eighteenth-century Ireland have been extensively studied. So too the history of early colonial New South Wales has been examined by numerous historians. Yet neither historiography fully takes accounts of both the Irish and Australian dimensions of the lives of these transported political prisoners. The existing historiography is therefore hugely problematic and incomplete. And as it pertains to Irish-Australia, much of this historiography is dated. Moreover, as with all histories, 1798 Ireland cannot remain a static chronicle immune to revision, or at least augmentation. The story of Irish prisoners in New South Wales would also benefit from full reference to 1798 Ireland and the way in which this plays into nationalist Australian and Irish historiography. What is necessary is the illumination of individuals whose stories have been at best sidelined, at worst silenced, by intractable assumptions and sectarian animosities that have influenced the historiography. Undoubtedly, the tradition of casting the Irish in this light is deeply historically rooted. It is therefore necessary to examine the circumstances that produced it.

As a small island north-west of continental Europe, Ireland has a long history of contact—through trade, migration and invasion—with England. Twelfth-century colonisation by English and Scottish settlers ensured a continuation of a mutual (though often problematic) interaction. This influx, as it continued during the sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries would prove decisive, as would the development of sectarian antagonisms as the so-called Protestant Ascendancy became the Irish elite. Some native Irish, chiefly Catholics, clashed with the settlers, although their position was weakened by the introduction of the Penal Laws, barring them from land ownership and positions of influence. Added to this were economic and political grievances which fuelled numerous attempts for redress through constitutional and violent means. Ireland during the 1790s, a separate yet dependent kingdom, would again see the eruption of discontent.

Ireland’s 1798 rebellion thus resulted from problems long-festering and others newly emerging. Some were locally specific and distinctly agrarian; others derived from events unfolding abroad. Grievances about rents and tithes became blurred with more familiar political and sectarian animosities. Added to this mix was a distinctly European dimension. Far from a single convulsion that shook the European consciousness, France’s revolution was less a script than an inspiration as the masses digested a set of abstract principles embodied by France’s later institutionalised tripartite motto: Liberté, égalité, fraternité. Events in France seemed to speak to a series of wider truths about the transience of tyranny. The French Revolution also demonstrated that Catholics were capable of choosing liberty over absolutism, which helped break Ireland’s denominational stalemate. And while the Irish did not necessarily identify with the aims of Robespierre and Saint-Just, they saw in them allies against their English oppressors. Here the war between Britain and revolutionary France becomes an important, if often underestimated factor. Locked in a colossal struggle for dominance from 1793 until the Treaty of Amiens in 1802, and then again until 1815, the two powers invested unprecedented human and material resources in an effort to secure total victory. 19 This had a string of implications

for the Irish. An unwillingness to enlist Irish Catholics quickly gave way to pragmatism as Britain’s wartime demands increased.\textsuperscript{20} Offering various concessions to ensure Irish Catholic loyalty and recruiting as many as one in five Irish males between 1793 and 1815, the British government turned to its local volcano for relief at the risk of aiding its militarisation and politicisation.\textsuperscript{21} Just as important in fuelling the mounting crisis was the enormous financial burden of the contest. This had several political consequences: ‘by 1799 the war was consuming some 78 percent of Irish government expenditure,’ and Dublin Castle was on the verge of bankruptcy as it ushered in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{22} For the poor, this translated to further economic hardship. Increased taxation and wartime inflation helped to cultivate ground already ripe with mass disaffection; something Irish subversives could not fail to miss.

The spectre of a coalition between domestic radicals and revolutionary France loomed large for British authorities. The newly formed Society of United Irishmen—a largely middle-class body headed mainly by Protestant professionals in pursuit of constitutional change—had already been tapping into popular disaffection and causing concern for authorities. From the outset their agenda of parliamentary reform was viewed by Dublin Castle, the seat of British rule, with scepticism. For the government, their intentions appeared solely geared towards the establishment of an Irish republic. In outlawing the society in 1794, Dublin Castle facilitated the radicalisation of the United Irishmen as it was transformed into a clandestine, oath-bound body with links to revolutionary France. The society thus became what it had always been suspected to be.

\textsuperscript{20} The Catholic Irish, indeed all Irish citizens, had previously been barred from serving in the army. From the Seven Years War (1756-63), however, Irish Catholics were recruited for service overseas. The use of Irish Catholics in British forces presented obvious difficulties, especially on mainland Britain. Sending Irish Catholics abroad presented fewer problems. According to Harman Murtagh, ‘On the British side...sixteen of the forty-four battalions serving in America in 1776 originated in Ireland which continued to provide recruits, mainly Catholics, throughout the war.’ Harman Murtagh, “Irish Soldiers Abroad, 1600-1800,” in Bartlett and Jeffery eds., \textit{A Military History of Ireland}, 307.

\textsuperscript{21} Bartlett, “Defence, Counter-Insurgency and Rebellion,” 247.

\textsuperscript{22} Bartlett, “Defence, Counter-Insurgency and Rebellion,” 247.
This fifth columnist threat worried British Under-Secretary Edward Cooke who used the
danger to advocate a union between Great Britain and Ireland. Adamant that ‘a connexion
with France has been lately renewed upon new principles’ and convinced ‘that the French
will never cease to intrigue in this kingdom,’ Cooke hoped to consolidate the territory and
resources of the British Empire to counter the combined threat. While the efficacy of
Cooke’s proposal is arguable, his fears were by no means unfounded. A French invasion
of Ireland appeared imminent. Contact between Irish subversives and French spies had
been confirmed as early as 1794 with the Jackson affair and by 1796 Theobald Wolfe
Tone was in Paris to secure an undertaking from the revolutionary government for a
French invasion of Ireland. For various reasons, however, Dublin Castle exhibited
unwarranted complacency when it came to potential foreign invaders. Instead its concern
focused chiefly on the threat of an internal eruption of violence from a disgruntled and
volatile native population. This preoccupation with domestic insurrection was challenged
in December 1796 with the attempted landing of a French invasion fleet at Bantry Bay and
again in August 1798 as a thousand or so French soldiers landed at Killala in County
Mayo. While French attempts made little difference to the final outcome of Ireland’s
1790s unrest, they exposed the ineptitude of Ireland’s army command, provided Irish
subversives with rich stores of propaganda, and fed clamorous calls for ‘counter-terror’
from enraged loyalists.

When the rebellion did erupt in May 1798 it was initially confined to the counties
surrounding Dublin, and quickly became one of the bloodiest and most destructive

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23 Edward Cooke and Josiah Tucker, Arguments for and against an Union between Great Britain and
Ireland, Considered: to which is prefixed, a Proposal on the Same Subject by Josiah Tucker, D.D., Dean of
Gloucester (London: Reprinted for John Stockdale, 1798), 11,
http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/17348202.html.
24 The Jackson affair of 1794 involved the surfacing of information regarding treasonable contact between
Irish clergyman and French emissary, Reverend William Jackson, and members of the Society of United
174-88.
confrontations in Ireland’s history. The main action took place in Leinster, a province in the east of Ireland, particularly in Wexford; Mayo, in the western province of Connaught; and in eastern Ulster. The evening of 24 May 1798 marked the first signs of active unrest. Rebel forces launched attacks in Kildare with initial success but were forced to retreat after incurring heavy losses. During the following week government forces had secured Kildare and prevented rebel activity from reaching Dublin. This did not, however, mark the end of the disturbance. Wexford became the site of significant rebel action as they clashed with troops and matched them with almost equal vigour.26 Elsewhere, however, the rebellion had failed to materialise in any significant fashion; taking on instead the form of minor skirmishes to a limited effect.27 By September Crown forces had definitively gained the upper hand; the rising was largely over. Disturbances did continue in the years after 1798 as pockets of resistance, notably headed by ‘Wicklow chief’ Michael Dwyer, held out in the hope of a renewed attempt at insurrection. The central struggle had been a short but bloody civil war in which as many as 30,000 had died. Its legacy proved to be even more extensive.

During the conflict, open warfare and brutal repression were complemented by unsettling displays of religious ferocity and senseless massacre. Both sides evoked the pain of past atrocities to justify newly committed ones. Yet it is hardly surprising that the rebellion was not a United Irish success. Having faced harassment from government forces since the time of its formation, the society was in complete disarray by 1798. A string of early arrests of its leaders left the United Irishmen directionless.28 As local leaders—including Joseph Holt—assumed command, the rebellion also became localised.


And while the insurgents conducted several successful campaigns, their efforts were hampered by a distinct lack of coordination and military discipline, a failure on the part of their French allies to intervene in any purposeful manner, and a clear failure to check sectarian antagonisms that transformed the rebellion into almost as much of a religious war as a revolutionary one. As the rising petered out in some places and was savagely repressed in others, Ireland was left with damaged relations and revived fears about the shape of Ireland’s future. The crisis seemed also to justify the passing of the legislative union, and left authorities with the very pressing problem of what to do with the Irish subversives involved in the rebellion.

Thus from its beginning, the 1790s proved to be a particularly turbulent decade in Irish history. It witnessed a concerted attack against the Protestant Ascendancy, the growing politicisation of the peasantry, foreign invasion, and of course, rebellion. As a result, the period has seen the production of a series of potent Irish archetypes strengthened by the jarring tradition of bitter sectarianism. Unsurprisingly, these stereotypes clung to those implicated in the unrest of 1798. Those state prisoners sentenced to transportation by courts martial for their involvement in the rebellion were confronted with preconceived notions of Irishness and often, hearty contempt upon their arrival in Botany Bay. Fortunate enough to escape execution through a combination of luck and leniency on the part of Lord Lieutenant Cornwallis, these political transportees quickly became pariahs of the New South Wales colony. Suspected of hatching plots and characterised as perfidious, the Irish were goaded into conformity that only served to heighten allegations that they tended to band together. And it was this that undoubtedly fuelled such virulent anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment in the colonial setting. Here, most significantly, is where the conflation of identities—Irish, Catholic, nationalist,

29 On the failures of the 1798 Rebellion, see for example Jackson, Ireland 1798–1998, 18-22.
renegade—became both potent and convenient for the fledgling colony. There is, however, something peculiarly simplistic about the assumption that all Irish convicts, particularly political transportees, were at best recalcitrant and at worst openly antagonistic towards the colonial authority they met with upon Australian soil. This was a transported prejudice that proved politically useful in the penal colony. It was also one that continued to flourish in Australia and abroad long after transportation had petered out. Indeed, the third governor of New South Wales, Philip Gidley King, confirmed the assumption that the Irish opposed authority in a letter to the Duke of Portland in 1801: ‘I am well aware...that this colony was formed for the reception of such characters...[yet] what may not be expected if their numbers are allowed to increase...as to encourage them in making these attacks.’

Yet to lump together a diverse group of individuals who identified themselves as Irish, as well as those who may not have made such an identification, creates an assumption based not on fact but political convenience for authorities intent on removing seditious elements from their midst, as well as for Irish compatriots who saw in the rebels reverence for their homeland and opposition to British authority. The colonial setting was instead host to a diversity of experience not solely predicated upon national, religious or political affiliation. Despite this, British officials and colonial governors, and some Irish nationalists themselves, clung to the stereotype of the rebellious Irish. And although separated by some twelve thousand miles, New South Wales must be viewed as more than simply a microcosm of the conflicts in Ireland and with Britain; as just the well-versed tale of political confrontation performed on a new stage. The chapters that follow will demonstrate this, and show that the closer the mythology surrounding the early nineteenth-century Irish political prisoners in Australia is examined, the less it seems to hold true. Their activities were often crucial for the

development of the colony as the majority forged for themselves an existence that diverged considerably from official and public expectations.
THE MAKING OF IRISH EXILES

IRELAND’S 1798 REBELLION

The events of 1798 are often viewed anachronistically. Through the lens of Ireland’s twentieth-century civil war and the more recent ‘Troubles’, 1798 becomes by default Catholic and nationalist.¹ Yet events on the ground were far more complex. Loyal Catholics certainly existed. An address to the Lord Lieutenant in May 1798 was signed by 2,000 of them which explicitly declared their allegiance. These Irish Catholics ‘[felt], in common with the rest of His Majesty’s subjects, the danger to which both are exposed from an implacable and enterprising enemy, menacing invasions from abroad, and from the machinations of evil and disaffected men conspiring treason.’² Just as the existence of a large number of loyal Catholics in 1798 complicates a neat narrative of religious division that weaves its way through Irish history, it is necessary to consider the fluidity of experience and adaptability of identity for the Irish people.³ This chapter’s starting point is the argument that Ireland’s history of 1798 has not been written in a sensitive way. A

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¹ ‘The most usual ideological abuse of history is based on anachronism rather than lies,’ wrote Eric Hobsbawm in On History (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 7. Perhaps the most telling example of this historical distortion in relation to 1790s Ireland is the way in which eighteenth-century United Irishman Theobald Wolfe Tone, of a Church of Ireland background, became a hero for Catholic nationalists of many later periods. Tone, himself, ‘disliked Catholic (especially Irish Catholic) priests, considered the Catholic Church to be an enslaving institution hostile to liberty, and was profoundly anti-papal in outlook.’ Richard English, Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland (London: Pan Books, 2006), 109.
² ‘The Address of the Roman Catholics of Ireland, Presented to His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant, on Wednesday May 30 1798’, Stewart Papers, PRONI D/3167/2/143, quoted in English, Irish Freedom, 92-3.
³ The history of Ireland is too easily portrayed by some nationalists as the narrative of an oppressed people attempting to throw off the shackles of foreign oppression. Kavanagh’s A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798 (1870) is one such example of this tendency with its portrayal of the rebellion as a fight for ‘faith and fatherland.’ This is equally as damaging as the alternative: Irish history as a string of insults perpetrated by Irish Roman Catholics against the Protestants population. On this point, see Ian McBride, “Memory and National Identity in Modern Ireland,” in McBride, History and Memory in Modern Ireland, 1-42.
series of unbalanced yet influential contemporary accounts—perhaps most notably Musgrave’s *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland*—have worked to fashion an image of the rebellion that is emblematic of a more generalised sectarian dimension of its related historiography. The following chapter provides an alternative to this reading. Instead, it explores the nuances of Ireland’s history at the turn of the century with the presentation of significant actors—principally Protestant United Irishman Joseph Holt—who do not fit easily into archetypal ‘Irish’ positions.

In much the same way as the existence of loyal Catholics defies easy reduction, the history of the United Irishmen is likewise a reminder of the dangers of oversimplification. Initially concerned with constitutional change, the United Irishmen pursued as one of their objectives civil rights for Catholics, still disenfranchised and denied the right to be elected to the House of Commons. The society was not, however, a Catholic body. Certainly for Belfast Presbyterian radical Dr William Drennan, acknowledgement of the common cause between Presbyterians and Catholics was partial and reluctant at best. He came to be convinced by the failure of earlier agitation, however, that reform was unlikely without some sort of alliance with Irish Catholics. In a pamphlet that was to provide a general framework for the society, Drennan concluded that ‘parliamentary reform in Ireland would always prove elusive until Irish Catholics were brought to lend their weight and numbers to the campaign.’4 As Drennan was contemplating a reform body with an ecumenical dimension, the Dublin barrister and Protestant—and later, Irish revolutionary—Theobald Wolfe Tone was also considering the role Irish Catholics were to play in a campaign for parliamentary reform. Tone’s 1791 pamphlet, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* advocated Irish Catholic involvement in Ireland’s quest for liberation. If liberty is ‘a disease for which we are to be prepared as for inoculation...and if fasting and

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abstinence, and long suffering, be preparation,’ observed Tone, ‘there are no men under Heaven better prepared than the Catholics of Ireland.’ These ideas of Drennan and Tone formed the basis of the new society. Three resolutions were passed on 14 October 1791 at its first general meeting in Belfast, acknowledging the need for ‘a complete and radical reform of the representation of the people in Parliament’ which was to ‘include Irishmen of every religious persuasion.’

The United Irish Dublin branch, founded one month later, consisted of 50 or so consistently active members who were Catholics and Protestants in almost equal numbers. Despite this, the denominational alliance remained to some a union of nothing more than necessity. Largely middle-class in composition and encompassing mainly Protestant professional groups, the Dublin society had a surprisingly bourgeois leadership and ‘came under the control of an unofficial “interior circle”, composed almost exclusively of aspiring protestant professionals and the high-born.’ And as Dublin Castle had always feared, the political agenda of the Society of United Irishmen seemed to extend further than parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation, to republicanism and eventual independence for the Irish nation. Indeed, Drennan described a clandestine inner circle from which Catholics were consciously excluded. ‘Tell Sam [McTier] not to tell anyone, even his interior,’ wrote Drennan to his sister, ‘that we are to form one of our own, Protestant but National. The Catholic cause is selfish, compared to ours, and they will make use of every means for success.’ And so ensued an unusual situation in which

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the upper echelons of Protestant professionals and elites envisioned a far more radical solution to the problems facing Ireland than the rank and file—chiefly the Catholics—who were more responsive to British cajoleries. This fact is one largely ignored by much of the contemporary historiography concerning the United Irishmen. On this point, Musgrave provided an interesting, if partisan, alternative. ‘Many of the Catholic committee,’ wrote Musgrave, were United Irishmen, ‘though they artfully concealed themselves...having left the obnoxious and dangerous part to the protestants, who...served as scape-goats to draw on them the vengeance of the law and the detestation of...loyal subjects.’

This gave, as Musgrave saw it, ‘a colour to the Romanists to say, that the plot was originally framed by protestants.’ Ironically, this association of the United Irishmen with Catholicism was reproduced by many Catholic nationalists during centenary celebrations of 1798. Commemorations took on a distinctly Catholic character as 1898 became a ‘year-long indulgence in patriotism and anglophobia.’

So religious outlook, despite polemical reportage, did not necessarily determine the battle lines of 1798. Yet while it would be difficult to read subsequent events as purely sectarian, episodes during the rebellion did take on a decidedly sectarian nature. When considering the poor execution and patchy nature of the rebellion itself, it is not surprising that local grievances shaped events on the ground. It is even clearer that the United Irishmen and their rhetoric could not entirely overcome denominational divisions. This is best demonstrated through their wider alliance with the militant Defenders. As a Catholic counterpart to the Protestant Peep O’ Day Boys, the anti-Protestant, anti-English, anti-

10 For a comprehensive discussion of the generally more radical aims of the United Irish Protestant elites and reasons for Catholic moderation when it came to the society’s aims, see Durey, “The Dublin Society of United Irishmen,” 96-97.
12 Musgrave, Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland, 112.
settler secret society embodied one side of the religious schism that plagued eighteenth-century Ireland. As the lines between these two movements became increasingly and uncomfortably blurred, the pluralistic rhetoric of the United Irishmen was offset by the professedly sectarian doctrine of Defenderism, the logic of which had not been relinquished despite United Irish calls for the union of Ireland’s various factions. This tension between rhetoric and reality is hardly astounding given the acuteness of existing hostilities that festered in 1790s Wicklow and Wexford, for example. The notorious massacres at Wexford Bridge and Scullabogue—where around seventy Protestant prisoners were piked to death by rebel forces, and another hundred burned in a barn, respectively—were amongst the most brutal outrages of the conflict. These instances spoke to the wider sectarian profile that often subsumed the supposedly interdenominational cooperation embodied by the aspirations of the United Irishmen. They also stand as important reminders that 1798 was not solely a rebellion of United Irishmen. That being said, it remains an essential fact that the rebellion was not a religious war as such. It only came to assume some of the traits of one as ‘the United Irishmen overestimated their ability to transcend the inherent politics of religion in Ireland.’

Individual murders, mass killings and forced conversions there certainly were. But crucially, Protestant Irish also peopled the rebel rank and file.

Many of these Irish Protestant insurgents have not fared well in popular reimaginings of 1798. The attempt on both sides to characterise the rebellion as a Catholic effort to throw off the yoke of British oppression has left little room for Protestant involvement in the historical record. Kavanagh’s history is an example of this silencing. Its focus on the heroism of the Catholic priests during 1798 came at the expense of other key actors. Rather than discussing the involvement of secret societies like the United

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Irishmen, Kavanagh praised priests like Father John Murphy, who was ‘fearless enough, in the midst of an oppressed and dismayed people, to raise the standard of revolt, and bid a brave defiance to the tyrants of his country.’ As a result, the historiography of 1798 has not served rebels like Joseph Holt particularly well. A disparity exists between Holt as historical figure and historical persona; one that he himself, as well as later observers, fashioned for the Protestant-farmer-turned-United Irishman in the years that followed the unrest. And because of this, his case may be in need of an advocate. Ruán O’Donnell seems most entitled to assume this role, given his detailed analysis of Holt’s role in Wicklow during the rebellion. As a result of O’Donnell’s research it is now clear that Holt led a far more formidable operation from the mountains than has previously been acknowledged. Yet given the concerted effort of all parties involved to conflate the rebellion with a professedly Catholic cause, Holt has since been overlooked by numerous scholars and eclipsed by fellow insurgents like the Catholic Michael Dwyer. Certainly, of all the principal United Irishmen involved at ground level, Holt’s revolutionary career is perhaps the most difficult to assign an appropriate position in the historical record. This is at least in part due to his religious affiliation which, in the wake of a general attempt to catholicise the rebellion, appears an anomaly easier to overlook. Mired by accusations of informing on his associates following his surrender in late 1798 and in light of his Protestantism, Holt thus appears an unlikely candidate for memorialisation as something of an Irish hero. As O’Donnell concedes, plans to honour Holt on the site of his Roundwood farm for the 140th anniversary of the Rebellion in 1938 came to a halt after the laying of the foundation stone, while Cork historian Sean Ó Coindelbháin suggested a

few years later ‘that the Wicklowman’s name be erased from that city’s 1798 memorial in view of his alleged treachery.’\footnote{Ruán O’Donnell, ““Keeping Up the Flame”: General Joseph Holt,” *History Ireland* 6, no. 2 (1998): 39.} Just as the Irish rebel was exiled to the colonial periphery in the aftermath of 1798, so too his memory has been marginalised by post-rebellion literature. Thomas Pakenham’s *A Year of Liberty* makes reference to him once, and only as ‘the Wicklow partisan,’ while Richard English’s more recent and acclaimed work on the history of Irish nationalism makes no note of Holt in his discussion of the United Irishmen or 1798.\footnote{Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty: The story of the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969), 350; English, *Irish Freedom.*} Yet it is precisely the apparent adaptability of his character and flexibility of his allegiance that makes Joseph Holt worthy of study. While O’Donnell has advocated the importance of Holt’s position for Ireland’s eighteenth-century history, the transnational significance of his thirteen years in colonial New South Wales has been largely ignored. His experience as a man of ’98, however, provides a window into two very different socio-political milieus: the first characterised by divisive social, economic and political issues; the second afflicted by newly emerging ones. The passage of Joseph Holt between these two worlds and his conduct in each therefore does much to debunk the mythology that envelops the Irish state prisoners transported to the infant colony following Ireland’s turn-of-the-century unrest. Additionally, Holt’s notable absence from much of the historiography of early colonial New South Wales reveals the ‘heroes and villains’ mentality of many contemporaries and subsequent historians, as well as the way that temporary migrants have been overshadowed by permanent settlers. The former—figures like Holt who made his way back to Ireland having served his sentence—do not fit neatly into the Australian nation building project and therefore fall out of the historiography.
Holt’s own ‘history’ takes the form of an autobiographical manuscript. As the chief source of information detailing his exploits during 1798 and as an exile in colonial New South Wales, ‘The Life and Adventures of Joseph Holt, Known by the Title of General Holt in the Irish Rebellion of 98’ assumes an interesting position somewhere between fact and fancy. This manuscript was edited by folklorist Thomas Crofton Croker and published posthumously in 1838 as Memoirs of Joseph Holt, General of the Irish Rebels, in 1798. Both sources, however, paint an incomplete picture of the rebel leader. Croker, in his preface to the memoirs, acknowledged Holt’s somewhat elastic approach to precise reportage:

Estimating him by his own statements, [he] was an exceedingly vain man, and the consequence is, that he often inflates facts into nearly that extreme state of expansion, that the slightest attack from the lance of an assailant is formidable as to the buoyancy of Holt’s veracity.

Yet Croker himself was guilty of such extensive embellishments that his 1838 publication diverged considerably from Holt’s original manuscript. This transformation has had ‘serious consequences for Holt’s historical reputation.’ Certainly, Croker’s edited version neither captures the image of the prominent revolutionary as he existed in 1798 and beyond, nor as he intended to be seen following the publication of his memoirs. And because of this it is first necessary to make a note of the circumstances that led Croker to in some places censor, and in others to ornament what had been recorded by the rebel.

23 Discrepancies between Holt’s original manuscript and Croker’s edited version were noted by the Mitchell Library in 1938 and again in 1971 in Patrick O’Farrell’s introduction to Memoirs of Joseph Holt by Irish Universities Press. See also, Holt, A Rum Story, ed. O’Shaughnessy, for a transcription of the section of Holt’s manuscript detailing his time in Australia, as well as Ruán O’Donnell and Bob Reece, “‘A Clean Beast’: Crofton Croker’s Fairy Tale of General Holt,” Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr ? (1992): 7-42, for an examination of the Irish section of Holt’s manuscript.
24 O’Donnell and Reece, “‘A Clean Beast,’” 8.
Son of a British army officer and a descendant of English settlers who had arrived in Cork during Queen Elizabeth’s reign, Croker was born in the same year of many of Holt’s revolutionary exploits and displayed an interest in the events of 1798. Indeed, his successful work, *Researches in the South of Ireland* (1824) contained an appendix entitled ‘A Private Narrative of the Rebellion of 1798.’ Sir William Betham, a friend and colleague of Croker’s at the Admiralty of London, facilitated this new enterprise. Betham had been Holt’s neighbour upon Holt’s return to Ireland following his exile in New South Wales, and came into the possession of his manuscript following Holt’s death in 1826. Betham charged Croker with the task of editing Holt’s manuscript, sending him ‘the original M.S. from which you can take what you think ought to be inserted and use your own discretion thereon.’ Perhaps taking this invitation too liberally, Croker proceeded to manufacture a history for Holt that diverged from the original spirit of the revolutionary’s account. It would be difficult to imagine that Croker was not influenced by contemporary concerns. The anti-tithe campaigns contributed greatly to the resurgence of unrest during the 1830s and the revival of local secret societies was redolent of the agrarian turmoil of the late eighteenth century. It is little wonder then that Croker and his contemporaries found the revived movement for Catholic emancipation and alacritous calls for a repeal of the Union somewhat alarming. Even less so that in this political climate Croker felt the need to commandeer Holt’s manuscript to reduce the impact of its potentially inflammatory content. Ruán O’Donnell and Bob Reece acknowledge this in their reappraisal of Holt’s manuscript, arguing that in ‘editing the memoirs of a prominent 1798 revolutionary, Croker knew that he was addressing a sensitive issue within living memory, and at a time when the loyalist Ascendancy again perceived themselves to be under


threat." Croker therefore had to mediate Holt’s narrative to an audience unlikely to be receptive to a figure perceived to be fighting for a Catholic nationalist cause. This need to rehabilitate Holt’s account for a loyalist palate explains Croker’s efforts to depoliticise Holt’s involvement in the insurrection. In addition to this, Croker developed a narrative voice not entirely compatible with what may be expected of a man of farming origins. The more refined narrative voice is unusual if one considers that the original manuscript was the result of the work of Holt and his secretaries, who were, as Croker himself conceded, ‘quite as illiterate, if not more illiterate than [Holt].’ And while Croker claimed to have refrained from ‘any attempt to refine Holt’s expressions, or embellish his style,’ he was perhaps more influenced by his own literary background and milieu than by any need to present an authentic historical work. Such modifications are suggestive of Croker’s intention of restoring the ‘General’ by distancing him from the politics of the rebellion and elevating him from the position of a Wicklow farmer to a misrepresented and misled member of the lesser gentry. In short, to reassign this Protestant rebel a politically acceptable historical persona.

In light of Croker’s efforts to relate the life of a revolutionary not concerned with the political aspects of the rebellion, Holt’s views on the events of 1798 fell into line for the editor’s convenience. Holt therefore presented an opinion remarkably conservative for a rebel and United Irishman. Croker’s edition had Holt claim: ‘self preservation was the motive which drove me into rebellion...but as to effecting change in the government, it gave me little trouble or thought.’ Holt’s assessment of the rebellion, as Croker presented it, also appears irreconcilable with the chief aspirations of the United Irishmen:

Reform was much more necessary among the people of all ranks than the government...It was private wrongs and individual oppression, quite unconnected with the government, which gave the bloody and inveterate character to the rebellion...The poor people...had very little idea of political government...most, were compelled to join in the rebellion on pain of death.\(^{31}\)

Certainly, the United Irish movement sought to harness existing local grievance in its pursuit of a repeal of the penal laws and general reform. Delivering a statement to the Irish Government on 4 August 1798, United Irishmen Thomas Addis Emmet, Arthur O’Connor and William James MacNeven highlighted, however, a broader political awareness on the part of the lower orders:

The discussion, however, of political questions, both foreign and domestic, and the enacting of several unpopular laws, had advanced the minds of many people, even before they were aware of it, towards republicanism and revolution; they began to reason on the subject, and to think a republican form of government was preferable to our own...the friends of liberty were gradually, but with a timid step, advancing towards republicanism, they began to be convinced that it would be as easy to obtain a revolution as a reform, so obstinately was the latter resisted, and as the conviction impressed itself on their minds, they were inclined not to give up the struggle, but to extend their views.\(^{32}\)

Holt appeared to be of a similar opinion, when judging him by his original manuscript.

‘That there was a conspiracy to overthrow the constitution I believe cannot be denied,’ he observed, ‘and that its origin was amongst the lower order of people.’\(^{33}\) This is a significant deviation of Croker’s 1838 edition which portrayed Holt as an apolitical actor drawn involuntarily into the rebellion. Croker’s efforts thus had an important role in presenting 1798 as a rebellion lacking in ideological orientation. And it was this that worked to absolve British administrators of accusations of mismanagement of the issues that plagued the Irish nation. Thus in titling himself an ‘impartial editor,’ Croker quite


\(^{33}\) Holt, “Life and Adventures of Joseph Holt” MS, 125
effectively concealed his role in the ‘over-colouring’ of Holt’s memoirs. Yet despite his efforts it does not appear as though Croker was able to endear the figure to a loyalist audience, given that no later editions were published. Holt therefore remained largely ignored in the historical record and certainly misunderstood. Indeed, in a review of the book for *Dublin University Magazine* in 1838, arch-conservative Isaac Butt demonstrated his contempt for Holt. He deemed the memoirs ‘a disgusting farrago of blood-boultered egotism, the irreligious pulings of affected religion, and the conscientious sensibilities of a wholesale murderer.’

Holt himself did not set out to write a history of the events of 1798. He was concerned with narrating the rebellion in relation to his personal experience. Undergoing its final revision in 1819 after his return to Ireland, his memoirs appeared to be motivated more by a wish for social acceptance than a desire to present an infallible record of 1798. He was confident that his memoirs would be widely read in Ireland and New South Wales: ‘I am sure there is no part of the world that my name and character has reached but will buy my history—as I can find proof for what I write,’ he asserted in his memoirs. In spite of this, omissions are apparent. Holt for instance, concealed his role in the notorious Wexford campaign, which involved some of the leading atrocities of the conflict. Nor was reference made to Catholic insurgent Michael Dwyer who on occasion worked in concert with Holt and, in a remarkable feat, remained at large in Wicklow until December 1803. Similarly, Holt obscured the reasons for his initiation into the United Irish movement which he maintained took place in May 1798, but which probably occurred earlier. He recorded in his manuscript that he had fallen prey to ‘diabolical influence,’ most likely to

34 Croker, preface to *Memoirs of Joseph Holt*, vol. 1, xix.
disguise any involvement in the earlier stages of the rebellion. He was—as he claimed and Croker reinforced—the victim of circumstance; goaded into rebellion as a result of a personal dispute with local landlord Thomas Hugo. Yet this private grievance does not provide a satisfactory explanation for Holt’s staunch commitment to the Irish cause during this period of unrest. In maintaining the argument that he was thrust into rebellion, Holt mirrored his rebel counterparts in their tendency to ‘suppress or misrepresent their subversive pasts’ for fear of retribution, or in anticipation of clemency. Such oversights are to be expected of any piece of autobiographical writing, especially when considering the strength of partisanship that enveloped Ireland prior to and beyond the late eighteenth century. It must therefore be recognised that Holt’s manuscript is by no means a complete and scholarly history of the rebellion or even of his own life, and must be approached as cautiously as Croker’s adaptation.

Yet Holt’s account is still useful and important. Other evidence confirms his significance as a rebel leader. Discussions of Holt by historians Thomas Bartlett and Ruán O’Donnell, for example, make clear that he was an effective strategist in the field as a rebel commander. At Whelp Rock and Seven Churches he demonstrated his skill by rallying a disheartened force, and he recorded his efforts to organise and discipline ‘a great number of poor creatures’ by forming them into companies and ‘exercising them in the use of the pike.’ What can also be gleaned from the memoirs, however, is that Holt was active throughout the rebellion as a leader of a ‘band of ruffians’ for which he had no small amount of disdain. Holt’s memoirs are punctuated by harangues that expose his feelings of contempt towards the men supposedly fighting for a common cause under his

39 O'Donnell and Reece, “‘A Clean Beast,’” 36.
40 See Bartlett, “‘Masters of the Mountains,’” 379-83; O'Donnell, “‘Keeping Up the Flame,’” 39-43.
leadership: ‘not a fourth of those with us were obedient to orders when fighting was necessary, but slunk off like dastardly cowards, as they were, if they had an opportunity, and if not, they were sure to create a panic by running before the enemy.’

The former constable and bounty hunter was perhaps all too aware that his own force had been largely reduced to a set of criminally inclined desperados. The crucial point here is that as the rebellion progressed and the ideals for which the United Irishmen espoused were obscured by pre-existing sectarian animosities and generalised violence, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the rebel and the common criminal. This confusion was inevitably transported to Botany Bay along with Ireland’s state prisoners, becoming a major source of justification for negative opinions of the Irish community.

Holt’s military prowess, coupled with accounts of his willingness to exercise compassion and moderation did not prevent detractors. Musgrave was less than complimentary in his assessment of Holt and his conduct during the rebellion:

I did not hear of a single instance of disaffection among the protestant yeomen in the county of Wicklow,* or that a person of that persuasion was concerned in the conspiracy or rebellion.

* Except Holt, a low fellow, without any kind of principle, and a notorious robber.

Brother Luke Cullen, who collected oral testimonies from Wexford and Wicklow rebels during the 1840s, also argued that Holt’s military capabilities were perhaps not as impressive as the ‘General’ would have us believe: ‘Holt was their General-in-Chief, notwithstanding that there were men far superior to him in the qualifications of a warrior.’

Regardless of these assessments, however, it remains indisputable that he earned considerable status amongst supporters of the rebellion, maintained firm military

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44 Musgrave, Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland, 289.
45 Luke Cullen, quoted in O’Shaughnessy, introduction to A Rum Story, 14.
discipline, and organised untrained men into a formidable rebel force. As Holt and fellow insurgents kept the flame of rebellion alive amidst military measures to counter their efforts, instability persisted in Ireland. Holt’s stint in the Wicklow mountains—from June to November 1798—remained a source of embarrassment for the authorities; so much so that a reward was offered for his capture. Lieutenant General Craig offered three hundred pounds for Holt’s apprehension given his role in ‘promoting the present unprincipled Rebellion.’ A proclamation appeared in the Dublin newspapers during the tail end of 1798 advertising the offer. Evidently Holt posed enough of a threat to come to the attention of the authorities.

Even once the rebellion was ‘officially’ over, peace proved elusive. For the United Irishmen, this was a consequence of the Government’s own making:

The Rebellion [in Ireland] was a convulsive effort of despair excited by the systematic atrocities of the [British] conspirators against the legislative independence of Ireland...The Government instituted the intolerable practise of house burnings, free quarters, tortures and summary executions which, as the Ministry intended, exploded in rebellion. When the combat began its vigour greatly exceeded the calculation of those who provoked it.

Having goaded its people into a state of ferocity beyond its control, Dublin Castle had, as the United Irishmen saw it, familiarised Ireland with its master grievance: dependence on England. And while it is perhaps too much of a stretch to suggest that the rebellion was intentionally produced by the authorities, the unrest that resulted from a failure to reform was no less potent. In a letter to William Wickham, Under-Secretary Cooke depicted the turbulent climate: ‘the universality of the conspiracy, the frequent detections, and the consequent trials, keep up irritation. Our militia is also disorderly, and our yeomen

resentful. These circumstances are impediments to tranquillity, but indeed the disorder is deep. From such disarray Lord Lieutenant Cornwallis was determined to deliver Ireland. Attempting to scotch the spirit of disaffection and recurrent violence that threatened the passing of a legislative union, Cornwallis advocated the removal of those rebels who had acted as leaders. A fairly new solution following the loss of the American colonies, transportation to Australia appeared the answer to the quandary facing Ireland generally, and Cornwallis specifically. In a letter to Major-General Ross, the jaded Lord Lieutenant painted a striking picture of the continual turmoil that pitted countrymen against each other. In 1796, in response to the mounting crisis, a voluntary, part-time, local defence force called the Irish Yeomanry had been formed from loyalist residents. Yet far from restoring order to the island, the yeomanry were involved in perpetuating the conflict. As Cornwallis lamented: ‘the whole country is in such a state that I feel frightened and ashamed whenever I consider that I am looked upon as being at the head of it...The yeomanry are in the style of the Loyalists in America, only...a thousand times more ferocious.’ With martial law declared and loyalists calling for ruthless and exemplary punishment, Cornwallis found himself trapped between a people still pulsating with rebellion on one side, and retribution on the other. Heated with passion fanned by continuing rebel activity, the yeomanry and the Irish militia, having ‘saved the country...now [took] the lead in rapine and murder.’ Given the emotive way in which the rebellion was reflected upon—by an experienced British Army officer and colonial administrator who had witnessed firsthand the revolutionary war in America—it is little wonder that his contemporaries echoed this language in their descriptions of Ireland and

49 Cooke to Wickham, Dublin Castle, July 28, 1798, quoted in Marquis Charles Cornwallis Cornwallis, Correspondence of Charles, first Marquis Cornwallis, ed., Charles Ross, vol. 2. (London: John Murray, 1859), 375-76.
50 Marquis Cornwallis to Major-General Ross, Dublin Castle, July 24, 1798, quoted in Cornwallis, Correspondence of Charles, first Marquis Cornwallis, 368-69.
51 Cornwallis to Ross, quoted in Cornwallis, Correspondence of Charles, first Marquis Cornwallis, 369.
the Irish. It also seems to justify the particular dread colonial authorities in New South Wales expressed when confronted with the prospect of Irish rebels reaching the colony.

Determined to break the back of rebellion, Cornwallis had to strike a balance between his desire for conciliation and rancorous calls for rebel blood by loyalists. This in part accounts for the fate of almost 3,500 rebel prisoners who found themselves dispersed across the globe in the wake of the rebellion. And while the majority volunteered or were drafted into various army regiments, around one tenth of the state prisoners reached Australia’s shores. These were the relatively fortunate ones for once magistrates and the army began to mete out punishment to the rebels—or those reputed to be such—sentences could be both hasty and vindictive. Amidst this ad hoc and vengeful administration of justice, proceedings were often not recorded, with ‘only the barest indication of the numbers of those summarily executed and shot out of hand.’ Indeed, transportation was often only secured as a result of Cornwallis’ more measured approach to the punishment of captured rebels. Michael Durey in his discussion of the treatment of the Irish state prisoners highlights Cornwallis’ view that transportation was a penalty suitable only for delinquents and rebels who had committed serious offences, rather than the general rank and file led astray in the heat of the moment. ‘This goes at least part of the way to explain,’ Durey argues, ‘why of the 556 rebels sentenced to transportation by courts martial between 1798 and 1801, only 174 (30.7 per cent) arrived in New South Wales.’

Amongst those sentenced to transportation for involvement in the rebellion was Joseph Holt. He had surrendered on 10 November 1798 to Lord Powerscourt, perhaps all

54 Durey, “Marquess Cornwallis and the Fate of Irish Rebel Prisoners,” 135.
too aware that the rebellion had transformed into a debacle with no chance of success, and
that as a Protestant United Irishmen, he had come to lead targeted attacks against
Protestant communities on behalf of a now ‘Catholic’ cause. The exact conditions of
Holt’s surrender are unclear. In all likelihood, he was convinced this would involve exile
to America. The comparative moderation of Lord Cornwallis when dealing with captured
rebels did not appear to extend as far as Holt had assumed, however. Certainly, he must
have received a rude awakening upon discovering his fate. The Courier Newspaper
reported on 16 January 1799: ‘Holt, double-bolted, handcuffed, and encompassed with
what is called an iron circumfernce, [sic] was lately put on board a transport to be
conveyed to Botany Bay. He swore, blasphemed, and inveighed most bitterly against
“breach of treaty.”’\textsuperscript{55} Regardless of Holt’s protestations, he numbered among the 165 male
and 26 female prisoners embarked aboard the Minerva.\textsuperscript{56} Also bound for Australia were
other Irish rebels who had had their death sentences commuted, including William Henry
Alcock, a Protestant and Captain in the Wexford Militia, and Father James Harold, a
Catholic priest and United Irishman.

Fresh from their loss of the revolutionary contest in America, the British
government was determined that the penal colony of New South Wales would not
experience the same fate. But as state prisoners were transported abroad, it is not surprising
that their revolutionary ideals followed, if in a diluted form. In their more sanguine
moments, Australia was for British authorities a colonial experiment that promised a
convenient solution for the disposal of a criminal class.\textsuperscript{57} As reported by the Hibernian
Journal, Botany Bay was both a welcome opportunity and an effective punishment: ‘the
scheme of sending convicts to Botany Bay, we trust, will operate to the advantage of this

\textsuperscript{55} Courier Newspaper, 16 January 1799, quoted in O’Shaughnessy, A Rum Story, 17.
\textsuperscript{56} Charles Bateson, The Convict Ships 1787-1868 (Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1974), 158.
\textsuperscript{57} See Bob Reece, The Origins of Irish Convict Transportation to New South Wales (New York: Palgrave,
2001), 129-37.
country, as nothing but annihilation or transportation can prevent us being subject to the depredations of the hardened ruffian. At a time when penal reform was high on the social agenda, however, transportation was not without its detractors. Jeremy Bentham, for instance, regarded this form of punishment as unsatisfactory as an instrument of social control. Favouring panopticon penitentiaries over the transportation of felons, Bentham argued that the New South Wales penal colony facilitated the removal of convicts ‘to the antipodes, as far as possible out of the view of the aggregate mass of individuals, in whose minds it is wished that the impression should be made.’ Indeed, many conceded that transportation to the Americas had not proved much of a disincentive as convicts volunteered in the hope of establishing themselves abroad. The establishment of a penitentiary system, however, was considered an expensive and long-term solution to manage Ireland’s surplus of convicts and to render visible the outcomes of criminal behaviour. Additionally, not all reformers were ready to relinquish transportation as an option. Prison reformer and Irishman Sir Jeremiah Fitzpatrick, like Bentham, conceded that transportation had lost its intended effect, but remained convinced that Botany Bay provided enough of a deterrent to be an appropriate solution for the most hardened prisoners. In Thoughts on Penitentiaries of 1790, he wrote: ‘to have to dread the horrors of

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61 Regarding the opportunities offered to transported rebels by the New World, see Durey, “Marquess Cornwallis and the Fate of Irish Rebel Prisoners,” 143.
62 For a comprehensive discussion regarding Irish trans-Atlantic transportation, see Bob Reece, *The Origins of Irish Convict Transportation*. 
being sent...to Botany Bay...we should hear no more of volunteering, for then transportation, in the vulgar opinion, would become punishment.  

In light of such debates and despite Bentham’s concerns, a steady stream of prisoners arrived in the New South Wales colony until 1840, and to Western Australia until 1868, by which time more than 16,000 subjects had been shipped by the Crown in the ‘largest forced exile of citizens at the behest of a European government in pre-modern history.’ In ridding Ireland of its criminal burden, particularly its seditious elements, however, the New South Wales colony struggled under its weight. From its foundation in 1788, New South Wales had of course been home to individuals of Irish descent, whether convict or administrator. Yet the cargo aboard two convict ships, *Friendship* and *Minerva*, arriving in 1800, introduced a new dynamic to the colony. Having carried to Australia’s shores the first batch of political prisoners from the 1798 rebellion, these ships were the first of six to arrive from Ireland between 1800 and 1806. While the number of Irish political prisoners can never be exactly determined, of the 1,000 convicts who survived the arduous journey, it is estimated that at least 400 of them were classed as ‘politicals’. Thus, not only was the frontier society supposedly peopled with common delinquents, it also had to contend with those state prisoners transported for their role in the late rebellion. This would prove to be an enormous difficulty for colonial authorities, for whom the expectation of Irish sedition loomed large. Having established the context from which these Irish state prisoners emerged, the following chapter tracks their less than painless integration into colonial New South Wales at the turn of the century.

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PARIAHS OF THE PENAL COLONY

IRISH POLITICAL PRISONERS IN COLONIAL NEW SOUTH WALES

Britain’s first Australian settlement inherited from its mother country a host of problems. From 1786 when the decision was made by the British government to send convicts sentenced to transportation to a new outpost in New South Wales, the penal colony, in the eyes of British authorities, could not have been destined for greatness.¹ A settlement peopled by a criminal underclass inspired little confidence and much disdain.² For colonists, New South Wales was inhospitable. Mass starvation was a major fear for Arthur Phillip, governor-elect of New South Wales, at the time of the arrival of the First Fleet in January 1788. Moreover, encounters with indigenous populations had in the past proved to have the potential for volatility. Added to this was the very real fear of the Irish. This chapter is concerned with the disjunction between myth and reality as it relates to the convict Irish in New South Wales. Its argument focuses on perceptions of colonial officials and members of the settlement regarding the Irish generally and their political prisoners specifically. Not only did these imported prejudices shape the colonial experience of the convict Irish, they have since influenced related historiography and

¹ An unexplored continent was selected by the British Government to facilitate the disposal of a criminal class, whose existence, as observed by Robert Hughes, ‘was one of the prime sociological beliefs of late Georgian and early Victorian England.’ Australia’s remote location was seen by Jeremy Bentham and his adherents as its fatal flaw; for a believer in panopticon penitentiaries, the notion of removing the spectre of punishment from general society would deeply impact upon its deterrent power. For British administrators, Australia’s distance held much of its appeal. Hughes, The Fatal Shore, 1.

² Having developed his arguments against transportation, Bentham set out his case regarding law and punishment in Panopticon Versus New South Wales published in 1802. He found the idea of a ‘thief-colony’ particularly alarming given that the number of convicted criminals would greatly outweigh the number of those attempting to enforce order and reform behaviour. According to Bentham, ‘The measure was, indeed, a measure of experiment...a peculiarly commodious one—a set of animæ viles—a sort of excrementitious mass, that could be projected, and accordingly was projected...purposely—as far out of sight as possible.’ Bentham, “Panopticon Versus New South Wales,” 176.
resulted in an overall portrayal of these individuals as perennial recidivists whose only contribution to the burgeoning colony was that of rebelliousness and savagery, or alternatively, heroic resistance. Though constituting a relatively small segment of the colonial population, political prisoners transported in the wake of Ireland’s rebellion of 1798 have therefore attained disproportionate significance. In tracing Joseph Holt and other United Irishmen in their movements between Ireland and the penal settlement of New South Wales, this chapter explores their reception and treatment during their lives in exile as shaped by their revolutionary reputations.

In the early years of the settlement, concerns about Irish convicts were frequently exhibited. Any fear, however speculative, was for colonists entirely rational. The disturbed state of the Irish nation at the turn of the century was yet to become a distant memory. Seared into the minds of early colonists was the image of the Irish pikeman of that struggle. The ferocity with which he marched towards his own capital could only be taken as an indication of his potential to continue his defiance in exile. With the importation of participants in Ireland’s late unrest, this paranoia weighed heavily on the minds of colonial authorities. Those arriving in New South Wales from Ireland were thus from the outset considered a separate class of convict; and this distinctiveness pursued them relentlessly, even into twenty-first century scholarship. Certainly, Grace Karskens in *The Colony* (2009) conflated the Irish with their reputation for sedition in her description of their colonial contributions: these ‘Irish convicts brought a series of insurrectionary plots and a daring rebellion.’ Pinpointing the Irish rebels as a key group of colonial resisters, Karskens asserted: ‘the question to be wondered at is not why they resisted in these ways, but why the colony was not burned to the ground, or taken in violent uprising?’

image of the Irish as anti-authoritarian has proved pervasive for modern-day scholars as well as contemporary observers.

That a rich catalogue of descriptions of Irish convicts existed, and that this prejudice coloured their experience in the colony is beyond dispute. English convict D.D. Mann provides one such example of the conventional attitude towards Irish prisoners in *The Present Picture of New South Wales*, published in London in 1811. Spouting the usual phrases associated with the Irish, Mann noted their ‘ceaseless exertions, to disseminate their pernicious and absurd doctrines’ and their alleged propensity for ‘insubordination and riot’ which prevented them from being ‘[intimidated] by punishment, nor discouraged by failure from the pursuit of that career of depravity, which is become dear to them from habit.’ And while this contemporary account may be expected, though is not necessarily accurate, later commentary by historian Ernest Scott, for example, mirrors Mann’s observations to a surprising extent. In his work *A Short History of Australia* (1916), Scott identified the prisoners implicated in Ireland’s rebellion as a turbulent people who ‘contributed to the life of the colony elements of violent hatred and conspiracy.’ ‘There never was,’ Scott continued, ‘any serious danger of disruption except from these Irish political prisoners...Rebels by life-long disposition, bitter enemies of the authority...with a feeling of injustice rankling in their hearts, these Irish exiles...were a continual cause of unrest.’

The prospect of conveying rebels to New South Wales was also one that troubled authorities. An expectation of unrest from such transportees weaves its way like a ‘green

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6 Scott, *A Short History of Australia*, 63-64.
thread in a tangled skein’ through the despatches of the colonial governors.\(^7\) Their letters made plain their anxiety that sedition was being transported to the colony by Irish state prisoners. The pre-1798 transportation of Irish convicts had certainly set the tone. Governor Hunter made no secret of the contempt he felt towards ‘these lawless and turbulent people, the Irish convicts,’ and took particular offence at the arrival of a number of Irish Defenders to the colony in the years that preceded 1798.\(^8\) In a despatch to the Duke of Portland in November 1796, Hunter discussed security measures made necessary by the decision ‘to send to this country such horrid characters as the people call’d Irish Defenders, who I confess, my Lord, I wish had been either sent to the coast of Africa, or some place as fit for them.’\(^9\) This suggestion of savagery aptly encapsulates the opinions of early colonial authorities with respect to the Irish convict contingent. Hunter’s successor, Governor King, seemed equally anxious to prevent ‘any more of those violent Republican characters being sent here for some time,’ and with the arrival of the Anne I from Cork in 1801, noted with disdain the influx of 135 ‘desperate and diabolical characters...together with a Catholic priest of most notorious, seditious and rebellious principles.’ This made—according to King’s estimates—‘the number of those who, arriving a determination never to lose sight of the oath with which they are bound as United Irishmen, amount to 600,’ who were ‘ready, and only waiting an opportunity to put their diabolical plans in execution.’\(^10\) This figure had, as King calculated, reached 780 by 1802. While King’s estimates appear to be definite exaggerations, such figures were the result of limited records accompanying transportees, which partly explains the governor’s misapprehension. Also, King generally made no distinction between Irish convicts and Irish rebels, suspecting that either or both had the capacity to disrupt the colony. Later

\(^8\) Governor Hunter to the Duke of Portland, 10 January 1798, in F.M. Bladen, ed. *Historical Records of New South Wales* vol. 3 (Sydney: Charles Potter, Government Printer, 1896), 348.
\(^9\) Governor Hunter to the Duke of Portland, 12 November 1796, in *H.R.N.S.W.* vol. 3, 175.
\(^10\) Governor King to the Duke of Portland, 10 March 1801, in *H.R.N.S.W.* vol. 4, 319.
estimates have also been to some extent the stuff of conjecture. Irish diplomat and academic Thomas Kiernan placed the figure at 775 between the years 1800 and 1806. Australian historian A.G.L. Shaw suggested a more conservative figure of 500 at this period. Alternatively, and more recently, Anne-Maree Whitaker cites the arrival of at least 400 Irish political prisoners between 1800 and 1806. These variations are primarily the result of scanty records and hasty sentencing, as those thought or known to be involved in the rebellion came before courts martial during the thick of Ireland’s unrest. More than 2,000 rebels were tried by the military between June 1798 and December 1801, of whom almost 900 had received sentences of military service, imprisonment or transportation. And of those whose fate involved transportation to Botany Bay, few carried with them accurate information as to the nature of their conviction. This goes part of the way to explain King’s wariness when it came to Irish convicts, given the inability to satisfactorily distinguish the revolutionary from the common delinquent. In any case their actual numbers seem less significant than the perceived impression of their presence. These political rebels became a spectacular minority, but a minority they remained. Yet their presence was the cause of considerable angst during those formative colonial years.

Thus the Irish ‘menace’ loomed large in New South Wales. Certainly the colony at this time was not without its turbulence. Discontent was exhibited in a variety of forms and the Irish proved to be particularly exasperating for British officials. Lieutenant-Colonel David Collins in his account of New South Wales used a series of opprobrious epithets when describing those Irish convicts ‘who were always foremost in every

14 Durey, “Marquess Cornwallis and the Fate of Irish Rebel Prisoners,” 131.
mischief and discontent.¹⁵ They were, on Collins’ authority, ‘nearly as wild themselves as the cattle.’¹⁶ Many an ill-conceived attempt was made at escape, occasioning amusement as well as irritation. Lured by the all too powerful prospect of liberation, escapees appeared undeterred by foiled attempts which saw the Irish ‘saddled with a growing national reputation for stupidity and idiocy.’¹⁷ Their apparent willingness to believe stories that a mythical paradise lay just beyond the settlement despite evidence to the contrary therefore came to be seen as an indication of not only their refractory nature, but also of their lunacy. And while some of the more credulous Irish convicts ventured into the scrub, others were expected of scheming against their captors with almost equal vigour. Attempted rebellions, commandeered vessels and wild expeditions to China confirmed what authorities believed they already knew: the Irish were deluded miscreants whose troublesome spirit knew no bounds. It is hardly surprising then, that by August 1804, King was more pointed:

altho’ every exertion is made to counteract their being misled, I am sorry to say that a few disaffected characters will always be endeavouring to poison the minds of the greater part of those who have been sent here for sedition and rebellion in Ireland, who, notwithstanding the lenity shewn them so lately, have been endeavouring to resume their wild plans.¹⁸

This reputation was not, however, wholly deserved. Episodes of recalcitrance undoubtedly worked to form a negative national reputation for the Irish. Yet the reality was quite different. After some initial contrariness, the transportees for the most part were fairly compliant. The majority of attempts at escape or disturbance were by 1803 both isolated and opportunistic, with the exception of the Castle Hill

¹⁸ Governor King to Lord Hobart, 14 August 1804, in H.R.N.S.W. vol. 5, 418.
Rebellion of 1804. It must also be noted that they too were carried out by English as well as Irish convicts, and by both political and ordinary prisoners.\(^\text{19}\)

Pariahs of the penal colony with a reputation difficult to shake, the Irish convicts were thus lumped together as a deluded and seditious race that kept authorities in a constant state of suspicion. They also became, in light of existing sectarian antagonisms, associated almost exclusively with the Catholic faith. Perhaps their most unforgiving and influential detractor was the Reverend Samuel Marsden. As overt in his anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiments as he was in his religious convictions, the Yorkshire-born chaplain, missionary and farmer proved determined to purge the colony of its immorality upon his arrival in March 1794. Providing the London Missionary Society with a comprehensive report on the inferiority of the Irish within the colonial setting, Marsden’s ‘A Few Observations on the Toleration of the Catholic Religion in New South Wales’ of 1807 made clear his views of the Irish people:

> The number of Catholic convicts is very great in the Settlement, and these in general composed of the lowest Class of the Irish Nation, who are the most wild, ignorant and savage Race that were ever favoured with the Light of Civilisation, Men that have been familiar with Robberies Murders and every horrid Crime from their Infancy. Their minds being destitute of every Principle of Religion & Morality render them capable of perpetrating the Most Nefarious Acts in cool Blood. As they never appear to reflect upon Consequences; but to governed [sic] entirely by the Impulse of Passion and always alive to Rebellion and mischief they are very dangerous members of Society. No Confidence whatever can be placed in them by those in Authority as their natural dispositions are impatient of all Subordination.\(^\text{20}\)

Marsden continued his diatribe by labelling the ‘low Irish Convicts’ an ‘extraordinary Race of Beings; their Minds...depraved beyond all Conception, and their whole Thoughts employed on mischief.’\(^\text{21}\) Inveighing against the treachery of the Irish—rendered all the more powerful by his sufferance of Irish convicts in the colonial setting—Marsden in his

\(^{19}\) See Whitaker, introduction to *Unfinished Revolution*.


report made a case for preventing the celebration of Catholic Mass as occurred in New South Wales during 1803 and 1804. Any Catholic service, as Marsden saw it, provided the Irish with an opportunity to congregate under the guise of religious observance to connive and conspire.

This ‘otherness’ was ascribed to Irish convicts generally, and those of the Catholic persuasion more specifically; an assumption rarely questioned in early colonial Australia. As a minority group, (comprising approximately 20 percent of a white population of 4,500 by 1800), the Irish convicts were as much shaped by expectations of the majority as by their own sense of their distinctiveness.\(^{22}\) Yet while it would be convenient to assume a uniformity amongst them that did not necessarily exist, accusations of a dangerous brand of solidarity amongst them only served to strengthen such ties. Indeed, Marsden conceded that while the Irish were ‘designing and treacherous in their general Conduct,’ they ‘considered their engagements to each other of whatever nature they be, as sacred.’\(^{23}\) It was this continual suspicion of Irish contempt for the law and allegations of clandestine arrangements that shaped the Irish experience as well as opinions of them.\(^{24}\)

Here, it is once again helpful to return to the figure of ‘General’ Joseph Holt in his passage to the fledgling colony. While as noted previously, certain limitations exist in terms of Holt’s rendering of his narrative and the subsequent editions that it generated, these works still provide valuable insights into the political milieus which spawned them. As an eminent (and to some, infamous) participant in the events of 1798 and numbering among the ‘dregs’ that filtered into New South Wales, Holt deserves further attention. He not only stands as a figure disrupting sectarian binaries with his involvement in a revolt

\(^{22}\) Whitaker, *Unfinished Revolution*, 23.
\(^{24}\) See Patrick O’Farrell, introduction to *The Irish in Australia: 1788 to the Present* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2000).
which was to become ostensibly Catholic in its popular reimaginings; but his life upon foreign soil provides an example of a former rebel, for the most part, taking the path of least resistance. In Holt’s adaptability we can see that rebel intransigence was not necessarily the sole guiding principle by which transportees served their respective terms.

The circumstances of Holt’s passage to Australia immediately set him apart from the common prisoner, Irish or otherwise. He recorded having been granted certain privileges during the voyage, including freedom of the ship. Holt was also permitted to bring his wife and son to the colony. These privileges would later be granted to a select group of high profile Irish rebels, notably Michael Dwyer and fellow Wicklow men who arrived in the colony in 1806. To William Colthurst in May 1799, Holt communicated his satisfaction with regards to his passage from Ireland: ‘Sir, I assure you I am very happy as a prisoner for our captain is a gentleman of the best morals i ever new and all his officers to such as disarve indulgence [sic].’ Few transportees, whether state prisoner or common convict, enjoyed such indulgences. And for the majority of Irish convicts there was generally ‘no danger of any ill-considered compassion, or any laudable desire to lessen their sufferings’; the miseries of transportation beginning upon embarkation and almost always continuing until arrival.

It has also been claimed that of the transported Irish convicts, those linked to the United Irish movement fared comparatively poorly. In compiling a family history closely connected with the Society of United Irishmen, Sidney Harold Sheedy claimed that of the 44 deaths aboard the transport ship Hercules, 42 had been United Irishmen.

Atlas had been United Irishmen, while another 7 had been implicated in some way in the events of 1798.\textsuperscript{28} While Sheedy’s estimates have since been called into question by historians like Whitaker, claims of persecution of Irish political prisoners speak to a series of wider truths. Firstly, it falls into line with the general mistrust of Irish convicts by colonial authorities. This anxiety was particularly directed, not surprisingly, towards those implicated in the political unrest that culminated in, and persisted after 1798. Secondly, it is indicative of a tradition that has since developed of holding up as victims of maltreatment a set of heroic Irish rebels long-suffering under the yoke of British oppression. This ‘hero-worship’ as O’Farrell noted, proved to be both potent and misleading.\textsuperscript{29}

The ‘General’ upon his arrival in New South Wales seemed to escape much of this mythologisation, although not the mistrust. Suspected by Protestants and Catholics alike, he did not receive a hero’s welcome like fellow transportee Father Harold. As a writer of propagandist verse and a United Irishman, Harold had urged his parishioners to show restraint and surrender their arms soon after the confrontation at Vinegar Hill in County Wexford in late June 1798. Harold’s efforts earned him accusations of seditious practices and saw him arrested and transported despite his public displays of allegiance to the Crown.\textsuperscript{30} Upon his arrival to the colony, however, he was met with a rapturous welcome. Richard Sheil’s memoir of Harold included an anecdote of his arrival in Sydney where he entertained a crowd with his rendition of ‘The Exile from Erin’: ‘The beach being crowded with people, mostly Irish, the people cried, encore! and he had to sing it again. He told me

\textsuperscript{28} Sheedy, ‘History of the Sheedy family’ MS, 134.
\textsuperscript{29} See discussion of the ‘hero worship’ of the Irish rebels within the colonial setting in O’Farrell, \textit{The Irish in Australia}, 29-33.
\textsuperscript{30} For a discussion of the lives of the three Roman Catholic priests, (including Father James Harold), and one of the Church of Ireland transported to Australia for alleged involvement in the Irish Rebellion of 1798, see Harold Perkins, \textit{The Convict Priests} (Gardiner: Thistle Press, 1984).
it was one of the pleasantest days of his life.’\(^{31}\) Holt’s reception was not nearly as euphoric. Indeed, he remarked rather bitterly that upon coming ashore, ‘all the robbers, pickpockets &c. had plenty of acquaintances there but I saw no person who knew me.’\(^{32}\)

It was not long after Holt’s arrival, however, that his reputation for sedition saw him embroiled in a series of disturbances that seemed to confirm all of the suspicions colonial authorities harboured towards Irish transportees. Although Holt seemed eager to start his life in exile afresh, his meeting with ‘Scottish Martyr’ Maurice Margarot could not have inspired much confidence amongst the authorities. Transported to New South Wales in 1794 for his involvement in seditious practices, Margarot was deemed a recidivist whose dwelling was, on Captain George Johnston’s authority, the ‘most seditious house in the country.’\(^{33}\) And while Holt may not have been aware of Margarot’s reputation at the time of his arrival in early 1800, subsequent alleged Irish disturbances that punctuated early nineteenth-century colonial life frequently saw Margarot implicated as an adept political agitator; something Holt could not have continued to miss. Certainly the Scot came to the attention of Governor King shortly after he took command of the colony in late 1800. Not only had Margarot sent King an inflammatory letter that offered to ‘throw light on several of the transactions of this colony which may not perhaps have reached you in the shape they will then assume,’ but King had also been confronted with Margarot’s insolence following his arrest.\(^{34}\) Writing to Under-Secretary John King in London to ‘convey a complaint of performances...not admitted among civilized [sic] nations,’ Margarot described a spirited encounter with the Governor:\(^{35}\)


\(^{32}\) Holt, A Rum Story, ed. O’Shaughnessy, 46-47.

\(^{33}\) Holt, A Rum Story, ed. O’Shaughnessy, 50.

\(^{34}\) Maurice Margarot to Lieutenant-Governor King, 13 May 1800, in H.R.N.S.W. vol 4, 87.

\(^{35}\) Maurice Margarot to Under-Secretary King, 1 October 1800, in H.R.N.S.W. vol 4, 215.
M.M.—I hope, sir, my behaviour has given you no cause of suspicion.

G. King—No, sir, no; to be sure, we have not found you out yet; but take care, sir, mind you do not give any reason for complaint; sir, go along.

M.M.—Sir, I know my duty, and you may depend upon my fullfilling it.\textsuperscript{36}

Margarot thus proved to be a practiced agitator, earning a certain repute as a result of his colonial transactions. He was, however, an exception to the rule. The Scots were not, on the whole, regarded as particularly seditious in the same way that the Irish were.\textsuperscript{37} Despite this, in keeping company with Margarot, Holt identified himself, to colonial authorities at least, as a figure entangled in the dissent that was thought to threaten the stability of the settlement. It also seemed to confirm a need to be wary of Holt and his associates should an attempt at a revitalisation of the Irish cause be extended to the antipodes.

This extension of grievance peaked on 4 March 1804 with the convict uprising on Sydney’s outskirts at Castle Hill. The rebellion, led by United Irish veterans Philip Cunningham and William Johnston, saw the gathering of more than 300 convicts prepared to march on Sydney. While causing great alarm for the settlement, the New South Wales Corps suppressed the unrest both swiftly and bloodily. Although the rebels were unsuccessful in their attempt to possess themselves of the settlement prior to their planned escape, the uprising stood as an uncomfortable reminder of past rebellion and the potential Irish convicts had for fomenting unrest. Their rallying cries of “Death or Liberty!”—having been used by the United Irishmen in 1798—appeared an ultimatum of their own making given that many of the rebels were men of some education, and could have earned for themselves a pardon from the Governor to return home.\textsuperscript{38} In the days that followed the uprising, the Sydney Gazette featured an account of the ‘sudden Insurrection, of the

\textsuperscript{36} Margarot to King, in H.R.N.S.W. vol 4, 217.
\textsuperscript{37} See Malcolm Prentis, The Scots in Australia (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2008).
deluded Objects of the Artful designs of some unknown, but not unsuspected miscreants’ who ‘now lament their diabolical schemes miscarrying.’ They had, according to the report, failed to ‘expect the great assistance given to His Excellency’s measures...or the absurdity of the seditious designs when opposed to the steady Exertions of preserving Loyalty.’ With absurdity and seditious behaviour already considered part of the Irish national identity, the Castle Hill rebellion became both popularly and officially recognised as an Irish revolt. And while, as historian Patrick O’Farrell observes, this is ‘true enough to its general character,’ the rebellion involved English as well as Irish convicts; a fact conveniently overlooked in many an apportionment of blame and responsibility. This for instance, is seen in Karskens’ description of the unrest as an explicitly Irish convict effort.

The nature of this uprising has been blurred by conflicting contemporary accounts. As a result, the extent of the involvement of Holt and other United Irish veterans is unclear. Certainly, Holt had been implicated in Irish conspiracies throughout his time in the colony and arrested three times because of it. For authorities it seemed ridiculous to entertain any idea of the ‘General’ relinquishing his revolutionary career. His account, however, expresses a professed reluctance to assume leadership of the plot. Regarding the 1804 insurrection, Holt claimed to have distanced himself from a conspiracy likely to fall short of liberty, particularly given what he considered to be the slipshod techniques of the Irish Catholics. In his memoirs he noted that by February 1804, ‘the Devil was as busy in New South Wales as ever he was in Ireland. Both Irish and English men, seeing the torment increasing, they formed an opinion that they could conquer the army and get out of

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41 O’Farrell, The Irish in Australia, 37.
42 Karskens, The Colony, 192.
that country.\textsuperscript{43} Holt also recorded having actively discouraged the plotters: ‘Don’t attempt any such thing. You seen \textit{sic} in Ireland you could not depend on one another and I am sure you will be worse here.’\textsuperscript{44} He continued:

I reasoned the case...As bad as the laws was in Ireland they were worse there, and I tould \textit{sic} them that there was as much false swearers in New South Wales as was in Ireland...They had not army enough, nor could they ever rally or get together. I endeavoured to persuade them from any such thing, but they, being foolhardy, they made up their minds and I always seen a weakness in men.\textsuperscript{45}

Holt was not, however, so modest as to admit the task was beyond his capabilities as a military tactician. He was quick to claim that had he been leader, the rising would have undoubtedly been a triumph:

But if I had not my wife with me it would be but a short job in my ‘head on’ plan, for the army lay in such a awkward state that any one of skill would adapt a plan to take arms, magazine and all in one hour, but I let everyone take care for themselves. Government treated me in such a manner I had no right to become an informer for them. And, as for the unfortunate men, I would not trust them with giving them my advice.\textsuperscript{46}

Any attempt at disassociating himself from the rebel plans proved futile. Those involved in the plot invoked Holt’s reputation as a formidable insurgent while colonial authorities found it very difficult to imagine that the exile would pass up the opportunity to undermine the penal settlement. Holding aloof from seditious activities appeared useless. All his denials earned him was a sentence of exile to Norfolk Island. He was later moved to Van Diemen’s Land, and did not return to Sydney until early 1809. A number of other Irish political convicts were also expelled to Norfolk Island despite the absence of convincing evidence. Governor King, however, was certain that these practiced revolutionaries had a powerful effect over the other convicts and thus posed a threat to colonial security. For this

\textsuperscript{43} Holt, \textit{A Rum Story}, ed. O’Shaughnessy, 79.
\textsuperscript{44} Holt, \textit{A Rum Story}, ed. O’Shaughnessy, 79.
\textsuperscript{45} Holt, \textit{A Rum Story}, ed. O’Shaughnessy, 79.
\textsuperscript{46} Holt, \textit{A Rum Story}, ed. O’Shaughnessy, 79.
reason, King removed ‘the most daring characters’ to eliminate ‘every future inclination of the kind’ amongst the convict Irish.\textsuperscript{47}

A very different image of Holt and the other Irish state prisoners may be gleaned from the account of Englishman R.W. Eastwick, who captained their voyage to Norfolk Island. Eastwick sympathised with the reverence these men had for their homeland: ‘they were persons of refinement, whose only crime was a love of their native island, and a desire for its freedom. Had they been Englishmen this would have been highly esteemed.’\textsuperscript{48} Eastwick also recounted with disdain the harsh treatment meted out to Holt upon his landing at Norfolk Island: ‘the jailer standing by them perceived General Holt...Then the uncouth man cried out: “Damn the General. Let Holt assist to unload the boat; put the biggest bag of sugar on his back, for he appears a big man in his own estimation.”’\textsuperscript{49} Eastwick went on to record the poignant image of ‘the General, all in his fine clothes, laden like a common felon...[wading] a long way through the water.’\textsuperscript{50} The captain had been struck by these ‘gentlemen rebels’—Holt especially—and was pained to witness ‘so gallant a gentleman submit himself to these vulgar people in authority.’\textsuperscript{51}

On the mainland, conspirators were hanged, flogged or despatched to more remote penal settlements and government raids marked attempts to catch the more practiced agitators. The Irish-led convict rebellion had thus further tarnished colonial relations while simultaneously evoking bitter memories that fed religious and national bigotry. It had a deep and lasting impact upon the colony, chiefly with the ‘development of a siege mentality, motivated primarily by the perception of an Irish republican threat’ which was

\textsuperscript{47} Governor King to Lord Hobart, 12 March 1804 in Frederick Watson, ed. \textit{Historical Records of Australia} vol. 4 (Sydney: Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1915), 564.


\textsuperscript{49} Eastwick, quoted in Amos, \textit{The Fenians in Australia}, 9.

\textsuperscript{50} Eastwick, quoted in Amos, \textit{The Fenians in Australia}, 9.

\textsuperscript{51} Eastwick, quoted in Amos, \textit{The Fenians in Australia}, 10.
seen to be very much apparent. The crucial point here is that the early years of the colony seemed to be tainted by the Irish presence. They had gained a reputation for feverish defiance and savagery. Anything could be expected of this indignant and resourceful people. Schemes to gain control of the settlement, or at best, to corrupt it with every possible contrivance could be the work of one or all of the Irish transportees. The uprising at Castle Hill in 1804 merely settled the matter conclusively. But the reality of this Irish presence was not necessarily as straightforward as it has been portrayed. Those bitter protagonists exiled for their involvement in the Irish rebellion in many ways did not fulfil the expectations of sedition and disloyalty that colonial authorities and fellow convicts had of them. Such attitudes, while reflecting an unjust national prejudice, have also had a series of repercussions for the historiography of early colonial New South Wales. The views of British administrators and contemporary observers have overshadowed the various contributions of these Irish prisoners. This has in turn impacted upon later historical interpretations. Certainly, Karskens in her recent contribution to the history of early Sydney referred to the Irish as understandably aggrieved and wondered at their restraint during the colony’s formative years. Having set up the conditions of early colonial society and the way in which Irish convicts have been regarded, the following chapter continues to debunk the notion of automatic recalcitrance on the part of Irish political transportees. As we shall see, these very individuals were to play an integral part in colonial society.

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AN ENTERPRISING CONTINGENT

REBEL CONTRIBUTIONS AND SOCIAL ASSIMILATION

Precision holds none of the appeal or romance of mythology. Nor does it possess the potency of national or religious bigotry. This holds true for many a discussion of Irish history given the manner with which grievance has been bestowed upon successive generations and the way the flame of hostility has been kept alive by unbalanced and partisan accounts. Certainly, the way 1798 entered popular consciousness was no doubt shaped by the steady stream of post-rebellion literature. Sir Richard Musgrave inveighed against the Irish Catholic instigators with obvious disdain: ‘it is much to be lamented, that the Irish Roman catholics in general, have, for two hundred years, manifested a marked hostility against the protestant empire, which all the rebellions kindled on the score of religion...unquestionably prove.’

Similar sentiments were echoed in Britain’s distant colony of New South Wales by Anglican clergyman Samuel Marsden as he condemned ‘that extreme Ignorance and Barbarism, which constitute the natural Character of all the lowest Class of Irish Catholic Convicts.’ Nor did the Irish escape persecution on a national level. Colonial authorities remained attuned to their ‘seditious and mutinous behaviour,’ and expected from them nothing but ‘insurrection and massacre.’ From this tradition of festering resentments and prejudicial reportage emerge mainstream accounts of

1 Musgrave, Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland, xx.
3 Governor King to the Duke of Portland, 10 March 1801, in H.R.N.S.W. vol. 4, 319.
Irish political prisoners transported to Botany Bay in the aftermath of the Irish Rebellion of 1798.

The United Irish veterans, including the likes of ‘General’ Joseph Holt and Father Harold were undoubtedly suspected—by colonial authorities as well as subsequent observers—of harbouring ulterior motives. To this was added assumed indignation at the failure of the United Irish cause and resentment towards the resulting punishment meted out by law enforcement at home and in exile. For colonial authorities, this was expected to culminate in an extension of Irish grievance to the antipodes. As previously discussed, a portion of these transportees had helped to fortify this expectation through their characteristically ‘Irish’ machinations. A few plots came to fruition, several others were detected, and an even greater number were thought to be in circulation during the early years of the colony. Certainly, the prospect of an Irish uprising led by a handful of tested insurgents proved to be a niggling concern for colonial governors until well into the nineteenth century. Added to this was a more general disdain for Irish convicts, political or otherwise. Their ventures into the unforgiving wilderness in search of freedom earned derision, and more than fifty sets of human remains discovered by Indigenous Australians during this period were thought to belong to Irish escapees. All of these colonial transactions worked to set the tone for a general view of the Irish convicts: if they were not infecting their countrymen with treason, they were equally as likely to fall prey to the influence of their traitorous compatriots. This historical representation of the Irish as a deterministic people, inevitably shaped by their national past and destined to wage war against the injustices of their oppression, creates an image replete with sentimentality but lacking in depth and scope. Certainly, Lynette Ramsay Silver in her reconstruction of the events of the Castle Hill Rebellion of 1804 could not avoid emotionalism in her portrayal

4 Travers, The Phantom Fenians, 27.
of the convict Irish. ‘Like their countrymen before them,’ she argued, ‘the fires of resentment within the hearts of many would continue to smoulder and the longing for liberty and justice would never diminish.’\(^5\) In his discussion of the same challenge to colonial authority, Patrick O’Farrell proved susceptible to the romance of the repressed Irish: ‘theirs was not a rebellion of crushed desperation, but of sentiment and hope, forlorn maybe; an affirmation of spirit.’\(^6\) He continued: ‘what drove the Irish was not only ideologies and dreams, but frustrations, sickness of heart, and impulses of affront: in a word, pride.’\(^7\) This fatalism, although part of the lived experience for some, proved more abstract and unassimilated for many of the Irish in New South Wales. Pre-existing conditions, namely active rebellion against a seemingly unjust system of authority, did not always determine future prospects abroad. Indeed, life in the colony could be harnessed as an opportunity rather than a punishment, and many of the political exiles proved themselves to be fairly successful in their various enterprises when they opted for the path of least resistance. When considered, their achievements in and contributions to the penal colony further assist in debunking the myth that the Irish veterans of ’98 brought only sedition and centuries-old grievance to New South Wales. In reality, they made a far greater contribution to early colonial life than has previously been recognised, and demonstrated their capacity for assimilation once initial frictions and hostilities had abated. The following chapter then, takes as its basis the argument that the Irish, notably the political offender of ’98, became integral to the development of colonial New South Wales. To augment Holt’s narrative are the journeys of the United Irishman Michael Dwyer and fellow Wicklow men who arrived in the colony in 1806. These Irish rebels, in the face of often stringent opposition, made contributions far beyond sedition and violence.

\(^6\) O’Farrell, Irish in Australia, 38.  
\(^7\) O’Farrell, Irish in Australia, 38.
Colonial relations with Irish convicts in light of the assumed United Irish plot of 1800 and the Castle Hill rising of 1804 proved to be tautly strained. Attempts to purge the colony of its plotters continued and there were very real feelings of victimisation at the hands of the Irish prisoners. In a despatch to Lord Hobart written in the immediate aftermath of the events of 1804, Governor King discussed colonial defences needed to ‘[repress] a repetition of any future attempts from the deluded people who have made themselves so troublesome in Ireland as well as in this colony.’\(^8\) Despite such concerns, the unrest at Castle Hill proved to be the last serious scheme of mass escape from New South Wales hatched by United Irish transportees. Yet any possibility of respite for those wary of republican sentiments and Irish conspiracies were jeopardised in February 1806 with the arrival of another contingent of Irish political prisoners aboard the *Tellicherry*. Their infamy had preceded them; King was convinced that extra precautions would be necessary. He wrote to Earl Camden to express his concern. These ‘considerable leaders in the late Rebellion in Ireland’ would need to ‘call forth the utmost attention of the Officers of this Colony.’\(^9\)

Among them was ‘Wicklow Chief’ Michael Dwyer, a United Irishman who had headed the last pocket of rebel resistance from the mountains before surrendering in December 1803. Having frustrated all attempts at capture, Dwyer and his fellow insurgents had prevented any definitive end to Ireland’s rebellion by remaining ‘outstanding’. Such a lengthy resistance—over five years championing the rebel cause from the Wicklow mountains—was to earn him a place amongst the most illustrious of Irish resisters. His surrender was finally induced by a series of interlocking pressures: the absence of any decisive intervention on the part of the French, the failure of Robert Emmet’s rebellion of

\(^{8}\) Governor King to Lord Hobart, 12 March 1804 in Frederick Watson, ed. *Historical Records of Australia* vol. 4 (Sydney: Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1915), 565.

\(^{9}\) Governor King to Earl Camden, 22 February 1806 in *H.R.A* vol. 5, 636.
July 1803, and efforts by Dublin Castle to remove all those likely to succour him, thereby forcing him to make terms. Instead of voluntary exile to America—the terms Dwyer and the Wicklow men believed they had surrendered on—they found themselves aboard a convict ship en route to Botany Bay. This provided a rich store of propaganda for later renderings of such men twice wronged by the treacherous British; firstly in their initial oppression in Ireland, and secondly in their punishment for resisting such oppression.¹⁰

The five men—Dwyer, Arthur Devlin, John Mernagh, Hugh Byrne and Martin Burke—were, however, granted concessions during their journey and were considered free settlers upon their arrival; luxuries easily overlooked when portraying these Irish exiles as victims of a dual colonial tyranny.¹¹ Accompanied by a letter from Irish Under-Secretary Alexander Marsden, the five Irish political transportees were taken to Government House where Governor King was informed of their special status:

Among the Number, are five men...who were engaged in treasonable practices here and who have requested to be allowed to banish themselves for life to New South Wales to avoid being brought to Trial; And as it has been deemed expedient to make Such a Compromise with them, they are sent there. Not having been convicted they claim the advantage of this distinction, the Effect of which is not however to prevent their being Subjected to all the Laws and discipline of the Settlement. And that any further indulgence is to be earned by their behaviour.¹²

King’s reply to the Irish Under-Secretary did little to conceal his lack of enthusiasm regarding the new injection of potential leaders of colonial unrest. ‘Well knowing the capricious disposition of the Irish Characters,’ wrote King to Marsden, ‘I have clearly explained to them the footing they are on, and on their promises of being circumspect in their Conduct and not giving cause for any Complaint, I have allowed them to become

¹⁰ The figure of Michael Dwyer—at the expense of Joseph Holt—had attained hero status most noticeably towards the later decades of the nineteenth century. On this point, see O’Donnell, “‘Keeping Up the Flame,’” 39.
¹¹ Amos, The Fenians in Australia, 11.
¹² Secretary A. Marsden to Governor King, 17 August 1805, in H.R.A vol. 5, 551-52.
Settlers. The five transportees were each awarded a land grant of 100 acres south-west of Sydney, an allotment equivalent to grants awarded to non-commissioned officers, and double that of grants given to private men. The location of this land was possibly allocated in a bid to lessen the rebels’ capacity for inciting sedition by distancing them from other Irish convicts. King was undoubtedly suspect of their ability to assimilate, further remarking: ‘how far these Indulgences will operate on their apparent turbulent dispositions time will show.’

This ‘turbulence’ once again reared its head in August of that year, as suspicions mounted over the maturation of another Irish revolt. Informants advised King that the Irish were once again conspiring to rebel. The arrival of William Bligh, who was to assume the office of governor, was said to have prevented the conspirators from putting their plans into execution, but this was thought to be only a temporary delay. While the wearied Governor King, having been subjected to six years of effrontery from the convict Irish, was unable to sentence any disaffected Irishmen thought to be involved, Bligh appeared more determined to establish his authority. Bligh had Dwyer, the other Irish political prisoners and another three convicts arrested and put on trial in May 1807. He reported to London his certainty that a conspiracy amongst the Irish was afoot, having been in germination for some eighteen months. The existence of a siege mentality is very much apparent in this correspondence, with hearsay enough to excite Bligh’s suspicion: ‘no arms have been found, or any positive overt act been committed, our information leading only to declared plans which were to be put into execution by the Irish Convicts, headed by

13 Governor King to Secretary A. Marsden, 22 February 1806, in H.R.A vol. 5, 638.
15 This observation is made by Whitaker, who notes that if this had indeed been Governor King’s rationale, he was soon disappointed. She cites as evidence of the stir caused by the arrival of the Wicklow men aboard the Tellicherry an incident involving convict Joseph Smallisalts, brought to trial for having allegedly uttered inflammatory and seditious expressions that intended to disrupt the colony. See Whitaker, Unfinished Revolution, 145.
16 King to A. Marsden in H.R.A vol. 5, 638.
O’Dwyer and some of the Irish State Prisoners, as they are here called.' In light of this lack of material evidence, Dwyer and his alleged conspirators were acquitted. All that the trial had proven was the existence of rumours that implicated the Wicklow men. Two other convicts, however, were sentenced to 1,000 lashes and dispersed to the more remote regions of the colony, away from the more impressionable Irish convicts.

Bligh remained unwavering in his belief that Dwyer and his men were guilty of fomenting treason amongst their compatriots. A letter addressed to British statesman William Windham confirmed his certainty that the Wicklow men were culpable and should not escape punishment. ‘The fact, in my opinion, [was] proved, yet they were acquitted,’ he wrote in his despatch.18 Treating the men not as free settlers but as though they had been convicted for their dealings in Ireland, Bligh revealed to Windham the action he had been compelled to take: ‘the whole being Prisoners for Life I immediately divided the Gang and sent two to each of the Settlements of Norfolk Island, the Derwent, and Port Dalrymple, and kept two here.’19 Thus this incident—as with numerous other alleged Irish schemes that seemed to threaten the security of the settlement—received a prompt and legally dubious response from colonial authorities, and involved the removal of those individuals considered to epitomise Irish insurgency in Australia, and upon which republican aspirations were thought to hinge. This incident has since provided historians with evidence to prop up men like Dwyer as figures persecuted relentlessly by colonial authorities. T.J. Kiernan, for instance, referred to this persecution as an action carried out ‘with no authority other than the whim of fear.’20

17 Governor Bligh to the Right Hon. William Windham, 19 March 1807, in H.R.A. vol. 6, 128.
18 Governor Bligh to the Right Hon. William Windham, 31 October 1807, in H.R.A. vol. 6, 159.
19 Bligh to Windham, in H.R.A. vol. 6, 159.
20 Kiernan, The Irish Exiles in Australia, 32.
This tone of distrust of Irish transportees was set long before the arrival of the Wicklow men in 1806, and even predated the influx of Irish convicts following Ireland’s 1798 unrest. And in light of such treatment, it is little wonder that there existed clear tensions between colonial authorities and Irish transportees, particularly the high profile political prisoners. While this incipient aversion was maintained—if in a milder form—for successive generations, a series of concessions proved crucial to Irish appeasement in the colonial setting. The principal factor in any alleviation of tension between British administrators and Irish transportees took the form of property ownership. Certainly, the veterans of 1798 accrued such a substantial landholding concentration that the district to the south-west of Sydney was known initially as Irishtown. Antagonisms were also lessened in the wake of the Rum Rebellion and the deposition of Governor Bligh in January 1808. This precipitated a turning of fortunes—for Dwyer and his associates at least—as they were recalled from the more remote Australian settlements. They received pardons from the new regime and had their land grants finally confirmed by Lieutenant-Governor William Paterson in May 1809, which proved to be ‘an important step towards Irish appeasement, as Dwyer was recognised among his countrymen as the most prominent Irish nationalist in the colony.’ This softening of relations would firstly mollify, and eventually assist in the relative prospering of the Irish political prisoners in New South Wales. Irish integration, however, has often been rendered secondary to instances of insurgency as a minority of Irish rebels active in the colony came to typify the whole. Yet

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as acknowledged by Whitaker in her discussion of the activities of the United Irishmen in New South Wales, this process of assimilation on the part of the Irish transportees becomes particularly evident following the arrival of Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1810.\textsuperscript{24} It was at this time that Macquarie began his ‘inchmeal conversion of a jail into a colony.’\textsuperscript{25} The governor’s efforts to restore order in the wake of the deposition of Bligh, coupled with his immense improvements to the recordkeeping of the colony inadvertently documented many of the activities of the Irish political prisoners. Having revoked all the land grants, leases and pardons made in Sydney from the day of the Rum Rebellion of 26 January 1808 until his arrival, Macquarie inspired a series of petitions to confirm previous grants, many of which were written by Irish prisoners. This stands as an indication of the level of education of these transportees as they personally petitioned the governor to reinstate what they had been working towards over the previous decade. Advancements, even amongst the most eminent Irish insurrectionists, had been made in spite of ongoing hostilities and unrelenting suspicion. And given that many had moved up the ranks and achieved a certain standing within the colony, these transportees continued to make valuable contributions as engineers, overseers, constables and clerks.\textsuperscript{26} It is only when their various colonial successes are examined that inconsistencies emerge with regards to their reputation for sedition as harped on by the colonial government, local authorities and loyalists, or alternatively, for heroism in their struggle for Ireland as judged by Irish patriots. It too exposes the way in which these competing strands have influenced subsequent historiography.

Michael Dwyer becomes an appropriate case in point when it comes to former rebels trying their hand at assimilation. His activities in the Wicklow mountains as he held

\textsuperscript{24} See Whitaker, \textit{Unfinished Revolution}, 181.
\textsuperscript{25} Hughes, \textit{The Fatal Shore}, 294.
\textsuperscript{26} See Whitaker, \textit{Unfinished Revolution}, 181-83.
together a skeletal rebel force had been crucial in keeping alive the dying embers of rebellion in Ireland. As general lawlessness prevailed and with ongoing hopes of a French invasion, Dwyer and his men had remained central to expectations of a reinvigorated struggle. Having for five years conducted an exceptionally successful guerrilla campaign which resisted all attempts of the authorities to neutralise, Dwyer had earned for himself considerable repute. This popular support became central to Dwyer’s lengthy insurgent career: ‘The country wished to protect him and I found it impossible to arrest him,’ lamented Captain Hume of the Baltinglass Yeomanry.  

Similarly, a letter from magistrate and Yeoman officer Morley Saunders to Alexander Marsden addressed Dwyer’s popular support as a serious concern threatening any restoration of calm, let alone a lasting peace:

> I am concerned to say that a degree of terror prevails thro’ this country with all descriptions who live out of protection respecting this man [Dwyer] and his associates. Something should be done. You will have the goodness to mention these circumstances to his Excellency, that he may give such directions or take such measures as his Excellency may approve to free the country of a man who from terror or goodwill has obtained a dangerous degree of authority and protection among the lower orders of the People.  

Interestingly, this support did not simply come from those vying for the ultimate success of the rebel cause. Certainly as Bartlett conceded, ‘elements of the yeomanry were prepared to harbour Dwyer or at least to turn a blind eye to him,’ which also assists in explaining his lengthy stint in the mountains.  

This can be best explained by a dual consideration on the part of this local volunteer force: firstly Dwyer had a large support base capable of vengeance against anyone involved in the apprehension of the rebel; secondly, as long as Dwyer continued to threaten Ireland’s security, the yeomanry would retain a pressing reason to remain mobilised. His apprehension ‘would have caused [the yeomanry] to be

27 Captain Hume quoted in Bartlett, ““Masters of the Mountains,”” 386.
29 Bartlett, ““Masters of the Mountains,”” 387.
stood down and thus suffer a loss of income.’

This dependence of the yeomanry upon Dwyer remaining at large, coupled with his favour amongst the ‘lower orders’ produced an uncomfortable situation for Captain Myers. In a letter to Sir Edward Littlehales at Dublin Castle, Myers recounted an incident in which Dwyer had been taken into custody by two yeomen. These men ‘were distinguished for their activity during the rebellion’ but were allegedly persuaded to release their captive by ‘a number of women in the house, who were terrified at the apprehension of having their house burned and their family murdered by the followers of this daring ruffian.’ Myers continued: ‘should there hereafter, unfortunately, be any disturbance in this part of the country this fellow [Dwyer] will be found to be a troublesome and dangerous ruffian; the attatchment [sic] and fidelity of the country people to him is without parallel.’

Carrying his revolutionary reputation with him, Dwyer’s transportation to the penal colony of New South Wales caused a fairly predictable stir amongst the Irish convicts and colonial officials. Yet, apart from his time in Norfolk Island for unproven seditious plotting, he appeared to have relinquished any attempt at importing Ireland’s grievances. Instead, rather ironically, Dwyer became involved in law enforcement as constable of the Georges River district. By May 1820 he had been appointed chief constable of Liverpool. This, however, is where his luck began to wane. Within the year he had lost his post for ‘drunken conduct and mislaying important documents’ and in December 1822 was found guilty of having set land belonging to a woman named Ann Stroud.’ With a fine and the loss of his spirit licence, Dwyer was forced to sell many of his possessions and spent several weeks in the debtors’ prison in Sydney in May 1825. Here he contracted dysentery,

30 Bartlett, ‘“Masters of the Mountains,”’ 387.
from which he died on 23 August 1825. Initially buried in Devonshire Street Cemetery, his remains were reinterred in 1898 at Waverley amidst centenary celebrations of Ireland’s 1798 rebellion; the ‘massive crowds attending Dwyer’s burial and the subsequent unveiling of the monument testified to the unique esteem in which Irish-Australians held the former Wicklow hero.’\textsuperscript{33}

Much of the romanticism that shrouds the life of Michael Dwyer is more difficult to reconcile with his final years in the colony. These years are also often absent within the related historiography. O’Farrell for instance, suggested that Dwyer ‘died in respectable prosperity.’\textsuperscript{34} Yet if acknowledged, his untimely end seems also to perpetuate the myth of the wronged rebel leader, punished for his attempt to stop the abuses that had continued to plague the Irish nation. ‘While the rising had failed,’ wrote historian and academic Tony Moore, ‘it was a noble defeat in a worthy cause—a brave but doomed stand like that of the 3,000 Spartans against the Persian Empire at Thermopylae.’\textsuperscript{35} Dwyer’s insurgent career in the Wicklow mountains retained an almost fantastic aspect and his daring escapades acquired popular resonance. He had done enough in Ireland; it seemed, to have earned the esteem of his compatriots regardless of his future colonial endeavours. Not once was Dwyer’s revolutionary career realised in exile. Yet this single fact did not appear to impact upon the perceived impression others, including historians, had of the former rebel. From the moment of his arrival in 1806, Dwyer ‘epitomised Irish rebellion in Australia’ and personified for colonial officials and fellow patriots ‘the period of archetypal Irish rebellion, 1798-1803.’\textsuperscript{36} His future conduct therefore became irrelevant: he had already attained an historical image as a seditious ruffian for authorities; as an Irish freedom

\textsuperscript{34} O’Farrell, \textit{Irish in Australia}, 30.
\textsuperscript{35} Tony Moore, \textit{Death or Liberty: Rebels and Radicals Transformed to Australia 1788-1868} (Millers Point: Murdoch Books, 2010), 131.
\textsuperscript{36} O’Farrell, \textit{Irish in Australia}, 30.
fighter for his compatriots, inspiring unrelenting suspicion from the former and respect from the latter in an interesting fusion of memory and myth.

Dwyer’s trajectory in Australia is not an isolated example of an Irish political offender achieving a degree of assimilation in the fledgling colony. Indeed many others, while not attaining the same level of celebrity, made lasting contributions to early colonial life. James Meehan, a former United Irish sergeant, arrived in Sydney aboard the *Friendship* in early 1800. He received early acceptance amongst colonial officials and his skills as a surveyor were quickly utilised. Just three years after his arrival, Meehan was carrying out the duties of Government Surveyor, a role he would continue to occupy until his retirement in 1821. Granted an absolute pardon in 1806, Meehan had most certainly forfeited his former revolutionary career to try instead his hand at integration. During this time he laid out various towns including Liverpool, Bathurst, Windsor and Hobart, and ‘watched his fellow countrymen settle in a swathe south-west from Campbelltown through the Southern Highlands to Monaro.’ He also seemed to embody Governor Macquarie’s attitudes regarding the rehabilitation and reform of transportees. Macquarie was convinced of the potential for emancipated convicts to re-enter respectable society, and certain of the need for this to be the case given that their numbers greatly exceeded that of emigrant settlers: ‘for the emancipated to grasp the normal responsibilities of citizenhood,’ observed Hughes, ‘they must be shown that they had rights while they were still in the larval stage of convict servitude.’ Meehan then, served as a powerful validation of Macquarie’s attitudes towards convicts. In a letter to Viscount Sidmouth in 1821, Macquarie wrote of him: ‘I have...had an opportunity of witnessing his indefatigable assiduity in the fulfilment of his arduous duties. I believe that no man had suffered so much privation and fatigue in

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the service of this Colony than Mr Meehan has done.’ He continued in a similar vein, conveying in his despatch that Meehan’s ‘integrity has never, to my knowledge, been impeached; and I certainly consider him to be, both on account of his professional skill, and the faithfull and labourious [sic] discharge of his duty, a valuable man.’39 Meehan’s position in relevant historiography is less certain. He receives fleeting mentions in numerous accounts of transported Irish political prisoners and is rarely used by historians to make wider observations about this group of individuals.40

Similarly, ‘General’ Joseph Holt remains relevant to this discussion, despite the turbulence of his earlier colonial years. Although relentlessly implicated in a series of Irish plots during his time in the colony, it is difficult to image how it could have been otherwise. Already anxious about the calibre of Irish convicts arriving on their shores, the authorities of colonial New South Wales could scarcely have overlooked the potential of the man, well-known for his success as a military strategist in Wicklow, for stirring up discontent amongst his countrymen. If unrest was to be the order of the day, there seemed no more obvious candidate (before the arrival of the Wicklow men in 1806), to lead dissenters than former rebel commander Joseph Holt. And yet, he seems to have been determined (for the most part) to distance himself from the cause that had resulted in his exile. Here, Holt exhibited a similar sentiment to many of the other transported veterans of 1798. He worked as farm manager for Captain William Cox, a Protestant from Dorset who had commanded the troops aboard the *Minerva*.41 Holt’s agricultural expertise, like other Irish transportees with farming backgrounds, made very real contributions to a

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40 Meehan receives passing references in Moore’s *Death or Liberty* and escapes mention in Silver’s *The Battle of Vinegar Hill*. He is ranked among O’Farrell’s ‘most prominent and prosperous Irishmen in Sydney Town’ although the details of his life are not thoroughly explored. O’Farrell, *Irish in Australia*, 33. For a comprehensive commentary on Meehan, see Whitaker, *Unfinished Revolution*.
colony struggling to attain self-sufficiency and stability in its early years. He was also, as documented by Peter O’Shaughnessy, an ‘expert builder and maker of roads and bridges.’ Many of Cox’s later enterprises—the building of St. Matthew’s Church, the Courthouse at Windsor and as the head of the project to construct the 101 mile road over the Blue Mountains in 1814—utilised skills likely to have been learnt from Holt. Is it then, as O’Shaughnessy questions, “too curious to consider” that the unsung Holt might deserve some reflected glory for those landmarks in Australian history? Certainly, his skills were such that his decision to leave New South Wales for Ireland in 1812 prompted an attempt from Governor Macquarie to persuade him to stay. Holt noted in his memoirs:

The Governor were very much surprized [sic] when he seen my goods and chattels in the paper and said it was a pity to let a man of my knowledge go out of the country. Because there was no man in New South Wales could cure a beast with me, either cow or horses. It is hard to think that a pickpocket or robber ever studies much about serviceable invention, so that leaves the country destitute of knowledge.

Holt’s reputation as a formidable rebel leader and the way in which his presence in the colony acted as a focus for Irish discontent became, under Macquarie’s governorship, secondary to the incredible need for the agricultural expertise he could offer. Yet when comparing the repute of Dwyer with the relative obscurity of Holt in Australian historiography, it is interesting to consider the implications of Holt’s decision to leave the colony. His departure seems to have hindered the resonance of his colonial reputation, just as allegations of informing on his men barred him from re-entering respectable society upon his return to Ireland.

Individuals such as these are far from inimitable examples of Irish political transportees shaping the future of the penal settlement. They are instead, representative of

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42 O’Shaughnessy, introduction to A Rum Story, 23.
43 O’Shaughnessy, introduction to A Rum Story, 23.
44 O’Shaughnessy, introduction to A Rum Story, 23.
45 Holt, A Rum Story, ed. O’Shaughnessy, 112.
a much wider trend that has since fallen out of the historiography because of the tendency to focus on the Irish political transportees almost exclusively as rebels. William Henry Alcock, who had arrived with Holt in 1800 aboard the Minerva, and John Ahern, who followed in the Anne a year later, were both deputies to the Colonial Engineer; Tristram Moore of the Atlas II became an apothecary at the General Hospital dispensary; and Patrick Field was appointed as a constable in Sydney in the aftermath of the Rum Rebellion. Thomas Brady, a Minerva transportee, stands as another noteworthy example. Implicated in the Castle Hill Rebellion of 1804 with the discovery of an ‘inflammatory letter’ that contained ‘terms and expressions...of a virulent and seditious tendency,’ Brady came to the attention of colonial authorities. Governor King labelled his ‘whole conduct grossly insolent and disrespectful,’ and continued: ‘such are the characteristic outlines of the stubborn and inflexible Anarchist who would establish his impious fabric upon the ruins of Society and the subversion of all order upon which its existence ever must depend.’ He would later serve the colony in the capacity of clerk and overseer.

These Irish successes were attained in spite of substantial hostility and potent feelings of mistrust. Having been imported from the British Isles, this aversion towards Irish transportees, particularly those convicted of political offences, found fertile ground in the penal colony. Though separated by a lengthy sea voyage and some twelve thousand miles, the New South Wales settlement retained many of the prejudices of its governing state. There existed a very real fear of violence and sedition at the hands of the Irish convicts and a belief in their potential of taking over the colony. While signs of this potential surfaced numerous times to varying degrees of effectiveness during these early years, however, the most serious attempt at mass escape in March 1804 had been promptly

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46 For further details regarding the various achievements of the Irish political transportees, see Whitaker, Unfinished Revolution, 181-83; 196-99.
neutralised. The arrival of Governor Macquarie saw the ushering in of a new period of prosperity for the colony, and this was indeed inclusive of the Irish political transportees. Given their generally higher levels of education and skills, these individuals were in a position to shape the direction the colony was to take.
The Irish Rebellion of 1798 brought together an assortment of ideological, political and confessional strands in a not always comfortable alliance. What gave the conflict its potency was its powerful fusion of liberal rhetoric with long-standing national antagonisms and religious resentments. Economic grievances and sectarian prejudices, as well as the idea of addressing ancient wrongs thus assisted in sustaining the rebellion. For loyalists in the immediate aftermath of 1798, the conflict remained a bloody and inveterate incident. Some, like Sir Richard Musgrave, went so far as to argue that the conflict was carried out by seditious Catholics and facilitated by their priests.\footnote{Musgrave, \textit{Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland}, 196-97.} For radical nationalists, on the other hand, the rebellion retained its heroic aspect, having been induced by a series of setbacks for the cause of Catholic equality.\footnote{Foster, “Remembering 1798,” 73.} Edward Hay and Father Patrick Kavanagh, for instance, highlighted the role of an oppressed peasantry goaded into a rebellion for their nation and faith.\footnote{Edward Hay, \textit{History of the Irish Insurrection of 1798}; Kavanagh, \textit{A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798}, 92.} These influential accounts have undoubtedly provided for a glossing over of experiences that are not easily reconciled with convenient and pervasive reductions of the conflict.

These accounts proved crucial in setting the tone for discussions of Irish convicts transported to colonial New South Wales in the aftermath of this bloody and largely unsuccessful rebellion. By colonial officials in particular, Irish transportees (especially those convicted for political offences), were regarded with a mixture of derision and fear. These ‘politicals’ were by no means a huge proportion of the population. By 1806, they numbered somewhere between 400 and 500. Yet the
impression of their presence was far greater. The impact was twofold. Firstly, it cemented an official image of the Irish that drew on deeply entrenched ideas about their savagery and volatility. Secondly, it allowed these Irish transportees to emerge as national heroes steadfast in their defiance of persecution and injustice. The tension between these competing stereotypes and the way in which they have played into the historiography of 1798 Ireland and colonial New South Wales is an interesting, if often overlooked, consideration. This historiography, especially in relation to Irish-Australia, is dated. As has been demonstrated, it has also exhibited a reliance on partisan accounts. The contributions of historians Patrick O’Farrell and Anne-Maree Whitaker are amongst the more valuable works, and must be acknowledged. Yet these accounts alone do not encompass the subject of the men of ’98 in their entirety. Nor can they be expected to.

A study of the lives of the Irish political prisoners reveals a wealth of information pertaining to Ireland’s turn-of-the-century turmoil and its reverberations for the distant penal colony of New South Wales. Many contemporary accounts reveal a general conviction that Irishness was synonymous with rebellion, which was thought to have made Irish integration a chimera. This was not the case. Instead of an extension of the United Irish cause, the exiles proved to be enterprising and resourceful. They achieved a certain level of standing and earned for themselves positions of authority which ultimately allowed them to regulate their new society to avoid some of the injustices they had found fault with in Ireland. While this is a far cry from the mythology that has built itself around these Irish ‘politics’, it is important to consider the realities of Irish assimilation in New South Wales. Both officially and popularly, violence clung to these individuals, forming something of a national reflection. Yet while their exploits in Ireland left a legacy of either suspicion or pride,
depending upon the observer, the men of ’98 proved themselves to be central to the development of the colony from a remote prison camp to a respectably prosperous society.
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