



Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798)

Period of activity and area: Student, Member and Auditor of Hist, Graduated February 1786

Rationale for memorialisation:



Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798), a graduate of Trinity college (Batchelor of Arts, Feb 1786), influential member and orator of the Hist during one of the most pivotal decades of Irish history, is of course widely recognised as one of Ireland's leading and most influential nationalists. Yet, despite his substantial achievements in life, and his towering posthumous legacy, he has remained unmemorialised by his own college. In his autobiography, written while in exile in France, he remembered Trinity warmly: 'I look back on my College days with regret, and preserve and ever shall a most sincere affection for the University of Dublin.' He recalled having obtained a scholarship and three premiums, but also three silver medals from 'the Historical Society, a most admirable institution, of which I had the honour to be Auditor', and close the session from the chair, 'the highest compliment that society' could bestow. Undergraduate history students at Trinity are especially pleased to quote his inspiring words from that speech: 'Be assiduous in history; bold, yet temperate in debate.' Yet students have not failed to notice the anomaly which has led to Robert Emmet having a lecture theatre named after him, though he was expelled from the College and never graduated, led a poorly-planned and doomed rebellion, while Tone has been forgotten. This is all the more astonishing given Tone's papers were donated to our Manuscripts department.

His published memoirs, diary and correspondence became one of the most inspirational and widely-read texts throughout the 19th-century, and his candour, vivacity, humanity and powers of observation were admired by everyone from revolutionary nationalists like Patrick Pearse to none other than Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland during the 1916 Rising. Birrell, in a previous life as a man of letters, had praised him as 'a formidable rebel...who loved adventure and romance; he was ridiculously outspoken', extravagantly frank, genial and gay. But beneath all this lay 'the serious purpose of an earnest man.' Tone's Writings have been overlooked for their rich interlayering of cultural history and literary references. While it is unlikely he would have chosen academia as a career, he expressed his indebtedness to Trinity College.

After 1922, but especially during the Troubles, Tone's legacy was hijacked by republican paramilitaries, and his name and purpose wrenched out of their 18th century context and stained with the ignominy of extreme sectarianism and wanton bloodshed. In this Centenary Year, outdated and narrow interpretations of history must not longer prevent us from celebrating the vibrancy of his mind and generosity of his spirit, and commitment to learning. Even a hardened Loyalist recalled how Tone had been an effective tutor at Trinity, helping him to succeed. Tone's legacy is far more complex than the narrow misrepresentations of him as an anglophobic revolutionary; amongst other things he had an unsatiable thirst for reading and learning. He was one of Ireland's greatest gamechangers, in the context of his times. It is timely for Trinity to remember Theobald Wolfe Tone.