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THE PROTESTANT NATION

(1775-1800)

by R. B. McDowell

The war of American independence profoundly and dramatically influenced Irish politics. There were significant resemblances between the position of Ireland and the North American colonies within the imperial framework. Each colony had a representative assembly just as Ireland had its more venerable and decorative parliament. Yet the Westminster parliament claimed the right to legislate for both the colonies and Ireland alike. So when the American colonists defied the British parliament, they were fighting Ireland's battle. Many Irishmen appreciated this and openly sympathised with the colonists, their sympathy being intensified by the fact that many of the colonists were emigrants from Ireland, more especially from Ulster. But the government secured the support of the Irish parliament for its American policy, and as the war went on military units maintained at Ireland's expense were sent overseas. The result was that, when in 1778-9 France and Spain, taking advantage of their old rival's transatlantic difficulties, entered the war on the American side, Ireland, stripped of troops, lay open to invasion. Faced with this danger Irishmen, or at any rate the Irish protestants, sprang to arms. All over the country groups of neighbours or public-spirited landlords formed volunteer corps. Volunteering soon became the fashion. The corps were numerous and splendidly uniformed. Reviews and parades were frequent. Gentlemen proudly used their volunteer rank, and Ireland soon abounded with captains and colonels. Volunteering not only provided an outlet for patriotism and opportunities for conviviality, but it also generated political activity. A corps easily became a debating society. And not only was political Ireland better organised than ever before but

it soon became obvious that a drastic shift in power had taken place. Armed force – the ultimate arbitrator – was no longer controlled by the government but by the politically-minded public.

All this coincided with a growing awareness of Ireland's grievances, commercial and constitutional. The dislocation of trade caused by the war strained a weak economy. By 1778 the commercial restrictions were being vigorously denounced as the source of Ireland's economic ills. The Volunteers paraded in Dublin with a cannon, having round its neck a placard with the words 'Free trade or this!' The British government, caught between British businessmen determined to maintain their privileges and angry Irishmen, fumbled, uncertain what was best to do. And when at last in 1779 it decided to conciliate Ireland by abolishing the commercial restrictions, it was too late to gain gratitude. By then a new agitation was gaining force – an agitation directed against the limitations on the powers of the Irish parliament imposed by Poynings' law, and the act of 1720 declaring the right of the British parliament to legislate for Ireland.

This movement had a great and eloquent leader in Henry Grattan, who after entering parliament in 1775, speedily established himself as a superb orator – nervous, high-flown, romantic. With generous enthusiasm he demanded that Ireland should be granted its rightful status, that of an independent nation, though he always insisted that Ireland would remain linked to Great Britain by a common crown and by sharing a common political tradition. In a series of powerful speeches he expounded his case, but the government, retaining a majority in parliament by the use of patronage, successfully repulsed his attacks. Outside parliament, however, the situation was growing critical. In the autumn of 1781 Lord Cornwallis, at the head of a large British force, hemmed in at Yorktown, Virginia, by an American army and a French fleet, surrendered. Then in February 1782 delegates from a number of Ulster Volunteer corps gathered at Dungannon in the parish church and pledged their support to resolutions in favour of legislative independence. The old empire was crumbling with defeat in America, there was a loss of confidence, and in Ireland an absence of force. Shortly after the Dungannon meeting, Lord

North, the British prime minister whose government had been struggling to maintain the old imperial system, was driven from office and the whigs who took his place were anxious to conciliate Irish opinion by abolishing the restrictions on the Irish parliament. The declaratory act was repealed and in the following year the British parliament specifically renounced its claim to legislate for Ireland. And Poynings' act was so drastically modified that the only control over Irish legislation retained by the crown was the right to veto bills. Also it was agreed that Ireland should have an annual mutiny act and that the Irish judges should be irremovable except by deliberate parliamentary action.

Ireland was now in form an independent kingdom sharing a monarch with the neighbouring island. For the moment there was a great upsurge of satisfaction and pride. Signs of sovereignty appeared in many directions. An Irish post office separate from that of Great Britain was started, the Bank of Ireland was founded, the Custom House and the Four Courts were built. Rutland Square and Merrion Square were completed. The Dublin which Malton at this time depicted was undoubtedly and self-consciously a capital city.

The sense of national unity manifested itself in the removal of a number of the religious, social, and economic disabilities which in the past had been imposed on the Irish catholics, though it should be quickly added that generosity was checked by caution. Only extreme liberals were prepared to allow catholics a share in political power. There was also an optimistic feeling about the economic future. Agriculture, as the famous Arthur Young noted when he toured Ireland, was improving, though by rapidly advancing English standards there was plenty of room for further improvement. Irish industry was expected to benefit from the availability of cheap labour and abundant water-power. The Irish parliament was ready to assist with tariffs and bounties, though keen protectionists sensed an unwillingness to go too far against English interests, and we still have a reminder of the economic optimism of the period in the great canals linking Dublin with the Shannon – impressive and extravagant eighteenth-century engineering feats.

It was soon seen however that constitutional forms did not correspond

88 James Caulfield, first earl of Charlemont, by William Cuming (National Gallery of Ireland)

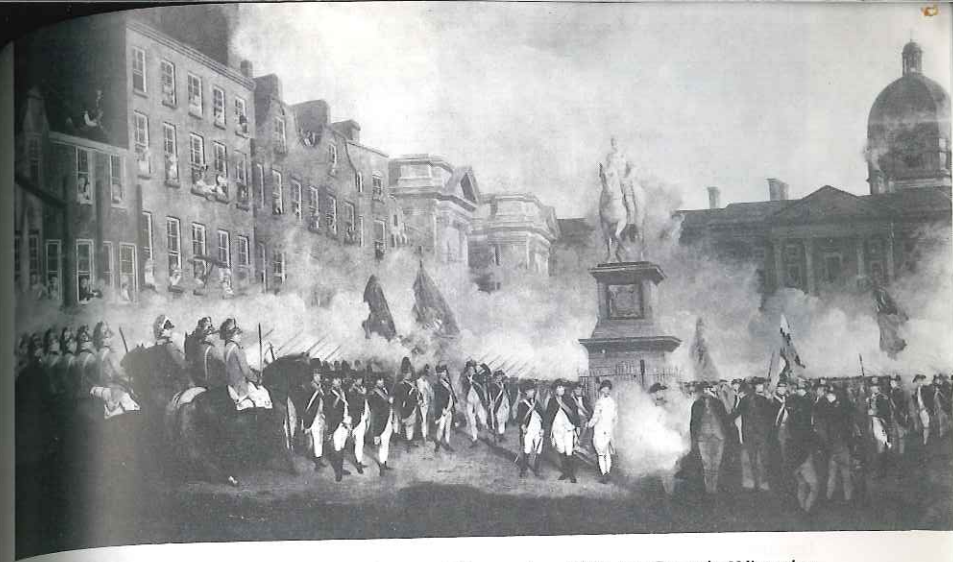


with political realities. Ireland was legally an independent country. But the king of Ireland was represented by a lord lieutenant nominated by the British government, and the lord lieutenant selected and controlled the Irish executive, which in turn controlled the patronage – peerages, places, and pensions – that influenced the outlook of many M.P.s. Behind the façade of independence, the British government continued to exercise control over Irish affairs. There was an obvious remedy – to reform parliament so that it should more accurately mirror public opinion. And in the early eighties liberals in England and Ireland were vigorously discussing schemes of reform. In Ireland the Volunteers took up the question, and after provincial conventions made up of delegates from different corps had agreed that the house of commons must be made more representative, it was decided to hold a national Volunteer convention in Dublin which would prepare a plan and submit it to parliament to be turned into legislation. The delegates gathered at the Rotunda on 10 November 1783 under the chairmanship of Lord Charlemont, the general of the Volunteers, noted for his refined taste as a patron of architecture, in politics a very cautious liberal. The most conspicuous of the delegates was Hervey, bishop of Derry and earl of Bristol, a magnificent prelate, a mighty builder of mansions, and at this time a strong radical. The most influential delegate was Henry Flood, a man with a strong political intellect and a severe oratorical style. Flood dominated the convention, and its plan of reform reflected his views. It was presented to the house of commons but that body, refusing to be overawed by armed men, summarily rejected it. The M.P.s had gauged the situation correctly. The Volunteers were far too respectable and law-abiding to employ force against parliament. When what they believed

was a reasonable plan was turned down, they had no idea what to do next. In fact they went home quietly.

From then on, reformers were face to face with a major problem. What was to be done if a majority in parliament, determined not to lose their privileges and confident that the system in practice worked very well, simply refused to alter existing arrangements? At first, reformers seem to have believed that the pressure of public opinion, if it were mobilised and displayed to its fullest extent, might shame or frighten the house of commons into reforming itself. And shortly after the Volunteer convention dissolved, the radicals of Dublin, led by Napper Tandy, an exuberant and at times absurd orator and a very shrewd political organiser, attempted to assemble a reform convention. It was to be made up of delegates from the counties and parliamentary boroughs who, having been chosen by the people, were to gather in Dublin and frame a plan of reform. It was a complete failure. Only a comparatively small number of delegates arrived (25 October 1784), and their deliberations attracted very little attention. In fact Irish radicals were taught another lesson. In the absence of success, the momentum behind a movement can slacken as the public lose interest.

Indeed during the middle eighties Irish politics were remarkably placid. But it was the quiet that precedes a storm. Events in France – the meeting of the states general, a great representative assembly, and the fall of the Bastille – were to start off a great political seismic disturbance. It is impossible to sum up the significance of the French revolution in a phrase. But it might be said that its driving ideas can best be expressed by the words liberty and equality. Liberty meant in the first place that the individual was protected against the arbitrary use of power by the government and in the second place that the nation – or at least those who were considered fit for the vote – should control the government. Equality meant that no section of the community should be legally privileged. Furthermore all institutions were to be ruthlessly examined, judged by the criteria of liberty, equality, and efficiency, and, if condemned, completely reshaped. It was the first time that a great European community had attempted to reconstruct the whole of its constitutional and admini-



89 Volunteer parade in College Green, 4 November 1779, by Francis Wheatley (National Gallery of Ireland)

strative machinery. Of course many of the principles the French were enunciating were, it could be argued, the commonplaces of British and Irish political thinking. But whereas in the British Isles they were used to justify the revolution of 1688, in France they were being employed to open up a new era. The relics of the past were being swept away, and European man, or at least the middle classes, were taking over control of their destiny. Liberals all over Europe were exhilarated at the prospect of reshaping society.

There were many links, commercial, cultural, religious, and family between Ireland and France, and the Irish newspapers provided abundant coverage of French happenings. And just at the very time the French revolution was getting under way, Irish politics had for local reasons begun to stir. Six months before the states general met, George III, king of Great Britain and Ireland, went out of his mind. It was agreed that the regent of Britain and Ireland should be the prince of Wales. But a great debate broke out over the method by which he should be installed in office. Grattan and his friends stressed that it should be made clear that the British regent did not automatically become regent of Ireland. The king's recovery put an end to the debate, but by then an Irish whig or liberal opposition led by Grattan, the Ponsonbys, and Curran, a great advocate who could fuse indignation and humour in his speeches, had

come into existence. It demanded not the reform but the 'purification' of parliament by the drastic scaling down of the pension list and by limiting the number of the office-holders permitted to sit in parliament. The whigs denounced in scathing terms the government's methods of maintaining a majority. At the same time Grattan's fervent belief in the British connection was shown in the summer of 1790. There was a possibility of war between England and Spain when their claims clashed on the west coast of North America. Grattan emphasised that the interests of England and Ireland were inseparable. His attitude angered a young protestant barrister, Theobald Wolfe Tone, who was beginning to take an interest in politics. He promptly published a pamphlet in which he argued that Ireland had no quarrel with Spain, and that 'the good of the empire' was a specious phrase. About a year later he developed his views at greater length in his famous publication, *An argument on behalf of the catholics of Ireland*. Tone argued that Ireland had 'no national government', its government being under British control, that the only way to counteract British influence over Irish affairs was by parliamentary reform, and that parliamentary reform could only be won if two underprivileged groups, the Irish catholics and the protestant radicals, cooperated in a reform programme that included catholic emancipation.

Tone's views greatly impressed the Belfast liberals. Belfast, at this time a town of about 20,000 inhabitants, was pulsating with economic and political life. It was the centre of the linen trade, the importance of which was symbolised by the recently opened White Linen Hall, and Ritchie was about to open his new shipyard, a step that marked the beginning of a great industry. At the same time the inhabitants were intensely interested in voluntary organisations for charitable and educational purposes – the Belfast Society for the Promotion of Knowledge, for which Tone's friend, Thomas Russell, a dreaming soldier, was the first librarian; the governors of the Academy, who managed a successful grammar school; and the Belfast Charitable Society which in the Poor House took care of the sick poor and set sturdy beggars to work at spinning and weaving. The typical Belfastman of the period, a presbyterian businessman, was bound to be critical of the ruling world of episcopalian landlords and to suspect

90 Theobald Wolfe Tone, c. 1792,
(National Library of Ireland)



that his economic interests were being ignored. Tone was invited to Belfast in the autumn of 1791. He was one of the few Irish politicians who found himself at home both in Belfast and Dublin, and during a fortnight of conversation and conviviality the Belfast Society of United Irishmen was founded (14 October). Immediately afterwards Tone got into touch with Napper Tandy, that experienced municipal politician. And as a result of Tandy's efforts the Dublin Society of United Irishmen came into existence in November. These societies were middle-class debating societies which strove to mould public opinion. The Dublin society published numerous manifestos, including a plan of parliamentary reform which appeared in 1794. This plan suggested that Ireland should be divided into 300 parliamentary constituencies equal in population, and that every man should have a vote (one prominent member of the society considered it logical that women should have the vote too, but admitted that the idea was impractical).

How did the United Irishmen hope to secure reform? Apparently at first they still trusted to persuasion, to the pressure of public opinion. Volunteer corps and political clubs passed resolutions in favour of reform, and early in 1793 Ulster reformers held a representative convention at Dungannon, the delegates pledging their support to parliamentary reform. It was hoped that later a national convention could be held at Athlone. To radicals parliamentary reform was the first step towards a just and efficient administration of Ireland. They looked forward to the abolition of tithe, a reduction in government expenditure, lower taxation, the encouragement of trade, and help for primary education.

But the pressure group which was successful during 1792 and 1793 was



91 The parliament house and Trinity College, Dublin, c. 1793, by James Malton (National Library of Ireland)

a catholic body. In 1791 the catholic committee began to bestir itself. Strengthened by the loss of its more moderate members who wished to leave the question of concessions to the government, the committee presented a petition to parliament asking for further relaxation of the penal laws. The result was the meagre relief act of 1792. When the catholic question was being debated in the house of commons, some M.P.s sneered at the committee's claim to represent the catholics of Ireland. The committee, led by a number of energetic and successful Dublin businessmen, of which the most prominent was John Keogh, reacted vigorously. They engaged Tone as their assistant secretary, thus both advertising their belief in toleration and obtaining a very efficient employee. And they decided to prove that they represented catholic opinion by asking parish delegates to choose representatives from the counties and towns all over Ireland to meet in Dublin.

The catholic convention assembled in Dublin in December 1792 and agreed to ask for the abolition of the remaining penal laws. A delegation was chosen to go to London to interview the prime minister, by-passing the Irish government. The lord lieutenant and his advisers were convinced that the protestant ascendancy should not be tampered with at a time when the established order all over Europe was threatened. Concessions might set the country on a slippery slope. Fitzgibbon, the lord

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chancellor, a hard-headed, outspoken conservative, was to argue that catholic emancipation would lead to parliamentary reform and that a reformed parliament would break the connection with Great Britain – a connection which was essential to British safety and Irish social stability. In fact his arguments almost completely reversed Tone's.

But the British government, facing the certainty of a war with revolutionary France, was desperately anxious to conciliate Irish opinion. And Burke, the great intellectual opponent of the revolution, was urgently eager to win over the Irish catholics to the conservative side by granting them the concessions they were morally entitled to. The British government put pressure on the Irish government and the result was the relief act of 1793 which swept away most of the disabilities and gave the catholics the vote. But the catholics were still excluded from parliament, from the judicial bench, and from the higher offices of state. At the same time the government agreed to some other concessions to Irish public opinion. Some pensioners and placeholders were excluded from parliament. Cottages were exempted from the hearth tax, the powers of juries in libel cases were extended. But at the same time Volunteering was suppressed, a paid home-defence force – the militia – under government control, was formed, and a convention act was passed forbidding assemblies to meet which claimed to represent a large section of Irish opinion.

By concession and repression authority was preparing to meet a time of crisis. Abroad Britain was now at war with France; at home there was much agrarian discontent, directed against tithe and rent. And in Ulster, competition for land led to rural rioting between catholics and protestants, rioting culminating in the 'battle of the Diamond' and leading to the formation of the Orange Society (September 1795). The whigs or liberals led by Grattan were in favour of further concession to the catholics. Complete catholic emancipation and a moderate parliamentary reform bill, stopping well short of manhood suffrage, would, they believed, satisfy the country at large. In January 1795, after a wartime coalition government had been formed in Great Britain, Fitzwilliam, a whig and a friend of Grattan's, became lord lieutenant and for the moment it looked as if the Irish whigs would be in control. But Fitzwilliam was inexperienced



92 The Custom House, Dublin, c. 1793, by James Malton (National Library of Ireland)

and impetuous. The British cabinet thought that in agreeing to complete catholic emancipation he was exceeding his instructions. Fitzwilliam was recalled – a decisive disappointment to those who hoped to carry out reforms by constitutional methods.

Meanwhile the radicals were growing impatient. Their impatience expressed itself in two forms. They began to organise themselves on military lines and tried to obtain help from revolutionary France. In the spring of 1794 William Jackson, a French agent, visited Dublin. Tone gave him a paper on Irish conditions which suggested that a French invasion would be welcomed. Jackson had brought with him to Ireland an old acquaintance who steadily informed the government of his doings. In the event, Jackson was arrested and on being convicted of treason dramatically committed suicide in the dock on 30 April 1795.

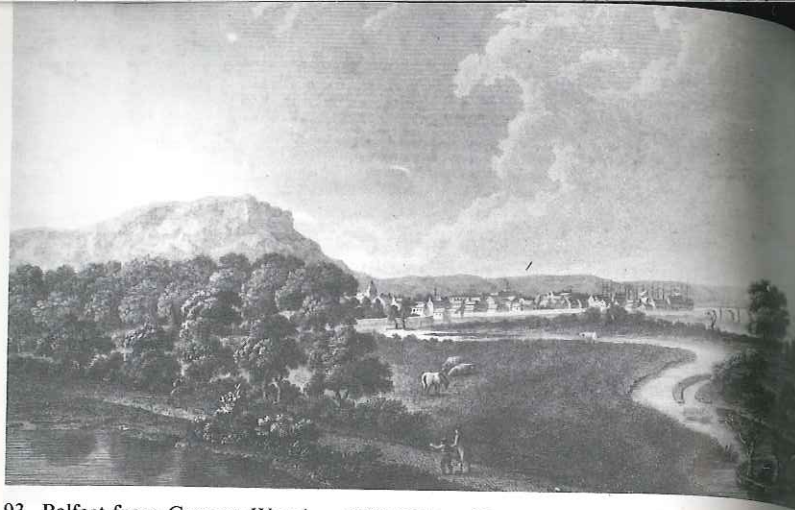
Tone was in an awkward position since it was clear that he had had dealings with Jackson. But the legal evidence against him was thin and he was personally well liked by some influential conservatives. So in the end he was permitted to emigrate to America. Using America as a stepping stone he reached France at the beginning of 1796. There, speaking on behalf of the Irish radicals, he started to press for a French invasion, and in the summer his requests were reinforced by Arthur O'Connor, a young M.P., who had shocked the house by expressing radical views. Since the beginning of the war the French had been considering an

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invasion of the British Isles, and Ireland was an obvious target. The very fact that it lay so far to the west rendered it easier for a French expedition to avoid the blockading squadrons. And if the French secured control of the Irish ports it was clear that British trade would be seriously impeded and the whole west coast threatened. Moreover, as Tone especially emphasised, in Ireland the invader would meet with a friendly reception. In Paris he put the case forcibly to Carnot 'the organiser of victory', and in December a French fleet carrying a force of 14,000 men, under the command of Hoche, one of the most brilliant of the young revolutionary generals, set out from Brest for Ireland. Everything went wrong for both the British and the French. The British fleet was badly placed and sluggishly led. The French, delayed by dockyard deficiencies, sailed as the winter storms set in. The fleet was scattered, Hoche's ship was carried far into the Atlantic, and the units which reached Bantry Bay, after tossing for some days in wild weather off the coast, failed to make a landing.

That the French should come so very near to success was most alarming to the Irish government, particularly as it was well aware that discontent at home was becoming effectively organised. In 1794, about a year after the war began, the Dublin Society of United Irishmen had been constrained by the authorities to suspend their meetings. Soon after, some of the middle-class reformers, acting along with urban workingmen and countrymen long accustomed to agrarian conspiracy, began to build up a widespread, secret, oath-bound society, pledged to obtain emancipation and reform. The organisation was based on innumerable small committees which sent representatives to local committees, which sent their representatives to county committees, which in turn sent representatives to provincial committees, the system culminating in a national committee.

The government took vigorous counter-measures. It encouraged the formation of yeomanry corps by conservatives, eager to defend the existing order, suspended the habeas corpus act, and passed an insurrection act which in a 'proclaimed district' imposed a curfew and gave the magistrates extensive powers to search for arms. And in 1797 Lake, a heavy-



93 Belfast from Cromac Wood, c. 1780 (Ulster Museum). Note the shipping in the harbour, the rural setting of the town, and, in the background, Cave Hill with MacArt's Fort (where Tone and his friends spent a memorable day in May or June 1795)

handed soldier, set to work by systematic raiding for arms to disarm Ulster. Soon throughout Ireland the desperate efforts of the government to check conspiracy produced a steady succession of incidents and outrages. The United Irishmen were determined to win catholic emancipation, radical reform, and independence. The upholders of the existing order were equally determined to preserve law and order, maintain the connection with Great Britain, and to resist French aggression. Neither side was prepared to yield and each charged the other with being ultimately responsible for the unhappy condition of the country.

One practical consideration influenced the radicals. As time went on and their organisation was extended and improved the danger grew that the government might regain the initiative and smash it. And the government had one valuable asset, its intelligence system. Early in 1797 Thomas Reynolds, who had a house in County Kildare, joined the United Irishmen. He was made a member of the Leinster provincial directory and shortly afterwards he decided to supply the government with information. As a result, in March 1798, the Leinster directory of the United Irishmen, meeting at Oliver Bond's house in Bridge Street, Dublin, were all arrested. Lord Edward Fitzgerald, an experienced soldier and a fervent revolutionary, managed for some weeks to evade arrest but on 19 May his hiding place was discovered, and he was captured, mortally wounded. When therefore a few days later the United

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Irishmen rose in rebellion, their efforts were badly coordinated, and the rebellion from a military point of view was a series of isolated struggles. There was skirmishing in the counties round Dublin, which was firmly held by the authorities. In the south-east there was a widespread rising in the counties of Waterford and Wexford. Having secured control of their own counties the rebels tried to drive west and north but were halted at New Ross and Arklow. Finally military columns converged on Vinegar Hill beside Enniscorthy, where the rebels had pitched their main camp, and after a fiercely fought engagement the United Irish force was dispersed. In the north there were risings in Antrim and Down. But Lake's operation in the previous year had seriously weakened the United Irishmen in Ulster. Moreover the government forces kept control of the strategic centre of the area, Belfast. At Antrim the rebels under Henry Joy McCracken and at Ballynahinch under Henry Munro were decisively defeated.

A few days before the rebellion broke out, Napoleon sailed for Egypt, which he had decided should be the main French overseas objective. So with the forces available only minor French expeditions could be sent to help the Irish rebels, and in fact these expeditions arrived after the rising had been suppressed. In August a small French force under Humbert landed at Killala and was joined by many Irishmen. Humbert's campaign was exciting but short. Having defeated a force of yeomanry and militia at Castlebar, he was surrounded by Cornwallis, the viceroy, at the head of a much larger force and compelled to surrender at Ballinamuck in County Longford (8 September). A week or so after Humbert surrendered, another small French expedition set sail for the north of Ireland. Off Lough Swilly it was met by a superior British squadron and most of the French ships were captured (October). On board the flagship was Wolfe Tone, serving as a French officer. He was brought before a court martial in Dublin, found guilty, and before he could be executed, committed suicide (19 November).

The rebellion had one important consequence. It demonstrated unmistakably that Ireland presented an urgent political problem. To William Pitt, the British prime minister, Ireland constituted a challenge. Pitt had

