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Mathieu Ferradou

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A “Banquet Fraternal” at Hamburg in 1798: The Irish Connection and the Birth of the Modern Conspiracy Theory

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This article is part of a collaboration with the Commission internationale d’histoire de la Révolution française (<https://cihrf.info/>) (CIHRF) following the August 2022 meeting of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (<https://www.cish.org/index.php/en/>) at Poznań, Poland. The Commission convened a panel on “revolutionary nationalism in a global perspective” together with the Japanese and Korean National Committees and the Network of Global and World History Associations.

By *Mathieu Ferradou*

At the French National Archives, the carton F⁷ 6151 contains three folders of about 100 documents each detailing Léonard Bourdon’s mission to Hamburg as special agent of the French Republic from 25 December 1797 to 18 April 1798. Out of the 27 letters forming Bourdon’s official correspondence with the Directory, 22 have the same handwriting, the same found in another letter, dated 3 germinal Year VI (22 March 1798) from Hamburg, and signed “W. D.,” which was addressed to the editors of the semi-official newspaper *Le Conservateur* in Paris.^[1] (https://www.archives-ouvertes.fr/ark:/61907/3/C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn1).

This letter is an account of a “fraternal” banquet, held in Hamburg for the celebration of spring, a holiday devoted to the sovereignty of the people in the republican calendar. About 80 guests, with Bourdon presiding, assembled in a room with tricolor decorations, sang civic hymns and patriotic songs, and held several toasts before ending the night in a philanthropic display – a quintessential example of a republican festival.

This banquet and its account held a deeper meaning and had far-reaching consequences. It was held one day later than it should have been—on the second of *germinal*, not the first. The account, dated the third of *germinal*, was an open letter, meant for publication in *Le Conservateur*, but it failed to appear in that newspaper’s issues during *germinal* or the following month of *floréal*. The author of the letter, recognized by his initials and distinct handwriting, was William Duckett, Irish revolutionary, who was at that time Bourdon’s secretary. In this article, I aim to understand why Duckett and Bourdon failed to get this account of the feast of spring published, and how this failure can be explained by the European-wide scandal this celebration provoked. To do this, it is necessary first to have the larger context in mind.

The collapse of the First Coalition against France and the French invasion of Switzerland in January 1798 left only England to fight against France. The driving force behind the First Coalition (and its

main source of funds), England faced an existential crisis: the Congress of Rastatt had opened in November 1797 with the objective of attaining a general peace in continental Europe, which would have allowed France to focus its might against England, most notably in launching a new expedition to Ireland. Plans were already underway, after the failure of the first expedition of December 1796. Hamburg, in this context, played a pivotal role as a neutral city, a status reinforced by English and French blockades, since all traffic had to go through the Hamburg hub.

In this situation, the English government instrumentalized the atmosphere of conspiracy going on in Europe, and notably in central Europe, since the publication in the spring of 1797 in London and Hamburg of the three first volumes of the Abbé Augustin Barruel's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, by linking it to the Irish question. The Illuminati scare was also a green scare: the British government used the fear of revolutionary conspiracy to rally Europe and the United States and reform a coalition against revolutionary France, and the Irish Jacobins were at the very heart of this conspiracist fear. This sequence lasted until the publication of the *Report of the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons* of March 1799, which was followed up in July by the passing of the Unlawful Societies Act and the Act to Prevent Unlawful Combinations of Workmen, respectively targeting secret societies (the Illuminati) and working-class organizations.

In his recent book on the Illuminati, Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire has given a very persuasive account of this sequence of events.^[2] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn2](#)) However, he did not include Hamburg in his narrative. Doing so requires examining the Irish question, which helps to bring the rise of modern conspiracy theory by offering a history from below to complete the cosmopolitan narrative. Finally, retracing the personal failure of William Duckett to get his letter published encapsulates the larger, ideological failure of revolutionary cosmopolitanism's ability to prevail over rising counter-revolutionary and conspiracist nationalism.

“Le citoyen Bourdon y a présidé”

In the aftermath of the Coup of 18 Fructidor (4 September 1797), republican Director Rewbell and the newly appointed Director Merlin de Douai met with Léonard Bourdon in November. Intelligence received from Hamburg, sent by ambassador Charles-Frédéric Reinhard as well as through other channels, demonstrated that the neutral city had been the center of the royalist conspiracy against the French Directory, one supported by English financing. Bourdon was chosen by Minister of Police Sotin to go to Hamburg and investigate.

Léonard Bourdon (1754-1807) was a former Montagnard deputy at the National Convention, one of the leading men in his radical section of the Gravilliers and in the dechristianization, which had earned him the enmity of Robespierre. He participated in Robespierre's downfall, but was still denounced by Thermidorians, notably Fréron in his newspaper, *L'Orateur du peuple*, as a “Septembriseur” in Orléans and for his role in the dechristianization. He was jailed from April to October 1795. Participating in the Coup of 18 Fructidor against the royalists, Bourdon staged his political come-back. His appointment as envoy to Hamburg in November-December 1797 was a chance to benefit from the Directory's swing to the left.^[3] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn3](#))

Bourdon arrived in Hamburg on January 23, 1798, officially as an agent of the Minister of Finances to secure provisions for France. As soon as he arrived, however, he found to his dismay that the French residents at Hamburg did not celebrate the decadi and other republican holidays. Surrounded by émigrés who had been refugees in the city since the early days of the Revolution, the “good citizens” kept a low profile. With the French consul Lagau and the secretary of the embassy Lemaître, Bourdon tried to rally the French citizens into an assembly which would meet regularly to raise their patriotic spirit. This initiative was far from revolutionary. Indeed, French nationals used to meet in an assembly before 1789. However, Bourdon's move created a political storm in much of central Europe,

implicating the Hamburger Senate, the Courts of Prussia, Denmark, Austria, and the Circle of Lower Saxony. Much of the consternation was because of the involvement of Bourdon's acquaintance-turned-employee William Duckett.

“Des patriotes hambourgeois et quelques defenders ont assisté à cette fête.”

William Duckett was born in Killarney, Co. Kerry, in Ireland in 1768 (or 1770). As a Catholic and because of the “penal laws,” he had to go to the Continent to receive an education. Educated at the Irish College in Paris, he spearheaded a revolt of the students there in October 1792, in the wake of the fall of royalty and the founding of the Republic in France, in connection with the sans-culottes of the Faubourg Saint Antoine. While the “republic in the college” was short-lived, it is at this moment that he met Bourdon.^[4] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn4](#)) Shortly after, having come to the notice of the French republican government, he was sent to Ireland with two other students as propagandists. Between early 1793 and 1795, he traveled throughout Ireland and England and established connections between democratic and radical societies. He was instrumental in the merging between the United Irishmen and the Defenders in Dublin in 1794-5. He published a series of open letters in the *Morning Chronicle* and *Morning Post* under the pen name of “Junius Redivivus,” attacking the British government of Pitt and its war against France, which attracted a lot of attention and forced him to flee England. In 1796, he was among the Irish patriots around General Hoche who sent him to England to prepare for the Irish expedition to connect with the republicans there and prepare for a general insurrection. To further this aim, he wrote proclamations to the Irish people and to the Irish soldiers and sailors in the English army and navy to incite mutinies and to set the docks on fire. He may have been involved in the mutinies of May and June 1797 in the Navy.

Back from England for the second time in July 1797, he stopped in Hamburg, writing a series of letters to the Directory in France. An attentive examination of the correspondence of the ministers and the Directors shows that it was his information that convinced the Directory that Hamburg had been the center of the royalist conspiracy of Fructidor. In fact, Duckett was able to spy on the counterrevolutionary networks there thanks to his brother Sidney, who lived in Bremen, and who had befriended an agent of Great Britain, the émigré and adventurer Anne Gédéon Lafitte, self-appointed “marquis de Pelleport.” Through Sidney, William was able to identify a network of false passports and a spying agency headed by English Colonel Donn that involved several French émigrés.^[5] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn5](#))

A graph (**fig. 1**) of Duckett's (large green circle at the center) network along with Bourdon's (large black circle in the center) confirms Mark Granovatter's “strength of weak ties” theory.^[6] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn6](#)) Bourdon was able to identify the British/émigrés networks in northern Germany and Denmark, thanks to the access Sidney Duckett (green circle at the bottom left) had to Verteuil, Harcourt, Donn – all leading figures in the royalist/émigrés/British network. Both Ducketts were committed republicans and adept at navigating the cosmopolitan, Bohemian underworld of spies and refugees who were so numerous in revolutionary Europe.^[7] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn7](#))

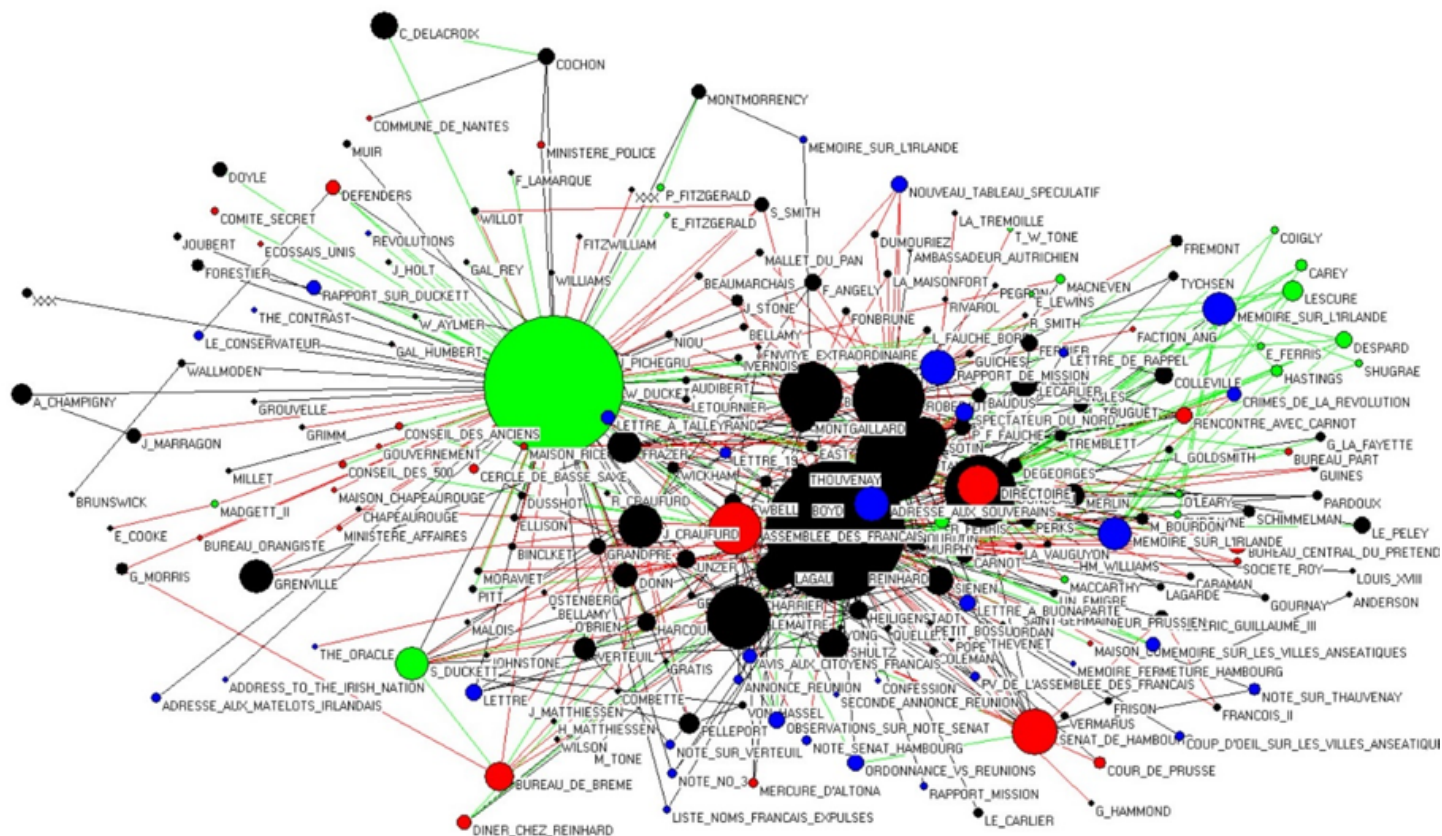


Figure 1 : The networks of William Duckett and Léonard Bourdon in Hamburg, 1797-1798. In this map generated from the Fichoz database, ^[8] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn8](http://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn8)) individual actors are either mapped in black or green (Irish) circles, collective actors are in red, and cultural actors are in blue. Black lines between two actors indicate a neutral action, red a hostile action and green a friendly action. The size of the circles is proportionate to the number of actions. The data here has been extracted from a plurality of sources in the French, English and Irish archives.

William Duckett also connected Bourdon with the exiled Irish, Scottish and English republicans in Hamburg, Britain, and Ireland (green circles on the right) who were in the process of unification through the United Britons. Three figures stand out: Colonel Marcus Edward Despard, whom William Duckett knew personally, and who was the first to bring him to the attention of the Directory, Father James Coigly, who was instrumental in the founding of the United Britons, ^[9] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn9](http://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn9)) and Irish Defender/United Irishman Peter Carey. ^[10] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn10](http://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn10)) Duckett knew Coigly from his Irish college years, while he had met Carey in Dublin and Despard in London.

Finally, through Bourdon, William Duckett connected the Irish and English exiles to the republican citizens of Hamburg who were important figures of the German and Jewish Enlightenments, among whom was Dr. Johan August Unzer (1727-1799), friend of Professor Reimarus, Johann Heinrich Campe and of Moses Mendelsohn, and who, with his wife Charlotte Ziegler, promoted educational and sanitary reforms, and who advocated in favor of the emancipation of the Jews. They were also connected with the pro-French trading families like the Sievekings and the Matthiessens. Johann Georg Kerner, ambassador Reinhard's personal secretary, had founded in April 1797 a philanthropic society in Hamburg which served as a meeting point for all these republicans.

In sum, the fraternal banquet convened by Léonard Bourdon and Duckett had gathered French citizens, agents of the French Republic, Hamburger citizens and patriots, important figures of the German and Jewish Enlightenments, United Irishmen and Britons, Irish Defenders, who toasted together the future "federation of the republics in Europe" under the approving eye of Bourdon (and

Duckett).

The Conspiracist Backlash

The “fête du printemps” and its toasts took place within the backdrop of a conspiracy scare which was exploited to its fullest by the English government. By the late eighteenth-century, European society’s obsession with conspiracy theories had reached a fever pitch, only amplified by the dissolution of the Jesuits (<https://ageofrevolutions.com/2023/01/16/the-dissolution-of-the-jesuits-and-the-birth-of-an-anti-semitic-conspiracy-theory-in-the-age-of-enlightenment/>). The Abbé Barruel exploited this vein when he published in April 1797 his *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme*: The same year, 1797, also saw the publication of John Robison’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments*. In this book, the respectable professor in Edinburgh denounced, as its complete title clearly suggests, the “secret meetings of free masons, Illuminati, and reading societies” in Great Britain and Ireland.

In Hamburg, Bourdon was warned in February 1798 of the upcoming publication of a pamphlet, entitled *Adresse aux souverains de l’Europe*, accompanied by a second part, *Lettre à Buonaparte*, written anonymously in English, translated into French and published by Pierre-François Fauche, the editor of the royalist newspaper *Le Spectateur du Nord*. This pamphlet presented Bourdon’s assembly as the nexus of a conspiracy to overthrow all orders and to “revolutionize” the government in Hamburg. Its goal was to disrupt the ongoing negotiations at Rastatt by accusing France of trying to disrupt all established states. Bourdon, and then Reinhard’s successor, Claude Roberjot, managed to prevent the publication of the book. Yet, the Senate forbade Bourdon from holding his planned banquet in a public building. This is why it was delayed and took place in the home of Lagau, the secretary of the French legation.

Across the Atlantic, this atmosphere of conspiracy prompted the United States government to pass the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts in June and July 1798, clearly targeting the Irish refugees from the failed “rebellion.”^[11] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn11](https://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn11)) In September 1798, former general Dumouriez, published *Nouveau tableau spéculatif sur l’Europe*, in which he denounced “Jacobine” and “Illuminati” societies of Jews and Irish who, under the aegis of Bourdon (without explicitly naming him), conspired to revolutionize all of Northern Europe.^[12] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn12](https://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn12)) Dumouriez’s informant was an émigré, D’Angely, whose reports held in the National Archive at Kew are quite precise, as he also worked for the British ambassador, Craufurd, who had been appointed in March to watch over the Irish.^[13] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn13](https://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn13)) At the same moment, Robert Clifford (who had translated Barruel’s book into English), published anonymously his *Application of Barruel’s Memoirs of Jacobinism to the Secret Societies of Ireland and Great Britain* in London.

The Illuminati/ Irish/ Jewish conspiracy was encapsulated in the *Report of the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons*, presented in March 1799. The preparatory documents for the reports, furnished by the Privy Council to the Committee, show that intelligence from Hamburg was collated with reports from all over Ireland and Britain about workers’ combinations, reading circles, and philanthropic societies.^[14] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn14](https://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn14)) In the wake of the Irish “rebellion” of 1798, these societies were targeted as centers of sedition. The final report highlighted these connections (except for the Jewish aspect) to denounce an international Illuminati and French/Irish, i.e., “Jacobine” conspiracy.^[15] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn15](https://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn15))

Conclusion

Faced with this international campaign of fear of conspiracy, the French Directory chose to back down. Talleyrand, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, demanded Bourdon’s recall to his colleague Sotin.

In Hamburg, the philanthropic society was closed by the Senate. The Danish government sent Dr. Unzer to trial in Altona where he had fled, and he lost custody of his children.^[xvi] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn16](https://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn16)) Duckett had been sent by Bourdon back to France and was employed by the Minister of Marine to convey money to England to pay accomplices who would help him trigger a new mutiny in the Navy in order to facilitate a new French expedition to Ireland. However, he was identified by none other than Pelleport on his way to Hamburg and arrested, which provoked another diplomatic crisis. Duckett survived a poisoning attempt. The English government finally ordered Craufurd to let him go, having already accomplished its aim by detaining him in Hamburg. He lingered in the city for a while before returning to Paris.

The 1797-99 moment, when patriots across Europe contemplated a European federation of republics,^[xvii] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn17](https://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn17)) had generated tremendous fear across the Atlantic world. In his *Memoirs*, Barruel quoted from a document he had supposedly translated from German, in which the Hierophant Adam Weishaupt, the leader of the Illuminati, used the word “nationalism” to denounce the tendency of men to retreat from the great family of mankind, from cosmopolitanism, into nations and empires. Then, the Hierophant denounced patriotism as an expression of localism and “national preference” against cosmopolitanism. This very adroit maneuver enabled Barruel to coin a word, “nationalism,” to deride and caricature a political project, the democratic republican nation, as an “illuminated” cosmopolitan delusion, one linked with antislavery, atheism, and anarchy.^[xviii] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn18](https://C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_edn18)) In other words, Barruel hijacked the concept of the “nation,” redirected it toward the idea of “nationalism,” and therefore rendered it desirable for the counterrevolutionaries. Against these alleged conspiracists, the counterrevolutionaries – the real conspiracists – promoted a nationalist version of the nation, depriving it of its democratic republican basis, and drew on these conspiracy fears to split liberals from the emerging left. The English-backed campaign in the international public sphere linked this fear with the fear of Irish and Jewish emancipation. The failure of the Rastatt Congress (with the assassination of the French delegates, including Roberjot, in April 1799), the building of the Second Coalition, and the Coup 18 Brumaire all insured that this conception of the “nationalist nation” prevailed and erased the revolutionary one. A defeat we still live in the wake of today.

Mathieu Ferradou (<https://www.parisnanterre.fr/m-mathieu-ferradou>) is *maître de conférences* (associate professor) at the Université Paris Nanterre and Centre d’histoire des sociétés médiévale et moderne (<https://memo.parisnanterre.fr/>) (MéMo). He is currently working on his book manuscript provisionally titled, *Aux Etats-Unis de France et d’Irlande : une hétérotopie transnationale à l’époque de la République atlantique*(publication forthcoming).

Title Image: The city of Hamburg, 1730. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Further reading:

Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *Les Illuminati. De la société secrète aux théories du complot* (Paris: Tallandier, 2022)

Michael Butter and Peter Knight (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020)

Barry Coward, Julian Swann, *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: From the Waldensians to the French Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004)

Janet Polasky, *Asylum Between Nations. Refugees in a Revolutionary Era* (New Haven and London: YUP, 2023)

Michael Taylor, "British Conservatism, the Illuminati, and the Conspiracy Theory of the French Revolution, 1797–1802", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Spring 2014), pp. 293-312 Paul Weber, *On the Road to Rebellion. The United Irishmen and Hamburg, 1796-1803* (Dublin: Four Courts

Endnotes:

[1] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref1\)](#) W. D., "Au rédacteur du journal du conservateur à Paris", Hamburg, 3 germinal [an VI – 23 Mar. 1798], Archives nationales, Pierrefitte, F⁷ 6151 plaq. 9, p. 68.

[2] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref2\)](#) Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *Les Illuminati. De la société secrète aux théories du complot* (Paris : Tallandier, 2022).

[3] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref3\)](#) Michael J. Sydenham, *Leonard Bourdon. The Career of a Revolutionary, 1754-1807* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999). Sydenham does not identify Duckett.

[4] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref4\)](#) Mathieu Ferradou, "'La République au collège', Paris, 29 octobre 1792 : catholicisme, radicalisme et républicanisme entre France et Irlande pendant la Révolution française (1792-1795)", *Études irlandaises* 41-2, (2016). (<https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/5021>)

[5] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref5\)](#) Duckett to Talleyrand, Hamburg, 19 brumaire an 6 [9 novembre 1797], Archives Diplomatiques (AD), La Courneuve, Correspondance Politique Angleterre 592 ff 84-85 ; Reinhard to Talleyrand, Hamburg, 10 frimaire an VI [30 novembre 1797], AD Correspondance Politique Hamburg (CPH) 112 ff 148-149.

[6] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref6\)](#) Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited", *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 1 (1983), 201-233.

[7] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref7\)](#) See Robert Darnton, "Bohemians Before Bohemianism", 3rd KB Lecture, Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2006 for more on this milieu.

[8] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref8\)](#) See Jean-Pierre Dedieu et Álvaro Chaparro, "De la base au réseau. L'apport des bases de données à l'étude des réseaux", *Les Cahiers de Framespa*, 12 (2013). (<https://journals.openedition.org/framespa/2173>)

[9] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref9\)](#) Mathieu Ferradou, Timothy Murtagh. "A workers' international behind the Irish Rising of 1798? James Coigly, the Irish, Scottish and English popular movements and the Republican Federation project (1797-1798)", *Mo.do. Rivista di Storia, scienze umane e Cultural Heritage* 3-4 (2021) (<https://www.rivistamodo.it/2021/10/21/ripensare-la-geopolitica-delle-rivoluzioni/>), 187-226.

[10] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref10\)](#) His name was Peter, and not Christopher, contrary to what both Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution. The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 140, and Roger Wells, *Insurrection. The British Experience, 1795-1803* (London: Breviary Stuff Publication, 2013), 109, wrote.

[11] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref11\)](#) Terri Diane Halperin, *The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Testing the Constitution* (Baltimore, 2016); Wendell Bird, *Prosecutions under the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2020).

[12] [\(//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref12\)](#) Charles François Dumouriez, *Nouveau*

tableau spéculatif de l'Europe (n. p., 1798), 181-5.

[13] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref13](#)) National Archives, Kew (NA), Foreign Office, 33/15-17.

[14] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref14](#)) The documents are listed in NA PC 1 43/152.

[15] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref15](#)) *Report of the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons* (London, 1799), 35-6.

[xvi] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref16](#)) Lemaître to Talleyrand, 24 germinal an VII [13 Apr. 1799], AD CPH 114 ff 141-2.

[xvii] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref17](#)) Bernard Gainot, “Vers une alternative à la « Grande Nation » : le projet d’une confédération des États-nations en 1799”, in Pierre Serna (ed.), *Républiques sœurs. Le Directoire et la Révolution atlantique* (Rennes : PUR, 2009), 75-86.

[xviii] ([//C50B1D46-711B-4198-A0C8-B302DAD48379#_ednref18](#)) Abbé Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, 5 vol. (London and Hamburg, 1797-1803), 3, 172-173.

ATLANTIC HISTORY FRENCH REVOLUTION HISTORY IRISH HISTORY LEAVE A
COMMENT

