

Becoming a Counterrevolutionary: A Conservative

Noble in the National Assembly, 1789-1791

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In recent years historians have increasingly come to appreciate the role played by the different conservative factions within the National Assembly at the beginning of the French Revolution. Several of the alignments or clubs on the Right—the “Monarchiens,” the “Impartials,” the “Capuchins”—are known to have been surprisingly well organized as voting blocks and active in Constituent debates. On occasion during the first year of the Revolution these groups succeeded in electing Assembly presidents and secretaries, taking control of key committees, and substantially influencing the shape of certain legislation. At the time of its creation toward the end of November 1789, the Society of the Friends of the Constitution was intensely aware of the organization of the Monarchiens and even used them as a model in shaping their own “club.” Though the strength of the conservative factions would diminish after the summer of 1790, as increasing numbers of conservative deputies ceased attending or abandoned the Assembly altogether, organized alignments on the Right would persist in the political dynamic of the Constituent through the dissolution of that body in September 1791.¹

Unfortunately, however, the evolution of the politics and ideas of these conservatives has always been more difficult to follow than that of their patriot colleagues. For the most part, historians have had to rely on the speeches pronounced in the Assembly by certain conservative deputies, on the few newspapers to which such deputies contributed, and on a certain number of personal memoirs. Invariably such documents concerned only that small minority of conservatives who published or

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¹ On the Monarchiens, see Jean Egret, *La révolution des notables. Mounier et les Monarchiens* (Paris, 1950); and Robert Griffiths, *Le centre perdu. Malouet et les “Monarchiens” dans la Révolution française* (Grenoble, 1988). See also the author’s *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton, 1996), esp. chaps. 6 and 8.

who spoke in the Assembly.² As for their memoirs—those of Malouet, Reynaud de Montlosier, or of the marquis de Ferrières, for example—almost all were written twenty or thirty years after the events they described, a period during which memories were profoundly influenced and modified by the later experiences of the emigration and the Terror.³ Moreover, memoirs rarely convey the immediacy found in personal letters or diaries, nor do they allow us to follow the evolution of political ideas from week to week or month to month.

To date, however, only very few series of letters written by conservative deputies have ever been located. Unlike the patriot deputies, the conservative nobles and clergymen seldom wrote to local municipalities, intermediary commissions, or other institutional bodies. For this reason, their letters have rarely found their way into public archives. Indeed, until recently only five significant series of correspondence by nobles on the Right had been identified: those of the marquis de Villemort, the marquis de Ferrières, Garron de La Bévière, Le Clerc de Lassigny de Juigné, and the co-deputies Banyuls de Montferré and Coma-Serra.⁴ Among these five, only the letters of Ferrières are truly extensive and cover a substantial portion of the Constituent period. But despite the considerable interest of this marquis from the Saumurois, he was far from typical of the conservative nobles in general. He was very much an individualist who published extensively before the Revolution and studiously avoided signing most of the protests by the Right during the Constituent. He never emigrated and fully cooperated with the government of the Terror, even serving as a municipal official in Marsay from 1793 to 1796.⁵

It is for this reason that the recently discovered correspondence by the noble deputy and lieutenant-général of Poitiers, Pierre-Marie Irland de Bazôges is particularly interesting and important.⁶ Unlike Ferrières, Irland would come consistently to identify himself with the conservative opposition sitting on the Right of the Assembly. Indeed, according to a report published at the time of the Restoration, few Constituent deputies ultimately participated in more formal protests against Revolutionary decrees—fourteen of a possible total of fifteen.⁷ The ninety letters preserved in the correspondence, written to Irland's noble colleague and closest

² Among the deputies of the Constituent Assembly, 116 are known to have published before the Revolution. During the Assembly, seventy-one deputies are known to have pronounced two-thirds of all the speeches (Tackett, 54, 232).

³ Pierre-Victor Malouet, *Mémoires*, 2 vols., ed. Baron Malouet (Paris, 1868); François-Dominique de Reynaud de Montlosier, *Mémoires*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1830); Marquis Charles-Elie de Ferrières-Marçay, *Mémoires*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1825).

⁴ By "significant" I mean only those series containing a minimum of ten letters: Claude-Jean-Baptiste de Garron de La Bévière, letters to his wife: Archives départementales de l'Ain, 1 Mi 1. Marie-Mesmin du Bouex, marquis de Villemort, "Lettres du marquis de Villemort au comte François d'Escars (1790-1791)," ed. Henri Calvet, *Archives historiques du Poitou*, 52 (1942), 5-167; Charles-Elie, marquis de Ferrières-Marçay, *Correspondance inédite*, ed. Henri Carré (Paris, 1932); Louis-Jean-Baptiste Le Clerc de Lassigny de Juigné, letters to his wife and mother: private archives of the château de Saint-Martin, Taradeau (Var); and Michel de Coma-Serra et Raymond-Antoine de Banyuls de Monferré, letters to the correspondence committee of Perpignan: Archives départementales des Pyrénées-Orientales, C 2119.

⁵ See Ferrières-Marçay, *Correspondance inédite*, introduction by Henri Carré.

⁶ The letters were cited occasionally in Marquis Marie de Roux, *La Révolution à Poitiers et dans la Vienne* (Paris, 1910). I was subsequently able to locate them in the private archives of Michel Beauchet-Filleau, with the assistance of the director of the Archives Départementales des Deux-Sèvres where they had recently been deposited and are now held in the Fonds Beauchet-Filleau, unclassified register of "lettres politiques, 1788-90." They will be published in 2005 by the Centre vendéen de recherches historiques in La Roche-sur-Yon, edited by Katherine Turley.

⁷ See *Déclarations et protestations de messieurs les députés des trois ordres aux Etats-généraux de 1789, contre les décrets de l'assemblée dite "constituante"* (Paris, 1814).

friend, Henri Filleau, allow us to follow the political and psychological itinerary of an exceptionally thoughtful and articulate conservative over nearly the entire period of the Constituent: to examine, in short, how one individual *became* a counterrevolutionary.⁸

Relatively little is known of Irland's life and career before the Revolution. Despite his surname, he descended not from an Irish but a Scottish family, a family present in Poitiers since the fifteenth century and ennobled in the sixteenth.⁹ His direct ancestors seem to have held the office of lieutenant général from one generation to the next since the late sixteenth century. Over this period the Irlands had amassed a substantial fortune and Pierre-Marie himself could claim a marriage dowry worth nearly 160,000 livres—over three times larger than the average noble dowry in Poitou and over six times greater than the average dowry for commoners in the Constituent Assembly.¹⁰ His marriage to the daughter of a prominent local baron indicates the extent to which this *robe* family was well integrated into the older Poitevin nobility.¹¹

During his years as an ancien régime magistrate, Irland had earned a certain notoriety for his support of the monarchy in its struggles against the parlements. At the end of Louis XV's reign he had backed the Maupeou reforms and opposed "l'égoïsme des parlementaires." He had also endorsed the edicts of May 1788, more than delighted to see the creation of a "Grand Bailliage" in Poitiers at the expense of the Paris Parlement. That summer he was invited to Versailles for special consultations with Loménie de Brienne concerning the political situation in Poitou. In March of the following year he was elected alternate deputy to the Estates General, actually taking a seat in the National Assembly at the end of August 1789, following the resignation of the duc de Luxembourg. Despite his position as a "backbencher" who rarely spoke in the Assembly and who was never elected as an officer or committee member, Irland would take a passionate interest in virtually everything that happened in Versailles and Paris. His letters to Filleau were often written rapidly, jotted down on his lap while attending the meetings. He excused himself for "mon griffonnage et même la négligence de style."¹² Nevertheless, with his analytical mind and his legal and professional background, his correspondence provides an exceptionally thoughtful account of Assembly debates as viewed from a conservative perspective.

In fact, when Irland first arrived in Versailles, and for several months thereafter, he was clearly prepared to cooperate with the Revolution and to follow the rules of the new representative political system. There was no obvious indication that he adhered to an "aristocratic" ideology. Indeed, in a rather remarkable "profession of

⁸ For unknown reasons, the last ten weeks of the correspondence have been lost. By comparison, the correspondence of Ferrières to his wife is more ample overall—with 166 letters—but includes two six-month periods during which his wife was in Paris and no letters were written. Irland wrote continuously throughout the period.

⁹ Most of the biographical information in this paragraph was kindly passed to me by Katherine Turley. See also Edna Hindie Lemay, *Dictionnaire des Constituants, 1789-1791*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1991), 1: 465-66.

¹⁰ The average noble dowry in Poitou was about 50,000 livres. Irland himself brought a dowry valued at 134,000 livres. His bride also brought a permanent rent of 1,200 livres—suggesting an additional capital of about 24,000: information from Katherine Turley. On dowries of commoner deputies in the Estates General, see the author's *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 40.

¹¹ Note also that Irland's grandfather was both *lieutenant général* and *chevalier de Saint-Louis*, suggesting that he may have served for a time as an officer in the military.

¹² Letter of 4 Sep. 1789. Though Irland hired a secretary, most of his letters to Filleau seem to be in his own hand.

faith” penned in mid-January 1790, he insisted that he was a moderate, “ni aristocrate ni démocrate.” The ideal government for France, he argued, would be “une monarchie tempérée par les lois.” And in his opinion, “l’aristocratie comme la démocratie est éloignée d’un tel gouvernement.”¹³ For the time being he continued to believe that a compromise could be worked out within the context of the Assembly. As all of his co-deputies of the nobility from Poitou, he was critical of the intransigence of the comte d’Antraigues and the vicomte de Mirabeau, when the two announced on 4 February that they could only swear a restrictive oath to the new Constitution: “nous n’avons pas cru devoir mettre au jour une opinion qui pouvait être la pomme de discorde, lorsque nous désirions tous la paix.”¹⁴ Apparently under the influence of Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des lois*, he professed great admiration for the parliamentary government of England.¹⁵ Given his earlier support of Maupeou and Brienne, it is not surprising that he also condemned the ancien régime French parlements when several of them attempted to assert their independence from the National Assembly.¹⁶

Moreover, in the early months of the Constituent, Irland showed himself to be remarkably flexible and tolerant toward other deputies whose opinions he did not share. He praised the oratorical talents of both the Monarchien Lally-Tolendal and the “democrat” Mirabeau.¹⁷ At the beginning of 1790 he also displayed a certain equanimity toward the Jacobins: “Je ne blâme pas ... ceux qui sont du club,” he wrote, even if “leurs principes sont différents des miens.” Insofar as he was critical of the Friends of the Constitution, it was mainly because, in his view, they were engaging in a politics of factionalism. “Ces assemblées partielles,” he wrote, were unacceptable: “rien n’était plus propre à mettre la division entre les membres.” Even as late as the winter of 1789-90, he firmly announced that he belonged to “no party.”¹⁸ And he hoped and believed that he would be able to participate in the new regime that was being created, once the Constitution had been completed. “Dans le nouvel ordre de choses,” he wrote, “d’un instant à l’autre, je pourrais encore être appelé à la vie publique.”¹⁹

The apogee of his involvement in the affairs of the Constituent Assembly—and one can say much the same for many other deputies—was clearly between November 1789 and February 1790. During this period, in the midst of debates on the new divisions of the French territory into departments and districts, he became passionately committed to promoting the advancement of his home city of Poitiers as an administrative and judicial center. Nearly all the letters written at this time make reference to the complex negotiations and horse trading between the different regional factions and sub-factions. Throughout these discussions he worked particularly closely with his colleague from the Third Estate and fellow citizen of Poitiers, René-Antoine Thibaudeau.²⁰

Yet we must also not underestimate the possible differences which, even in 1789, separated Irland from the patriots on the Left. In the first place, several of his

¹³ Letter of 18 Jan. 1790.

¹⁴ Letter of 8 Feb. 1790. Compare his assessment of the intransigent speech of Duval d’Eprémessnil: letter of 1 Oct. 1790.

¹⁵ Letter of 14 Sep. 1789.

¹⁶ Letters of 9 Nov. and 18 Dec. 1789.

¹⁷ Letters of 18 and 26 Sep. 1789.

¹⁸ Letter of 18 Jan. 1790.

¹⁹ Letter of 8 Jan. 1790.

²⁰ See esp. the letters of 6, 9, and 20 Nov. 1789.

letters to Filleau give evidence of an exceptional emotional attachment to the person of the King, an attachment which seemed even to intensify over time. Already, in the midst of the October Days, he had rushed to the palace with a small group noble gentlemen and remained standing for over seven hours to protect Louis from what he felt was the dire threat of the Parisian crowds. Such an action was all the more remarkable in that this *robe* noble who had spent most of his life on a court bench was probably relatively inexperienced in the use of arms. Though he lamented in his correspondence Louis XVI's "faiblesse" and "défaut d'énergie," he never abandoned the ideal of a quasi-feudal relationship between the King and his nobility, an ideal to which he felt all gentlemen were bound by the ties of honor and fealty.²¹ In the second place, Irland never accepted the concept—most clearly formulated by the abbé Sieyès—that each deputy represented the entire nation. In his own mind, he would always remain the representative only of the nobility, and more specifically of the nobles of his province. Although he did occasionally make reference to "l'opinion publique," he always returned in the end to the small group of gentlemen who had elected him. "Tous les députés," he wrote in April 1790, "tiennent leurs pouvoirs de leurs [électeurs] et ils les tiennent d'eux seuls." And he was frequently critical of the deputies of the patriot majority who, in his view "sont accoutumés à fouler aux pieds leurs mandats, à substituer leur propre volonté à la volonté connue de leurs commettants."²² It was on the basis of this very limited conception of representation, that he would later justify his numerous formal protests against votes by the Assembly's majority—protests always strongly condemned as illegal by the patriot deputies.²³

In any case, the spring of 1790 would mark a sharp and dramatic change in Irland's attitude toward the policies of the majority in the Constituent. The origins of this growing disaffection with the Revolution are complex. Undoubtedly for Irland, as for many other as yet uncommitted deputies, conflicts concerning the reform of the Church would serve as a catalyst. Unfortunately, we have very little evidence concerning his attitudes toward religion on the eve of the Revolution. During the first weeks of his presence in the Assembly, the new deputy from Poitou did not take an inordinate interest in the questions of the Church. He announced without commentary the decrees abolishing religious vows and granting civil rights to Protestants. He displayed no particular emotion when proposals for the sale of church lands were first introduced in October 1789: "plan ... que je ne crois pas sans mérite, mais qui a besoin d'être analysé."²⁴

It was only in the midst of the great debates on ecclesiastical lands at the beginning of November that he began to have misgivings. The speeches of the abbés Maury, Boisgelin, and Montesquiou clearly impressed him: "soit par la force du raisonnement, soit par les autorités qu'ils avaient citées, soit par la force de leur éloquence." Significantly, however, he was influenced less by religious objections than by reasoning based on legal principals and questions of property. After listening to the speeches of the three ecclesiastics he announced that the law placing Church property "à la disposition de la nation" was "contre le principe sacré de la

²¹ Letters of 4 Mar. and 27 June 1791.

²² Letter of 30 Apr. and 5 Oct. 1790. Cf. also his letter of 26 Sept. 1789.

²³ On this "ancien régime" concept of representation, see Ran Halévi, "La monarchie et les élections: position des problèmes," in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 1, *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (Oxford, 1987), 387-402.

²⁴ Letters of 25 Sept. and 12 Oct. 1789.

propriété.”²⁵ When the Assembly broached the question once again in mid-April 1790, Irland was ready to take up the defense of the Church with a carefully considered theory of property which he had never mentioned before and which he might almost have taken from the early writings of Rousseau: “La loi qui est la base du pacte social,” he wrote, and “la loi de la propriété ... a été le but des hommes qui, en quittant l’indépendance qu’ils tenaient de la nature, ne l’ont sacrifiée en se réunissant que pour s’assurer à jamais la conservation de ce qui restait de la propriété de chacun.”²⁶

Yet the critical turning point for Irland came in mid-April 1790, when in the midst of the debates on church property the Carthusian monk Dom Gerle suddenly proposed that Catholicism be declared the official state religion. The proposal set off an extraordinarily passionate debate between the two sides of the Assembly hall. As the great majority of the nobles, Irland was outraged by the defeat of Gerle’s motion: “Quel étrange abus d’éloquence, du raisonnement et des mots!” he concluded concerning the declaration of the majority: “Aucun peuple de l’univers peut-être n’en a fait un semblable.” And for the first time in his correspondence he openly associated himself with what he described as an “assembly” of the deputies on the Right. With the other noble deputies from Poitou he would subsequently take part in the coalition meeting in the hall of the Capuchins and sign on 19 April the first of his formal protests against the decrees of the Assembly.²⁷

From this point on, he came increasingly to subscribe to a whole set of ideas—one might say “ideology”—promoted by the leaders of the Capuchin faction. For the first time the threat to religion was enunciated as a central reason for his opposition. He now began arguing that the revolutionaries not only wanted to seize control of all Church land but to destroy the Catholic religion. He made few comments on the Civil Constitution of the Clergy itself, whose theological implications were beyond his competence. But on several occasions he attacked the oath imposed on all clergymen with cure of souls on 27 November 1790. He was deeply unhappy over the religious schism that would divide the country in early 1791: “Ainsi la religion catholique n’est plus la religion de l’Etat. C’est la secte des novateurs qui jouit de cette prépondérance; [quant] à la religion catholique romaine, elle est rabaissée au niveau des sectes protestantes.”²⁸

And nevertheless, based on his correspondence, the religious policy of the Constituent was never the sole, and perhaps not the most important issue pushing Irland toward a break with the new regime. One can identify at least three other questions which engendered feelings of particular anger and opposition on his part. In the first place, Irland was vigorously opposed to the Assembly’s policies on the judiciary, first elaborated shortly before the Dom Gerle Affair. As the former chief magistrate of a *sénéchaussée* tribunal strongly devoted to his profession, he was never able to accept the new jury system for criminal justice. “Toutes les anciennes idées,” he lamented “sont bouleversées.”²⁹ And he was even more unhappy that the Constituent opted not to create regional courts of appeal in certain departmental *chef-*

²⁵ Letter of 2 Nov. 1789.

²⁶ Letter of 10 Apr. 1790.

²⁷ See his commentary on the “Décret concernant la motion sur la religion catholique,” preceding his letter of 15 Apr. 1790. See also his letters of 20 Apr. and 3 May 1790. According to his letter of 19 Apr., “fidèle à mes principes,” he had refused to formally join the Capuchin “club.” But it is obvious that from this point on he attended and closely adhered with virtually everything this association did.

²⁸ Letter of 15 Apr. 1791. See also those of 29 Oct. 1790 and 6 Jan. 1791.

²⁹ Letter of 10 Apr. 1790.

lieux. With the demise of the parlements, he clearly hoped to see a decentralized judiciary that would favor Poitiers, in the manner of the Maupeou parlements or the “grands bailliages” of chancellor Lamoignon. He was thus bitterly disappointed that Poitiers’ new courts would have even less preeminence than under the ancien régime and would be essentially coequal to those of all other departments. He was convinced that the nation would never be able to find a sufficient number of men with the requisite “lumières, l’instruction, l’expérience dans l’art de juger.” In sum, the Revolution’s judicial legislation was based on “ces principes exagérés de liberté et d’égalité dont se sont voilés des démagogues.” It would bring “une vraie calamité pour la France entière, puisque notre vie, notre honneur, notre état et nos propriétés ... se trouvent livrés par ce décret à l’ignorance, à l’impéritie, à l’inexpérience.”³⁰ In May 1790 he linked himself once again with the “Capuchin” faction of deputies in formally protesting the Assembly’s judiciary policies.³¹

In the second place, Irland was extremely unhappy with the decree of 19 June 1790 abolishing the hereditary nobility. To judge by the amount of space devoted to the subject in his letters, this act was even more disturbing to him than the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. It was, in his opinion, “le décret le plus ridicule, le plus injuste et le plus illégal qui soit encore sorti de l’Assemblée.”³² Along with almost all the other nobles of the Poitou delegation, he signed another formal protest, in which a whole series of arguments were mobilized against the law. Nobility, in Irland’s view, was as much a form of property as were the lands of the Church, and in this respect, it was “inviolable et sacrée.” But he also convinced himself that a hereditary nobility was integral to the whole monarchical system, so that without the nobles the position of the king himself would be threatened. When he accepted his mandate as deputy, Irland had sworn an oath to protect the nobility and “aucune puissance humaine” could ever prevent him “de remplir religieusement l’engagement sacré” which he had contracted.³³ To the very end of his tenure as deputy he would always use the feudal titles of individual nobles when referring to his colleagues, ostentatiously rejecting the Constituent’s decree on such usage.

In addition, once Irland came openly to identify himself with the Right, he revealed himself increasingly unhappy with what he felt were the manipulative political tactics, the “tyranny” through which patriots were now winning legislative victories on nearly every front. During the spring 1790 he began complaining of the lack of “freedom” within the Assembly and the use of dubious parliamentary manoeuvres employed to block the deputies on the Right from speaking. He was convinced that it was this “défaut de liberté” which had prevented the Dom Gerle motion from being passed. He was thus particularly angry when several patriot political leaders forced deputies who had signed protests against the majority to resign their Assembly offices of president or secretary. The “tyrants” on the Left, wrote Irland, “ne connaissent et ne veulent connaître aucun coupable dans ceux qui tiennent à leur parti, comme ils veulent pouvoir juger criminels les innocents accusés qui ne sont pas de leur parti.” The comte de Virieu, prevented from becoming President because of his protests in the Dom Gerle Affair, was “une des victimes de la persécution qu’on exerce sur ceux qui n’opposent que l’honneur à l’infamie.”³⁴ By the same token, Irland became convinced that the “majority” was mobilizing the Parisian

³⁰ Letters of 10 Apr., of 10 May, and 23 July 1790.

³¹ See above, note 7, *Déclarations et protestations*.

³² Letter of 2 July 1790.

³³ Letter of 28 June 1790.

³⁴ Letters of 16 Apr., and 13 Nov. 1790, and of 21 Jan. 1791.

crowds to intimidate the conservatives. He was horrified by what he conceived as the “anarchy” of Paris. He had always held a very low opinion of the common people, “ces furies” as he called them in October 1789. Now, in his view, “tel est l’effet ... de cette indépendance absolue et de cette licence effrénée dont [on] a laissé le peuple se saisir sous le masque imposant de liberté, [que] celui de Paris est devenu pis que les hordes de sauvages.”³⁵

Thus, despite his earlier commitment to never take part in any partial “associations,” by the late spring of 1790 Irland was entirely and self-consciously identifying himself with what he described as the “minority” of the Assembly, a group composed of the majority of the deputies of the clergy and the nobility, plus a handful of individual members of the Third Estate. He virtually cut all ties with those deputies of the Poitou delegation who did not take part in this faction—notably with his former friend and colleague, Thibaudeau, whom he now described as an “enragé.”³⁶ His earlier flexibility and pragmatism seemed entirely to disappear. By 1791 the confrontation between the minority and the majority in the Constituent was portrayed as a kind of Manichaean struggle between good and evil, between “honor” and “infamy.” Henceforth, he began linking most of the patriots’ actions with the supposedly “abstract and empty” philosophy of the Enlightenment. We will probably never know if Irland had read Edmund Burke—extracts of whose *Reflections on the Revolution* had already appeared in French translation in 1790.³⁷ But a great many of his ideas might easily have reflected the thought of the Anglo-Irish statesman. “Nos philosophes modernes,” he wrote in May 1791, “ont fait disparaître [la religion et la loi]. Les insensés n’ont pas voulu voir que les abstractions et les raisonnements tirés de l’égalité et de l’indépendance de l’état de nature étaient inapplicables à un vieux corps politique.”³⁸

In fact, he argued, the supposed patriot appeal to “reason” was nothing but unreason, prejudice, and self-interested passion. “Il a été un temps,” he wrote to Filleau in September 1790, “où ... j’aimais à penser que la raison l’emporterait. Je voyais encore des motifs d’espoir. Mais j’avoue qu’il ne m’en reste plus.” And Irland became progressively more pessimistic for the future. “Je crois que la France est perdue, les impôts mal payés, l’esprit du peuple perdu; la licence la plus effrénée substituée à une police exacte et existante sous le nom de liberté; l’irréligion ayant déchiré son masque, devenue elle-même persécutrice.”³⁹ He had the impression that he and his friends on the Right were being assailed from all sides. He was “placé dans cette minorité qui est l’objet de la haine des uns, celui de la censure des autres, et qui n’a de consolation que dans l’estime du petit nombre assez juste pour apprécier la difficulté des circonstances.”⁴⁰

It was in this state of mind that he came, in the end, to withdraw all allegiance to the new government and to place all his hopes in a future counterrevolution. At times he seemed to embrace a *politique du pire*: “On pense généralement que plus les rouages de la machine sont mauvais, moins elle pourra rouler.” But already in the spring of 1791, before the king’s “flight to Varennes,” he had come to accept the need for an invasion of France by foreign armies in order to purge the country of the

³⁵ Letter of 13 May 1791.

³⁶ Letter of 15 May 1790.

³⁷ Edmund Burke, *Réflexions sur la Révolution de France. Extraits du livre de M. Burke* (London and Paris, 1790).

³⁸ Letter of 13 May 1791. Cf. the letter of 30 May 1791.

³⁹ Letters of 2 Sept. 1790 and of 28 Jan. 1791.

⁴⁰ Letter of 14 June 1791.

Revolutionaries. In April of that year he heard rumors that Austrian troops were approaching the frontier and were planning to act within the month. “C’est bien tard,” he wrote. He repeated much the same hope in the days after Varennes.⁴¹ Even a humiliating national defeat by the Empire seemed to be a lesser evil than the continuing domination by “the Jacobins.” Although we have unfortunately lost Irland’s letters for the final ten weeks of his mandate, it was clearly in this state of mind that he signed a whole new series of protests: against the “imprisonment” of the royal family after Varennes; against the Constitution voted by the Constituent in early September; and even against the King’s signing of that Constitution, which Irland and his colleagues were convinced had been coerced.

Indeed, at the conclusion of the Constituent Assembly, Irland seems immediately to have emigrated and enlisted as a simple “volunteer” in the army of the princes being organized beyond the Rhine—his lack of military experience preventing his obtaining the status of officer. Here he would serve with six colleagues from the Constituent delegation of nobles from Poitiers—as well as with his correspondent Filleau—he and his noble friends remaining together in the counterrevolution as they had once voted as a unit in the Constituent. He returned to France only in the first decade of the nineteenth century when he finally accepted a reconciliation with the Napoleonic regime.⁴²

When Irland de Bazôges was seated as a deputy in Versailles in late August 1789, he had clearly been prepared to accept the great foundation acts of the French Revolution: the creation of a sovereign National Assembly, the destruction of feudal and corporate privilege (on August 4), and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Soon after his arrival, as we have seen, he had announced his desire both to take an active part in the New Regime and not to affiliate himself with any faction. As late as January 1790 he had continued to maintain that position. But by the late spring, even before the suppression of the nobility, his attitude toward the Revolution, the whole tone of the letters had changed dramatically.

Why and how did this happen? Ultimately, Irland’s testimony is more revealing of the chronology than of the precise reasons for his transformation. Clearly, the critical moment was the great debate surrounding the Dom Gerle Affair in mid-April 1790. Irland claimed at the time that the failure to declare Catholicism the state religion offended his religious beliefs, and there is no reason to doubt his sincerity. Yet it is also true that he had never previously shown himself to be particularly devout, and that he had been seemingly unperturbed by earlier Church transformations.

In my view, two other factors came into play to make the Dom Gerle episode a particularly pivotal experience. First, when Irland witnessed the debate, he was already deeply frustrated with the failure of his efforts to achieve the judicial reforms he had worked for and concerning which he had given his one and only major speech before the Assembly. In this respect, the defeat of mid-April helped focus the accumulated anger and resentment he already felt over other issues. Second, the Dom Gerle debates represented a moment in which particularly intense group pressures were exerted on the deputies. We know that the leadership on both sides of the Assembly lobbied vigorously, pushing all members to take a stand, to demonstrate their solidarity for or against everything accomplished by the Assembly since the

⁴¹ Letters of 19 Apr., and of 4 and 25 July 1791.

⁴² Henri Beauchet-Filleau, *Tableau des émigrés du Poitou aux armées des princes et de Condé* (Poitiers, 1845), 36, 121. Irland served as mayor of Poitiers from 1807 to 1811 and died there in 1818 at age sixty-eight (Lemay, 1: 466).

previous summer. It thus became the major polarizing event of the first year of the Revolution. We also know that the other noble deputies from Poitou, with whom Irland was very close and to whose opinions he was extremely sensitive, all opted for the same position. In the emotion of the moment, and with the collective support of his friends and colleagues, he was persuaded to drop his self-imposed rule against association with factions and begin attending the conservative Capuchin club. Once he had implicitly chosen sides and had committed himself to this faction, his whole orientation, his very rhetoric was transformed, as he was rapidly socialized by the Capuchin group and adopted their ideological positions. Thereafter, he ceased all talk of political independence and fully identified himself with the “minority,” meeting and collaborating with them on virtually all protest petitions through the end of the Constituent, and embracing the politics of counterrevolution.

In previous studies focusing primarily on the liberal, patriot contingents within the Constituent, I have stressed the importance of the revolutionary process, of “the school of the Revolution”—as one commoner deputy described it—in the progressive radicalization of deputy positions. During the first year of the Revolution many patriot deputies evolved political positions and ideologies which they would scarcely have imagined only a few months earlier. The case of Irland de Bazôges suggests that a similar if opposite process also occurred among the conservative deputies. It seems clear that for most of the representatives neither radicalism nor counterrevolution was “scripted” in May 1789, but that both were profoundly affected by the complex, dynamic, and creative process developing during the Revolution itself.