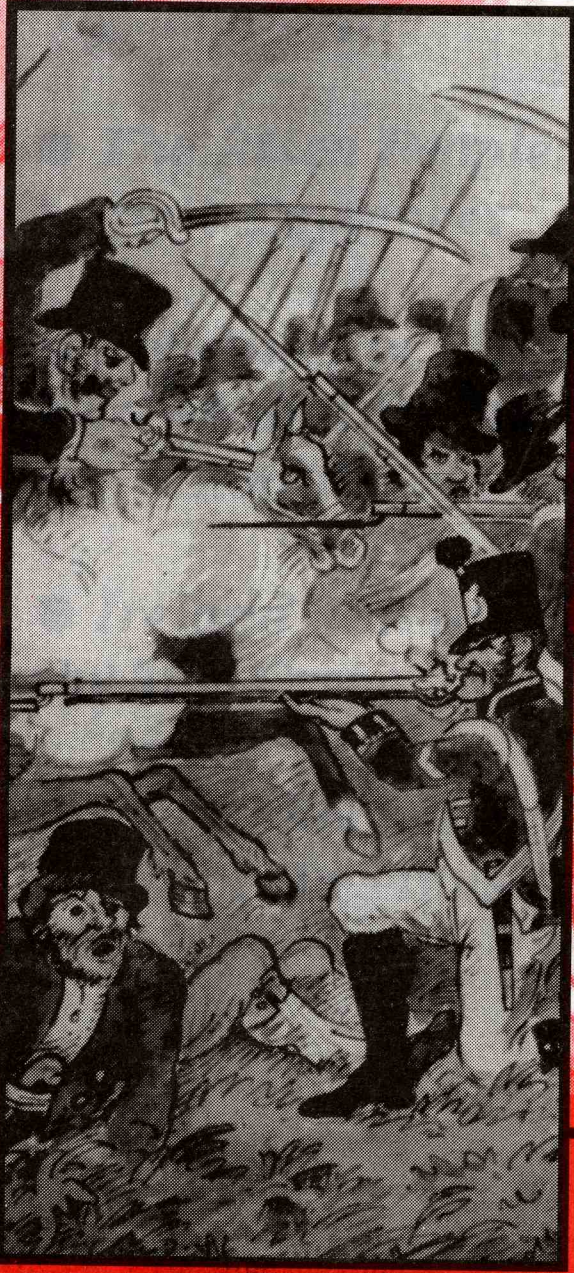


Revolution in Ireland

1798



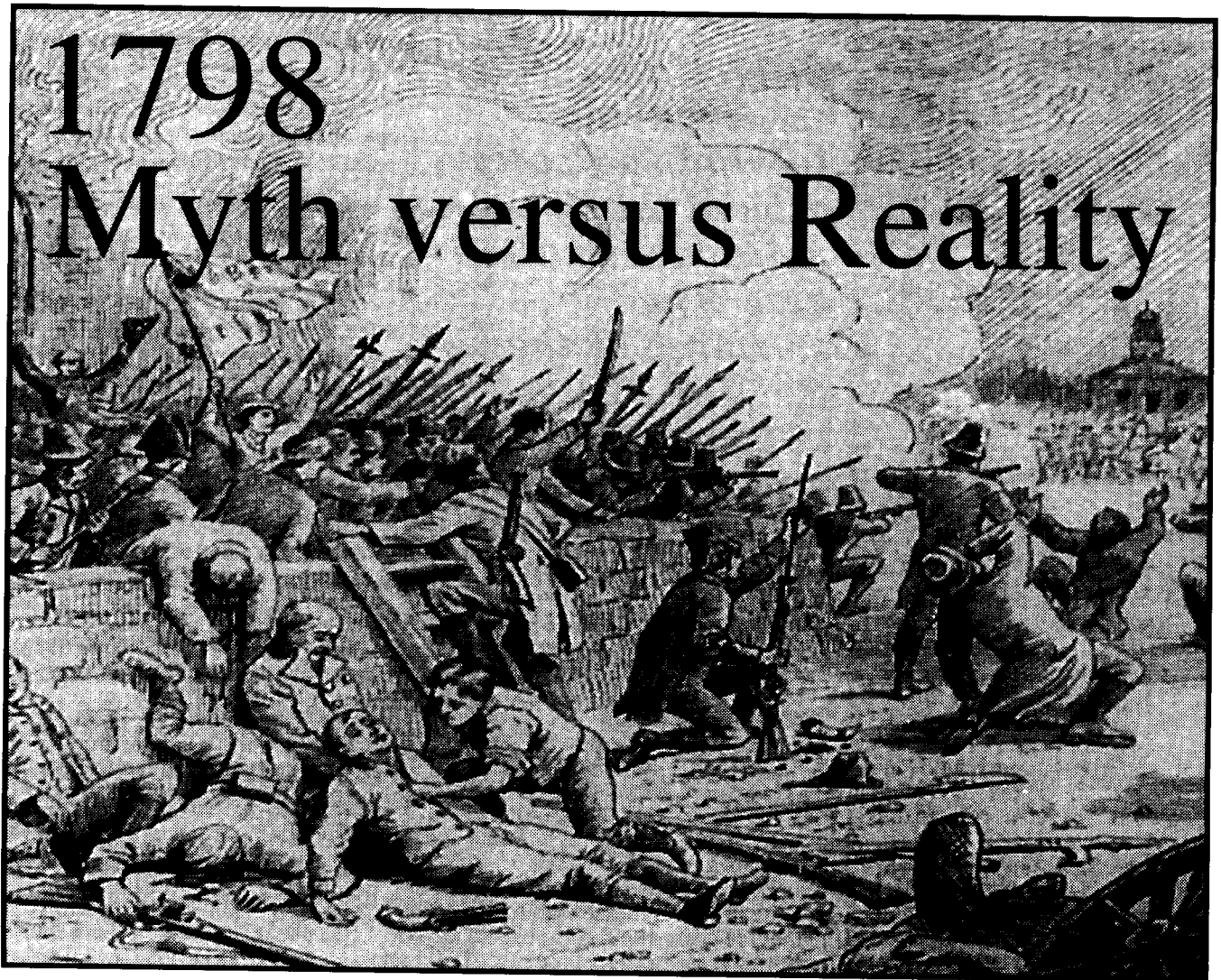
Contents include:

Sans Culottes of Belfast
The Wexford Republic
Rebellion in the North
Ireland and the French Revolution
Remembering and Rewriting 1798

Socialist Party
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Contents

- ***Introduction: 1798—Myth versus Reality***
Pages 5 - 10
- ***The Sans Culottes of Belfast:***
The United Irishmen and the Men of No Property
by John Gray
Pages 12 - 17
- ***The Risen People: The Wexford Republic***
by Ruth Coppinger
Page 18 - 23
- ***Rebellion in the North Was Not Just***
Antrim and Down!
by Anton McCabe
Pages 24 - 28
- ***Ireland and the French Revolution***
by Tom Crean
Pages 29 - 33
- ***Remembering and Rewriting 1798***
by Eoin Magennis
Pages 34 - 28



The battle of Antrim—United Irishmen on the attack, led by Henry Joy McCracken, 7 June 1798.

The 200th anniversary of the 1798 United Irishmen rebellion has led to the publication of an astonishing amount of material. An enormous range of commemorative events have also been organised.

Even the Orange Order is getting in on the act by staging a reenactment of the Battle of the Diamond which resulted in their establishment in 1795. Republicans are of course most at pains to claim 1798 as the birth of their tradition. But liberals have also been keen to "reclaim" the rebellion from Orange and Green mythology.

The Socialist Party believes this is an important debate. We are producing this pamphlet in order to make available to the left wing public some of the findings of more recent historical research as well as our own analysis of the

importance of the revolutionary events of the 1790s for the workers' movement today.

The aim is not to produce a comprehensive history but rather to focus on some of the key facets of the revolution including the role of artisan workers in Belfast, the Wexford and Ulster risings, the connection with the French Revolution and the ways in which the history of the rising has been manipulated.

Ireland before 1798

It is impossible to understand 1798 without considering the nature of Irish society as it emerged from the upheavals of the 1600s including the Ulster Plantation, the Cromwellian invasion in 1649 and the Battle of the Boyne in 1691. The defeats of Gaelic Ireland in that

century resulted in the confiscation of almost all land owned by Catholics.

However, the infamous Penal Laws which were passed by the Irish Parliament after the defeat of James II by William of Orange in 1691 were not only aimed at Catholics but also at those Protestants outside the Established Church. Ireland in the 18th century was therefore a society dominated by a Church of Ireland elite (the so-called Protestant Ascendancy) who owned the bulk of the land and monopolised politics. Dissenters, including Presbyterians who constituted the majority of Ulster Protestants, were second-class citizens and Catholics were third class citizens.

The 1700s in Ireland were also a period of economic growth which

was reflected in the development of Georgian Dublin, the beginnings of a mechanised textile industry in the Northeast and the emergence of a Dissenter and Catholic urban middle class.

This middle class increasingly chafed at the restrictions on Irish trade imposed by the British parliament which were seen as hampering the further development of the Irish economy. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Catholics lived an impoverished existence on the land with many Protestant small farmers not much better off. In short, it was a society with huge social contradictions which were bound to come to the fore at some stage.

Irish Volunteers

At several key points in the events which led to the 1798 rebellion, it was international developments which acted as catalysts. The first of these was the American Revolution of 1776 which had a profound impact on the consciousness of Dissenters because of the key role that Dissenters who had emigrated from Ulster played in George Washington's revolutionary army.

The other effect it had was due to the need to withdraw British troops from Ireland and send them to America. The Protestant Ascendancy was alarmed at the prospect of not having any defence in the midst of a largely hostile population. This led to the establishment of the Irish Volunteers in 1778 which pledged to defend Ireland from invasion while the British army was otherwise engaged.

The Volunteers came under the influence of the "patriot" opposition in the Irish parliament who began to use this force to push for political reform, including the right of the Irish parliament to introduce its own legislation. The Irish parliament was based on a thoroughly undemocratic franchise with many urban constituencies being effectively controlled by individual aristocrats. Political reform inevitably led to raising the question of removing the Penal Laws against Catholics.

The British parliament conceded "legislative independence" for Ireland in 1782 but the Protestant

In 1789 another event outside Ireland radically altered the political situation here. The storming of the Bastille by the citizens of Paris struck fear in the heart of the Irish ruling class but gave enormous hope to ordinary people that tyranny could be defeated.

Ascendancy was in no way willing to countenance a wider franchise or Catholic emancipation. These things stood for almost a decade.

French Revolution

In 1789 another event outside Ireland radically altered the political situation here. The overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy in France and the storming of the Bastille by the citizens of Paris struck fear in the heart of the Irish ruling class but gave enormous hope to ordinary people that tyranny could be defeated. These events in one of the most Catholic countries in Europe shook the widespread belief among Dissenters that Catholics were inherently superstitious and reactionary.

Two years later in 1791, a young Protestant lawyer named Wolfe Tone authored *An Argument on*

Behalf of the Catholics in Ireland in which he argued precisely that Catholics could be the allies of radical Dissenters in a movement for democratic reform. Tone by that stage had become the secretary of the Catholic Committee, an organisation which had been dominated by conservative Catholic gentry but was coming increasingly under more radical middle class influence.

In October of the same year, the United Irishmen were established. They demanded Irish independence and Catholic rights. Their commitment to this was demonstrated by their role in providing a Belfast Volunteer defence guard for the Catholic Convention which met at the end of 1792. This body was made up of 244 delegates elected nationally. It terrified the Ascendancy, especially given the comparison to the newly-established Convention in France which was the name adopted by the national assembly of the French republic declared earlier that year.

Besides the support of much of the Catholic and Dissenter middle class, the United Irishmen began to develop a base amongst urban workers, especially linen and cotton weavers in the Belfast area. These workers were

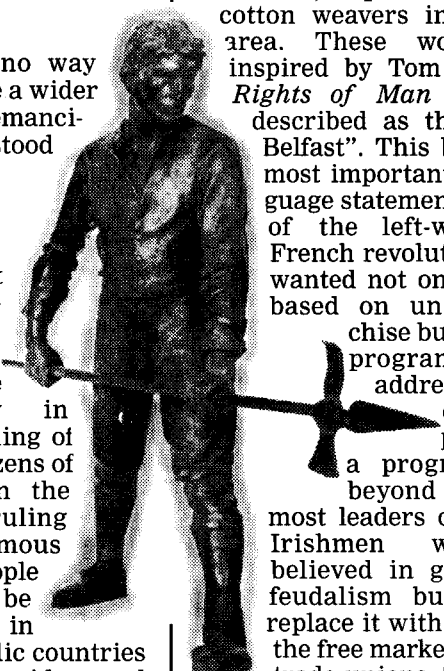
inspired by Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* which Tone described as the "Koran of Belfast". This book was the most important English-language statement of the ideas

of the left-wing of the French revolutionaries who wanted not only a republic based on universal franchise but also a social programme to

address the needs of ordinary people. Such a programme went beyond the aims of

most leaders of the United Irishmen who firmly believed in getting rid of feudalism but wanted to replace it with the glories of the free market and opposed trade unions. These contradictions are very well illustrated in John Gray's account of strikes by weavers in 1792 which is reproduced in this pamphlet.

Paine's views did, however, receive an echo amongst a layer of



prominent United Irishmen including Thomas Russell, Jemmy Hope, Napper Tandy and Henry Joy McCracken. Russell once declared, "Property must be altered by some measure—he who knew the recesses of the heart loved not the rich."¹ An anony-

The French Revolution and the United Irishmen rebellion were enormously progressive but the working class, though playing a decisive role, was not yet strong enough to take power in its own right.

mous eleven page pamphlet entitled *The Union doctrine; or poor man's catechism* gave voice to the aspirations of many ordinary workers and peasants in the 1790s:

"I believe in a revolution founded on the rights of man, in the natural and imprescriptable rights of all citizens to all the land...As the land and its produce was intended for the use of man 'tis unfair for fifty or a hundred men to possess what is for the subsistence of near five millions...the almighty intended all mankind to lord the soil."²

From reform to revolution

The next international event which impacted the Irish situation was the declaration of war by Britain against the French Republic in February 1793. Since the United Irishmen were so strongly aligned with the French, repression by the British government inevitably followed and in May 1794 the organisation was pro-

claimed illegal.

On top of this was the dashing of radical hopes for significant reform. Such hopes were especially high when the liberal Earl Fitzwilliam was appointed Lord Lieutenant (i.e. the king's representative sent to run the Dublin Castle administration) in January 1795 by the Whig government. When Ascendancy opposition forced his recall a little over a month later, there was bitter disappointment.

It was only at this stage that the United Irishmen decided that an insurrection was necessary in order to establish an Irish Republic. It was also decided to enlist French military aid and Wolfe Tone made his way to Paris with this aim. In December 1796, a French fleet arrived in Bantry Bay. Due to the terrible weather, they were unable to land but if they had the history of this island could have been quite different.

Meanwhile, the United Irishmen reorganised themselves. They set up a cell structure in order to facilitate preparations for an insurrection. They sent emissaries across the length and breadth of Ireland, to Scotland and into the British navy to spread republican ideas and administer the United Irish oath. Besides the *Northern Star* paper edited in Belfast by Samuel Neilson, the organisation produced an enormous mass of leaflets and other printed material. Crucially, they absorbed the Defenders, the main Catholic agrarian organisation. The Defenders initially emerged in rural sectarian feuds in Ulster against Protestant groups like the Peep O'Day Boys but developed into a national force which absorbed agitation against rack-renting and the hated tithes paid to the Anglican Church.

It has been asked, particularly in regards to the merger with the Defenders, whether the United Irishmen really succeeded in overcoming long-standing sectarian divisions or simply papered them over. This is a difficult question to answer but what must be noted is the level of politicisation among the Defenders and especially the influence of "French ideas" even before the link with the United Irishmen was formally established. But of course, the potential for sectarian conflict to reemerge on a



Theobald Wolfe Tone

large scale was always there. Any revolutionary situation—which by definition means the sharpening of social conflict to fever pitch—always carries the potential for counterrevolution. The radicalisation of the French Revolution itself led to pro-royalist peasant uprisings in the Vendée and other areas.

Establishing an accurate figure for the size of the United Irishmen may be impossible but according to one estimate, nearly 280,000 men in Ulster, Munster and Leinster took the oath before the rebellion, making it the largest mass movement ever to exist on this island.

As 1797 progressed, the repression against the United Irishmen became more ferocious, especially in Ulster where Orange lodges were being incorporated into the yeomanry and used to conduct house to house searches for arms in Catholic areas and deliberately inflame sectarian tensions. By March the province was under martial law. Jim Smyth describes what happened as repression spread across the country in the latter half of 1797:

Reports of half-hangings, floggings and house-burning multi-

plied. According to *The Press* in the six months to late November three hundred houses were burned in Westmeath alone. This was the period too when 'pitch-capping' was invented. This consisted of tarring the heads of 'croppies' (men who wore their hair short, or 'cropp'd', in the French style) and then setting them alight. The commander-in-chief, General Sir Ralph Abercromby, observed that the 'irregularities' and 'abuses' of his own troops 'could scarcely be believed'.³

Insurrection

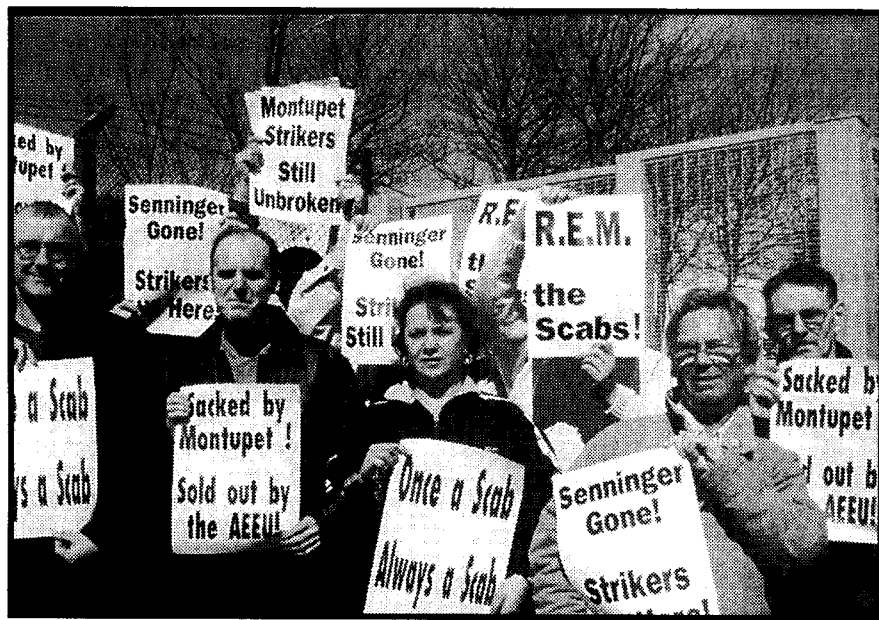
Within the leadership of the organisation, a debate raged about whether to wait for another French landing before beginning an insurrection. The more radical faction advocating an immediate rising won and the date was set for 23 May 1798. By then, martial law had been declared across Ireland. In the end, the rising was isolated to certain areas, most spectacularly Wexford.

In Ulster, the working class were the backbone of the rising in which 27,000 turned out. When the more middle class elements in the United Irishmen leadership in Antrim kept delaying in setting a date:

it was popular opinion in the weaver heartland that prevailed: on their way home [the leaders] were accosted by a crowd, who, on learning that once again action was to be deferred, 'burst forth into an open uproar', and shouts of 'aristocrats', 'despots', 'cowards', 'villains', and even 'traitors'. The meeting of the colonels was hastily reconvened and the decision to rise was taken.⁴

On 7 June, the United Irishmen rose in Antrim and Down. In Antrim, led by Henry Joy McCracken, they briefly occupied Antrim town. Ballymena, Kells and other towns were also captured before government troops forced a retreat. 7,000 rebels under Henry Munro fought staunchly before being defeated on 14 June at Ballynahinch. The key leaders in the North, including McCracken and Munro were captured and hanged.

While it is obvious that the rising was a failure, the causes are com-



Workers on strike at Montupet in the North - only the working class can resolve the "National Question".

plex. Contributing factors included the penetration of the organisation by government spies; the many delays in setting the date for insurrection which sapped morale; and the ferocity of repression, especially in Ulster where the United Irishmen were strongest.

The tragedy of this defeat is captured in a conversation between Thomas Russell and a Belfast mill worker:

[He] says, 'I think liberty worth risking life for. In a cause of that sort I think I should have courage enough from reflection to brave death.' One of his children was climbing on his knee. 'As for my part', says he, 'it does not much signify now as to myself but it grieves me to breed up these children to be slaves. I would gladly risque all to prevent that.'⁵

The French Revolution and the United Irishmen rebellion were enormously progressive but the working class, though playing a decisive role, was not yet strong enough to take power in its own right. Feudal misery was therefore replaced by capitalist exploitation in France while in Ireland a divided bourgeoisie failed entirely to fulfill the aspirations of 1798. But it is only by getting rid of capitalism and with it all class divisions that true liberty for working people can be achieved. That is our task.

1798 has been the most systematically distorted set of events in Irish history.

The debate about 1798

For example, in the late 19th century, the Catholic Church, in an attempt to fight the influence of the Fenians claimed that the Wexford rising was really a clerical-led Catholic led insurrection against Orange oppression. This was supremely ironic in that the Catholic hierarchy at the time was completely opposed to the United Irishmen and the rising. In more recent times others have argued that the 1798 was spontaneous, chaotic and characterised by Catholic sectarianism.

But some of the most recent historical work is seeking to set the record straight by trying to understand the 1790s on its own terms. These historians emphasise the enormous influence of the French Revolution on the consciousness of ordinary people in Ireland and the degree of organisation that the United Irishmen had achieved.

Of course, the main use or abuse of 1798 has been by the republican movement which sought legitimacy for the "armed struggle" by wrapping itself in the mantle of Wolfe Tone. But for them to claim to stand in the tradition of uniting "Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter" is completely hollow. In practice, Sinn

Fein bases itself increasingly on sectarianism and has sought to ally itself with the biggest imperialist power in the world today, the United States.

In fact, it is not possible to make a simple analogy between the situation in late 18th century Ireland and today. The United Irishmen movement was based on an alliance between the Dissenter and Catholic bourgeoisie (including Northern manufacturers, merchants and professionals); Belfast and Dublin artisans; and Catholic peasants (the Defenders) against an entrenched "Protestant Ascendancy" which had many features of the French pre-revolutionary "ancien regime". It is therefore not surprising that the French revolution had a greater impact on Ireland than on any other European country.

But having been defeated, it was not possible to put this alliance together again. In the 19th century, the Northeast became increasingly industrialised while the rest of the country actually experienced deindustrialisation. Nationalism was increasingly associated with the Southern Catholic bourgeoisie and middle classes who wanted to reestablish an independent Irish parliament with a protectionist economic policy to facilitate defending native industry from British competition. This perspective had no appeal to the Northern Protestant bourgeoisie in the linen, shipbuilding and engineering industries who saw their wealth as dependent on access to imperial markets.

Bourgeois nationalists in Ireland showed no ability to complete the historic tasks associated with the 1789 and 1798 revolutions including national unification and creating a secular republic. Only on the land question was an alliance formed with revolutionary potential, between Parnell and a wing of the Fenians, culminating in the Land League struggle against landlordism.

By the end of the 19th century, it was becoming clear that

the only truly progressive social force in Ireland was the working class. It was the defeat of the radicalised labour movement between 1917-23 which set the stage for partition and the creation of two sectarian states, an outcome which suited both the Northern and Southern bourgeoisie.

Today it is even more clear that bourgeois politics can only mean sectarian politics. The recent Agreement in Northern Ireland is being touted by some commentators as an "historic reconciliation", even as the basis of restoring the unity achieved in the 1790s. But this is quite false. The Socialist Party has pointed out that at best the Agreement could provide a breathing space in the conflict while the alternative—if it had been defeated in the May referendum—was even more bleak.

But the situation on the ground since 1994 is the exact opposite of reconciliation. Division between Protestants and Catholics is deeper than ever, with fewer mixed communities and an increasing majority living in areas which are either overwhelmingly Catholic or overwhelmingly Protestant. The conflict over parades which has erupted each summer shows in a concentrated way the reality behind the hype.

Capitalism has no answer to the social deprivation which fuels the conflict and in any case the sectarian politicians who signed the Agreement have a clear stake in maintaining the division. The idealism of the young bourgeoisie reflected in the United Irishmen movement is long gone. Despite the surge of confidence which Southern capitalism has received on the basis of the "Celtic tiger" boom, this in reality is a system in

KEY EVENTS

1776 - beginning of American Revolution

1778 - formation of Irish Volunteers

1789 - beginning of French Revolution

1791 - United Irishmen founded

1792 - France declares republic

1793 - Britain declares war on France

1794 - United Irishmen proclaimed illegal

1795 - Feb: Earl Fitzwilliam recalled

Sept: Orange Order founded

1796 - Feb: Wolfe Tone arrives in France

Dec: French fleet in Bantry Bay

1798 - 30 Mar: martial law declared

23-4 May: rebellion begins in Leinster

30 May: Rebels capture Wexford Town

6-13 June: rising in Ulster

13 June: Battle of Ballynahinch, Co. Down

21 June: defeat of Wexford rebels at Vinegar Hill

22 Aug: General Humbert lands with 1,000 men at Killala, Co. Mayo

1801 - Act of Union takes effect

decline.

Understanding what really happened in the past and dispelling Orange and Green myths is indeed vital. But it is only by combining historical understanding with a working class socialist programme, which among other things recognises that this island's bitter history has now created two

minorities—Catholics within the North and Protestants on all-Ireland basis—that a progressive solution to the national question can be found.

FOOTNOTES

1. quoted in Jim Smyth, *The Men of No Property: Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century*,

- p. 165.
2. quoted in Smyth, p. 168.
3. Smyth, p. 172.
4. quoted in John Gray, *The Sans Culottes of Belfast: The United Irishmen and the Men of No Property (Belfast, 1998)*, pp. 34-5.
5. quoted in Gray, p. 31.

Other Socialist Party publications

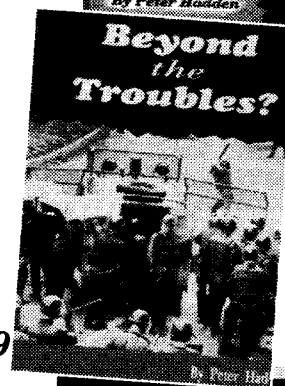


For further reading and analysis on Irish history and the national question from a socialist perspective:

Beyond the Troubles - £3.95

Troubled Times - £5.99

Divide and Rule - £1.40



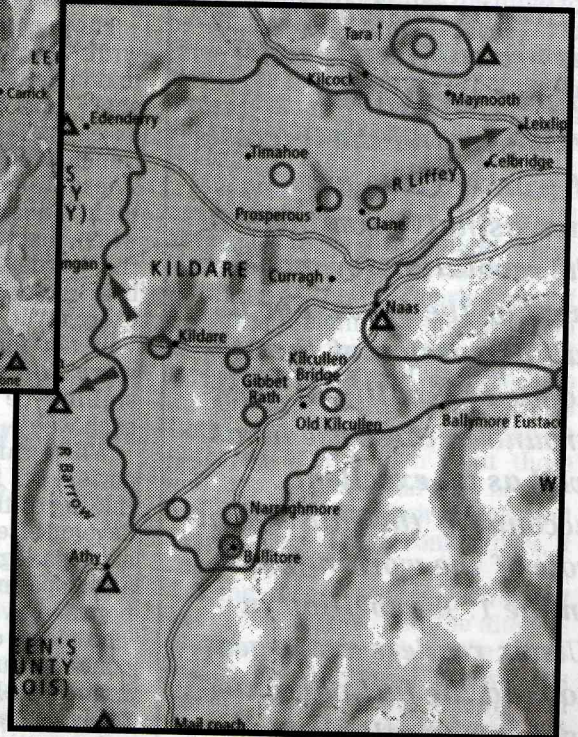
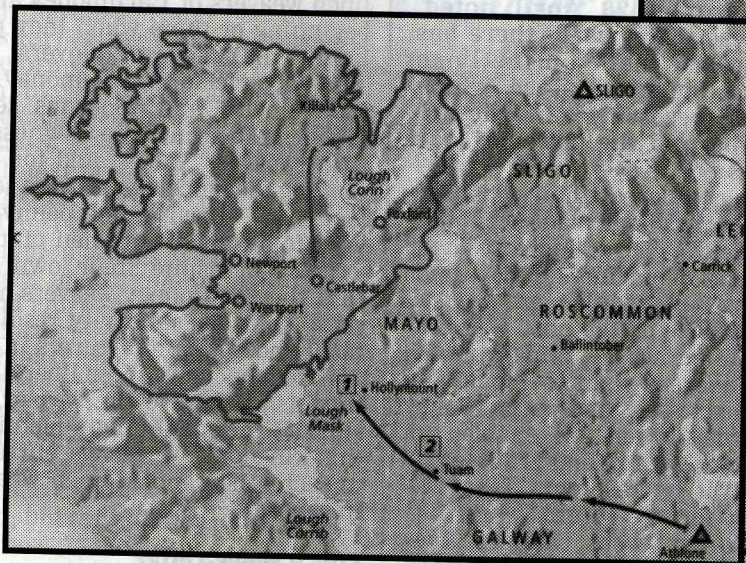
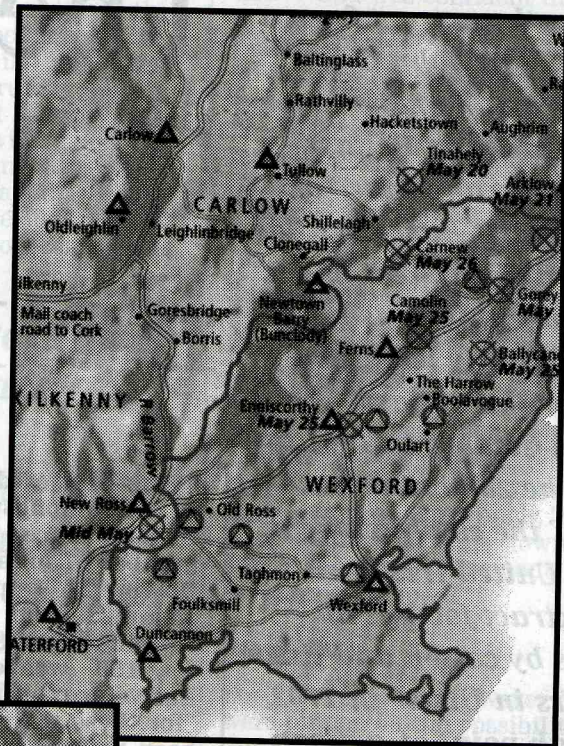
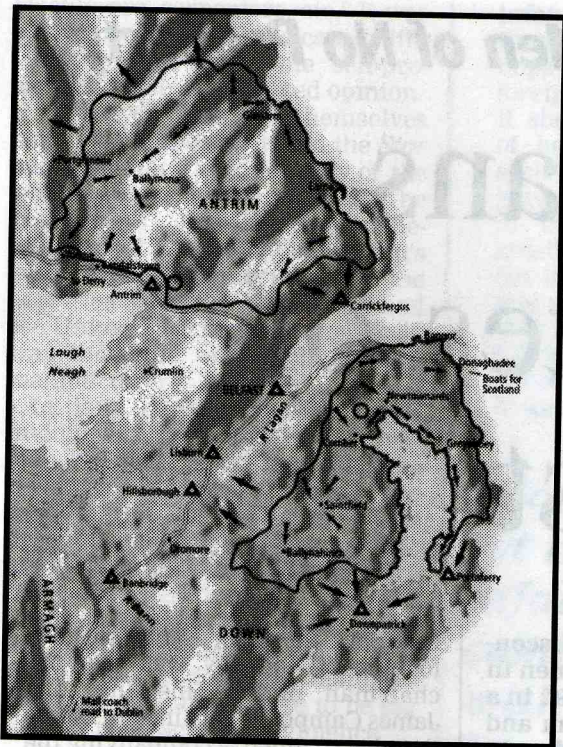
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The main areas occupied by the rebel forces in May and June, 1798, (maps one to three, clockwise), and the area occupied by the French under General Humbert in August (map four)

The United Irishmen and the Men of No Property

The following is a lengthy extract from a pamphlet by John Gray, the Librarian of the Linen Hall Library in Belfast. John is not a member of the Socialist Party but has kindly agreed to let us reproduce this. It is based on a May Day lecture he gave for the Belfast Trades Council in 1991 to mark the 200th anniversary of the establishment of the United Irishmen. The extract focuses on strikes by cotton and linen weavers in Ulster in 1792, the high point of artisan working class militancy in the 1790s. It clearly illustrates the tensions between the pro-capitalist leadership of the United Irishmen and the interests of workers who were increasingly prominent in the revolutionary movement of the 1790s. For a full discussion of the economic and political background to these events as well as an excellent account of the subsequent role of the working class in the 1798 rebellion in Ulster, readers are urged to read the full pamphlet which is available from the Socialist Party.

The Sans Culottes of Belfast

by John Gray

The first evidence of discontent amongst working men in Ulster surfaced in April 1792 in a number of areas of Antrim and Down. This agitation clearly stemmed from increasing hardship in a declining [linen] trade. As 150 weavers meeting in Ballyclare on 28 April noted, "for these thirty years there has been no rise made on the linen weaving business; since which time the necessaries of life are raised beyond the power of our purchase."

They compared their position with, "the provision made every day to enable the rich to increase their share, and the farmers to pay their excessive rents" while there was "no remembrance of the poor weaver". These linen weavers maintained their "inherent right to—complain when distressed, and to lay down the burden when not enabled to bear the pressure", and proposed to exercise it by resolving, "that we will not for the future, work any more linen webs, unless one shilling be added to the price of each web".

While this was the first evident action of its kind, it gave little inkling of the bitterness that was to develop elsewhere, and rather reads as a panegyric on the benevolent and paternalistic relationship between weavers and merchants. The men's demands were promptly conceded and the merchants "were immediately chaired, carried by twelve stout weavers, followed by a numerous crowd, and preceded by an excellent band of music playing

God Save the King". The sole misfortune of the day was that the chairman of the meeting, one James Campbell, "strained his voice that day so much accompanying the music, that his organs have since refused to give sound".¹

A similar victory was won by the linen weavers of Carnmoney at the beginning of June when they publicly thanked employers in Templepatrick and Carnmoney "for their liberal and generous sentiments respecting the lowness of linen weavers' wages, and for confirming the sincerity of these sentiments, by allowing one penny per yard to all good workmen of their weavers". Despite their own success, the Carnmoney weavers had a sense of wider solidarity, resolving that, "should manufacturers in general not concur in these liberal sentiments, to relieve the weaver and support the staple manufacture of this kingdom, we pledge ourselves to each other, and to linen weavers in general".²

Star v News-Letter

Linen merchants may well have conceded quickly, not so much for fear of the combination of their weavers, but in order to meet competition for good workers from the cotton industry, and it was here that a much more serious dispute was to develop. On 9 June the *Northern Star* warned its readers that, "a very bold and daring spirit of combination has broken out amongst the cotton weavers of this town, and has been communicated to the

bricklayers, carpenters, etc." It was a development bound to cause difficulty for the *Star*, the self-proclaimed voice of advanced opinion.

If weavers did not themselves subscribe to the paper, and the *Star* admitted that "the great body of the working people do not read the newspapers", they were, nonetheless, part of the radical movement's desired constituency, and yet the paper, as with the Volunteers and the United Irish organisation itself, was the child of merchants and manufacturers.

Initially the *Star* sought to chart a middle way; it wanted "every workman [to] have a full and adequate reward for his labour"; master artisans in the various trades were urged to "take such measures as to bring the question in a proper manner before the public", although they were urged "not individually [to] yield to demands made in a tumultuous and illegal manner". Ideally then matters were to be settled "by contract not by violence".

There was no such equivocation in the response of the more conservative *Belfast News-Letter*. Henry Joy, the editor, had supported the French Revolution and had by no means turned his back on "moderate" reforms, but when it came to action by organised artisans he knew exactly where he stood, and in his issue of 5 June simply published the full text of the draconian anti-combination laws, "to check as far [as is] in our power, the spirit of combination among tradesmen and artificers, and to remind both masters and journeymen of their reciprocal duties as established by law".

He hoped that this would have "due effect, by convincing those who are, or may be led into unlawful combinations, that it will not only injure themselves and [their] families most essentially, but be a means of damping the spirit of enterprise which now prevails."

Low wages

Two issues later Joy waxed eloquent on the low wage foundation essential not merely for the progress of Belfast, but for Irish industrial advance in the face of English competition. Yes, he noted "the extraordinary progress we have made, and are making in the cotton branches", and in other spheres, but he asked:

How is Ireland, yet in a state of

infancy comparatively with England, to have any rational hope of meeting the other in a foreign, or in any other market, if she does not take advantage of her less advanced stage of society, and of her consequently lower price of labour? Don't we to the latter circumstances greatly owe the present state of our linen trade. It is pretty certain that in throwing aside the only advantage in our favour (the low price of labour) we forfeit out best chance of success.³ It was the first coherent expres-

"How is Ireland, yet in a state of infancy comparatively with England, to have any rational hope of meeting the other in a foreign, or in any other market, if she does not take advantage of her less advanced stage of society, and of her consequently lower price of labour?"

Belfast News-Letter
15 June 1792

sion of an argument that was to gather force through the succeeding stages of Belfast's industrial development, and one which remains potent to the present day.

But what then of the *Star*? What if its idealised social contract between employers and artisans was not pos-

sible? Then, no less than Henry Joy at the *News-Letter*, it knew where it stood. It advocated "the circulating of handbills containing a digest of the existing laws against combination"⁴ and was confident that "our present Chief Magistrate, and indeed all our Magistrates, have ever evinced a readiness to step forward, and they well know they will be supported". Here the *Star* preferred the support of the Volunteer movement, even then being re-activated as the effective militia movement of the radical cause. And yet the revival of the Volunteers was for the moment being safe-guarded by an insistence on their willingness to serve in the enforcement of existing laws. The *Star* pointed out that only two months earlier, the Belfast Volunteers had used their cannon to help evict a tenant in Upper Massarene, twenty miles distant⁵, and that, accordingly, "the citizen soldiers of this town—will surely be ready at a moment, to preserve order at home."

Arbitration

For the moment, however, hopes were pinned on the possibility of a fair resolution of the potential conflict at a Town Meeting. Much of the discussion at this meeting was devoted to just such a balanced proposal: "that a committee (of nine) to be composed of three journeymen [that is workmen], three masters and three disinterested inhabitants be formed, for the purpose of fixing on proper standard prices for each trade".

The proposed arbitration scheme recognised that workmen could have grievances which might not be fairly settled by the unfettered workings of the free market, and it also gave a right of representation to the workmen. The proposal appears to have had considerable support as "several of the trades (both employers and employed) approved of the plan", but those who opposed it could not be persuaded to change their minds and "being objected to by some others, it was dropped".

If the model scheme could not proceed, agreement on the alternative was not required, for the status quo of the combination laws was already in place. It was a point soon emphasised by the chairman of the meeting, the Sovereign of the town,



Irish Volunteers in Dublin 1779 demand "Free trade or revolution." In 1792, revived Volunteers in Belfast clashed with weavers.

James Banks, who ordered that "extracts from the several Acts of Parliament, relating to combination" be read out, and "expressed his firm determination to execute the laws". He also relied on the potential of the additional force already offered by the *Northern Star*, "not in the least doubting but he should receive the support of the inhabitants, particularly the Volunteers."⁶

Despite the inconclusive outcome of the Town Meeting, efforts at compromise continued and in some areas succeeded, thus on 14 June a strike or lockout involving carpenters was successfully concluded. The Journeymen Carpenters of Belfast gave "sincere thanks" to fourteen employers "for complying with their request, in advancing the wages to two shillings per day."⁷

Similar efforts were made in the cotton trade, and on 16 June the weavers sought to push matters to a conclusion on the basis of the arbitration scheme proposed at the Town Meeting. They announced that "the weavers' propositions in the weighty branches were agreed to by the manufacturers", this in the hope of finalising a deal in the finer muslin trade. Here, however, the position was evidently more difficult. The weavers' objective had been to achieve "the prices that have been paid by Mr. Orr (during his first three years in the Kingdom)". Orr as a newcomer had apparently

been prepared to pay above the then prevailing rate. According to the weavers, the manufacturers had agreed to do so provided that a majority of their number approved, and the weavers now announced that eight of the ten firms original-

Hostility between the Belfast weavers and the Volunteers now developed.

ly involved and an additional four firms⁸ had agreed with this course of action. And yet, even by the weavers' own account, matters were not quite so simple as they had requested their committee "to treat with, and if possible, to adjust the remaining differences".⁹

Within two days hopes of an overall settlement were dashed when it became clear that all of the original ten firms and one other were still in dispute with the weavers, including the weavers' own model employer, Mr. Orr. The employers stated that, "they had adopted Mr. Orr's prices for the future", but alleged that, "some weavers on Saturday last carried home a number of webs to Mr. Orr unwrought", and accordingly they declared, "our intention to sup-

port Mr. Orr, or any other manufacturer, in the prosecution of weavers guilty of such unlawful practices; and until the present disturbances cease, we are determined not to give out any warps or winding".¹⁰ Had some weavers engaged in precipitate action while negotiation still offered some promise? No matter, the weavers were now reduced to protesting that the employers "have retracted from their written obligations", and faced a lockout.

True the employers were not quite united. Nicholas Grimshaw of Whitehouse, surprisingly not included in any of the earlier listings of firms, despite the size of his enterprise, proceeded to reach a separate agreement with the weavers.

Cotton weavers' action

...While gains within the linen trade, albeit from rates below those available in the cotton trade, appear to have been the general pattern, we may assume that the majority of cotton weavers in Belfast and neighbourhood were out of work from 18 June onwards. Threats of wider disturbances soon followed. On 21 June "information was received by the Sovereign of this town [Belfast], that a large body of the working weavers had assembled in a field, about two miles from the town, and that they mediated an attack on some of the cotton manufactories,

whose owners have not complied with their demands as to wages".

The Sovereign "immediately repaired to the spot where the weavers were—when after expostulating with them, he expressed his determination to effect the law with vigour, in case it should be necessary". This had the desired effect, "their behaviour to him was very respectful, and they shortly after marched quietly to their respective homes". The Sovereign's success may have owed something to the evident willingness of the Volunteers to assist him. Before setting out to talk to the weavers he had ensured that the Volunteers were holding themselves "in readiness, in case of necessity". That night and on the following night, the Volunteers provided a "strong guard" in Belfast, and it was intended to maintain this "until the men return to their employments".¹¹

Along with its sympathetic account of the work of the Sovereign and the Volunteers, the *Northern Star* offered a variety of moral messages. The first was that, quite apart from owing, "our independence as a nation" to the Volunteers, they now, evidently, provided "the only constitutional preservation of peace and good order" and served as "the steady protector of property". Faced by the combination of weavers and their threat to property, the *Star* now viewed it as "a disgrace to the town of Belfast, that the number of its Volunteers does not amount to above three hundred". Whatever the other causes, this relative weakness certainly reflected the absence of the weaving classes from the ranks of the "citizen army".

Lisburn

The second moral related to popular disturbances. These might be all very well for France which was so admired from afar, but in Belfast "all good men and citizens will endeavour to keep themselves out of mobs", and, more specifically, weavers were advised of "the danger of such meetings", with the *Star* instead "recommend[ing] in their place—honesty and orderly industry, which never fails of meeting suitable reward."

This patronising advice was soon scorned. On 28 June disturbances broke out when "some muslin weavers, resident in Lisburn"

arrived in Belfast "to take out warps from their employers here". They aroused the rage of the Belfast weavers, "displeased that they would work at the usual prices", that is rather than the new higher prices being demanded. The *Star* suggests that the Lisburn weavers normally worked for the Belfast employers, but it is quite as probable that this was not the case and that they were encouraged to come and to take on the work of the locked out Belfast weavers and that they were "blacklegs".

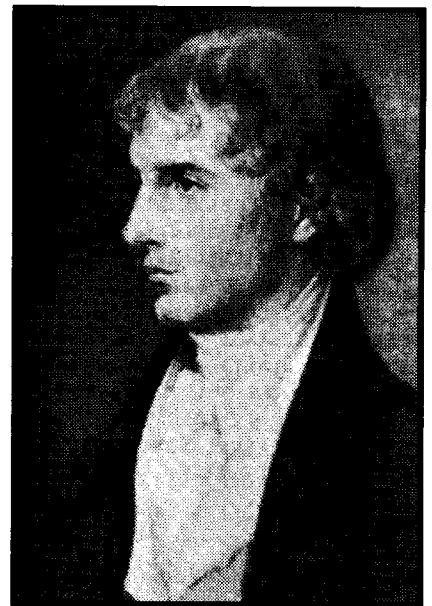
Certainly the resistance to the Lisburn men was furious. On their arrival in Belfast, "they were driven into a public house, where they were taken under the protection of the Magistrates and Volunteers". The following day a detachment from the Belfast Volunteers escort-

"A number of the working people assembled to investigate the cause; they proceeded in a large party to the quay, and examined every vessel which they supposed might be carrying grain out of the kingdom."

Northern Star

ed the Lisburn weavers back home but that was far from the end of the matter for "in that town, a furious mob (mostly from Belfast) attacked the party in a most outrageous manner." The detachment of 13 Volunteers had the advantage of arms and were able to quell this disturbance when "one or two were pricked with the bayonet".

Hostility between the Belfast



Henry Joy McCracken

weavers and the Volunteers now developed. The Belfast Volunteers had successfully escorted their charges to Lisburn, and all they had to do was return to Belfast. It was not as simple a mission as it seemed for "about six o'clock in the evening, accounts were received that a very large body of weavers intended to way-lay the party on their return." The alarm was just being sent round the Belfast Volunteer companies when trouble started independently in Belfast itself. Possibly the instigators aimed to distract the Belfast Volunteers from their initial mission, namely to provide reinforcements for their colleagues on the road from Lisburn. The trouble in Belfast was, however, of a confused nature and more probably had a momentum of its own. As the *Northern Star* described it, at about seven o'clock "an affray took place between two parties armed with poles, grapes & c. at the foot of North Street. A large crowd soon assembled, and on the interference of the neighbouring inhabitants to quell it, they were likely to be roughly handled." We need not doubt that weavers were at the heart of this affair because, as we shall see, at least one of them was to pay the price of his involvement.

The drum of the First Volunteer Company which was at the time beating "to exercise" quickly changed its tune to "to arms", and the Volunteers soon suppressed this trouble, also "taking up the ring-

leaders—and lodging them in the barracks".

Meanwhile members of the Belfast Volunteer Company set out to escort their colleagues back in along the road from Lisburn. Later in the evening members of the First Company set out to patrol the town and still the trouble was not over "one of the patrols was (about ten o'clock) attacked in Brown's Square and the neighbourhood, with volleys of stones, brickbats & c., from the houses and bye-lanes—several members were hurt but none seriously". Only when stronger patrols, accompanied by the Sovereign, were sent out did the trouble cease.

Attacks on workers

The *Northern Star* concluded, "the lenity with which these disturbances of the peace have hitherto been treated, not having produced the desired effect, we would submit it to the magistrates whether they ought longer to delay PUTTING THE LAW IN FORCE".¹² As prisoners were available from the disturbance on 28 June, the magistrates were in a position to take up the *Star's* invitation, and on 4 July, "James Reilly, a cotton weaver of this town, was taken and committed by the Sovereign to the county jail—having been convicted."

The *Star* did not limit itself to this brief account of the conviction, but rather took the opportunity to quote the entire section of the Combination Act under which Reilly had been found guilty. After their unsuccessful flirtation with the concept of arbitration, they had lapsed into citation of the draconian anti-combination legislation as a means of instilling fear, an identical position to that adopted at the outset by Henry Joy at the more conservative *Belfast News-Letter*.

And well might the citation have instilled fear. The convicted person was to be sent "to jail, there to be kept without bail or mainprize, for six months", and before he got there he was, as the *Star* emphasised, "to be three times publicly whipped."¹³

While we cannot trace the carrying out of Reilly's punishment, one of his colleagues was to suffer at the end of August—as the *Star* described it: "Hamil, who was convicted last assizes, of assaulting Stewart Banks, Esq. of this town, a magistrate of the county, when using his exertions to quell a riot,

was yesterday publicly whipped from the Linen Hall to the Exchange, agreeably to the sentence which had been pronounced upon him".¹⁴

Ten days after the conviction of Reilly on 14 July, the annual review of the Volunteers took place combined with a celebration of the French Revolution. There was no dissent in passing an address for forwarding to the National Assembly of France which recalled how the revolution had "sanctified" the day with its "declaration of human rights". There were, however, distinctions between the participants in the Belfast event. The "Grand Procession" to the White Linen Hall was both "military and civil". There were 790 Volunteers from Belfast and further afield, but also distinct civilian groups, notably "one hundred and eighty of the most respectable inhabitants of Carnmoney and Templepatrick".¹⁵ The question remains: was this in some way a separate manifestation, and one reflecting the strong handloom weaver constituency in those areas, a constituency which doubted the "national" pretensions of a force which first took the field against the working man, and, as it transpired, was never to do so again.

Agitation continues

The arrests of June and July did not end the agitation. When Hamil was whipped through the streets at the end of August, the Volunteers were once again called out, "an attempt to impede the execution of the law, and to rescue the prisoner, having been apprehended". The attempt was not made but nor were the Volunteers required. The authorities were now on their guard against providing the Volunteers with further opportunities for martial demonstration and provided the military escort themselves.¹⁶

...By autumn the agitation in the cotton industry appears to have died down. It seems unlikely that the men made significant gains, if any. And yet artisan organisation evidently survived, and continued to surface from time to time, as for example in the Ards district of County Down. Thus on 3 October we find a notice from "a meeting of a committee appointed by the [linen] weavers of Newtownards, Comber, Bangor and Donaghadee" and itself

suggesting wide ranging organisation. The committee resolved, "that we will not work—under the following prices", and gave a list of yarn weights and prices. They further made clear their resistance to skill dilution being determined to take "no apprentices but according to law".¹⁷

By November Belfast was threatened once more by disturbances, this time as a result of rapidly rising prices and feared food shortages. The *Northern Star* described events on the 20th of the month thus:

A number of the working people assembled to investigate the cause; they proceeded in a large party to the quay, and examined every vessel which they supposed might be carrying grain out of the kingdom: after they had examined the vessels in the harbour, without finding any meal on board, they went to several stores, alleging that the rise in the market might have been occasioned by large purchases of merchants, for the purpose of exportation and threatened that they would take whatever they might find.

...In the same month the *Northern Star* asked rhetorically: "When does the revolution begin? Where will it commence first?"; and went on to note, "such questions are in the mouths of everyone". The continental powers had attacked France and been repulsed, King Louis had been arrested, and, in Belfast radical political reformers, and the poor, each presumed that their cause might progress in like style. The *Star's* reassurance to government that, "there is no occasion for a revolution in this land" looked increasingly empty.¹⁸

Yet the November disturbance over food shortages was to prove a harbinger of a political and economic crisis which was to almost overwhelm the United Irishmen, and to hide the power of artisan combination from view. In December 1792 the government commenced a legal offensive against the United Irishmen, including prosecution of the *Northern Star*.¹⁹ In January King Louis was executed, in February England declared war on France, in March the Volunteers were suppressed, and Belfast found itself with a hard handed military garrison.

...Just as resolute government repression punctured the reformist balloon of the United Irishmen, economic crisis led to the virtual disappearance from public view of artisan combinations which had come to the fore so powerfully in 1792. Fear of hunger and unemployment, rather than hopes of advances in wages or the potential of strikes, were to be the overriding artisan concern for much of the rest of the decade.

Artisan radicalism

The economic crisis was no transient phenomenon; even General Lake, then engaged in the "dragooning" of Ulster and hardly a noted philanthropist, wrote to Dublin Castle in March in 1797 pleading for cash to pay his troops, but also urging "the necessity of some expedient being hit upon to supply the manufacturers of this part of the country with cash to pay their labourers" and warning of the risk that "many thousands will be out of work".²⁰ Little wonder that the breakneck growth of Belfast in the 1780s was replaced by what was at best stagnation in the 1790s.²¹

And yet those briefly public combinations of 1792 almost certainly remained available as powerful artisan networks in the following years, and with this advantage, that they were already illegal prior to the onset of government repression. Certainly their role falls largely outside the surviving historical record, but that in turn depends largely on papers seized and information received by government.

As Mrs McTier was to remark in 1794, "freedom of speech is here [i.e. in Belfast] only among the lower—orders of people",²² and as Jemmy Hope, who has left us the only extensive weaver testament, was later to argue, "the leaders, civil and military, chosen from the middle ranks, were exposed to greater risk from traitors, than labourers or tradesmen."²³ Greater risk too of leaving an archival trail for historians. Thus it is that United Irish use of arenas such as the freemasons, or of reading societies, receive disproportionate attention as compared with trades unions.

This is not to argue that these early and eighteenth century combinations had the capacity to provide a would be revolutionary vanguard more appropriate to the early

twentieth century. The social relations of small town Belfast and its hinterland in the 1790s, with many interlocking gradations between varieties of weaver, artisan, and merchant could hardly sustain such a burden. The total nature of the political and economic crisis from 1793 onwards, in any case, tended to push radical merchants and artisans in the same revolutionary direction. Certainly the class composition of the later United Irishmen moved in a more popular direction, but cotton and linen merchants remained well represented to the last.²⁴

FOOTNOTES

1. *Northern Star*, 5 May 1792.
2. *Ibid.*, 16 June 1792. Account of a meeting held on 7 June. The notice issued by the linen weavers was signed by John Mulholland.
3. *Belfast News-Letter*, 15 June 1792.
4. *Northern Star*, 9 June 1792
5. *Northern Star*, 14 April 1792.
6. *Northern Star*, 13 June 1792.
7. *Northern Star*, 16 June 1792
8. The ten firms were James Agnew, Barber and Duncan, Moorwood Bell and Co., Gemmill Smith and Co., John Howe and Co., Hugh Merrie and Co., William and John Orr, Sterling Whitla and Co., James Wallace, and John Wightman. Unfortunately the two which opposed the deal are not identified. The four additional firms, all of which were said to have supported the deal were Charles Clark, William McCoy, Anthony Richardson, and Richard Wolfenden.

9. The committee consisted of Daniel Dignan, Arthur Halfpenny, and Arthur Kenney, *Northern Star*, 20 June 1792.
10. *Northern Star*, 20 June 1792.
11. *Northern Star*, 23 June 1792.
12. *Northern Star*, 30 June 1792.
13. *Northern Star*, 4 July 1792.
14. *Northern Star*, 29 August 1792.
15. Henry Joy and William Bruce, *Belfast Politics* (Belfast, 1794), p. 55.
16. *Northern Star*, 1 September 1792.
17. *Northern Star*, 17 October 1792.
18. *Northern Star*, 28 November 1792.
19. John Gray, "A tale of two newspapers", in John Gray and Wesley McCann (eds.) *An Uncommon Boatman* (Belfast, 1996), p. 178.
20. General Lake, Thomas Pelham, 6 March 1797. Public Record Office Northern Ireland T-755, Pelham transcripts, vol. iv, pp. 139-42.
21. George Benn, *A History of the Town of Belfast*, vol. 11 (London, 1880), p. 82. "In 1800 it did not contain more than 22,000 inhabitants". This compared with the 18,320 of 1791.
22. D.A. Chart (ed.), *The Drennan Letters* (Belfast, 1931), p. 213 (Mrs McTier to William Drennan, 3 August 1794).
23. R.R. Madden (ed.), *The Autobiography of James (Jemmy) Hope* (Belfast, 1998), p. 20. The original edition of Hope's memoir is in R.R. Madden, *Lives of the United Irishmen*, 3rd series, vol. i.
24. Curtin, pp. 140-3.a



The Sans Culottes of Belfast: The United Irishmen and the Men of No Property By John Gray

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The Risen People

The Wexford Republic

by Ruth Coppinger



Famous statue by Oliver Sheppard shows Fr. Murphy directing pikeman.

“I understand... you are rather inclined to hold the insurrection cheaply. Rely upon it, there never was in any country so formidable an effort on the part of the people.”

(Lord Castlereagh to the Chief Secretary).¹

Wexford lay at the heart of 1798. Indeed, it was the only county where the rebellion was so successfully, popularly and enduringly fought. For over a month, a rebel Wexford army made up of approximately 30,000 ordinary people engaged trained Crown forces and won control of most of the county. For three weeks, a civilian government ran Wexford as a republic, electing four Catholics and four Protestants as their leaders.

Yet, the Wexford rebellion has been variously interpreted as a spontaneous rising of Catholics against oppression; an agrarian peasant war; or a sectarian campaign of bloodlust by an unruly mob.

A Catholic rising?

The first of those interpretations is the most ironic. The spin-doctoring which aimed at boosting the church's role in 1798 only began at the safe distance of the next century when the church sought to consolidate its hold over the people in cam-

paigns for Catholic emancipation, home rule and land reform. In 1870, Wexford's Fr Patrick Kavanaugh wrote a book which downplayed the politicisation and planning of the rebellion and characterised it as a solely Catholic struggle for “Faith and Fatherland” in which the church had stood by the people. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Not only the United Irishmen, but every other group which fought oppression in the 18th century such as Whiteboys, Rightboys and Defenders, were publicly condemned by the Catholic hierarchy. Rank-and-file priests who fought alongside the 1798 rebels, such as Wexford's Fr Murphy, were denounced as “the faeces of the church”. At all stages the bishops colluded with the authorities, having most to fear from cross-religious, radical political organisation and the dangerous influence of egalitarian ideas from the French Revolution. Wexford's Bishop Caulfield pompously declared that “it was a happy epoch indeed when the people, the puppies, the rabble

dictate.”

Similarly inaccurate is the view of Pakenham, whose 1969 book, *The Year of Liberty*, dismissed Wexford as “the old agrarian war under a new name” and the actions of “a half-disciplined mob with little idea beyond plunder”. Some closeted academics find it difficult to see how economic deprivation has anything to do with political action. In any case, Wexford was one of the most fertile and prosperous of counties. If land issues alone accounted for rebellion, why then did the most class-riven areas with a long record of rural secret societies, such as Tipperary, or the poorest western counties play little or no role in the 1798 rebellion?

A sectarian rising?

It is the charge of sectarianism which most demands an answer, given Ireland's history of the last 200

It is the charge of sectarianism which most demands an answer. Part of the concentration on sectarianism comes from the propaganda war immediately after the rebellion. The government portrayed the rebellion as yet another 'Popish plot' in order to detach Presbyterians from their anti-establishment stance. Apologists from the United Irishmen were also anxious to avoid blame for organising armed insurrection.

years. Part of the concentration on sectarianism comes from the propaganda war immediately after the rebellion. It suited the government to portray the rebellion as yet another 'Popish plot' in order to detach Presbyterians from their anti-establishment stance. Apologists from the United Irishmen were also anxious to avoid blame for organising armed insurrection. The Presbyterian rad-

ical James Hope commented on these distortions:

It is hard for a man who did not live at the time to believe or comprehend the extent to which misrepresentations were carried at the close of our struggle; for, besides the paid agents, the men who flinched and fell away from our cause, grasped at any apology for their own delinquency.

While it would be wrong to airbrush sectarianism from 1798, it is important to also understand that the structure of the 18th century state was such that any action against it would inevitably be characterised as sectarian.

Politically and socially, Wexford had the same three tiers as the country in general: Anglicans, Dissenters (Presbyterians) and Catholics as first, second and third-class citizens respectively. There was no monolithic "Protestant" and "Catholic" grouping—both were split between conservative and liberal. Encouraged by the French Revolution where 'Catholics' had shown such political maturity, Protestant liberals in Wexford such as Bagenal-Harvey, William Hatton, Samuel Cooper, Anthony Perry, Matthew Keugh, George Sparks and many others joined the United Irishmen founded in Dublin in 1791. On the Catholic side, younger radicals, recently returned from France, such as Edward Hay, James Edward Devereux and Edward Sweetman were outflanking the old Catholic leadership in the county and seeking to isolate the clergy. Bishop Caulfield bemoaned their political activity:

The spirit of [Wexford] town is now violent beyond belief and a general sullenness pervades. It seems to be the plan adopted to give the clergy nothing if they do not come into their measures.²

Politicisation

This younger, more assertive generation had been raised after the American and French Revolutions and gravitated towards the United Irishmen. However, more widespread politicisation had been taking place throughout the 1790s, so that Sweetman could boast to Wolfe Tone that in Wexford "the lower orders are all alive and would do

anything." In 1795, 20,000 signed a petition for a Catholic Relief Act and enthusiastically participated in the Catholic Convention elections; in 1795, 22,251 petitioned for the reinstatement of Fitzwilliam as Lord Lieutenant.³

More significantly, the proselytising carried out by United Irish activists was successfully establishing branches throughout the county. The extent and popular appeal of the organisation is seen by the professions of one cell in Clonegal—mason, blacksmith, slater, labourer, farmer, tailor, carpenter, carman and a malster, publican and schoolteacher. Wider links were established with the outer baronies, with Dublin and with Wicklow. Big farmers were also becoming active in the leadership.

While worried by the rapid spread of the United Irishmen, no consensus about how to respond emerged initially amongst the authorities. One tactic adopted in Wexford was to use the churches to extract a series of loyalty oaths from Catholics. Dublin Castle was more critical of the lax law and order policies in Wexford and elsewhere and appointed new hardline magistrates, as well as overseeing the transplantation of the Orange Order into the area.

While Wexford escaped much of the terror experienced in other counties—floggings, arrests and house burnings were being regularly carried out in Wicklow—the decision to base the 600-strong North Cork militia in the county in April 1798 created huge tension. Explicitly Protestant, publicly wearing Orange insignia and led by Lord Kingsborough whose family had a record of sectarianism, their ferocious reputation seemed vindicated by the introduction of the pitch-cap. Intended to stiffen loyalist backbone and strike fear into potential insurgents, the arrival of the North Corks also played into United Irish hands, whose leaders could now argue with moderate and clerical opponents that only the United Irishmen could legitimately defend Catholics against this new visible threat. A further boost to the imminent rising in Wexford was an accidental one: the Wexford United Irish membership figures had arrived late for the famous meeting at Oliver Bond's house in Dublin and so never



Massacre of Loyalist prisoners at Scullabogue.

reached government hands when the house was raided in March.

Preparations

By April there was a widespread acceptance of the need for rebellion, as seen by this extract from a touching letter by Walter Devereux of Ballybrittas to his brother in America:

It is the greatest happiness to you that you left this unfortunate country.. I would send you a more full account only I hope it will not be long until it will be known and praised throughout the world. Dear John, send no remittance to Ireland until you learn of her freedom and then, when you do, your honest friends shall only receive the benefit. If the times are not settled before August, I certainly will then leave this land of tyranny and seek a land of liberty. But for a man here to promise 'imself a single day to live would be presumption...⁴

These facts contradict the portrayal of the rebellion as spontaneous and unplanned. In fact, a well-laid out plan for rebellion had been drawn up amongst United Irishmen.

For some years, a debate had raged within the group over the course revolution should take. Moderates argued there should be no rising without French aid. Radicals favoured insurrection with or without French support. This latter view came to be more popularly accepted and by 1796 a military strategy was adopted more in line with indigenous rebellion.

Plans thwarted

To deliver a successful coup, Dublin was critical as the capital and military, administrative and economic nerve centre of the country. The plan was threefold: firstly, to seize key buildings in Dublin, engage the military in fighting and, presumably, enlist the support of ordinary Dubliners; secondly, to mobilise the "crescent counties" (the counties of Dublin, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow) and prevent reinforcements reaching the capital; and thirdly, for the outer tier of counties, including Wexford, to rise the following day and block reinforcements from any of the big military camps elsewhere. The date for rebellion was set for May 23rd, to be known only by a few leaders.

This ambitious plan was to be thwarted, however. Government awareness led to early arrests of key leaders and a nationwide enforcement of the handing in of all arms. There was thus to be no decisive strike in Dublin city, scuppering the key element of the plan, although the inner crescent areas from Dalkey to Tallaght and Lucan to Clontarf, did turn out. While the other crescent and first-tier counties rose and took control of some towns, confusion led to quick defeats. By the end of May 24th, the rebellion had failed to spread beyond Wicklow, Kildare and southern parts of Meath.

Confusion also reigned in Wexford. Amazingly, several very prominent United Irishmen continued to be involved in disarmament, with Edward Fitzgerald, Edward Hay and Bagenal Harvey even supervising the process! Meanwhile, in Gorey, their comrade, Perry, was being tortured by authorities.

Some units were well prepared, however, and did mobilise. On Saturday May 26th, for example, Kilcormick men gathered under the guise of a turf-cutting meitheal. As news filtered that the midlands had

risen and of government atrocities against prisoners and Catholic yeomen soldiers in Wicklow and Carlow, 2,000 people gathered, as planned, at parish level in groups of 30 or so by the morning of May 27th.

The government response was slow and confused. Having jailed most of Wexford's best-known United Irishmen, the authorities were oblivious to a newly emerging situation whereby the jailed moderate leaders were being replaced of necessity by an effective local leadership. As local bands of people began to search for the arms they

An eight-man Directory of four Catholics and four Protestants was the chief administrative body. A second tier of mainly Catholic town merchants was also elected. Most politically advanced was the establishment of a Senate of 500 citizens, made up of representatives from parishes across the county.

had been forced to hand in only days before, the authorities eventually reacted, burning empty houses which they assumed were those of rebels and even shooting stragglers they met along roadsides. Loyalist families took flight, throwing armfuls of belongings onto carts and driving out on any open route. Most were unharmed as they fled.

The first open confrontation took

place on Kilthomas Hill and was a disaster for the rebels. Heavily armed infantry fired at the rebels, which, as Daniel Gahan points out in his brilliantly detailed book, *The People's Rising*, was "the first volley almost every man on the hilltop would have heard and the sound must have been terrifying to many of them".⁵ They broke ranks and fled for their lives down the slope and into the countryside where they were chased and over 100 killed. The cavalry devastated the surrounding countryside for much of the rest of the morning and killed anyone they found.

The easy victory of the government forces confirmed in loyalist minds what they had assumed for years—that insurgents would utterly collapse when faced by trained soldiers. This innate feeling of superiority on the government side and the passionate conviction on the rebel side that Dublin must have risen turned the advantage towards the latter.

Oulart

The most decisive battle of the rebellion was at Oulart later that day and was a completely different outcome for the rebels, who made up for their inferior weaponry of pikes, pitchforks and a few stolen rifles by drawing in the loyalist army and forcing them into close combat. Oulart debunked the notion that trained uniformed soldiers could always defeat rebel fighters. With the rifles taken from the defeated soldiers and with rebel numbers swelling from surrounding areas, the insurgents now had the initiative and Oulart was to inspire further impressive victories.

The ingenuity and talent of ordinary people must be marvelled at when studying the Wexford rebellion. Among the initiatives taken was a raid on the house of the Bishop of Ferns whose curtains were taken for tents and leather book covers for saddles! Other houses of the wealthy or of officials — mostly now abandoned — were similarly raided. While some of today's commentators remain unimpressed, opponents were often to compliment their fighting skills.

The Wexford rebels were, of course, mostly untrained. Village/neighbour networks and commitment to a cause bound mem-



Wexford rebel leader, Miles Byrne.

bers together. As Kevin Whelan elaborates, bonds grew out of hurling teams, mayboy groups, turf-cutting and hay-gathering meitheals and other groups of young adult males. Corps marched chanting the names of their native townland. These pre-existing linkages were vital in keeping together non-professional soldiers through an arduous and very mobile campaign. So was commitment to a cause whose strength even adversaries had to concede. The Revd. Thomas Handcock spoke of hanging victims who "almost all died with a firmness and serenity worthy of a more worthy cause."

Miles Byrne, an 18-year-old who fought in all the key Wexford battles and would afterwards serve for 35 years as an officer in the French army, admired the "clever military manner" of the Pollahoney troop led by Matthew Doyle "all keeping their ranks as if they had been trained soldiers and strictly executing his commands." A loyalist soldier remarked that he "never saw any troops attack with more enthusiasm and bravery than the rebels did."

Enniscorthy was the next rebel target. After a fierce two-hour battle, the main garrison opted to abandon the town, leaving the rebels command of the central section of the county. In addition, hundreds of men and women from the town joined their ranks, injecting an important urban component and an irresistible momentum. It goes with-

out saying that the costs were high, with hundreds of casualties on both sides in the first opening days of this bloody conflict. Many corpses were also reported to be badly mangled.

A base camp had been established at Vinegar Hill, chosen for its important vantage point of the county. This was now swelling daily and discussions about strategy were ongoing. There was a case for no further offensives -- the Wexford rebels had already gone way beyond their planned brief which had been to stop reinforcements reaching the capital. With their leaders arrested, they opted to go on with Wexford town as the next obvious target.

Rebel administration

The rebels took the town easily on May 30th, the main garrison having decided to flee, leaving most of the loyalist refugees behind them. However, as Gahan comments, the massive destruction of life and property that the loyalists feared did not occur:

Bands of insurgents attacked buildings that symbolised the old regime and its main supporters... but most simply milled about the streets. Some ran up green and white flags on a number of prominent buildings as a formal declaration that the town had been liberated. The sailors in the ships anchored in the harbour promptly answered the signal by running up their own white flags, thereby demonstrating their common cause with the rebels and revealing how well organised the entire movement was.

Having captured the vital towns in the county, the rebels considered their next moves. Unbeknownst to them, the rebel cause nationally was in terrible trouble with only partial successes in the rest of Leinster, defeat in Dublin and nothing as yet in Ulster. The insurgents thus focused on consolidating their hold on the county, believing all their arrangements would be temporary until the official declaration of a republic by a provisional government in Dublin.

First concern was governing Wexford town itself which, as one of Ireland's chief settlement centres and ports, needed to be provisioned now that normal channels of trade had been disrupted. A burning pri-

ority also was preventing a complete breakdown of law and order, a real possibility in the revolutionary climate which prevailed. An eight-man Directory of four Catholics and four Protestants was the chief administrative body. A second tier of mainly Catholic town merchants was also elected. Most politically advanced was the establishment of a Senate of 500 citizens, made up of representatives from parishes across the county.

The former mayor was also included. A small press in the town was seized to print proclamations and other documents, including ration vouchers for food and fuel. Food supplies were maintained by requisitioning in the countryside and by intercepting ships passing Wexford harbour with grain. Security at the harbour was organised. Divisions were sent out to New Ross and other parts of the county to consolidate the new regime.

The view of the rebels as a "half-disciplined mob" ignores this sense of order. In one page of Pakenham's book alone, he patronisingly refers to a "leaderless army" cheerfully searching for whiskey" or a "mob of country people" shocking the "better class of people" with their actions.⁶ But the United Irish leadership made strenuous efforts to avoid descent into chaos. One example is a "test oath" issued on June 14th by the "Council for Directing the Affairs of the People of the County of Wexford". It included a commitment to "persevere in endeavouring to form a brotherhood of affection among *Irishmen* of every religious persuasion"; to "obtain an equal, full and adequate representation of *all* the people of Ireland"; to have "an aversion to plunder and the spilling of innocent blood" and to "avoid drunkenness". [Italics are those words highlighted in the original test oath.]

Breakdown of discipline

Prisoners and loyalist families naturally feared for their safety. Indiscriminate murders by hot-heads and fanatics had taken place in the town on first arrival. These were stopped by Keugh who organised volunteer companies to acquire arms for the purpose of discouraging mob action.

However, discipline broke down at various stages of the rebellion. Two atrocities stand out most in tarnish-

ing the rebels -- Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge. At Scullabogue, over 100 loyalists were being held captive in a barn. On June 5th, as the rebels were attacking New Ross, a messenger reached Scullabogue with stories of the burning of a rebel hospital and the deaths in battle of at least 7,000 rebels.

The messenger claimed an order had been given to kill loyalist prisoners in retaliation. Three times the rebel captain in charge refused. Eventually, groups of prisoners were hauled out and shot in groups of fours. A second group set fire to the barn's thatched roof, burning alive all those inside, including about twenty wives and children of the North Cork militia. At Wexford Bridge on June 20th, 97 prisoners were murdered.

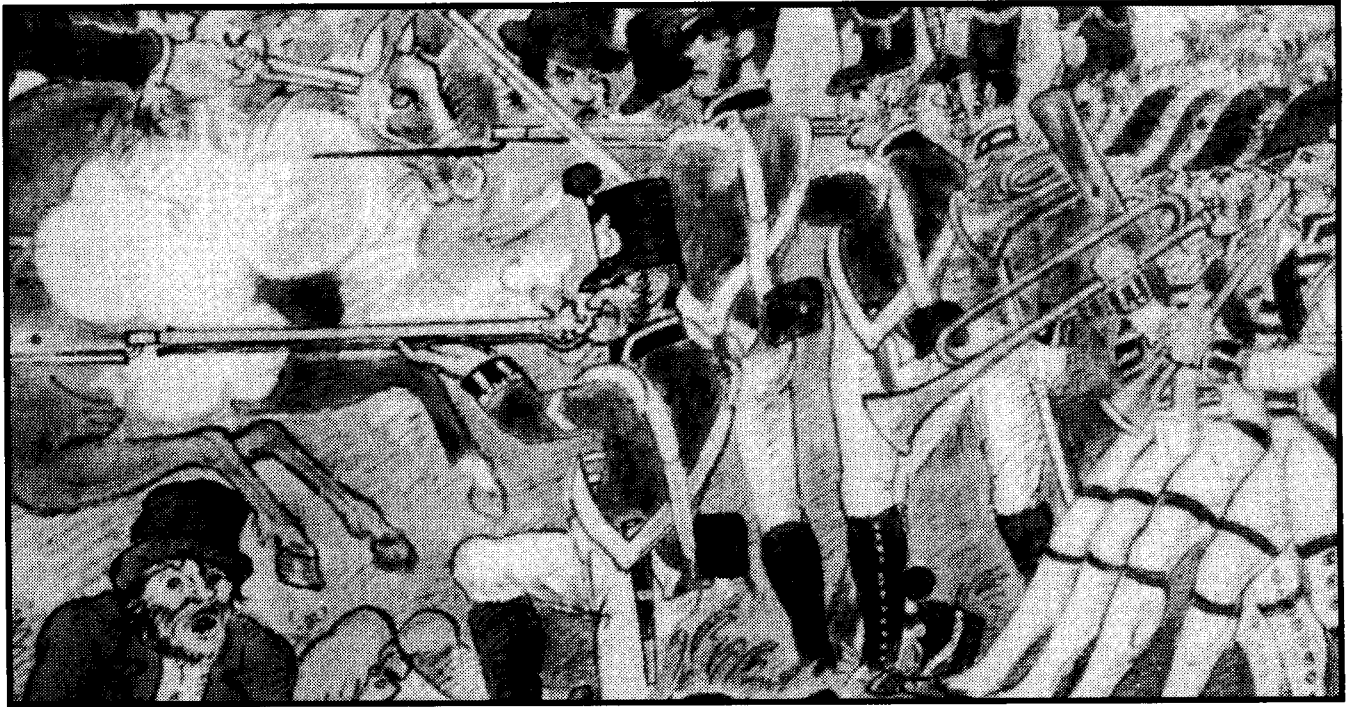
These horrific massacres were two occasions when discipline broke down. However, it is also important to note that they were not policy decisions of the United Irish leadership, who bitterly regretted them. On June 7th, for example, Edward Roche declared:

In the moment of triumph, my countrymen, let not your victories be tarnished by any wanton acts of cruelty: many of those unfortunate men in prison were not your enemies from principle, most of them, compelled by necessity, were obliged to oppose you. Neither let a difference in religious sentiments cause a difference among the people.⁷

There is no way of accurately estimating the number of casualties in the rebellion. Bodies were mutilated, dumped in mass graves or the sea. Of the 20-70,000 estimated deaths, a minority were inflicted by the rebels. Miles Byrne constantly complained that the United Irishmen were too gentlemanly in their warfare, too willing to rely on negotiations and government "good faith" and too squeamish in their conduct.

Protestant leaders

Within the Wexford United Irishmen leadership, a large proportion were Protestants and, if anything, there is every indication that the rank-and-file members deferred to them, rather than resented them. Anxious to avoid pogroms, a distinction was made between loyalists (politically active



Battle of Vinegar Hill, 21 June - the end of the Wexford Republic.

Protestants who had joined the yeomanry, Orange Order or army) and neutrals like the Quakers and liberal Protestants such as the Richards brothers and Ebenezer Jacob, who played leading roles in the Wexford republic.

Women and children were respected as non-combatants, the only dereliction being Scullabogue. Similar atrocities were authorised by the government side, of course, including the killing of fleeing rebels, stragglers on roadsides and the multiple rapes by the Dumbartonshire regiment of camp followers on Vinegar Hill.

The Wexford republic lasted for three weeks. Isolation, defeats and the failure of a French expedition to land and give a lifeline to the rebels meant the experiment would be shortlived. The failure of the rebellion was certainly no reflection on the people of Wexford.

Had other important centres—especially Dublin and the North—risen as successfully as Wexford had, the course of history could have been completely different. On June 21st General Lake bombarded rebels with cannon at the famous battle of Vinegar Hill, paving the way for the final defeat of the Wexford republic. A 45-mile march out of Wexford town into the surrounding hills and countryside was

conducted under Fr. John Murphy and Miles Byrne and the town recaptured by Crown forces the following day.

Most of the rebels would eventually be captured, including Fr Murphy who was executed on July 2nd. As one of several Wexford priests who had shown bravery and leadership during the rebellion, his place in popular folk memory is well-deserved, even if exaggerated and exploited by Catholic nationalists. Byrne was to fare luckier, enjoying a long life in exile. In his Memoirs, he placed the rising firmly in a political context, restating the republican ideals of the United Irishmen and their hopes that French aid would free the country and lead to widespread social change:

"the church property becoming immediately the property of the state; and the estates of all those who should emigrate, or remain in the English army fighting against their country, being confiscated, the revenue arising from these funds would have been employed to provide for and defray all the expenses necessary for the defence and independence of the country."

The attempt to claim 1798 for one political or religious tradition should be ended in this bicentenary commemoration. The shared politi-

cal project of the United Irishmen should be studied and discussed, now more than ever. The defeat of the 1798 rebellion marked a sad end to a century which had shown the potential to unite people of all religions in a republic in the true, original sense of the word. As this millennium closes, we could do worse than take note of a United Irish declaration and their attempt to create a new, non-sectarian society:

We have thought much about our posterity, little about our ancestors. Are we forever to walk like beasts of prey over the fields which these ancestors stained with blood?

FOOTNOTES

1. Kevin Whelan, "Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion in County Waterford", in D.Keogh & N.Furlong, (Eds.), *The Mighty Wave: The 1798 Rebellion in Wexford* (Dublin, 1996) p. 25.
2. *Ibid*, p. 13.
3. *Ibid*, p. 15.
4. *Ibid*, p. 22
5. Daniel Gahan, *The People's Rising: Wexford 1798*, (Dublin, 1995).
6. Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty: The Story of the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798*, (London, 1969).
7. Whelan, p. 28.

Rebellion in the North Was Not Just Antrim and Down!

By Anton McCabe

Absolute misery was the lot of the mass of the people in the Western half of Ulster in the 1790s. For most of the time, their energies were too concentrated on survival for revolt to feature on the agenda. Outside of the Presbyterian community, illiteracy was fairly widespread. In big stretches of the countryside of Tyrone, Donegal and Monaghan, the peasantry were Irish-speaking and didn't have a word of English.

Into this society in the early 1790s burst the United Irishmen, with their aim to "make all men politicians" by encouraging ordinary people to think about the way society was organised—and the possibility of changing it. Their paper the *Northern Star* circulated widely. Every town and village of any significance seems to have had its circle which read the paper—it is estimated that each copy reached at least ten people. Most subscribers were middle-class radicals, but there were a sprinkling from more modest backgrounds. In a society with a low rate of literacy, there was a tradition of newspapers being read aloud to groups of people.

The backwardness of the region did not, by the mid-1790s, prevent the majority in West Ulster from believing that a revolution was needed—that is, a fundamental change in the organisation of society. They would no longer allow a minority to exercise control over them by force: if peaceful means failed, they would answer force with force. While only a determined minority were prepared to take up arms to overthrow the existing social order, that minority enjoyed the support of the majority

in society. One hostile observer estimated that the United Irishmen were "almost the whole country".

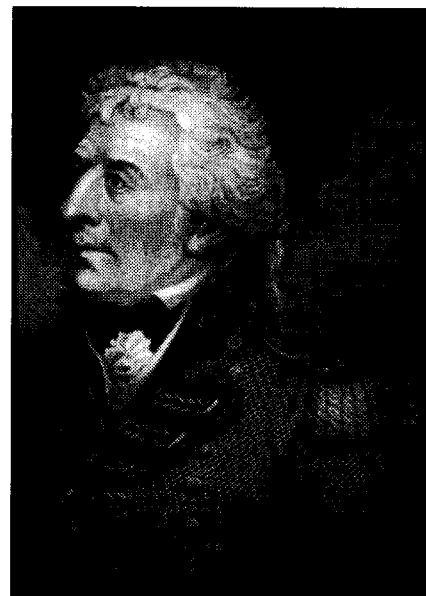
International influence

For all the region's isolation, international events fired ordinary people. First came the American Revolution of 1776, when the common people of Britain's American Colonies rose against the rule of the British upper classes, demanding control of their own destiny. Many were from Ulster, because tens of thousands had emigrated there in the previous three generations: of these, the great majority were Presbyterians, fleeing religious persecution. When the Americans won their freedom in 1784, the Yankee Club of Stewartstown, Co Tyrone, sent a message to George Washington, president of the new republic, assuring him that his activities had "shed their benign influence over the distressed Kingdom of Ireland".

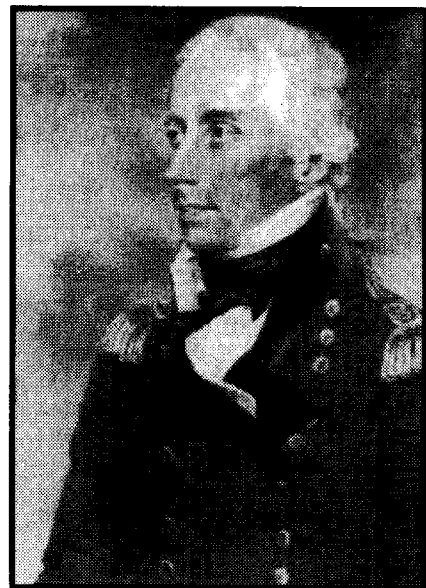
There was sympathy too for the English radicals. In October 1794, the English radical Thomas Hardy was tried for treason. When the papers brought the news of the "not guilty" verdict against him to Maguiresbridge, Co. Fermanagh, the majority of the village's inhabitants celebrated the event in the local inn well into the night.

Because they emphasised the personal interpretation of the Bible there was a high degree of literacy among Ulster Presbyterians. What helped them to read the Bible also helped them imbibe revolutionary ideas. Thus, the English radical Tom Paine was favourite reading in the Clones area of Monaghan round 1792.

The French Revolution of 1798



General Lake (top) who took charge of disarming the North and below his successor General Nugent.





Battle of Ballynahinch, 13 June - United Army led by Monro defeated.

was the event that politicised society, providing a living example of reform to all disgusted at the old political and economic set-up. In the Fintona area of Tyrone, a favourite toast was "No tithes, half-rent, and a French Constitution". In 1793 a Methodist preacher reported that, in the mountains and bogs of Cavan, Fermanagh and Leitrim, people were informed of political events even in places "where you could not conceive that any news could reach". A government supporter wrote from Ballyhaise, Co. Cavan, in 1794 that there were people in the area who "are as real republicans as ever was in France". Support for the French Revolution passed into popular Gaelic song.

The masses saw the advantages for them in the French system. From the start of the United movement, the leaders had called for Catholic Emancipation. This had little effect on the mass of Ulster Catholics, who cared little for the disadvantages endured by their rich co-religionists. Once the movement began talking of the abolition of tithes, reduction of rents, and an end to other economic injustices, they flocked to it.

In the spring of 1797, the local Orangemen of Drum found that they were "in the exact same state with what they called the enemies of their country, the "United Irishmen", and so defected to the rebel side.

The internationalist spirit included the wish to extend the revolution. Towards the end of 1797 James Boyle from Coagh in Tyrone went to Glasgow University, with a

bursary provided by the local community. His purpose was not just to study, but to swear in United Scotchmen.

Breaking down sectarianism

The revolutionary movement was able to break down old ideas as well as old isolations. West Ulster was an area of some sectarian tension. Prejudice of all sorts thrives when conditions are backward—and that was certainly the case! History had left its legacy: the Plantations had only taken place in the previous century: they, and the terrible war of 1641, were still vivid in popular memory. Tensions were particularly acute in North Armagh, flowing over into the adjoining (Eastern) area of Tyrone, and also influencing North Monaghan.

For more than a decade there had been clashes between groups of Protestants—usually known as "Peep o' Day Boys"—and Catholics: these had organised themselves into the "Defender" organisation (despite its Catholic membership, it had been set up by a Presbyterian minister). At least 7,000, and possibly as many as 14,000, Catholics fled North Armagh in the early to mid-

1790s. Sectarianism was sharpened to fever-pitch by land-hunger: this was a densely-populated area of small farms, with many of the peasants being also weavers. There had been a slump in trade: landlords had been evicting Protestant tenants on some estates, replacing them with Catholics, as the Catholics tended to be poorer, used to a lower standard of living, and so able to pay higher rents.

In 1795 the Orange Order was founded at the Diamond, outside Loughgall, just over the Armagh border from Tyrone, after a fight between "Peep o' Day Boys" and "Defenders". It was encouraged by the landlords and magistrates as a counter-balance to the United movement. The Dungannon-based General Knox perfectly expressed this establishment view: "... I have arranged a plan to scour a district full of registered arms or said to be so... and this I do not do so much with a hope to succeed to any extent as to increase the animosity between the Orangemen and the United Irishmen or Liberty men as they call themselves. Upon that animosity depends the safety of the Central Counties of the North (my emphasis, A McC)".

While the Orange Order was the main sectarian instrument used by the establishment, any other opening was also used. In the Coagh area of East Tyrone a local magistrate, Andrew Newton, worked up the prejudices of the Catholics to get them to abandon the United movement, in an area where membership and leadership were overwhelmingly Presbyterian.

The rank-and-file Orangemen were peasants, labourers, the occasional tradesman, usually members of the Church of Ireland. The ordinary Orangeman shared the conditions that were driving his neighbours to become revolutionaries. In some cases, he was even poorer than they—the difference being that he was less politically aware, and so blamed Catholics and United Irishmen, rather than landlords and government, for his hardships. But he wasn't immunised for life against revolutionary ideas. In South Tyrone, Joseph Cassells, the Aughnacloy-based United Irish leader, was able to win over Orangemen in some numbers. The Drum area of South-West Monaghan was one of Orangeism's early strongholds. In the spring of

1797, the local Orangemen found that they were "in the exact same state with what they called the enemies of their country, the United Irishmen", and so defected to the rebel side.

As a social movement, the United Irishmen broke down barriers between different religious groups. United Irish meetings used be held in the chapel at Aghayaran (outside of Castleterg in Tyrone), with the majority attending being Presbyterian or Established Church, and a significant proportion yeomen. Fermanagh is another example of how the movement encompassed all creeds. Not only were many of the Fermanagh rank-and-file members of the Church of Ireland: so were many of the leaders. In that county, there were very few Presbyterians, the people being either Catholic or Church of Ireland. An added local factor was overcome, the strong traditions from 1641 and the Williamite wars, when the Protestant "Enniskilliners" had defied superior Catholic armies.

Growth and repression

The Yeomanry were set up in the summer 1796 as an auxiliary force, to be largely composed of Orangemen. They were no great threat to any hostile army, but an absolute menace to civilians. These Yeomanry too were subverted, and not just by the two-faced who wished to keep their options open. The captain of the Castle Gore yeomanry (near Castleterg) was the leading United Irish figure in that area. He wasn't the only yeoman to play an important part: Davidson, from the Dungannon area, was several times Tyrone delegate to the Ulster Committee, as well as a yeoman.

The United movement in West Ulster did not develop as a simple gallop from success to success. In the late spring/early summer of 1796, it made an alliance with the Defenders from a position of strength, effectively taking over the other organisation. Many of the Defenders had been influenced by the spirit of revolution, and had moved on in the direction of egalitarian social ideas.

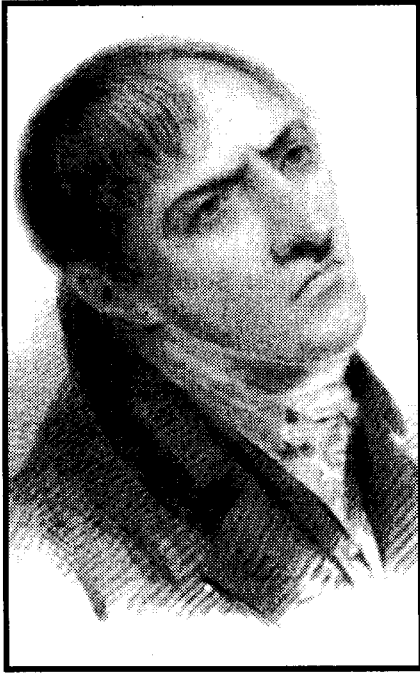
Pike manufacture began in Monaghan in the summer of 1796. Large-scale production began in Tyrone in the autumn, the Coagh area being particularly active. By

the latter part of 1796, the United Movement had the wind in its sails. At the November Fair of 1796 in Stewartstown (Co Tyrone) it felt confident enough to come into the open and give battle to the Yeomanry, and four days later to teach them another lesson at

"Resolved that our delegation do demand in explicit terms the nature of the engagement with France. We think that men who have risked their life and property in the support of the business could be entrusted with such information and that they be instructed to bring forward the business with or without such assistance".

***Ballynahinch
United Irishmen,
May 1797***

Cookstown Fair. Many on the government side felt all was lost, one clergyman in Dungannon writing, "...to the North of us is quite lost. Dungannon is frontier and Stewartstown an advanced post in the enemies country with many Royalists in it. Thence to the Northern Sea scarce a friend".



Robert Emmet

But within a couple of months the movement, particularly in Tyrone, seemed to be finished. Wolfe Tone's expedition had sailed away from Bantry Bay at the end of December. There was a big round up of suspects at the end of 1796-early 1797. Many of the leaders were imprisoned, martial law was in force, the countryside was at the mercy of the magistrates and the yeomen, who engaged in wholesale murder, torture and burning of property. A whole section of the less committed members capitulated to the authorities.

But within another couple of months, the pendulum had swung back again. Between January and March 1797 the Tyrone membership of the United Irishmen nearly doubled to 14,000: of these, it was estimated that at least 2,000 were prepared to take the field. The county was in a state of smothered revolt. In early January the notorious rebel-hunter, Dr William Hamilton, was assassinated in a well-planned attack near Newtowncunningham in East Donegal, his killers receiving excellent co-operation from the lower classes in a strongly Presbyterian area. The result was an exodus of government supporters. Juries at Omagh Spring Assizes had to be packed with gentry, as the middle classes were no longer reliable.

Tyrone and Monaghan were both heavily-organised counties:

Monaghan had over 10,000 United men, and some estimates make it the third-most organised county in Ulster. Some places were particular hot-beds: Coagh in Tyrone, Glaslough in Monaghan (which was on the border of the sectarian cauldron that was North Armagh), and Cootehill in Cavan. In Cootehill the necessity of assassinating reactionaries was the stuff of polite after-dinner conversation. Donegal was estimated to have 20,000 United men, mostly concentrated in the "Laggan" in the east of the county.

The numbers loyal to the government collapsed, those that remained were demoralised. The Rev Wright, a Church of Ireland clergyman in Clones, complained that "Men I could have put into my heart from a conviction of their loyalty have suddenly turned to the other side and are now from their situation in the country become the most dangerous enemies of the constitution". The United men were able to march through Dromore (Co Tyrone), unchallenged, in broad daylight.

Revolution delayed

Success in revolution is never guaranteed, but it is certain that had the Tyrone United men risen in the early part of 1797, they would have carried the county within a couple of days. Monaghan also would most likely have also fallen. Instead, in the early summer of 1797, the wing of the United Movement who were depending on a French invasion to achieve their aims gained the upper hand, and put a stop to military actions. Their argument was that this enforced discipline, preventing premature battle and the scattering of forces.

In the run-up to a revolution, a series of partial battles are inevitable and necessary. They give the revolutionaries time to test the enemy, to gain experience and develop confidence in their own strength. The decision to delay took the pressure off government forces on the ground. The previously-beleaguered class of government supporters took sufficient heart as to return to their old habits of mass flogging of civilians and wholesale burning their homes. Lord Blayney of Castleblayney in Monaghan established a mobile military force to

strike terror over the whole stretch of country from West Tyrone to South Armagh. On 11 May his column massacred eleven unarmed civilians who were setting potatoes for an imprisoned United Irish suspect at Annaghmakerrig, Co. Monaghan. The following week, he launched an attack on Glaslough, burning houses and destroying property. Suspects were interned, first in prisons then once these were full, on a tender in Lough Foyle.

The more determined opposed the policy of waiting on the French. The sentiments of a resolution passed at Ballynahinch, Co. Down, in May 1797 were widely shared: "Resolved that our delegation do demand in explicit terms the nature of the engagement with France. We think that men who have risked their life and property in the support of the business could be entrusted with such information and that they be instructed to bring forward the business with or without such Assistance". Coagh was an area where such a spirit was prevalent: a section there was none too keen on a French invasion, which they saw as exchanging the domination of one foreign power for that of another.

For all that some men held firmer, the less committed began to fall away. The continued postponement of the Rising, the orders against any armed action, the endless promises of a French invasion that never came, sapped zeal, energy and confidence. It was in this situation that the spirit of the Monaghan Militia was broken.

This regiment had been well-infiltrated by the United movement, until three of the leading spirits were executed in early May 1797 at Blaris Moor (outside Lisburn). Then the former revolutionaries became zealous servants of the government, sacking the offices of the *Northern Star* the following week. In an era of atrocities, they showed particular blood-thirstiness after the Battles of Antrim and Ballynahinch in June the following year.

This general loss of hope led to a certain haemorrhaging of Catholics from the movement by the end of 1797: at the bottom of Ulster's social pile, they felt more

vulnerable and thus more fearful of the authorities.

A last stand

Repeated hammer-blows of repression without a riposte from the revolution thinned the ranks, with many being convicted, or interned, or pressed into the navy, or forced to flee to America—either as a sentence, or to evade either the prison cell or hangman's rope. No movement could bear such a steady loss of experienced leaders. The sheer pressure from the government forces also sapped the energy which is needed for making revolution. Many formerly comfortably-off families were reduced to the status of beggars by imprisonment and destruction of property.

Not that all was lost. Even by the start of 1798 it was estimated that over one-third of the military in Tyrone were United men.

On 19 May 1798 the Ulster Committee met in Armagh, and decided on simultaneous risings, but the fighting spirit had been sapped. The general opinion was that, if there was to be no rising, they would all return to their homes and occupations, not meet again "and deceive the people any longer".

Although aware the cause was hopeless, and to fight almost suicidal, some from West Ulster still took the field. Some Cavan and Monaghan men marched to join the rebellion in Meath. A couple of days after the defeat in Antrim, the Maghera area of South Derry rose, but without any leadership. With the other rebel forces in Ulster smashed, they dispersed. A handful of Monaghan men trekked to Down and took part in the battle of Ballynahinch.

When in August the French landed, too few and too late, at Killala in Mayo, men from the Roslea and Belleek areas of Fermanagh walked to join them. The last act of the Rising in Ulster has been written out of history. On 26 August, 800 (including four Presbyterian ministers) died in a bloody rising at Baileborough, Co Cavan, where they had met in the hope of marching to join the French

forces. The composition of the rising also disproves those who say that the North had by then fallen away from the movement because the rebels in the South were largely Catholic.

Demoralisation followed, but revolutionary ideas, and organisation round them, did not completely disappear. William Henry Hamilton of Enniskillen returned from France to be one of Robert Emmet's most trusted lieutenants for the planned rising of 1803. Emmet based himself much more on the lower-classes than did the men of 1798. His movement was thus far less compromised by informers. Mid-Monaghan was one of the areas

where men were waiting to rise, with William Henry as organiser. But the 1803 rising was confined to Dublin, premature and a failure, and William Henry was captured. As a revolutionary, he personified all that was internationalist about the United Irishmen, and died fighting in the army of Simon Bolivar for the liberation of South America from the Spanish Empire.

Acknowledgment: This article is largely based on material in Brendan McEvoy's The United Irishmen in Tyrone and Brian McDonald's The United Irishmen in South Ulster.

JAMES 'JEMMY' HOPE (1763-1847) OF TEMPLEPATRICK, CO ANTRIM, was one of the most radical leaders of the United Irishmen. A weaver, he had little schooling and was almost entirely self-taught. He dedicated over a decade of his life to revolutionary activity, and was a confidant of all the most resolute leaders.

The following is a brief extract from his memoirs:

"The influence of the union soon began to be felt at all public places, fairs, markets, and social gatherings, extending to all the counties of Ulster, for no man of an enlightened mind had intercourse with Belfast, who did not return home determined on disseminating the principles of the union among his neighbours. Strife and quarreling ceased in all public places, and even intoxication.

"The 'Break of Day Boys' and 'Defenders' lamented their past indiscretions on both sides, and tracing them to their legitimate sources, resolved to avoid the causes which led to them. In short, for a little time, Ulster seemed one united family, the members of which lived together in harmony and peace. A secret delegation to Dublin was resolved on, and I was one of two persons who were appointed to proceed there, to disseminate our views among the working classes...

"The appearance of a French fleet in Bantry Bay brought the rich farmers and shop keepers into the societies, and with them, all the corruption essential to the objects of the British Ministry, to foster rebellion, to possess the power of subduing it, and to carry a Legislative Union. The new adherents alleged, as a reason for their former reserve, that they thought the societies only a combination of the poor to get the property of the rich. The societies as a mark of satisfaction at their conversion, and a demonstration of confidence in their wealthy associates, the future leaders, civil and military, were chiefly chosen from their ranks. McCracken, who was by far the most deserving of all our northern leaders, observed that what we had latterly gained in numbers, we lost in worth..."

Ireland and the French Revolution

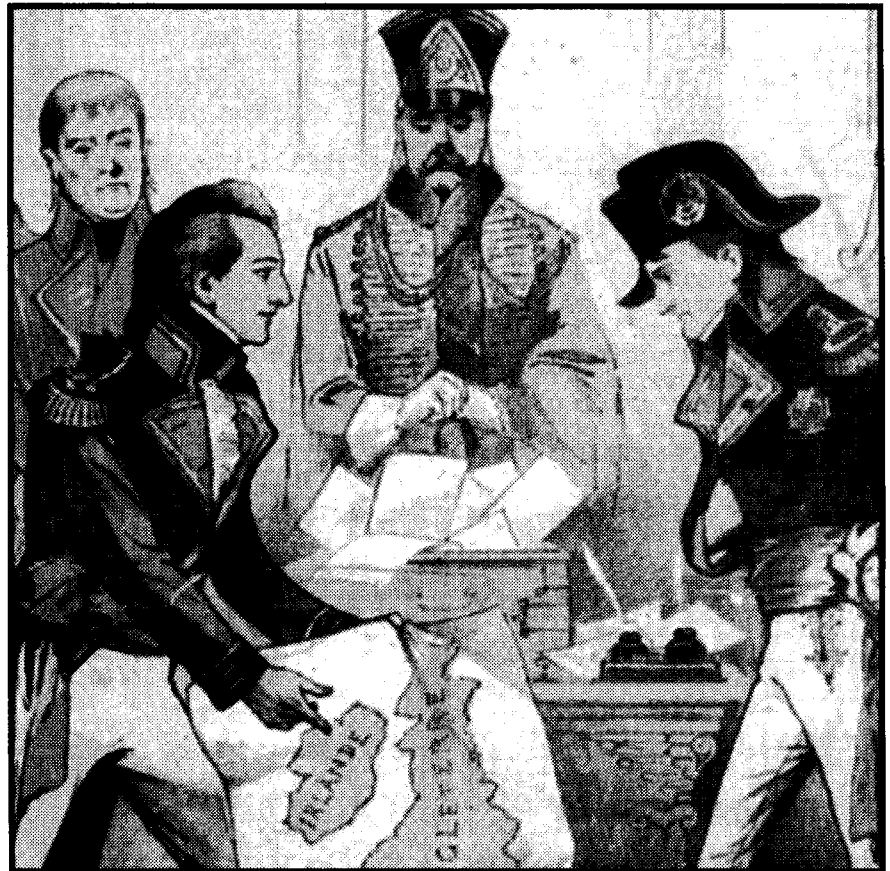
by Tom Crean

*O! spurn the mean prejudice,
Britons, and say
If your Fathers were right,
how can Frenchmen be
wrong?
The will of oppressors both
scorn'd to obey,
And asserted those rights
which to mortals belong
Yet the struggles of these are
to infamy hurl'd
While the actions we with
triumph rehearse:
But the bright orb of reason
now peeps on the world,
And the thick clouds of prej-
udice soon shall disperse.*

(from "A new song addressed to Englishmen", taken from the United Irish chapbook *Songs on the French Revolution* (1792))

The French Revolution had an explosive international impact. Its echoes were felt from Poland to Haiti and led to a whole series of movements which sought to emulate the French example. European and world politics would never be the same again.

There are many reasons for this. In 1789 most European countries were still ruled by "absolute" monarchs who justified their role by the doctrine of the "divine right of kings". The feudal aristocracy though weakened still remained the dominant social class while the mass of the population were impoverished peasants. Democracy in the modern sense was virtually non-existent. So for an urban-based, popular revolt to topple the most powerful royal house in Europe, strip the nobility of its privileges and then establish a republic based on universal male suffrage was obviously staggering. But to fully



In January 1798, Wolfe Tone tries to convince Napoleon to send an army to Ireland.

understand the impact of the Revolution on Ireland and the relationship of the United Irishmen with France, it is necessary to first of all trace the course of events in France itself.

French society before the Revolution was formally divided into three "estates": the nobility, the clergy and the so-called "third estate" which included everyone else. The nobility and clergy each owned vast tracts of land and were exempt from most forms of taxation. The monarchy in France and elsewhere in Europe during the 1700s were seeking to restrict the privileges of the first

two estates, particularly in regards to taxation. This was because they were seeking to build large standing armies in their competition for territory. Britain and France in particular were locked in a struggle for colonial domination in the New World.

Within the Third Estate, the emerging social force was the bourgeoisie, a term which originally simply meant "urban dwellers". But by the 18th century, the bourgeoisie referred specifically to the merchants and bankers who had grown prosperous through the building of trading empires, manufacturers and the higher ranks of the professions and

the civil service. In France, manufacturing was still concentrated in small guild workshops where a master craftsman employed journeymen and apprentices. Only in Britain had modern industrial production developed on a large scale and, even there, the bulk of the working class up until the mid 19th century were artisans and not industrial workers. In Paris, the smaller workshop masters and shopkeepers, along with the journeymen and apprentices, together formed the popular masses who played a key role in the development of the revolution. They were variously referred to as the "menu peuple" (ordinary people) or the "sans culottes" (those who didn't wear knee breeches, characteristic of the rich).

Of course, the vast majority of the Third Estate and of society were peasants. Serfdom by this stage was largely abolished in Western Europe and in France there was a substantial layer (a quarter of the total) who owned their land outright. Half, however, were sharecroppers who divided their crops on a 50/50 basis with their landlords, while the final quarter were landless labourers.

The role of the sans culottes in the Paris Commune (the city council) pointed towards the socialist programme that the workers should rule society.

The 18th century was a period of economic growth when a small elite amassed huge fortunes. But it was also a century when the European population grew by over 50% and some historians have argued that the growth of the food supply did not keep pace. The consequence of this for ordinary people in growing urban areas like Paris who spent at least half their income on bread was a steady decline in living standards. When food shortages became acute as



Lazare Hoche, commander of 15,000 strong French force sent to liberate Ireland in 1796.

in the winter of 1788-9, the prospect of starvation loomed.

Causes of the French Revolution

So while the rich got richer, the poor were often poorer and the resulting sharpening of social tensions was a very important factor in causing the French Revolution. But there were a number of other specific causes. First of all, there was the increasing tension between the French king, Louis XVI, and the nobility because

of the government's need to increase tax revenue. This financial crisis was exacerbated by French involvement in the American War of Independence against Britain. France was on the winning side but wound up in heavy debt to the banks.

Secondly, there was what the famous 19th century writer, Alexis de Tocqueville, referred to as a "crisis of rising expectations" among the French bourgeoisie. Historically, the bourgeoisie had used their wealth to buy their way into the nobility and

the sale of noble titles became a lucrative source of revenue for the state. But this also caused resentment among the established nobility against these "upstarts" and after the middle of the 18th century, there was increasing restriction placed on bourgeois upward mobility. So an increasingly wealthy class felt that their social status did not correspond to their importance in society.

The other factor pushing French society towards revolution were the ideas of the Enlightenment. Writers like Voltaire and Rousseau were challenging the established dogmas of the old society. They re-examined philosophy, religion and politics and rejected all ideas which could not be rationally justified. In particular, they attacked the privileges of the nobility and the church as well as the doctrine of the "divine right of kings". Edmund Burke, the Anglo-Irish politician who wrote the most famous conservative attack on the French Revolution, singled out these "philosophes" as the cause of all the subsequent trouble.

Undoubtedly the popularisation of the new thinking did play an important role, but the revolution was the result of a specific conjuncture as well as the longer term factors outlined above, especially the increasing social contradictions. In 1788, in one of the recurring standoffs between Louis XVI and the nobility, the king was forced to agree to the calling of the Estates General. This assembly of the representatives of the three estates had not met since 1614.

When the Estates General convened in May 1789, the crisis entered a new stage. The representatives of the Third Estate, chosen in assemblies where all men had a vote and various grievances were aired, were almost all bourgeois professionals. They were not prepared to simply be a rubber stamp in the nobility's dispute with Louis XVI. When the king appeared to threaten to dismiss the Estates General, the Third Estate constituted itself as a National Assembly and refused to disperse. The Parisian masses then rose up to defend the Assembly.

Constitutional monarchy

Thus what began as a protest by the nobility on taxation became a revolution of the bourgeoisie backed up by the sans culottes. Meanwhile, the peasants rose up and burned the m a n o r



English cartoon showing the "benefits" of Ireland's alliance with France.

rolls which listed all their debts to the feudal landlords. The new National Assembly soon abolished the remaining feudal privileges of the nobility and clergy. They also issued on 26 August 1789 a Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which reflected the ideals of the Enlightenment as well as echoing the American Declaration of Independence. These were also the values that inspired the early United Irishmen.

It is important to stress that in the first stage of the French Revolution which lasted through 1791, the French bourgeoisie did not seek to create a republic. Rather France was a constitutional monarchy modelled on Britain where the bourgeoisie had already established its social dominance in the 1600s. The Constitution of 1791 enshrined these aims. But before the ink was dry on this document, the revolution was already

beginning to take a more radical turn.

There are several reasons for this. The most important was the resistance of the nobility to the new order. Unlike Britain, where the aristocracy by the 17th century had already "cleared the land" of peasants and to some extent transformed themselves into capitalist farmers managing sheep runs, the French aristocracy still depended on taxing the peasants for its livelihood. As George Rudé points out:

The great majority [of nobles] though remaining in France... were never reconciled to the new order and, as a constant focal point of dissension, sullen resentment and suspicion, provoked the revolutionary authorities to take ever harsher and more vigorous measures to restrain their liberties and keep them in check.¹

Radicalisation

The king whom the nobility had been fighting previously now became their primary ally. In June 1791, Louis was caught trying to escape France to join a royalist army abroad. This was a very disillusioning experience for many in the bourgeoisie. But the final decisive factor in radicalising the situation was the outbreak of war between France and Austria in April 1792.

By this stage a clear division had emerged in the French bourgeoisie between those who wanted to "stop" the revolution and those who want to overthrow the monarchy and establish a republic. The republican wing through its political clubs like the Jacobins also actively developed an alliance with the sans culottes who want the reestablishment of the right to vote for all men—universal male franchise—which had been restricted since 1789.

Events were pushed along in the summer of 1792 as the war with Austria began going badly for France. The war also led to severe inflation making bread almost unaffordable and pushing the urban masses towards revolt. In August 1792, the "second revolution" occurs

as the sans culottes surround the king's Paris residence. A republic is declared and in January 1793, Louis XVI is executed. The following month, Britain which had initially welcomed the French Revolution primarily because of the difficulties it caused her major international foe, declared war on the republic.

But having reestablished universal male suffrage, a further split in the republican bourgeoisie emerged. The more moderate wing, the Girondins, were hesitant about executing the king while the radicals of the Mountain, led by Robespierre, won the allegiance of the sans culottes by their determination on this point and also by championing the popular demands for a minimum wage and a maximum price on bread. This more radical wing seized power at the beginning of June 1793 after the sans culottes surrounded the National Convention—as the Assembly now called itself—and forced the “purg- ing” of the Girondins.

The ascendancy of the Mountain marks the most radical phase of the French Revolution which lasts until July 1794 when Robespierre is in turn overthrown by more conservative forces. The “Year Two of the Republic” is remembered primarily for the Terror which the regime used against its opponents, symbolised by the guillotine. But what is often lost sight of is that, by this stage, France faced not only external enemies but also internal civil war, particularly in the Vendée where a pro-royalist Catholic rebellion was actively aided by Britain. Most people killed during the Terror were killed during the suppression of such rebellions which physically threatened the very existence of the republic. This, of course, does not alter the fact that it was a very brutal period. However, for many ordinary people in Paris, the Year Two was remembered as the period when “liberty, equality and fraternity” came closest to being realised. This is primarily because Robespierre kept his word and brought in the minimum wage and the maximum on prices.

These measures may not seem so radical today but it reflected a degree of popular participation in political administration which was unprecedented. The role of the sans culottes in the Paris Commune (the city council) pointed towards the socialist programme that the workers should rule society. But it was also unsustainable on the basis of the level of economic development which France had attained. The bourgeoisie needed the sans

culottes as an ally in the fight against the enemies of the republic, external and internal. But having defeated these enemies, the need for this alliance—with all its potentially dangerous implications for the rule of property—was removed and the main wing of the bourgeoisie moved to reestablish “law and order”. Elections on the basis of universal suffrage were not held again in France until 1848. On the other side, the sans culottes, a large force in Paris but a small minority of the population as a whole, were far too weak on their own to establish their rule over society.

In subsequent decades, the Year Two of the French Revolution became the model for social radicals including many socialists. But the

If the troops had landed in Ireland in December 1796, despite the fact that the United Irishmen had not been informed of the date or location of the invasion, victory was almost certain.

alliance between the radical bourgeoisie and the popular masses proved largely impossible to reestablish. The fight for democracy became increasingly the fight of the workers movement, particularly in Britain where the Chartists emerged in the 1840s as the first mass workers' party in modern history. Their central demand was universal male suffrage in a classic bourgeois society where even after the Reform Act of 1832 only 14% of adult males had the right to vote!

Ireland

The United Irishmen as one of the many movements across Europe inspired by the French revolution

went through a process of radicalisation which mirrored the radicalisation of the revolution itself. Initially, the organisation demanded radical reform of the Irish political system including Catholic emancipation. It was certainly not committed at this stage to the establishment of an Irish republic through an insurrection against English rule backed by French arms. The shift to the latter goals, as detailed in the introduction to this pamphlet, came as a result of the failure to secure fundamental reform—symbolised by the removal of Earl Fitzwilliam as Lord Lieutenant in February 1795—as well as the pressure of external events, particularly Britain's declaration of war against France. The United Irishmen, allies of France, were now perceived as enemies of the British state and were treated as such.

But the other key factor in the radicalisation of the United Irishmen was the spread of social republican ideas. Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* was the clearest statement of these ideas. The second part of this book calls for the redistribution of income, the provision of child care benefits and old age pensions. Again, these demands which anticipate the post-Second World War welfare state may not seem particularly revolutionary today. However, at the time, they were viewed by conservatives as an assault on the “rights of property”, on the very foundations of their social order. But it was precisely these social demands, along with the call for universal suffrage, which won the allegiance of artisans in Belfast and Dublin—the Irish sans culottes—to the United Irishmen. Hence an alliance of social forces quite similar to that which led to the radical republic of 1792-4 in France emerged in Ireland in the latter half of the 1790s. And as the ballad at the beginning of this article suggests, the United Irishmen sought to spread their ideas into Scotland and England where United Scotsmen and United Englishmen were established. These organisation also recruited heavily among artisan workers.

The French connection

The other and more celebrated part of the connection between Ireland and France in this period was the attempt to organise a French military invasion to coincide with an insurrection here. Informal contacts between Irish radicals and

French ruling circles existed from the early 1790s. However, a decisive change occurred in late 1795 when the leadership of the United Irishmen—in the process of reorganising the movement—decided to send Wolfe Tone to France with the aim of securing a French commitment to send an army to Ireland. It is interesting to note that at least one historian, Marianne Elliott, who has written extensively on the connection between the United Irishmen and France, believes that part of the motivation in seeking French aid was fear that the Irish “lower orders” could not be controlled after a revolution:

The United Irishmen would never consciously have encouraged catholic hopes of a reversal of the land settlement, or risked the possibility of a catholic revenge campaign against the protestant dispossessors. They were political rather than social reformers...and their insistence on the need for French military assistance stemmed as much from their fears of how the catholic lower classes would conduct themselves in a rebellion as from their desire for independence from English rule.²

Tone arrived in France in February 1796, after a circuitous trip via America. He immediately made contact with the leading figures in the Directory, as the post-Robespierre government was known. Tone was very confident of French assistance because of promises made a French agent, William Jackson, who had gone to Ireland two years before. However, from the standpoint of the French government, no formal offer of support had ever been made. In general their view was that military assistance should be given to foreign revolutionary movements once they had taken power. Tone insisted, however, that no rising would take place until the French arrived.

The Directory took Tone's proposals very seriously because their intelligence confirmed that a mood for revolution was indeed growing rapidly in Ireland. They were also naturally keen on any plan which would weaken the position of Britain with whom they were still at war. The difficulty was that the French republic was fighting on more than one front and concentrating forces for an invasion of Ireland—especially given the very weak state of the French navy—was no easy matter.

Fortunately for Tone, he found an

ally in Lazare Hoche, one of revolutionary France's most brilliant young generals. Hoche was certainly motivated by enormous personal ambition. His main rival was Bonaparte who at the end of 1799 was to overthrow the Directory and subsequently crown himself Emperor. But unlike many in the Directory leadership, Hoche was a committed republican and he wanted to see the Irish revolution succeed on principle.

Invasion

After many difficulties and delays, Hoche finally managed to assemble a force of 46 ships carrying 14,450 troops and over 41,000 weapons. A further force of 15,000 reinforcements was also being assembled. On 16 December 1796, the force sailed from Brest. The troops were “in high spirits, firmly convinced of a warm welcome in Ireland; they sang patriotic songs about the French releasing the Irish from bondage and seemed certain of victory.”³

If the troops had landed in Ireland, despite the fact that the United Irishmen had not been informed of the date or location of the invasion, victory was almost certain. The United Irishmen, especially in Ulster, were reasonably well armed, much of the government militia had taken the United oath and there were nowhere near enough regular troops to defeat both the French and the very large part of the population which would certainly have risen to support them.

However, due to a series of tragic accidents and blunders, there was no landing. The French fleet easily made it through the English naval blockade but Hoche's ship became separated from the others in a storm. Most captains of the other vessels had not been given clear instructions on where to land due to Hoche's desire to preserve maximum secrecy. Upon arriving in Bantry Bay, the remaining force, seeing no welcome from the shore—and with still no sign of Hoche—waited a couple of days, and returned to France.

After this fiasco, any further attempt to land a major force in Ireland were made even more complicated. Hoche died in 1797 and when Tone tried to persuade Bonaparte to lead a force to Ireland in early 1798, the latter decided to attack British interests by leading a campaign to Egypt instead. In the end, when rebel-

lion in Ireland did break out, a small force was organised under Humbert, which landed in Killala, County Mayo, in August. But with the United Irishmen having been decisively defeated by this stage, this force had little hope of success and was rapidly defeated.

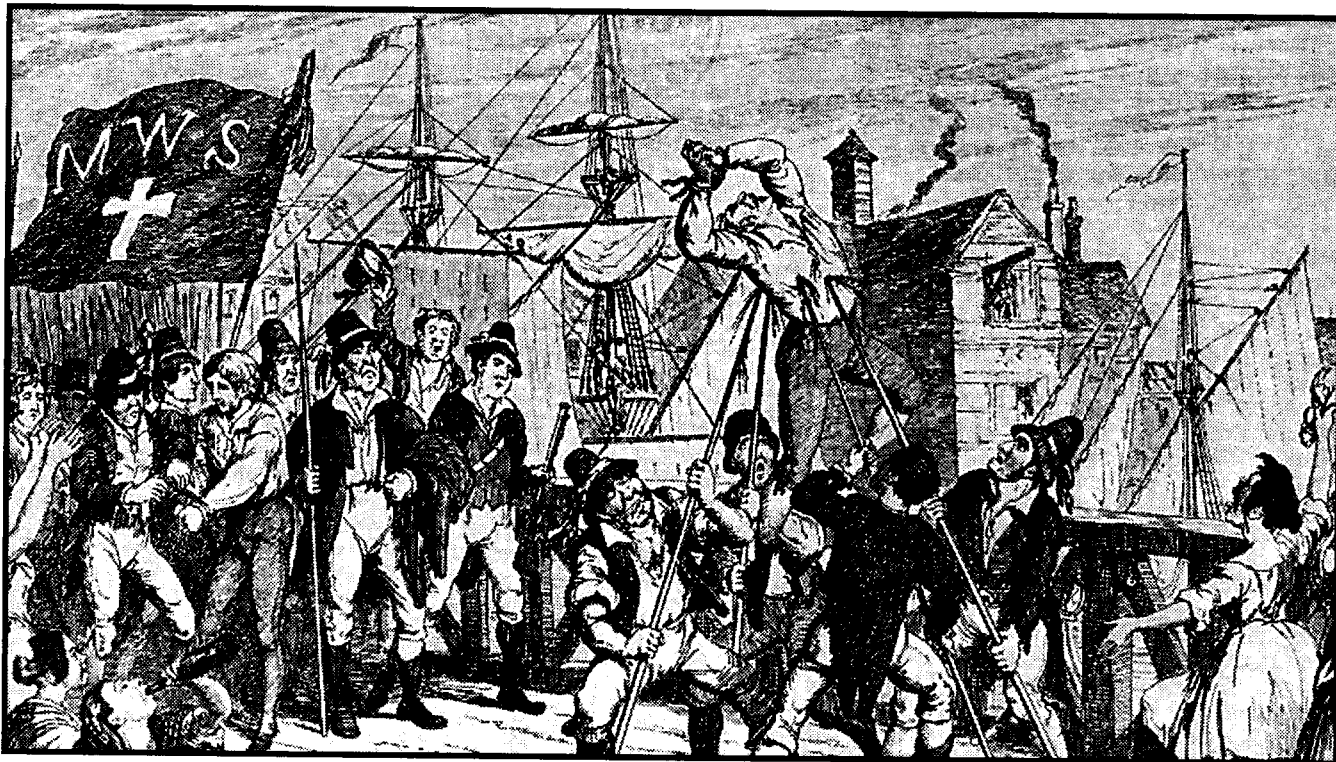
The strategic orientation of the United Irishmen towards a French invasion must be seen as a mixed blessing for the prospects of a successful Irish rebellion. Obviously, the near-success of December 1796 would seem to justify this orientation. Furthermore, the failure of Hoche's expedition, far from disheartening the United Irishmen actually contributed to the enormous growth of the movement in early 1797. Loyalists realising all too well how near they had come to defeat were in a state of enormous panic.

But as 1797 wore on, the insistence of the leadership of the United Irishmen on waiting for another French landing probably squandered the best opportunity for a successful rebellion. For as the French failed to materialise, the government regrouped and began a systematic programme of repression against the United organisation, particularly in its Ulster stronghold. Sectarianism was deliberately stoked and the more faint-hearted elements began to drift away. It is a very dangerous business to begin a revolution and not carry it through at the most opportune point. Timing is everything in politics but tragically the United Irishmen waited too long to make their move and paid a terrible price.

The United Irishmen were a consciously internationalist force inspired by the most profoundly revolutionary events the world had yet seen. Whatever their weaknesses, if there is one thing that socialists can draw inspiration from, it is this spirit of thoroughgoing internationalism. And it is worth pondering how close Irish history came to taking quite a different direction in December 1796. So much for the idea that the way things are is “inevitable”.

FOOTNOTES

1. *George Rudé, Revolutionary Europe, 1783-1815* (London, 1964), p. 122.
2. *Maryann Elliott, Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (London, 1982), p. xvii.
3. *Elliott, p. 113.*



A hostile depiction of rebels piking loyalists on Wexford Bridge.

Remembering and Rewriting 1798

by Eoin Magennis

It has often been said that history is written by the winners and that the losers are erased from the page. One of the great historians of the twentieth century, the socialist E. P. Thompson, used the phrase the “condescension of posterity” to describe how early British radicals and trade unionists were treated by those who wrote about the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This has also happened in regard to the many forgotten people in Irish history who failed to fit into the “nationalist” or “unionist” moulds.

However, this has not happened in the case of 1798. Rather what

has been distorted are the nature of the United Irish movement itself, the response of the authorities and the character of the years leading up to the Rising. In fact long before 1998 and the deluge of books, pamphlets and magazines devoted to commemorating 1798 there was a “paper war” with perspectives ranging from the ultra-loyalist to the ultra-nationalist and the radical response to this debate.

1798 and the Act of Union

The insurrection of 1798 and the Act of Union of 1800 have long—and rightly—been seen as intimately linked. From the standpoint of the British ruling class,

the act was part of the process of preventing another rebellion or civil war. And this is exactly how historians of the nineteenth century described the events. Much of the private and official correspondence that was published from the 1830s onwards presented British politicians such as Lord Cornwallis, viceroy of Ireland from 1789-1801, and his colleague, Lord Castlereagh, as attempting to save the Irish from themselves. As these two men were the architects of the Act of Union, including the bribery and persuasion that went with selling such a measure to Catholic and Protestant elites, then their views of the savagery of rebels and government supporters alike in 1798 became a

key part of the British analysis of the 1790s and the need for Union. "Benevolent imperialism" was all the rage in Victorian England as summed up in James Anthony Froude's three volumes, *The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*.

Loyalist accounts

Irish commentators, on the other hand, did not at all agree on the nature of the connection between 1798 and the Act of Union. The ultra-loyalist argument was made very soon after the rebellion had been crushed. This centred on the assertion that the Rising was another instalment in a long-running "popish plot" to exterminate Protestants. Loyalists sought to use such arguments to persuade British ministers during 1799-1800 that the Act of Union should not be accompanied by Catholic emancipation. Contemporary pamphlets that made these points bore names like *Union or Not? By an Orangeman*.

By the end of 1799, an ultra-loyalist Munster Protestant landlord, Sir Richard Musgrave, began collecting materials for his huge history of the rebellion. The queries that he sent out made it very clear that he would focus on the role of Catholics and their clergy and the sectarian intent of the rebels to kill all the Protestants they could get their hands on. The people that he sought depositions from were also those who could be relied upon to give the "correct" answers to his queries. They were often Anglican clergymen of a conservative bent or else magistrates with Orange links from Wexford and Wicklow who could provide harrowing stories of massacres and murders.

All of this material came together in the massive *Memoirs of the Various Rebellions in Ireland* published in 1801 and selling out three editions by 1803. Musgrave set the tone for later loyalist versions of 1798 with the horrors of Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge placed in the context of massacres of Protestants in Portadown in 1641 and more recent attacks on Munster landlords by agrarian secret societies like the Whiteboys.

In other words, the United Irish

rebellion was just another chapter in the sectarian history of Ireland caused by Catholics being unable to co-exist with neighbours they saw as heretics. In this account all

The Catholic Bishop of Ferns, James Caulfield, writing in 1799, dismissed those clergy involved in the rebellion, like John Murphy and John Martin, as being drunks who were the "very faeces of the church".

visions of "liberty, equality and fraternity" go out the window.

Other early accounts

This version of events did not go unchallenged by Musgrave's co-religionists, many of whom believed that the Orangemen and other loyalists had provoked the rebellion by their pitch-capping and other various other forms of torture and oppression. An Anglican bishop in the West of Ireland, Joseph Stock, published a sympathetic account of the rising in Mayo and Leitrim which denied the idea that the rebellion had been aimed at wiping out Protestantism. In 1800, this was a brave attempt to deny the sectarian nature of 1798 and to raise the liberal banner.

At that stage, Henry Grattan, the leader of the "Patriot" wing in the Irish parliament, had just emerged from a bruising pamphlet battle where he had been accused (possibly correctly) of having taken the United Irish oath in 1798. But Protestant liberals were also divided over the Act of

Union. Stock's version of events may have had some initial support but with the Emmet rebellion of 1803 and the increasing association of nationalism with the Catholic middle classes and the Catholic hierarchy itself, Protestant liberals were driven increasingly onto the defensive over the following decades.

The Grattanite Patriots were not the only people concerned with defending their reputations and distancing themselves from the United Irishmen. The Catholic Church which from the beginning was opposed to any attempt to import the secular ideas of the French Revolution into Ireland was engaged in the same exercise. The bishop of Ferns, James Caulfield, whose diocese included Wexford, was first into print with a pseudonymous pamphlet in 1799 entitled *A Vindication of the Roman Catholic Clergy of the town of Wexford during the late unhappy rebellion*. Caulfield dismissed those clergy involved in the rebellion, like John Murphy and John Martin, as being drunks who were the "very faeces of the church".

The bishop's approach, supported by Archbishop Troy of Dublin, was to downplay any activity by United Irishmen in Leinster and to play up the role of oppression and provocation of deferential and submissive Catholics by the Orange Order and government forces.

This approach was the one also taken by Daniel O'Connell in his Catholic Association days where he emphasised the loyalty of his co-religionists driven to rebellion by Orange terror. To hammer this point home it had to be made clear that the United Irish movement was a predominantly Presbyterian one and that they had fled the field leaving Catholics to their fate. To add insult to injury, in O'Connell's rendition, these same Presbyterians who were United Irishmen in the 1790s by the 1820s and 1830s had become violent Orangemen.

Young Ireland

The next stage in the writing and rewriting of 1798 came in the 1840s when the Young Ireland movement, led by Thomas Davis, emerged to challenge Daniel O'Connell's conservative Catholic



"United Irishmen in training" - caricature which appeared in London newspapers in 1798.

nationalism. By identifying themselves explicitly with the United Irishmen, the Young Irelanders laid the basis for putting the "men of '98" in the pantheon of nationalist heroes.

R. R. Madden's seven-volume *The United Irishmen, their Lives and Times*, published in the 1840s, and the publication of memoirs by leading rebels, from James Hope to Thomas Addis Emmet, helped to fuel the revived interest in the rebellion. But the new interpretation favoured by militant nationalists, including the Young Irelanders in the 1840s and the Fenians after 1865, both romanticised and depoliticised what had happened.

A blurb for this interpretation might read: romantic rebels, fired up by events in France, seek unity of all Irishmen but tragically fail due to spies and repression. The arrest and fatal shooting of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, the death of Tone and the execution of the "Man from God knows where", Thomas Russell, all add to this picture.

The Catholic Church, fearing the challenge from Fenianism, sought to challenge the new cult of '98. Father Patrick Kavanagh's *Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, harking back to O'Connell, portrayed the United Irishmen as no more than a short-lived secret society who had left the field before a defensive rebellion by Catholics provoked by Orange terror happened, almost spontaneously. This clerically-approved interpretation pushed the priests of Wexford to the forefront as the real heroes of the rebellion. Thus Father Murphy, in Oliver Sheppard's statue, points a young Wexford pikeman towards his glorious death at Vinegar Hill.

This interpretation also suited the leadership of the constitutional Catholic nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) in the run up to the centenary of the rebellion in 1898. The IPP leadership, seeking to revive itself after the Parnell split of 1891-2, naturally wanted to wrap itself in the mantle of '98 as presented by

Father Kavanagh.

Of course, in all of this, the role of the Northern Presbyterians was now almost forgotten, especially in Ulster itself where the centenary was hardly marked at all. The Kavanagh version of 1798 allowed those in Ulster who did not want to remember the time when Protestants had been divided over issues of loyalty and democracy to bury inconvenient memories.

Hence it can be seen that distortion of the nature of the United Irishmen and the 1798 Rising began early and continued on all sides. Some would say that such debates which can be found in relation to many great historical events prove that there is no real truth in history, just a host of propagandistic "interpretations". We certainly would not draw this conclusion. While it may not be possible to produce a purely "objective" history, it is still possible to distinguish fact from fiction. But in order to do this, it is vital to analyse every account in order to see clearly its bias, including its

class bias.

Revisionism

The debate on 1798 in recent times has been heavily affected by the "revisionist" attack on the nationalist writing of Irish history. This attack which is popularly associated with the work of Conor Cruise O'Brien beginning in the 1960s was not without its merits but its weaknesses were particularly evident in regards to the United Irishmen. Viewing Irish

But Connolly goes on to point out that despite Tone's desire for independence from Britain, he also sought the union of the peoples of both islands against their native aristocracies and monarchy.

society as inevitably divided into two sectarian camps—at the extreme, it was argued that Ulster Protestants constituted a separate nation historically—the revisionists saw the United Irishmen as at best doomed to failure.

They were romantic utopians leading the Catholic Defenders into what became in practice a sectarian bloodbath, especially in Wexford. At worst, the United Irish leadership, infected by a dangerous totalitarian Jacobin ideology, helped to lay the basis for IRA terrorism. The revisionists wound up identifying more with Edmund Burke and Daniel O'Connell, both bitter enemies of the French Revolution, than with Wolfe Tone or Jemmy Hope. Whatever the motivations of individual historians, revisionism

was in vogue because it suited the Southern establishment which was seeking to distance itself from its revolutionary origins while adopting a more "European" image.

New work, however, challenges both "revisionism" and the more traditional views of a spontaneous rising of Catholic peasants against Orange oppression with the United Irishmen already sidelined. Some historians now emphasise that there was a definite plan.

The rebellion was to begin in Dublin and spread outwards but this failed due to betrayals (and incompetence) in the capital. Thus Wexford and Wicklow were part of a strategy and not a desperate response to oppression. Ulster would have risen earlier but for bad communication and disagreements over having a rebellion without the French landing. In other words, far from the Leinster rebellion being led by Catholic priests, it was a United Irish affair.

Secondly there is the issue of politicisation. Those historians who dominate the television screens in 1998, like Kevin Whelan and Tom Bartlett, make the point that the United Irish project, inspired by the French Revolution, was to bring politics to every village and to combat the sectarianism associated with the past. This project was enlightened and democratic and this, it is argued, should not be lost sight of in the tales of battles and massacres in 1798.

Thirdly, the sectarianism which the United Irishmen sought to eradicate from society was precisely the poison which the administration in Dublin Castle and London sought to inject into the situation to divide Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter from one another. Thus the government set up Maynooth in 1795 and from that year gave first secret and then open support to the Orange Order. While not entirely dismissing the potential importance of French aid, the Irish context of the rebellion is rightfully restored and the ideas of the United Irish movement become not foreign but indigenous once more.

Without for a moment taking

away from the work done by Whelan and Bartlett and others in nailing many of the lies about the United Irishmen, it is worth pointing out that many of these points were made in the early part of this century by Ireland's greatest socialist, James Connolly. Already in 1898 at the time of the centenary, Connolly had challenged the distortions of the 1798 legacy by Father Kavanagh and the IPP. He produced a set of 1798 readings in order to popularise the real views of the United Irishmen in their own words.

James Connolly

Connolly's most developed analysis of 1798, however, is contained in his major 1910 work, *Labour in Irish History*. The sixteen chapters, written in lecture style, addressed the successive betrayals of Ireland, not by the Protestant Ascendancy or the British government but by Ireland's own nationalist elite. Right from the foreword, it was clear just what Connolly was arguing:

"...we have in Ireland for over 250 years the remarkable phenomenon of Irishmen of the upper and middle classes urging upon the Irish toilers as a sacred national and religious duty the necessity of maintaining a social order against which their Gaelic forefathers had struggled, despite prison cells, famine and the sword for over 400 years."¹

Connolly opposed both constitutional nationalists who explicitly accepted the social system which underlay British imperialism as well as the "physical-force" republicans who for the most part put all discussion of social questions off the agenda until after independence from Britain had been achieved. In Connolly's view the only consistent force in the struggle for Irish freedom was the Irish working class. All other classes had partially or completely sold out. The fight for independence in order to succeed had to become not just a fight against British rule but against the capitalist social order itself. This was also the only way to break the allegiance of Protestant workers to "their" bosses.

Connolly viewed the United Irishmen as serious revolutionaries who came far closer to succeeding than subsequent accounts suggested. It was precisely this point that the "moderate", well-heeled nationalist leaders sitting in Westminster wished to cover up. In his account of the rebellion in *Labour in Irish History*, Connolly contrasts the bravery of the insurgents with the poor performance of the British army regulars, despite their numbers and weaponry. This allows Connolly to make the point that had the United Irish plans worked and a nation-wide insurrection occurred, then the military defeat of Britain could have been effected. That is certainly very different from Kavanagh's view of a spontaneous Catholic peasant uprising and is far closer to the more recent scholarship. Connolly goes on to argue that the battle for democracy was won and lost on the high seas. Here United Irish agents sent into the British fleet had successfully recruited large numbers of sailors.

Fitting to this interpretation of the United Irishmen as principled revolutionaries is the title of the chapter in *Labour and Irish History* which described them as "democrats and internationalists". Connolly went on to quote approvingly from Jemmy Hope in 1798:

Och Paddies, my hearties,
have done wid your parties,
Let men of all creeds and professions agree,
If Orange and Green, min, no longer were seen, min,
Och, naboclis, how aisy ould
Ireland we'd free²

Connolly argues that besides denominational or religious divides within Ireland there were social divisions between rich and poor. The time was ripe to unite ordinary Protestants and Catholics. Tone sought to spread the message of unity by demanding equal representation for all in the Irish parliament. But Connolly goes on to point out that despite Tone's desire for independence from Britain, he also sought the union of the peoples of both islands against their native aristocracies and monarchy. In Connolly's words, the United Irishmen organisation:

"...understood that the Irish fight for liberty was but part of the world-wide upward march of the human race, and hence allied itself with the revolutionists of Great Britain as well as those of France, and it said little about ancient glories, and much about modern misery."³

Thus Irish socialists in 1910 and not nationalists should be the ones claiming Tone's mantle. In this regard, it has to be said that Connolly exaggerated Tone's social radicalism, describing him as an advocate of "class war" and quoting approvingly his motto that the United Irishmen would base themselves on the "men of no property". In reality, Tone was an advocate of a war against the aristocracy in order to establish a bourgeois social order. But, like the French revolutionary Jacobins, he saw the necessity for an alliance between the bourgeoisie and the "lower orders" to achieve this. However, one can certainly agree with Connolly in his description of the latter-day nationalists:

...all of his [Tone's] present day followers constantly trample upon and repudiate every one of [his] principles and reject them as a possible guide to their political activity."⁴

Commemorations

One can usefully compare the "remembering" of 1798 to the ways in which the Easter Rising of 1916 has been commemorated by "nationalist Ireland". In 1966, on the 50th anniversary of the Rising, the Southern state, led by de Valera put on a massive, aggressively nationalist pageant, complete with military parade. In 1991, on the 75th anniversary, on the other hand, there was virtually no official commemoration in the South, as the bourgeoisie sought to put as much political distance as possible between itself and the Provisional IRA. The "revisionist" school of history was then at its height.

As we have seen, the remembering of 1798 has gone through even more violent swings. In 1898, the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Catholic Church sought to wrap themselves in the mantle of 1798

to justify a conservative, clericalist nationalism. This could have no appeal to the descendants of the Dissenter rebels of the previous century. But in 1998, the "peace process" is in bloom, the Celtic Tiger roars and an assertive bourgeoisie finds it convenient to rediscover Wolfe Tone and his comrades as the forefathers of a more tolerant, secular national identity. This is all connected to the much-ballyhooed—and essentially non-existent—reconciliation between the North's "traditions".

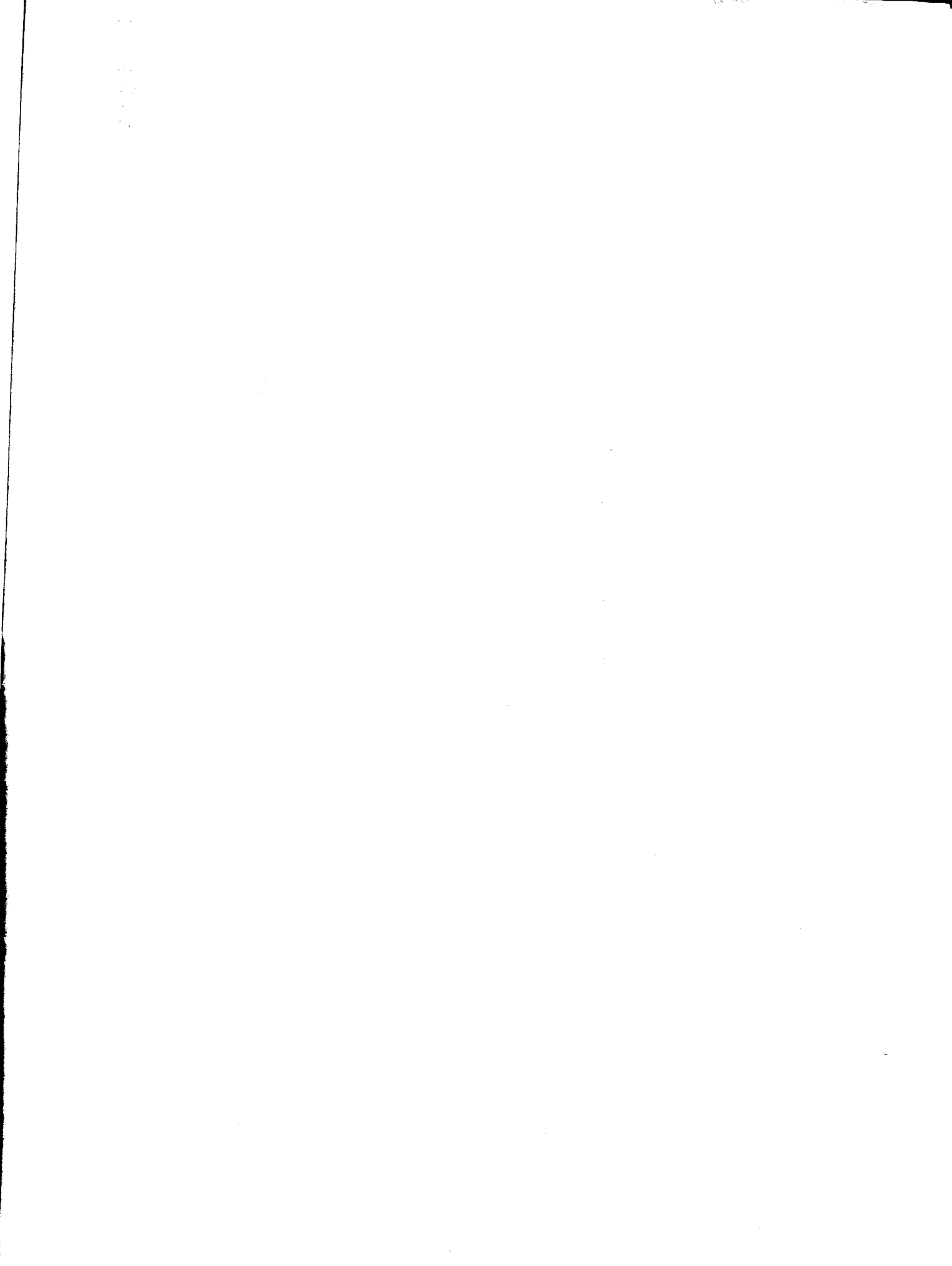
So now it suits for a more truthful portrayal of the United Irishmen to be popularised. The republicans, of course, have their own reasons for commemorating 1798, none of them to do with historical accuracy. Interesting as the new research is, however, many of the points made are not new for socialists as they echo arguments outlined by Connolly nearly a century ago. It is precisely because socialists have had no stake in either Orange or Green mythology that we have been able to look more objectively at Irish history.

1998, of course, is not just a year of historical commemorations. An enormous crisis has opened up in the world economy and many capitalist commentators have suddenly discovered that 150 years ago Karl Marx had a far better understanding than they of the workings of their system.

Marx and Connolly may now be acknowledged (the latter implicitly) as having had some very interesting things to say. But for them analysing historical developments or the workings of the economy were not ends in themselves. Rather, they saw scientific knowledge as the key to charting a path towards a socialist society. We intend to use the new knowledge about 1798 towards the same end.

FOOTNOTES

1. James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History* (1910), in *James Connolly: Collected Works* (Dublin, 1987), vol. 1, p. 22.
2. *ibid.*, p. 83.
3. *ibid.*, p. 89.
4. *ibid.*, p. 92.



1798

Revolution in Ireland

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So now it suits for a more truthful portrayal of the United Kingdom to be popularised. The republicans, of course, have their own reasons for commemorating 198 years of them to do with historical accuracy. Interesting as the past research is, however, many of the points made are not new for republicans as they echo arguments outlined by Connolly nearly a century ago. It is precisely because socialists have had to make in either Orange or Green mythology that we have been able to look more objectively at Irish history.

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FOOTNOTES

1. James Connolly, *Letters to Irish History (1919)*, in James Connolly, *Selected Writings* (Dublin, 1967), vol. 1.

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