

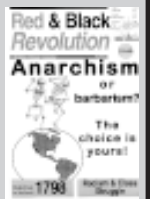


The 1798 rebellion in Ireland

In June of 1795 several Irish Protestants gathered on top of Cave Hill, overlooking Belfast. They swore "never to desist in our efforts until we had subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted our independence". Three years later 100,000 rose against Britain in the first Irish republican insurrection. **Andrew Flood** examines what they were fighting for and how they influenced modern Irish nationalism.

This article by Andrew Flood was first published (1998) in *Red & Black Revolution*. It is based on a much longer draft which includes discussion of the radical politics of the period and the pre-rebellion organisation of the United Irishmen. This can be read on the internet at

<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/andrew/1798.html>



In 1798 Ireland was shook by a mass rebellion for democratic rights and against British rule. 200 years later 1798 continues to loom over Irish politics. The bi-centenary, co-inciding with the 'Peace process', has attracted considerable discussion, with the formation of local history groups, the holding of conferences and a high level of interest in the TV documentaries and books published around the event.

It is rightly said that history is written by the victors. The British and loyalist historians who wrote the initial histories of the rising portrayed it as little more than the actions of a sectarian mob intent on massacring all Protestants. Later reformers sought to hide the program of 1798 to unite Irishmen regardless of creed. After 1798 they turned to the confessional politics of mobilising Catholics alone. Daniel O'Connell, the main architect of this policy, went so far in 1841 as to denounce the United Irishmen as "... wicked and villianously designing wretches who fomented the rebellion".¹

So the first response to the Loyalist history in Ireland was an alternative but parallel history produced to suit a Catholic nationalist agenda. Both of these agendas neatly dovetailed in showing the rising as a fight for "faith and fatherland". This is illus-

trated by the treatment of two portraits of prominent figures in the rebellion. Lord Edward Fitzgerald had his red cravat² painted out and replaced with a white one. Father Murphy had his cravat painted out and replaced with a priest's collar! Within parts of republicanism and the left there have been attempts to rescue this history, starting with the memoirs of United Irishmen like Myles Byrne who chose exile over compromise. But, all too often, this history has been crushed beneath histories designed to fulfil the needs of the British and Irish ruling class.

James Connolly neatly described the Irish nationalist version of 1798 thus

"The middle class "patriotic" historians, orators, and journalists of Ireland have ever vied with one another in enthusiastic descriptions of their military exploits

on land and sea, their hairbreadth escapes and heroic martyrdom, but have resolutely suppressed or distorted their writings, songs and manifestos."³

In short, although the name of the United Irishmen was honoured, their democratic ideas were buried even before the formation of the 26 county state.

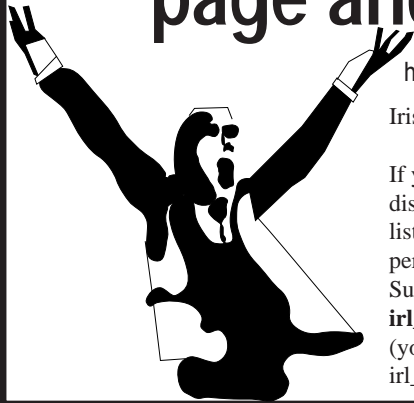
In the 1840's Ireland once again fell under the influence of a wave of international radicalism. They sought to uncover the real aims of the 1798 rebellion. The republican organisation of the 1840's, the Young Irelanders "celebrated the United Irishmen not as passive victims or reluctant rebels, but as ideologically committed revolutionaries with a coherent political strategy".⁴ They placed a marker on the grave of the key United Irishmen leader, Wolfe Tone, at Bodenstown. Paying homage at the grave is an essential annual rite for any party wishing to claim the republican legacy.

These different histories mean that even within republicanism there was little agreement about what the real legacy of 1798 was. In 1934 when Protestant members of the Republican Congress arrived at Bodenstown with a banner proclaiming 'Break the connection with capitalism' they were physically assaulted and driven off by IRA members.

Of particular note is the way the women of 1798 have either been written out of history altogether or exist only as the faithful wives of the nationalist histories and the blood crazed witches of the loyalist accounts. Like other republicans of that period the United Irishmen - for the most part - did not see a role for women, although "one proposal was made that women



Irish Labour History web page and email list



http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/ireland_history.html

Irish labour history discussion list

If you are interested in Irish history and would like to discuss labour and radical history with others then this list is for you. It is unmoderated but people who persistently post off topic messages will be removed. Subscribe by sending a blank message to irl_labour_history-subscribe@egroups.com, (you can unsubscribe by mailing irl_labour_history-unsubscribe@egroups.com)

*should have the vote as well*⁵. Nevertheless a number of women, including Mary Ann McCracken, played an important role from an early period in promoting the organisation, and a Society of United Irishwomen was established in 1796.⁶

In the run up to the rebellion, women were particularly active in subverting the Militia. They would swear in soldiers and also spread rumours that the troops were going to be sent abroad. Women were active in the rebellion, not just in 'traditional roles' of medical aid etc., but also in quite a number of cases as combatants. However, almost all of these roles seem to be ones that individual women demanded and fought for, there is little evidence of any serious effort on the part of the United Irishmen to mobilise women.

An overview of the Rebellion

In the Autumn of 1791, societies of United Irishmen were formed in Belfast and Dublin. Initially the organisation limited itself to calling for democratic reforms including Catholic emancipation⁷. In response to popular pressure, the British government - which effectively ruled Ireland - initially granted some reforms. This period of reform ended in 1793, when war broke out between revolutionary France and Britain.

In December of 1796 the United Irishmen came the nearest they would to victory, when 15,000 French troops arrived off Bantry Bay. Bad weather prevented the landing and saved Britain from defeat. After Bantry Bay, Irish society was bitterly polarised as loyalists flocked to join the British army and the United Irishmen's numbers swelled massively.

By the Spring of 1798, a campaign of British terror was destroying the United Irishmen organisation and many of the leaders had been arrested. The remaining leaders felt forced to call an immediate rising, even though this would be before French aid could arrive. The date was set for May 23rd. A number of factors undermined the rising in Dublin. However major risings

occurred in Wexford in the south, and Antrim and Down in the north. Elsewhere there were minor skirmishes. By the autumn - despite a small French landing - the rebellion had been defeated, tens of thousands were dead and a reign of terror had spread over the country.

Origins of the rising

The 1798 rising occurred at a unique moment in world politics, the point at which parliamentary democracy (and capitalism) was replacing absolute monarchy (and feudalism). The American Revolution of 1771-81 and the French Revolution of 1789 were the key inspirations for those who were to lead the rebellion in Ireland. Wolfe Tone described how *"the French Revolution became the test of every man's political creed, and the nation was fairly divided into two great parties - the aristocracy and democrats"*⁸.

To this was added the severe oppression the majority of Irish people lived under. The country was bitterly divided, two wars had been fought in the previous century with the combatants split along religious lines. The native Catholic landowning class had been forced either to surrender their lands or to convert to the Anglican religion. In parts of the country, in particular the North-East, even the ordinary Catholic tenants had been forced off the land, to be replaced with Presbyterian 'planters' brought over from Scotland. This left a legacy of sectarian rivalry which helped the British to 'divide and rule'.

Although some reforms had been won, the situation by the 1780's was that the country was ruled by Anglican **landowners**, with Presbyterian landowners having only limited political power, and Catholic landowners none. Beyond this, the mass of the population, Catholic, Protestant (Anglican) and Dissenter (Presbyterian) had virtually no rights at all. In 1831 there were 6,000 absentee landlords, who owned over 7,000,000 acres.

The complete subjection the peasantry were subjected to is hinted by a traveller through Ireland at the time who wrote

*"A landlord in Ireland can scarcely invent an order which a servant, labourer, or cottier dares to refuse to execute. ... A poor man would have his bones broken if he offered to lift a hand in his own defence. . . . Landlords of consequence have assured me that many of their cottiers would think themselves honoured by having their wives and daughters sent for to the bed of their master."*⁹

There were famines in 1740, '57, '65 and '70. The first of these alone killed 400,000.¹⁰

The arrival of capitalism had seen the beginnings of a working class. There were at least 27 labour disputes in Dublin from 1717 to 1800 and the formation of the early trade unions had started¹¹. *"There were 50 combinations in 27 different trades in Dublin in the period 1772-95. There were at least 30 food riots ... in the period 1772-94."*¹²

This atmosphere of revolutionary ideas on the one hand, and brutal oppression on the other, was the climate in which the United Irishmen were born in 1791. This initially reformist organisation, at first composed of the Protestant middle class was to choose within a few years to take the path of launching a democratic and anti-colonial revolution.

Leadership Vs masses

According to the *Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Lords* - shortly before the United Irishmen were founded - Tone, Samuel Neilson and others in the north circulated a *Secret Manifesto to the Friends of Freedom in Ireland*. Towards the end this contained a description of past movements that was to prove prophetic as a description of events in 1798

"When the aristocracy come forward, the people fall backwards; when the people come forward, the aristocracy, fearful of



being left behind, insinuate themselves into our ranks and rise into timid leaders or treacherous auxiliaries."¹³

Once the United Irishmen had decided to take the direction of rebellion, they had to win the mass of the people actively to join in such a rebellion. To do this they highlighted the economic advantages of reform. Gaining the vote for rich Catholic landowners would mean little to those paying rent for this land.

Dr Willam James MacNeven, under interrogation by the House of Lords in 1798, when asked if Catholic emancipation or parliamentary reform mobilised 'the lower orders' said "*I am sure they do not understand it. What they very well understand is that it would be a very great advantage to them to be relieved from the payments of tithes and not to be fleeced by the landlords*"¹⁴ In 1794 they asked "*Who makes them rich? The answer is obvious - it is the industrious poor*".

Historian Nancy Curtin points out that "*Some united Irish recruiters ... suggested that a major redistribution of land would follow a successful revolution*" and that as a result "*To a certain extent republicanism became associated in the common mind with low rents, the abolition of tithes and a tax burden borne by the wealthy and idle rather than by the poor and industrious*"¹⁵

The Union doctrine; or poor man's catechism, was published anonymously as part of this effort and read in part

*"I believe in a revolution founded on the rights of man, in the natural and imprescriptible right 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 ..."*¹⁶

Before 1794 the role consigned by republican leaders to the masses was one of fairly passive displays of support for change. For example Illuminations (where people put lights in their windows) were important to show the level of public support.

Following the 1794 banning of the Dublin United Irishmen the masses became more actively involved. Riots were organised by the United Irishmen, particularly around the arrival of the new Viceroy, Camden, in March 1795, when aristocrats were stoned in the streets of Dublin.

As public demonstrations were banned, various ruses were used to gather United Irishmen together. Race meeting were used as pretexts for mass assemblies. Mock funerals with up to 2,000 'mourners' would be held, sometimes the coffin would actually contain arms. In the countryside mass potato diggings (often for imprisoned United Irishmen) were organised and often conducted as military drills. These were a way of seeing who would turn out and how well they would follow orders.

This following of orders was central to the preparation for rebellion, as the United Irishmen's leadership wanted to be able to control and discipline the masses in the event of a rising. This was also why a French landing was central. The French army would help not just to beat Britain, but also to control the masses. The original strategy for the rebellion was for only a few thousand United Irishmen to join the army of the French (and for these to be quickly disciplined).

This is the context in which Tone's "*Our freedom must be had at all hazards. If the men of property will not help us, they must fall; we will free ourselves by the aid of that large and respectable class of the community - the men of no property*" must be

taken. Yes, the United Irishmen had turned to the 'men of no property', but the leadership still intended to run the show, and with French help hold back the masses if necessary.

After 1794, with the turn towards revolutionary politics and the need to mobilise the masses, the class basis of the United Irishmen underwent a radical change. Dublin membership of artisans, clerks and labourers rose to nearly 50% of the total.¹⁷

Other popular political societies in Dublin in the 1790's included 'the Strugglers'. One judge referred to "*the nest of clubs in the city of Dublin*". Their membership was said to consist of "*The younger part of the tradesmen, and in general all the apprentices*". The informer Higgins described these clubs as comprising "*King killers, Paineites, democrats, levellers and United Irishmen*".¹⁸

The link with the 'Defenders'

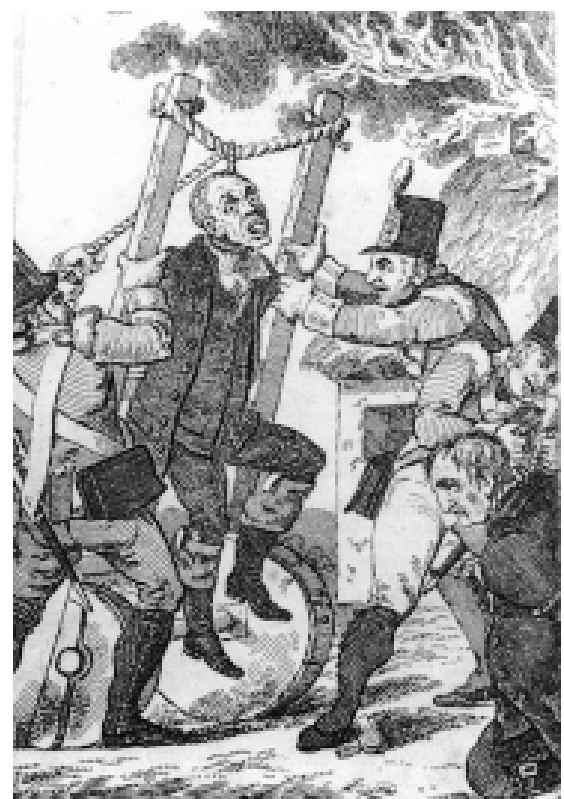
A central part of the strategy for mass rebellion was to build links with the already established movements, and in particular the Defenders. The Defenders had started as a local 'faction' (gang) in Armagh and were initially non-sectarian, their first Captain being Presbyterian.¹⁹ Armagh was the scene of intense political agitation around the arming of Catholics, with the Protestant Orange Order²⁰ conducting armed attacks on Catholics. However the arming of the Catholics had "*the full support of a radical section of Protestant political opinion*"²¹. These origins are important, as later historians have attempted to portray the Defenders as purely a Catholic sectarian organisation, a sort of mirror image of the Orange Order.

In 1795, up to 7,000 Catholics were driven out of Armagh by Orange Order pogroms. The United Irishmen provided lawyers to



Pitch capping, in which molten pitch was set alight on the victims head and the travelling gallows used to half-hang people. Tortures like these, along with flogging were used on thousands of people to try to force them to reveal the names of United Irishmen or the location of arms in 1797 and early 1798. Many died as a result of them.

They were accompanied by a general campaign of looting and rape, along with transportation of suspects to the fleet. This allowed the British forces to seriously undermine United Irishmen organisation and forced the remaining leadership to call a premature rising.



prosecute on behalf of the victims of Orange attacks. "Special missions were dispatched there in 1792 and again in 1795 and senior figures like Neilson, Teeling, McCracken, Quigley and Lowry worked the area ceaselessly ...".²² Many expelled Catholic families were sheltered by Presbyterian United Irishmen in Belfast, and later, Antrim and Down. These expulsions facilitated the spread of Defenderism and fear of the Orange Order to other parts of Ireland.

The Defenders were already politicised to some extent by the hope of French intervention and their anti-tax and anti-tithe propaganda. They proclaimed "We have lived long enough upon potatoes and salt; it is our turn now to eat mutton and beef"²³. Despite their rural origins the Defenders were not a peasant movement but "drawn from among weavers, labourers and tenant farmers ... and from the growing artisan class of the towns". By 1795 there were some 4000 Defenders in Dublin, closely linked with many of the republican clubs in the city. The complex nature of the Defenders is illustrated as "in Dublin there were Protestant Defenders" even though "revenge against Protestants was certainly an important element in Defender thinking"²⁴.

The Orange Order attacks had inevitably introduced sectarianism into the Defenders. But the United Irishmen saw this sectarianism as being due to the influence of priests, and directed only against Protestant landlords. This was to prove a serious underestimation, particularly outside of the north.

The Rebellion

In December of 1796, a French Fleet appeared off the shores of Bantry Bay with 15,000 French soldiers and Wolfe Tone. Rough seas and inexperienced sailors prevented a landing which would have liberated the country from British rule. The British campaign of terror against the United Irishmen which followed was seriously undermining the organisation by 1798. In the Spring of 1798, pressure was mounting for a rising without the French, and after the arrest of most of the Leinster leadership a date for the rising was set by those who escaped.

The key to the rising was to be Dublin. It was intended to seize the city and trigger a message to the rest of the country by stopping the mail coaches. However, although thousands turned out for the rising in the city, it ended up as a fiasco with almost no fighting. The reasons why this happened can be found in the class basis of the leadership of the United Irishmen.

Once it was clear that the rising was going to happen without the French, it was also clear that there was no mechanism to hold back the workers and peasants from going beyond the bourgeois democratic and separatist aims of the rising. The key informer who betrayed the Dublin rising, Reynolds, had turned because of fears of his ancestral

estates being confiscated.²⁵

Edward Fitzgerald, Neilson and the others who planned the May 21st rising in Dublin were willing to risk this. But they were arrested and removed from the scene by May 19th. The British, on the information of informers, had seized the gathering point for the rising. In the confusion there was little chance of the rank and file of the United Irishmen gathering to create an alternative plan. And the second rank of leadership, which could have created an alternative plan, failed to do so precisely because it now feared the uncontrolled 'mob'.

Precisely as had been warned "when the people come forward, the aristocracy, fearful of being left behind, insinuate themselves into our ranks and rise into timid leaders or treacherous auxiliaries."

The Wexford Republic

A limited rising occurred around Dublin which was rapidly and brutally suppressed. Loyalists and British forces unleashed further terror in the rest of the country. In Wicklow and North Wexford this included the execution of over 50 United Irish prisoners, the murder of civilians and the burning of homes.

There was United Irishmen organisation in this area, Wexford town was considered the preferred landing place for the French. But the bulk of the 300 or so United Irishmen here do not appear to have been preparing for a rising. One historian of the rebellion, Dickson, reckons that "without a French landing and without the compulsion applied by the magistrates and their agents ... there would have been no Wexford rising at all"²⁶ and his account demonstrates that the early battles were spontaneous clashes. The all important initial victory was at Oulard, where there was no real rebel commander and some of the United Irishmen were armed only with stones.

The Oulard victory demonstrated that the British army were not unbeatable. This, and the increasing repression, saw hundreds and then thousands flock to join the rebel hilltop encampments. However the superior tactics, arms and training of the British forces was to prove a match for the rebels. On 4th and 5th June the rebellion suffered its most decisive defeat at the

Henry Joy
McCracken,
executed in
Belfast at the age
of 31.

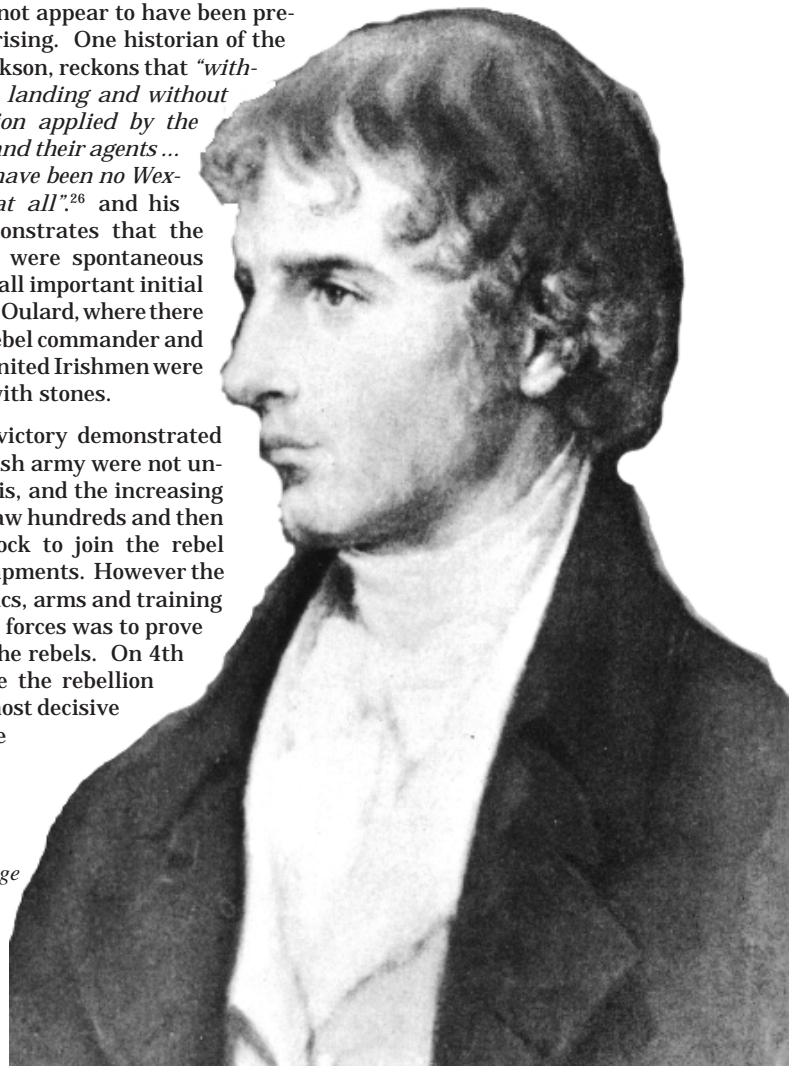
battle of New Ross, and on 9th the defeat at the battle of Arklow was the last major attempt to spread the rebellion to neighbouring counties.

Wexford town was however liberated for three weeks. At the time it was thriving and had a population of 10,000, many of whom were Protestants. After liberation, a seven man directory of the main United Irishmen and a 500 strong senate took over the running of the town. Both of these included Catholic and Protestant members. In addition each area/district had its own local committee, militia and elected leader. The time before it was retaken was not sufficient for much constructive activity beyond the printing of ration coupons. However the limited reorganisation of local government that did occur, and its success in maintaining order until just before the town fell, demonstrates the often denied political side of the Wexford rebellion.²⁷

On 21st the final major battle of the 'Wexford republic' was fought at Vinegar Hill. It had taken some 20,000 British soldiers three weeks to crush the 30,000 Wexford rebels who were "utterly untrained, practically leaderless and miserably armed".²⁸

Events in Antrim/Down

The North had also seen a savage campaign of British torture which had terrified, disorganised and disarmed many of



the United Irishmen. General Knox had told General Lake that his methods were also intended to "increase the animosity between the Orangemen and the United Irishmen". Robert Simms who was Adjacent-General of the United Irishmen in the north simply refused to acknowledge that the signal from Dublin indicated he should rise. Instead, presumably in part for the class interests already outlined, he preferred to wait for the French.

Nevertheless, the rank and file were determined there should be a rising and the lower officers with Henry Joy McCracken (who had just returned from jail in Dublin) forced Simms to resign on June 1st and got an order for a rising at a delegate meeting on June 2nd. This delay meant it was not till 5th that the rising started in Antrim, and 7th in Down. In the course of this delay, the northern rising was further weakened. Three of the United Irishmen colonels gave the plans to the British, taking away any element of surprise and allowing them to prepare for the rising.

More seriously, stories started reaching the north from the Wexford rebellion with the newspapers "rivalling rumour in portraying in Wexford an image of Catholic massacre and plunder equalled only by legends ...". Many of these stories were false although some Protestant men had been killed in Enniscorthy. The distorted version that reached the north by 4 June (before the rising) was that "at Enniscorthy in the county of Wexford every Protestant man, woman and child, even infants, have been murdered". Alongside this were manufactured items like a supposed Wexford Oath "I, A.B. do solemnly swear ... that I will burn, destroy and murder all heretics up to my knees in blood".

Later commentaries tried to deny the scale of the Northern rising, or have claimed that many Presbyterians failed to turn out. However, given all of the above, what is truly remarkable is how little effect all this had, in particular as by 5th the Wexford rising had clearly failed to spread. Of the 31,000 United Irishmen in the area of the northern rising, 22,000 actually took

part in the major battles (more turned out but missed the major battles).²⁹

Like the Wexford rising, the Northern rebels succeeded in winning minor skirmishes against the British but were defeated in the major battles by the experienced and better equipped. As in Wexford, the British burned towns, villages and houses they considered sympathetic to the rebels and massacred both prisoners and wounded during and after the battles. After the battle of Antrim, some were buried alive.³⁰

The last major battle of the Northern rising was at Ballynahinch on 13th June. By the time the French arrived in Killala in August, it was too late, although their initial success does suggest that either the Wexford or Antrim rebels may have been much more successful if they had the benefit of even the small number of experienced French troops and arms later landed at Killala.

Some 32 United Irishmen leaders were executed in the North after the rising, including two Presbyterian ministers. Henry Joy McCracken in hiding after the rising, wrote a letter to his sister in which he sums up the cause of the failure of the rising as "the rich always betray the poor". He was captured and executed in Belfast on July 16th.

Post rebellion republicans

After the rising it was in the interests of those who had led it to minimise their involvement by insisting they were ignorant dupes or forced by 'the mob' to take part. A song asks "Who fears to speak of '98?". People researching oral histories have indicated that the answer was 'just about everyone'. Even the year of death on the gravestones of those who died in the rising was commonly falsified. The reason was the British campaign of terror, which carried on into the following century with chapel burning's and deportations of cart loads of suspects.

In Wexford, where the death penalty still applied to anyone who had been a United Irish officer, it was a common defence for ex-leaders to claim they were forced into their role by mobs of rebels. This explanation was handy for both the official and Catholic nationalist versions of the history. It suggested that the Protestant portion of the leadership was coincidental in what was otherwise a confessional or sectarian rising, depending on your point of view. This deception was credible because the United Irishmen membership lists for Wexford were never captured. This allowed ex-rebel leaders like Edward Hay to argue that "there were fewer United Irishmen in the county of Wexford than in any other part of Ireland"³¹.

The Orange Order

On the loyalist side, the Orange Order needed to minimise Presbyterian involvement in the rising and portray it as a purely sectarian and Catholic affair. So loyalist accounts have tended to focus on

the Wexford massacres, often making quite false claims about their scale, who was massacred and why they were massacred. Musgraves (the main loyalist historian) in his coverage of the rebellion gives only 2% of his writing to the Antrim and Down rebellion while 62% of his coverage concentrates on Wexford.³² The limited accounts given of the Northern rising portray it as idealistic Presbyterians being betrayed by their Catholic neighbours and so learning to become 'good loyal Orange men'. The scale of British and loyalist massacres of these Presbyterians is seldom mentioned.

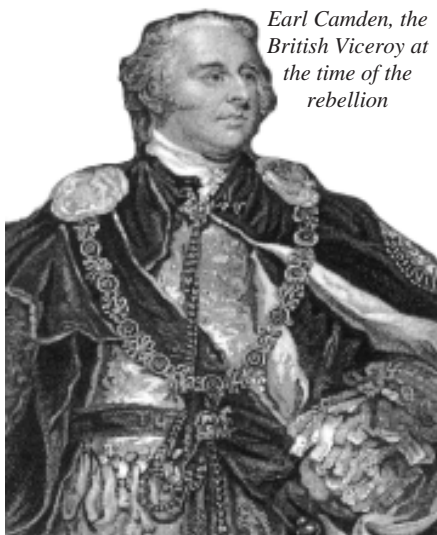
The Centenary

More than anything else the Catholic nationalist history of the rising was determined by the needs of the Catholic church when faced with the socialist influenced Fenian movement one hundred years later. Patrick Kavanagh's 'A Popular history of the insurrection of 1798', published in 1870 was the major work from this perspective. This 'history' had several aims; to hide the role of the church hierarchy in condemning the rising (and instead claim that the church led the rising); to blame the failure of the rising on underground revolutionary organisation (as an attack on the Fenians); and to minimise the involvement of Northern Presbyterians and democratic ideals. In so far as they are mentioned the view is that "it was the turbulent and disorderly Presbyterians who seduced the law abiding Catholics".³³

This history has therefore emphasised the rebellion in Wexford and elevated the role of the handful of priests who played an active part. Father Murphy thus becomes the leader of the rising. The fight was for 'faith and fatherland', as a statue of a Pikeman draped in rosary beads which was erected in Enniscorthy on the hundredth anniversary of the rising proclaims. Finally, the role of the United Irishmen is minimised. The leadership role of United Irishmen like Baganal Harvey, Matthew Keogh and Edward Lough, who were Protestant, is glossed over. The failure of the rebellion is 'explained' by the inevitability of revolutionary movements being betrayed by informers. Patrick Kavanagh presents Father Murphy as the sole heart of the insurrection, and the United Irishmen as "riddled by spies, ruined by drink, with self-important leaders ...".³⁴

Issues of '98

To a large extent, these histories shaped the popular understanding of the rising. In this limited space it is impossible to address all the issues they raise. But there is a need for current revolutionary organisations in Ireland to dispel the illusions created of the past. This is particularly true with regard to Protestant workers in the north who are largely unaware that it was their forefathers who invented Irish republicanism, nor indeed that the first Republican victim of a showtrial and execution was a Presbyterian from Ballymena, Willam Orr.



Earl Camden, the British Viceroy at the time of the rebellion

The current debate on the release of political prisoners could be much informed if Orr's pre-execution words were remembered "If to have loved my country, to have known its Wrongs, to have felt the Injuries of the persecuted Catholics and to have united with them and all other Religious Persuasion in the most orderly and sanguinary means of procuring Redress - If these be Felonies I am a Felon but not otherwise ..."³⁵

The role of the Catholic church

Although, by 1898, the Catholic church would choose to pretend it had led the Wexford rising, in 1798 nothing could be further from the truth. Dr Troy, Archbishop of Dublin, said within days of the rising (27 May 1798) that "We bitterly lament the fatal consequences of this anti-Christian conspiracy".

In fact the Catholic hierarchy was opposed to the radical ideas of the rebellion and, especially since the opening of the Catholic seminary at Maynooth, stood beside Britain and the Irish Protestant Ascendancy class. Three days after the rebellion had started, the following declaration came out of Maynooth

"We, the undersigned, his Majesty's most loyal subjects, the Roman Catholics of Ireland, think it necessary at this moment publicly to declare our firm attachment to his Majesty's royal person, and to the constitution under which we have the happiness to live... We cannot avoid expressing to Your Excellency our regret at seeing, amid the general delusion, many, particularly of the lower orders, of our own religious persuasion engaged in unlawful associations and practises" (30 May 1798)

This was signed by the President of the Royal College of Maynooth and 2000 of the Professors and students, 4 lords and 72 baronets.³⁶ One of the Wexford rebels, Myles Byrne, wrote afterwards that "priests saved the infamous English government in Ireland from destruction".³⁷

Individual Catholic priests like Father Murphy played an important leadership role in the rising, alongside the mostly Protestant United Irishmen leaders. According to Dickson "at least eleven Catholic curates took an active part and of these three were executed".³⁸ But their own Bishop described the rebel priests after the rebellion as "excommunicated priests, drunken and profligate couple-beggars, the very faeces of the Church".³⁹ Their role in the leadership of the rising was against the wishes of the hierarchy and out of a motivation to protect their parishioners from Loyalist atrocities.

Was the rebellion Protestant in the north and Catholic in the south?

A more complex attempt to deny the legacy of 1798 is to suggest that the northern and southern risings were not really connected. That the northern rising was Presbyterian



A loyalist cartoon of United Irishmen training

and democratic while the southern was Catholic and sectarian.

Although the population (and thus the rebels) in the north were mainly Presbyterian and those in the south mainly Catholic, both armies contained considerable number of both religions. I've already mentioned some of the Protestant leaders in the south. Indeed, if partly to head off sectarian tension within the rebel army, United Irishmen commander Roche issued a proclamation on 7th June "to my Protestant soldiers I feel much in debt for their gallant behaviour in the field". For the reasons discussed below, the Wexford rising was seriously mired by sectarianism, but right to the end there were Protestants among the rebels. It is still remembered around Carlow that after the battle Father John Murphy was hidden by a Protestant farmer, only to be betrayed by a Catholic the next day.

It is true that in the north there were sectarian tensions present, a Catholic United Irish officer urged a column of Presbyterians to "avenge the Battle of the Boyne"⁴⁰ just before the battle of Antrim! Also in the north, at Ballynahinch, the Defenders (who would have been overwhelmingly Catholic) fought as a distinct unit. However the figures show that thousands of Catholics and Protestants turned out and fought side by side in a series of battles, despite the obvious hopelessness of the situation.

Protestants in Wicklow and Wexford

There were stronger sectarian elements in the Wexford rising. To understand where these came from, we need to look at events immediately before the rising. About 25% of the population was Protestant, these included a few recently arrived colonies that must have displaced earlier Catholic tenants and thus caused sectarian tensions.

The high percentage of Protestants in Wexford also made it possible to construct

a Militia and later Yeomanry that was extremely sectarian in composition, in the words of Dickson in Wexford "these Yeoman were almost entirely a Protestant force".⁴¹ This Yeomanry was responsible in part for the savage repression that preceded the rising and the initial house and chapel burning during it. Col. Hugh Pearse observed "in Wexford at least, the misconduct of the Militia and Yeomanry ... was largely to blame for the outbreak ... it can only be said that cruelty and oppression produced a yet more savage revenge".⁴²

When faced with a Protestant Landlord class mobilising a mainly Protestant local army to torture them and burn their chapels, it is perhaps unsurprising that many Catholics were inclined to identify Protestants as a whole as the problem. The United Irishmen organisation in the area before the rising was too small to make much progress in overcoming this feeling, and in fact one of their tactics added to the sectarian tension. There were Orange Lodges in Wexford and Wicklow. As elsewhere, there is evidence that the United Irishmen deliberately spread rumours of an Orange plot to massacre Catholics. The intention was that the Catholics would join the rebellion in greater numbers, but such rumours inevitably heightened distrust of all Protestants.

The Wexford massacres

Throughout the Wexford rising, sectarian tensions were never far from erupting. This was expressed throughout the rising as a pressure on Protestants to convert to Catholicism, particularly in Wexford town where "Among the insurgent rank and file ... heresy hunting became widespread ... Protestants found it prudent to attend mass as the only means of saving their lives."⁴³ When the rebels carried out massacres they often had strong sectarian undertones. Loyalist historians and even Pakenham, the most widely read historian of the rising, are guilty of distorting the nature of these massacres by claiming only Protestants were executed.

The reality of the Wexford massacres was that the victims tended to be landlords, or the actual agents of British rule like magistrates and those related to them or in service to them. Anyone suspected of being an Orangeman was also liable to be executed. Massacres were also a feature of the rebellion in the north, where no sectarian motive can so easily be attached. A rebel unit near Saintfield (in the north), led by James Breeze, attacked and set fire to the home of Hugh McKee, a well known loyalist and informer, burning him, his wife, five sons, three daughters and housemaid to death.⁴⁴

Loyalist historians are also guilty of ignoring or minimising the causes of most of the massacres, the far larger massacres by British army and loyalist forces of civilians, rebel prisoners and wounded. The greatest of these was the massacres during and after the battle of New Ross where even the Loyalist historian Rev. James Gordon admits "I have reason to think more men than fell in battle were slain in cold blood"⁴⁵. The scale of this massacre can only be guessed at, but after the battle 3,400 rebels were buried, 62 cart loads of rebel bodies were thrown in the river and many others (particularly wounded) were burned in the houses of the town. According to many accounts the screams of wounded rebels being deliberately burned alive may have played a significant part in the murder of 100 loyalist civilian prisoners at nearby Scullabogue on the morning of the battle.

At Scullabogue around 100 were murdered, 74 were burned alive in a barn, (nine of whom were women and 8 of whom were Catholic) and 21 men were killed on the front lawn. A survivor, Frizel stated that the cause was the rumour that the military were murdering prisoners at New Ross.⁴⁶ At least three Protestants were amongst the rebels who carried out these killings. The presence of Protestants amongst the murderers and Catholics among the victims gives the lie to the claim that this was a simple sectarian massacre.

The leadership of the rebellion, both United Irishmen and the Catholic priests, tried to defuse the sectarian tension and prevent massacres. On 7th June, Edward Lough, commander of the Vinegar Hill camp, issued a proclamation "this is not a war for religion but for liberty".⁴⁷ Vinegar Hill was the site of many individual executions over the 23 days the rebel camp existed there. Between 300 and 400 were executed, most were Protestant although Luke Byrne, one of the organisers of the executions, is quoted as saying "If anyone can vouch for any of the prisoners not being Orangemen, I have no objection they should be discharged" and indeed **all** captured Quakers were released.⁴⁸ In general, throughout Wexford Quakers who were Protestant but not associated with loyalism were well treated by the rebels, but did suffer at the hands of the loyalists.

A proclamation from Wexford on 9th June called to "protect the persons and properties of those of all religious persuasions who have not oppressed us"⁴⁹ and on 14th June the United Irishmen oath was introduced to the Wexford army. None of this is to deny that there were sectarian tensions and indeed sectarian elements to the massacres, perhaps most openly after the rebel army had abandoned Wexford. Thomas Dixon and his wife then brought 70 men into the town during the night "from the northern side of the Slaney" and plied them with whiskey. The following day a massacre started at 14:00 and lasted over five hours. Up to 97 were murdered.

However, even here, not all the 260 prisoners from whom those massacred were selected could be described as innocent victims. One of those killed (Turner) was seen burning cabins in Oulard shortly before the battle there.⁵⁰ Another prisoner who survived was Lord Kingsborough, commander of the hated North Cork Militia and popularly regarded as having introduced the pitch cap torture, in which the victims head was set on fire.⁵¹ Most significantly this massacre happened when the rebel army had withdrawn from the town and stopped when rebel forces returned.

It is an unfortunate feature of some republican and left histories of 1798 that the sectarian nature of the Wexford massacres is either avoided or minimised. To northern Protestant workers today this merely appears to confirm an impression that this is the secret agenda of the republican movement. The stories - both true and false - of sectarian massacres in Wexford that were circulated in the North before and during the rising must have undermined the unity of the United Irishmen. Although the Wexford leadership did act to limit sectarianism, in hindsight it is obvious that the United Irishmen were complacent about sectarianism amongst the Defenders and in Wexford more could and should have been done. In particular the final and most blatantly sectarian massacre, at Wexford bridge, could probably have been avoided if the Dixons, the couple at the centre of it, had been silenced. They had spent the period of the rebellion in Wexford trying to whip up a pogrom.

1798 and Irish nationalism

The debate around nation is in itself something that divides the Irish left. In particular after the partition of Ireland in 1922, there has been a real and somewhat successful effort to divide people into two nations. One consists of all the people in the south along with northern Catholics. Catholicism is a central part of this definition, with the Catholic Church being given an informal veto for many decades over state policy in the south. To a large extent this definition is tacitly accepted by many parts of the Republican movement today. Francie Molloy's 1996 election campaign posters - based on there being 20,000 more nationalists (i.e. Catholics) than Protestants in Mid-Ulster - is a case in point. This has led to a situation where those responsible for sectarian murders of Protestants were not treated as seriously by the republican movement as informers or even those judged guilty of 'anti-social' crime.

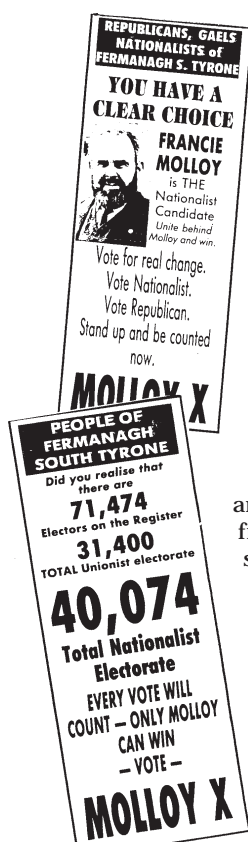
However, the south has started to emerge from under the long dark shadow of Catholic nationalism, in the urban centres at least. De Valera's comely maids at the Crossroads and the threat of the Bishop's crosier have faded into a distant and bizarre past.

However in the north, the ideology of a 'Protestant state for a Protestant people' is still strong. Particularly in recent years, this has seen the political decision of northern loyalists to start referring to themselves as British or 'Ulster-Scots'. This is a quite remarkable robbing of even the history of loyalism, and would have been an insult to even the Orangemen of 1798, one of whom James Claudius Beresford declared he was "Proud of the name of an Irishman, I hope never to exchange it for that of a colonist".⁵²

A couple of years after the rising, Britain succeeded in forcing the Irish Parliament to pass an 'Act of Union' which effectively dissolved that parliament and replaced it with direct rule from Westminster. It is ironic that 36 Orange Lodges in Co. Armagh and 13 in Co. Fermanagh declared against this Act of Union. Lodge No. 500 declared it would "support the independence of Ireland and the constitution of 1782" and "declare as Orangemen, as Freeholders, as Irishmen that we consider the extinction of our separate legislature as the extinction of the Irish Nation".⁵³

What was the nation fought for in 1798?

The rewriting of the history of 1798 by loyalists and nationalists alike has a common purpose, which is to define being 'Irish' as containing a requirement to being a Catholic. The greatest defeat of 1798 is the success of this project, in particular after partition when the southern and northern states adopted opposed confessional definitions of themselves. One legacy of that failure is that in 1998 we not only live on a divided island but that the vast majority of



our hospitals and schools are either Catholic or Protestant.

The United Irishmen's core project, to replace the name of Irishman for the labels of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter was not an abstract nationalist one. It came from a concrete analysis that unless this was done then no progress could be made because a people divided were easily ruled. Here lies the greatest gulf with 'republicans' today who reverse this process and imagine that such unity can only be the outcome rather than the cause of progress.

The rebellion of the United Irishmen was not a rebellion for four abstract green fields, free of John Bull. It was inspired by the new ideas of equality, fraternity and liberty coming out of the French revolution. Separatism became a necessary step once it was realised that fulfilling these ideas required the ending of British rule. For many it also represented a rebellion against the ownership of land by a few, and for some a move towards an equality of property.

Those leaders who planned the rising were part of a revolutionary wave sweeping the western world, they were internationalists and indeed an agreement for distinct republics was drawn up with the United Scotsmen and the United Englishmen.⁵⁴ They corresponded with similar societies in Paris and London. Some, like Thomas Russell, were also active anti-slavery campaigners. As Connolly puts it "these men aimed at nothing less than a social and political revolution such as had been accomplished in France, or even greater".⁵⁵

None of this is to claim that socialism was on the agenda in 1798. Common ownership of the means of production would not become a logical solution for some years yet, when large numbers of people started to work in situations where they could not simply divide up their workplace. But there is no denying that radical ideas that are well in advance of today's republicans were on the agenda of many in 1798.

The central message of 1798 was not Irish unity for its own sake, indeed the strongest opponents of the British parliament had been the Irish ascendancy, terrified that direct rule might result in Catholic emancipation. Unity offered to remove the sectarian barriers that enabled a tiny ascendancy class to rule over millions without granting even a thimble full of democratic rights. The struggle has progressed since as many of these rights have been won, but in terms of creating an anarchist society the words of James Hope, the most proletarian of the 1798 leaders still apply

"Och, Paddies, my hearties, have done wid your parties. Let men of all creeds

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and professions agree. If Orange and Green min, no longer were seen, min. Och, naboclis, how easy ould Ireland we'd free."

¹Freeman's Journal, 22 May, 1841

²Which represented not only a revolutionary badge but a defence of the execution of the French king Louis.

³*Labour and Irish History*, James Connolly, ChVII

⁴*The Tree of Liberty, Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity 1760 - 1830*, Kevin Whelan, p167

⁵*A history of the Irish Working Class*, Peter Berresford Ellis, 1972, p71

⁶*The Women of 1798: Representations and realities* by Dáire Keogh in *1798; 200 years of resonance*, Ed. Mary Cullen

⁷Catholic emancipation was the demand for the removal of laws that discriminated against Catholics

⁸quoted in *Labour and Irish History*, ibid, Ch VII

⁹Arthur Young, in his *Tour of Ireland* quoted in *Labour and Irish History*, ibid, chap IV

¹⁰*A history of the Irish Working Class*, ibid, p54

¹¹*The United Irishmen*, Nancy Curtin, 1994, p 147

¹²*The Tree of Liberty*, ibid, p92

¹³Quoted in *Labour and Irish History*, ibid, Chap VII

¹⁴*The United Irishmen*, ibid, p28

¹⁵*The United Irishmen*, ibid, p. 119 - 120

¹⁶quoted in *1798: the United Irishmen and the early Trade Unions*, Mary Muldowney in SIPTU Fightback No 7

¹⁷*The United Irishmen*, ibid, 1994

¹⁸*The Tree of Liberty*, ibid, p77 - 79

¹⁹*The United Irishmen*, ibid, p 149.

²⁰Then known as the 'Peep O Day boy' after their practise of carrying out dawn raids on Catholic homes

²¹*The Defenders*, p18, Deirdre Lindsay, in *1798; 200 years of resonance*, Ed. Mary Cullen

²²*The Tree of Liberty*, ibid, p128

²³*The Defenders*, p19, ibid

²⁴Ibid, p20-22

²⁵Citizen Lord: Lord Edward Fitzgerald, 1763 - 1798, Stella Tillyard, p246

²⁶*The Wexford Rising in 1798*, Charles Dickson, 1955, p36

²⁷*The Wexford Republic of June 1798: A story hidden from history*, Kevin Whelan in *1798; 200 years of resonance*, Ed. Mary Cullen

²⁸*The Wexford Rising in 1798*, ibid, p41

²⁹*The United Irishmen*, ibid, p260 -267

³⁰*Revolt in North*, Charles Dickson, 1960, p135

³¹*History of the Insurrection in the county of Wexford*, 1798

³²*The Tree of Liberty*, ibid, p138

³³ibid, p150

³⁴ibid, p170

³⁵William Orr, pre-hanging declaration, 2.45pm, 14 October 1796

³⁶*The Wexford Rising in 1798*, ibid, p 16

³⁷*Memoirs*, Vol. 1, p39 (1906)

³⁸*The Wexford Rising in 1798*, ibid, p 17

³⁹*A vindication of the Roman Catholic Clergy of the town of Wexford during the late unhappy rebellion*, pub 1799

⁴⁰When Catholics and Protestants fought on opposite side

⁴¹*The Wexford Rising in 1798*, ibid, p13

⁴²Col. Hugh Pearse in 'Memoir of the life and service of Viscount Lake' (1744 - 1808) p95 quoted in *The Wexford Rising in 1798*, ibid, p12

⁴³*The Wexford Rising in 1798*, ibid, p 18

⁴⁴*APRN*, 11 May 1998

⁴⁵*The Wexford Rising in 1798*, ibid, p116

⁴⁶Ibid, p129

⁴⁷Ibid, p126

⁴⁸Ibid, p77

⁴⁹Ibid, 1955, p126

⁵⁰Ibid, 1955, p62

⁵¹Ibid, 1955, p149

⁵²*Revolt in North*, ibid, p243

⁵³Ibid, p243

⁵⁴*A history of the Irish Working Class*, ibid, p72

⁵⁵*Labour and Irish History*, ibid, Chap VII



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