

Remember '98

An account of the stirring events and personalities of the 1798 Rising

Introduction

The United Irishmen

THE SOCIETY OF UNITED IRISHMEN was founded as a political organisation, openly putting forward its policies of democratic reform and Catholic emancipation, reforms that the Irish Parliament—dominated as it was by the landlord Ascendancy—was incapable of granting and the British government just as unwilling to enforce.

Public opinion, including Protestant public opinion, was coming to demand these reforms. The democratic ideas of the American and French Revolutions were gaining steadily in support, especially in Belfast, as shown by the popularity of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and Theobald Wolfe Tone's *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*. According to Paine, 16,000 copies of his pamphlet were sold in England that year, but 40,000 in Ireland.

So 1791 was an auspicious time to launch the Society of United Irishmen, with the purpose of establishing a "cordial union" of Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter, an objective far in advance of anything the reformers of the day would propose—Grattan's Parliament, the Catholic Committee, or the leadership of the Volunteers, all of whom feared the advent of democracy, for different reasons.

The initial strategy of the United Irishmen therefore was to appeal to public opinion, especially through the press. The *Northern Star* was begun by Samuel Neilson immediately and started publication in January 1792, surviving all attempts to suppress it legally until its presses were smashed by the Militia in 1797. The success of the paper was extraordinary, and it soon built up a circulation of 4,000 (as much as the *Times* of London), not only in the Belfast area, where it was appealing to a highly literate and politically conscious audience, but reaching as far as Ballyshannon and even Waterford.

In Dublin also there was a proliferation of political clubs and debating societies, a ready audience for the revolutionary propagandists of the *Northern Star* and the many political pamphlets produced by the United Irishmen and others. To quote its enemies (from the speech of a prosecuting barrister in 1797),

the *Northern Star* is the principal and most powerful of all instruments for agitating and deluding the minds of the people. The circulation too is great beyond example. The lowest of the people get it; it is read to them in clusters.

According to the Lord Chancellor, Fitzgibbon,

the Press has been used with signal success as the engine of rebellion. Sedition and treason have been circulated with unceasing industry in newspapers and pamphlets, in handbills and speeches, in republican songs and political manifestoes.

Organisationally, Neilson had proposed setting up a secret society, no doubt anticipating trouble; but the societies operated quite openly, the Dublin society meeting in the Tailors' Hall. While the membership was not enormous, its influence spread rapidly; in particular, support for parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation grew, and the anniversary of the French Revolution was celebrated in 1792, as it had been in 1791. John Keogh reported in 1792 that "Belfast is decided on the Catholic question and its neighbourhood daily converting."

The United Irishmen lobbied the delegates to the Catholic Convention in 1792, urging them to accept nothing less than full Catholic emancipation—in contrast to the hierarchy's policy of loyal supplication. The Presbyterian church adopted the policy of Catholic emancipation and elected a United Irishman, William Steele Dickson, as moderator in June 1793.

The convention of the Volunteers in Dungannon in February also supported emancipation and reform, though it did not condemn the war with France and rejected republicanism. This has been presented as a defeat for the United Irishmen; but the government seems not to have thought so, since it disbanded the Volunteers shortly afterwards and furthermore brought in a "Convention Act," forestalling the United Irishmen's plan for a national convention.

Britain declared war on France in February 1793. This was naturally denounced by the United Irishmen as a "war not to punish crimes but to persecute principles, entered into by tyrants and abettors of tyranny when France had committed no crime, unless the emancipation of 24 million people is a crime."

The war, of course, completely changed the position of the United Irishmen. It became increasingly difficult to operate openly, and the Dublin society was closed down by the authorities in 1794. By this time it had already gone underground.

The United Irishmen transformed themselves in a relatively short time into a secret oath-bound organisation seeking alliance on the one hand with revolutionary France and on the other with "that very respectable class, the men of no property." Tone, Neilson and Russell had been holding discussions with the Defenders, the Catholic secret society that had originated in Co. Armagh in self-defence against the sectarian Peep o' Day Boys, who, on the pretext of searching for arms, had terrorised the Catholic population and driven many families from their homes. The Defenders had expanded far beyond their county of origin, even to Dublin, and had recruited from all classes. Many of the political clubs supported by artisans and labourers also joined.

The United Irishmen expanded rapidly, swearing hundreds of thousands into their organisation and preparing for an armed rising, hopefully with French help, for which purpose Tone had been sent to France.

The brief episode of Fitzwilliam's Viceroyalty in 1795 raised hopes of reform

once more. Fitzwilliam had been appointed Viceroy because a group of Whigs had joined the British government. He was out of sympathy with the Irish Ascendancy and set about preparing reforms and conciliating the Catholics; but, at the behest of the Irish parliamentary leadership, he was recalled after only a few months, to be replaced by Camden, who favoured a policy of repression and fomenting sectarian division. This did not prevent him from laying the foundation stone of Maynooth College in 1796, to the immense gratitude of the Irish bishops, who repaid him with their loyalty in '98.

The Orange Order, sponsored by the landed gentry of Co. Armagh, now had the support of the state, and established lodges in Dublin and elsewhere. The Yeomanry was set up as an armed force of the loyal Protestants, which Orangemen were encouraged to join. The Militia, on the other hand, was largely composed of Catholics, though officered by Protestants.

Tone had been well received by the Directory in France, who sent an expeditionary force to Ireland, which failed to land at Bantry Bay in 1796, with catastrophic results. The government, alarmed at its narrow escape, intensified its repression. General Lake set about a campaign of terror in Ulster to disarm and cow the people and break the United Irish organisation.

The leadership of the United Irishmen prevaricated about a rising throughout 1797. Still expecting help from France, they feared rising prematurely; yet all the time the campaign of terror and the work of government spies were wrecking the organisation. Jemmy Hope and others were impatient for a rising, which stood a good chance of success even without the French had it gone according to plan; however, the arrest of Edward Fitzgerald and the Dublin leadership foiled the rising in the capital, and in the event the only serious insurrections were in Counties Wexford, Antrim, and Down.

The success, if temporary, of the Wexford rising shows not that the strategy was wrong but the lack of resolution that prevented it from being put into effect. The "foreign aid" men, so despised by Hope, feared to make any attempt at a rising without French aid—or perhaps feared the radicalism of the class they organised. Their organisation had been a formidable one, even under the pressure of government repression, the attrition of its leadership, and the failure of French help. According to Castlereagh, "Rely upon it, there never was in any country so formidable an effort on the part of the people."

But the great strategic flaw was the failure to establish an alliance with Irish-speaking Ireland. When General Humbert arrived belatedly at Killala, the Mayo peasants rose to join the French, showing that Irish Ireland was prepared to fight, if not for the same reasons. The Irish translation of Rights of Man was sorely missed.

The international background

THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY was a period of crisis for the ruling classes of Europe, a time filled with political agitation, revolt, and movements for colonial autonomy and independence. This was so not only in the United States (1776–1783) but in Belgium and Liège (1787–1790), in Holland (1783–87), in Geneva—even, it has been said, in England (1779)—and of course in Ireland.

A hidden conflict, soon to become quite open, was unfolding between the old society and the new “bourgeois” society. This conflict was fundamental and could not be settled within the framework of the old political regimes. The weakest point and the point where these conflicts were most often played out, the point where old and new met most clearly, was in the autonomy and independence movements of the remote or less firmly controlled colonies. Colonial resentment at the economic policies of the central government, which subordinated colonial interests to the interests of the “mother country,” sparked unrest; and in the Americas and Ireland, national movements for autonomy and independence blossomed.

In North America the growing American bourgeoisie was forced, in their own economic interests, to break the barriers that held them back—the British “mercantilist” policy that monopolised trade with the colonies and limited American industry by law in an attempt to maintain British supremacy. The result was the American Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776 and the American Revolution.

Marx was of the opinion that the American Revolution formed “the first turning-point in Irish history.” It is true to say that the victory of the American Revolution, that mighty blow to the whole corrupt oligarchic political system of the eighteenth century, found a ready and welcome response in Ireland, in particular in Ulster. For one thing, there was a direct connection to America through the many Ulster Presbyterians who had emigrated during the eighteenth century, searching for a freer political, economic and religious life in the colonies. In addition, Ulster was where the growing Irish bourgeoisie, in the form of mainly Protestant merchants and manufacturers, were most concentrated and where the chafing economic restraints of British colonial policy were most sharply felt.

With regular troops already fighting in America and with the entry of France on the side of the Americans in 1778, it was thought necessary to raise a Volunteer force, uniformed, armed and equipped by public subscription, as a defence against the old enemy. The anti-democratic character of the American war was not lost on the Irish, however, and, unfortunately for the British, the Volunteers soon became a focus for Irish middle-class discontent. This mainly Protestant force played a notable part in demands for an end to restraints on Irish trade and manufacturing and for the rights of the Catholic majority. At the Dungannon Convention of 15 February 1782 they demanded legislative independence and the “relaxation of the penal laws against our Roman Catholic fellow-subjects.”

Independence was established; but bribery and corruption ensured that it remained so in name only. The national Volunteer convention of 1783, despite the fine words and heady emotions, split on the issue of Catholic emancipation,

and declined thereafter. As Tone later said,

the revolution of 1782 was a Revolution which enabled Irishmen to sell at a much higher price their honour, their integrity and the interests of their country; it was a revolution which, while at one stroke it doubled the value of every borough-monger in the kingdom, left three-fourths of our countrymen slaves as it found them, and the government of Ireland in the base and wicked and contemptible hands of those who had spent their lives in degrading and plundering her . . . The power remained in the hands of our enemies, again to be exerted for our ruin, with this difference, that formerly we had our distress, our injuries, and our insults gratis at the hands of England, but now we pay very dearly to receive the same with aggravation, through the hands of Irishmen.

But the forces that led to the Volunteer movement, the growth of an Irish bourgeoisie and their social, political and economic constraint, did not go away. As C. Desmond Greaves wrote, "history came forward with a rare favour, a second opportunity within one decade. That was the French Revolution of 1789."

The revolution in France divided every nation in Europe (apart from England, which had undergone a bourgeois revolution of sorts in the seventeenth century) into two parties: the party of reaction and the party of democracy. The explosive slogan of "Liberty, equality, fraternity" soon found its supporters in Ireland as well. In Belfast in October 1791 Tone and a few others, middle-class radicals from Dublin and Belfast, primarily Protestant, formed the Society of United Irishmen. In many ways the United Irishmen were a continuation of a movement that had continued since the Dungannon Volunteer convention, supported in the main by Ulster Presbyterians in sympathy with the American colonists but with a sprinkling of Catholics and members of the established church. Their initial goals were an extension of the gains made in 1782, and equality for Catholics.

The United Irishmen hoped to establish the "rights of man" through parliamentary reform and religious equality. The rights of man, first formulated by Tom Paine (the English supporter of the American colonists who was eventually forced to flee England for revolutionary France), were an expression of the novel idea that politics were the business of the people—the common people, not just a governing oligarchy. Government was only tolerable if it secured the now-famous "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Any government that failed to do so, said Paine, should be overthrown, if necessary by revolution.

The Society of United Irishmen, though not all its members were initially revolutionaries, was soon spreading throughout Ireland, a revolutionary force perhaps despite itself, preaching the rights of man and an end to religious difference in "the common name of Irishman."

In all of western Europe, apart from Spain and Portugal, only Ireland had a large and widespread movement of agrarian revolution, organised in secret societies. As the excesses of terror and repression brought about by the French Revolution and the attempt to stop it spreading to Ireland drove the United Irishmen underground, the two movements met and merged, the agrarian revolutionaries, like the Defenders, joining the ranks of the United Irishmen. The stage was set for an explosive mix of Jacobin ideas and an aroused and revolutionary mass of country people.

Tone was later to describe the impact of the French Revolution in his memoirs:

The French Revolution had now been above a twelve-month in its progress; at its commencement, as the first emotions are generally honest, everyone was in its favour; but after some time the probable consequences to monarchy and aristocracy began to be foreseen and the partisans of both to retrench considerably in their admiration; at length Mr. Burke's famous invective appeared, and this in due season produced Paine's reply, which he called the Rights of Man.

This controversy and the gigantic event which gave rise to it changed in an instant the politics of Ireland. Two years before the nation was in a lethargy . . . But the rapid succession of events, and above all the explosion which had taken place in France, and blown into the elements a despotism rooted in fourteen centuries, had thoroughly aroused all Europe, and the eyes of every man in every quarter were turned anxiously on the French National Assembly. In England, Burke had the triumph completely to decide the public . . . But matters were very different in Ireland, an oppressed, insulted and plundered nation . . . In a little time the French Revolution became the test of every man's political creed, and the nation was fairly divided into two great parties, the Aristocrats and the Democrats (epithets borrowed from France), who have ever since been measuring each other's strength, and carrying on a kind of smothered war, which the course of events, it is highly probable, may soon call into energy and action.

The Father of Irish Democracy

Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763–1798)

THEOBALD WOLFE TONE, the principal political and theoretical leader of the United Irishmen and of the 1798 Rising, was born in Dublin into a middle-class Protestant family. His father was a successful coach-builder and small property-owner, and young Theo grew up in very comfortable circumstances. Later, Tone's father apparently neglected his business, and the family fell on harder times.

Tone had a happy childhood among his many brothers and sisters. He was exceptionally intelligent as a child, with a highly developed sense of humour. He was educated first at home, then at a liberal private school. As a schoolboy he already had a passion for politics and for debates; but his main childhood ambition was to be a soldier (like his younger brother). After an angry dispute with his father, however, he was enrolled in Trinity College, at the age of eighteen.

All his life (as he admits in his diaries) Tone suffered from a certain levity and lack of application, but he compensated for this tendency through pride and a determination not to fail, and he was a good student. While at Trinity he developed his radical thinking through reading and through debates in the college societies. But his increasingly radical opinions were not a pose: they were the result of a profoundly democratic personality, which matured as the young Tone did.

After graduating from Trinity, Tone spent two years in London studying law. He practised as a barrister in Dublin from 1789 (the year of the French Revolution) to 1795 (the first year of his exile). He read widely, about the French Revolution and contemporary politics, wrote articles for the reviews, and began to write pamphlets on political questions.

Tone's first political demand—one that he shared with many others, in Trinity and outside—was for the reform of the Irish Parliament, a body both unrepresentative and corrupt. The blind spot in the thinking of those who had previously campaigned for reform was the Catholic question. The great majority of the people of Ireland were barred from electing or being elected to the Parliament, because of their religion; they were also barred from most professions. Though they were compelled by law to pay tithes (a tax of 10 per cent on any profit from land, livestock, or personal industry) to the Church of Ireland—a church to which they did not belong—they were nevertheless politically invisible: indeed, members of the Anglo-Irish “Ascendancy” were known to use the term “the Irish nation” to refer to themselves, the exclusively Protestant fraction of the population.

It is easily forgotten that the restrictions on the civil liberties of Catholics also extended to “Dissenters” or Presbyterians and to other Protestants not members of the Church of Ireland, to Quakers, and other religious minorities. But there was a very significant class division between these groups: the Catholics were overwhelmingly poor peasants or landless labourers, the hewers of wood

and drawers of water. Deprived of the right to engage in political activity, many of the poorer Catholics formed themselves into secret agrarian societies, most notably the Defenders, who attacked landlords and their estates and whose actions were not without an element of sectarianism.

In 1789 the French Revolution, fought under the slogan “Liberty, equality, fraternity,” had captured the imagination of the world—much as the Russian Revolution was to do 128 years later. The king was beheaded, revolutionary tribunals replaced the parliament and courts, and tyrants throughout the world quaked in their shoes. Thomas Paine’s famous Rights of Man was reissued in Dublin in 1791; edition after edition sold out, and it was serialised in a number of newspapers. Paine passionately denounced aristocracy and religious discrimination while praising the French Revolution.

Tone had already come to realise that the demand for parliamentary reform without the granting of civil liberties to Catholics was meaningless, and he was disgusted by the failure of the Volunteers to take up the cause of Catholic emancipation. His pamphlet *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, published in 1791, was a huge success and was read avidly by Catholics and Protestants alike.

In 1790 Tone had met Thomas Russell, and they became close friends. Already a convinced radical, Russell had a great influence on Tone, and vice versa. In October 1791 Tone and Russell travelled to Belfast, where they were present at the founding meeting of the Society of United Irishmen of Belfast. The idea for the new organisation was a collective one, which had been simmering for some time; its manifesto, and its name, were the work of Tone, now at the ripe old age of twenty-eight. Back in Dublin a few days later, Tone and Russell helped to establish the Society of United Irishmen of Dublin.

In 1792 it was learnt that the relaxing of the penal laws against Catholics in England was not after all to be extended to Ireland. Tone was now approached by the angry members of the Catholic Committee, which had been established in 1760 by representatives of the small Catholic middle class, whose business and political ambitions were blocked by religious discrimination. The committee invited Tone, a member of the Church of Ireland (if not a very pious one), to become its assistant secretary, in effect a full-time campaigner for the ending of the penal laws and the granting of full civil liberties to Catholics.

Over the next few years Tone’s increasing radicalism and his frustration at the intransigence of Dublin Castle led to a sharper and sharper confrontation between the Castle on the one hand and the Catholic Committee and United Irishmen on the other. Then, limited Catholic emancipation in 1793 (much of which was cancelled later) helped to create a divide between the Catholic Committee and the United Irishmen and then led to the dissolving of the Catholic Committee itself.

Under the influence of these developments, of the French Revolution, of support for the French from America, of the writings of Paine and others, and especially of the outbreak of war between France and England in 1793, the Society of United Irishmen was transformed from a reformist movement into a republican and revolutionary one.

It is interesting to note that Tone was not in sympathy with this trend at first, regarding it as provocative, and he virtually dropped out of United Irish activities in the years 1792 and 1793. Meanwhile Dublin Castle began to clamp down on the United Irishmen, with a view to ultimately suppressing the movement.

In 1794 Tone was introduced to William Jackson, an agent of the French, who first mooted the idea of French involvement. Tone was not easily convinced of the correctness of this policy, despite extracting guarantees that the French would come as liberators and not as conquerors. Jackson was betrayed and arrested; and after his trial had implicated Tone it was clear that it was no longer safe to remain in Ireland and that Tone would have to leave the country.

With his wife and children and his brother, Tone set sail in August 1795 for America, where he quickly formed a “most unqualified dislike” for the country and its people. While there, he established contact with agents of the French government, and a year later he sailed for France.

From the beginning the French were reluctant allies, already more concerned with the building of a post-revolutionary empire than with helping aspiring republicans in other countries. Tone’s task became one of simultaneously encouraging the revolutionary movement in Ireland and restraining it until he received a promise of French help on a scale that would ensure success. Despite countless setbacks, he persisted with his typical determination and eventually succeeded in having a fleet sent to Ireland, with himself on board, which would be the signal for revolt; but violent storms prevented its landing, and the battered fleet returned to France, to Tone’s unspeakable frustration.

With no sign of help from France, with the betrayal and arrest of many of the leaders, and with daily provocations by the Militia and Yeomanry likely to lead to a spontaneous and leaderless uprising, the United Irishmen decided to act. But the initiative had been lost; there was no coherent leadership; and Orange sectarianism and military outrages were unleashed on revolutionaries and civilians alike.

The uprising in Ireland was already all but over when the French made a second attempt at a landing in Ireland. Again the weather opposed them; and this time the English were waiting. The French fleet was defeated; Tone was captured and brought to Dublin in chains, and before he could be hanged he cut his own throat.

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It is not for nothing that Theobald Wolfe Tone has been called the Father of Irish Democracy. Despite the limitations of his background and upbringing, despite all his own self-criticism, Tone’s commitment to democracy was genuine and profound. At every political crisis, Tone’s instinct was for the most democratic option.

Tone and his comrades were not socialists. The ideas of socialism had not been worked out at that time, nor could they have been, as the working class (as we understand the term) had scarcely come into existence. Nor—despite the role

played by a number of women in 1798—were the United Irishmen feminists. These were ideas whose time had not yet come.

The United Irishmen were democrats, and they were republicans. They were the first mass movement in Irish history whose aim was not to restore some ancient society or to invite a foreign monarch to lead the Catholic Irish against the Protestant English. Their aim was an independent and non-sectarian Irish republic—an aim that has not yet been achieved and one that is still in advance of much of what passes for political thinking in Ireland two hundred years later.

The Man from God Knows Where

Thomas Russell (1767–1803)

ON 21 NOVEMBER 1767 Thomas Paliser Russell was born in the village of Drumahane, near Mallow, Co. Cork. His father, John Russell, was a junior officer in the British army, and his mother, Margaret O’Kennedy, was a descendant of a dispossessed Catholic family. His parents were gentle, tolerant Anglicans who expressed liberal opinions in favour of the need for political reform and fair treatment for the Catholic majority.

In the early seventeen-eighties John Russell was appointed a “captain of invalids” at the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, Dublin, and his family was assigned comfortable residential quarters at the hospital. For Thomas, his new home, his religious affiliation and his social position combined to afford him easy access to the world of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.

The career options open to the young Russell were to become a clergyman in the established church or to follow his brothers into the British army. In 1783 he decided to join the army (like many future Irish republicans, including James Connolly, who also began their careers in the imperial army), and he was posted with the 52nd Regiment to the Malabar coast of India, to protect the business interests of the British East India Company.

In 1786 Russell returned to Ireland on half pay and continued his studies in science, philosophy, and politics, which were later to serve him well in the cause of the United Irishmen. He entered into the society of Whig liberalism, dominated by Henry Grattan; and on a July day in 1790 he met Theobald Wolfe Tone in the visitors’ gallery in the House of Commons, College Green, Dublin—a truly historic meeting.

Russell and Tone became firm friends, and on political matters their views were to merge. Russell visited Tone’s home at Irishtown, where they discussed parliamentary reform and the removal of religious disqualifications from the law. They also showed themselves to be men of action by deciding to form a political club for the following winter.

In 1790 Russell resumed his military career as a junior officer in the 64th Regiment of Foot and was posted to Belfast. With its thriving linen and textile industries and mercantile community, Belfast had been dubbed the “Athens of the North.” As an officer of the garrison, Russell entered socially into the circles of the emerging professionals and businessmen (and women, such as Mary Ann McCracken). Their politics were radical; being Presbyterians, they were excluded from the Ascendancy.

The kinsmen and women of Belfast Presbyterians had figured prominently in the campaign for American independence, and they greeted the revolution in France, with its ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Many were active in the anti-slavery movement. With his keen mind and radical ideas, Russell was soon drawn to the McCrackens, Simms, Templetons, McCabes and other families who were to play a prominent role in the United Irish movement. With these new friends he developed ideas of parliamentary reform, to include the bulk of the

people, and Catholic emancipation, and even raised the question of separation from England.

By July 1791 Russell was out of the army and attending a convention of the Whig Club in Belfast to mark Bastille Day. The convention was addressed by William Drennan, who proposed a brotherhood that would “go further than speculate or debate . . . and come to grips with practicalities.” He went as far as promoting separation from England and co-operation with the increasingly radical Catholic Committee in the pursuit of political and social reforms.

Many radical Ulster Dissenters were suspicious of Catholicism as a fundamentally conservative force that might easily be bought off with limited concessions. Russell informed Tone of the Belfast developments, and within weeks Tone published his *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*. Aimed principally at the Ulster Dissenters, Tone’s pamphlet called for unity, fraternity, and tolerance, without which the government would “play upon terrors of Protestants, the hopes of Catholics and, balancing the one party by the other, plunder and laugh at the defeat of both.” The *Argument* had a profound effect on its intended audience.

Tone and Russell were invited by the Belfast radicals to assist in the task of establishing the proposed brotherhood, and on 18 October 1791 the inaugural meeting of the Society of United Irishmen took place, with twenty-eight people present. The society’s declaration urged constitutional reform, cordial unity among Irish people, and the removal of all religious disqualifications. Dublin quickly followed suit, and on 9 November, in the Eagle Tavern, Eustace Street (around the corner from the present-day Connolly Books), the Dublin Society of United Irishmen was formed.

The movement quickly developed a strategy of spreading its ideals by means of leaflets, newspapers, ballads, “catechisms,” and travelling emissaries. The *Northern Star* of Belfast was especially successful, both commercially and politically.

Russell was a dedicated and consistent anti-slavery campaigner. He abstained from confectionery products, because they were made with sugar from the West Indies. He wrote impassioned letters to the *Northern Star* and *Belfast Telegraph* declaring that “on every lump of sugar I see a drop of human blood.” He identified the fact that slavery existed for the sole purpose “of contributing to the luxury and avarice of Europeans,” and he denounced the slave traders for introducing “the vices of Europe—fraud, subtilty, war and desolation to these once happy countries.”

The outbreak of war between England and France in 1793 enabled the College Green government to enact repressive laws, including the dispersion of the Volunteers and the establishment of the Militia. Russell attacked Grattan in the *Northern Star*, saying that “he peddled and he pranced, he reviled the government and the French, republicans and levellers” but facilitated the “perfect Inquisition.” Russell now looked to the excluded majority, the Catholics and Dissenters. The Whigs’ compliance with repression helped radicalise the United Irishmen and opened up the possibility of French support.

In early 1794 Russell was appointed librarian of the Belfast Society for

Promoting Knowledge (the Linen Hall Library)—a post with a salary and a house, welcome indeed for the now-impooverished activist, and the perfect cover for a revolutionary. The library's policy included the promotion of books in Irish, and Russell himself took lessons from a teacher of Irish, Patrick Lynch of Loughinisland. He collaborated on an Irish translation of the New Testament, an Irish dictionary, and the first periodical in Irish, *Bolg an tSoláir*.

In May 1794 the government officially suppressed the United Irishmen and raided its premises. Russell, McCracken, Hope and other northern leaders responded by reorganising and increasing membership. Communications were maintained with the national leadership by delegates and emissaries from Belfast, notably Russell himself; these structures ensured that the society quickly became a vehicle for political and social change. Under the influence of the new ideas from France and Belfast, Defenderism in rural areas was evolving from a spontaneous Catholic peasant force into a revolutionary army. Influenced by the "plan of union," as it was termed by Hope, the Defenders rallied to the ranks of the United men, and by September 1796 membership was 100,000 in Ulster alone.

In May 1795 Tone and his family set out for France, by way of Belfast and America. Facing imprisonment if he remained, Tone informed Russell, Neilson, Simms and McCracken of his plans at their historic meeting in MacArt's Fort on the summit of Cave Hill, overlooking Belfast; there they entered into a pact "never to desist in our efforts until we had subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted our independence."

In 1796 Russell published his pamphlet *A Letter to the People of Ireland on the Present Situation of the Country*, a powerful United Irish analysis of the gathering revolutionary opportunity and especially strong on the ploys used by the administration to split the Catholic leadership from the radical Dissenters. It was Castlereagh who identified the Presbyterian North as the real centre of republican activity. The offices of the *Northern Star* were raided, and warrants were issued for the arrest of the leadership. Russell, Neilson, McCracken and others were rounded up and lodged in Newgate and Kilmainham, Dublin. They were destined to remain imprisoned without either bail or trial—a form of internment. While the great events during and after 1798 were to unfold, Russell remained incarcerated in Newgate, where he endured many hardships, including tending to the wounded Edward Fitzgerald and the trauma of Tone's death.

In March 1799 Russell and twenty other leading United prisoners were transferred to Fort George, Inverness-shire. It is interesting to note the religious background of the prisoners: ten (including Russell) were Anglicans; six were Presbyterians; four were Catholics.

During his three-year period of further internment in Scotland, Russell's belief in the United cause was strengthened. "The numbers who have fallen and among them the great and good . . . imposes a greater obligation on the survivors to persevere in the great cause," he wrote. No doubt Tone and the McCrackens were much on his mind; his soul was "very much on fire," and he viewed the defeat of '98 as "a temporary miscarriage of the cause."

In June 1802 Russell was finally released, having spent six years in prison.

He spent the next nine months in revolutionary preparations in France, at a time when Napoléon Bonaparte's imperial star was in the ascendant. This changed political atmosphere was not so welcoming to Irish exiles, in contrast to the solidarity extended to Tone before 1798. Another United leader, Jemmy Hope, later claimed that Bonaparte was in league with the English to deport the Irish exiles, "their residence not being considered favourable to Napoleon's imperial views."

As a former "state prisoner" Russell was banned from entering Ireland, so he returned from exile in disguise, by way of London and Liverpool. By May 1803 he was in hiding in Butterfield Lane (now Butterfield Avenue), Rathfarnham, formulating plans with Robert Emmet and Michael O'Dwyer for another uprising. These ill-fated plans were to lead to his capture and his hanging at Downpatrick Jail on 21 October 1803.

By virtue of his role and achievements as a United Irish leader, Thomas Russell's prominent place in the history of Irish republican and democratic movements is assured. In particular, his attractive and somewhat enigmatic personality, combined with his genius at uniting Presbyterians and Catholics in the North, gave rise to a rich folklore of ballads and poems in his honour. What better way to end than with these verses from Florence Wilson's ballad "The Man from God Knows Where," which evocatively recalls his life, work and death in Counties Antrim and Down from 1795 to 1803.

Into our townlan', on a night of snow,
Rode a man from God-knows-where;
None of us bade him stay or go,
Nor deemed him friend, nor damned him foe,
But we stabled his big roan mare:
For in our townlan' we're a decent folk,
And if he didn't speak, why, none of us spoke,
And we sat till the fire burned low . . .

Two winters more, then the Trouble Year,
When the best that a man could feel
Was the pike that he kept in hidlin's near,
Till the blood o' hate an' the blood o' fear
Would be redder nor rust on the steel.
Us ones quiet from mindin' the farms,
Let them take what we gave wi' the weight o' our arms,
From Saintfield to Kilkeel . . .

By Downpatrick gaol I was bound to fare
On a day I'll remember, feth;
For when I came to the prison square
The people were waitin' in hundreds there,
An' you wouldn't hear stir nor breath!
For the sodgers were standing, grim an' tall

Round a scaffold built there forment the wall
An' a man stepped out for death!

I was brave an' near to the edge of the throng,
Yet I knowed the face again,
An' I knowed the set, an' I knowed the walk
An' the sound of his strange up-country talk,
For he spoke out right an' plain.
Then he bowed his head to the swinging rope,
Whiles I said "Please God" to his dying hope
And "Amen" to his dying prayer,
That the Wrong would cease and the Right prevail.
For the man that they hanged at Downpatrick Jail
Was the Man from God-knows-where!

The Man of No Property

Jemmy Hope (1764–1847)

JEMMY HOPE was an activist and organiser in the Society of United Irishmen. This was not all that unusual in those revolutionary times, especially among his fellow-Presbyterians in the North, who, as Hope later wrote, were imbued with “the republican spirit, inherent in the principles of the Presbyterian community,” which “kept resistance to arbitrary power alive.” What made him unique, and what makes the study of his life and opinions still interesting for us two hundred years later, is the fact that Jemmy Hope was a working-class United Irishman who was able to see and understand the social and economic basis of the 1798 struggle with a clarity and directness that many others were—and still are—unable or unwilling to do.

James Hope was born in Templepatrick, Co. Antrim, on 25 August 1764. His father, a linen-weaver, was a native of Templepatrick. His grandfather, “a Covenanter, a Highlander,” had left Scotland to avoid persecution, as had many in the Templepatrick area. The sectarianism of many of the settlers led to the Catholics of the area being driven off. Hope wrote that he could remember men boasting of “the snug bits of land their friends got when the papists fled to Connaught.”

Though Hope was raised in a fairly bloodthirsty anti-Catholic environment, he was—though deeply religious—completely non-sectarian. As he said in a little poem written in later years,

These are my thoughts, nor do I think I need
Perplex my mind with any other creed.
I wish to let my neighbour’s creed alone,
And think it quite enough to mind my own.

He was largely self-taught. “By the time I was 10 years of age I had been fifteen weeks at school, and this was all the day school learning I ever received.” He worked from a young age for various farmers in the parish, picking up bits and pieces of history and the rudiments of reading and writing, before being apprenticed to a linen-weaver, when he had the opportunity to attend night school during the winters.

Influenced by the events in America, he joined the Volunteer movement. As he later said, “the Volunteers of 1782 were the means of breaking the first link of the penal chain that bound Ireland.” Jemmy marched with the Belfast Battalion of the Volunteers when they celebrated the taking of the Bastille on 14 July. These stalwart Protestants marched through the streets of Belfast with green cockades in their hats, under a green flag with the slogans Our Gallic brother was born July 14, 1789—Alas! we are still in embryo and Superstitious galaxy—The Irish Bastille: let us unite to destroy it. Both mottoes were the product of Hope’s revolutionary enthusiasm.

After the demise of the Volunteers, Hope was quick to join the growing United

Irish movement. His natural ability was recognised and he quickly became a delegate to the Belfast committee, as well as acting, in his own words, as “an emissary, going from place to place throughout the country, organising people.” He was in close friendly contact with and received his orders from the United leaders Samuel Neilson, Thomas Russell, and Henry Joy McCracken.

From early on, Hope saw clearly into the class basis and socio-economic causes and functioning of the struggle. He noted that economic conditions were “the real basis of the persecution in the County Armagh, religious profession being only a pretext to banish a Roman Catholic from his snug little cottage, or spot of land, and get possessed of it.” Writing some forty years after the event, he said:

There are circumstances which should be kept always before one connected with the events of 1798, to which their production is mainly attributed. As a people, we are excluded from any share in framing the laws by which we are governed. The higher ranks usurped the exclusive exercise of that privilege, as well as many other rights, by force, fraud, and fiction. By force the poor were subdued, and dispossessed of their interests in the soil; by fiction the titles of the spoilers were established; and by fraud on the productive industry of future generations the usurpation was continued.

Hope was also fully aware of the class struggle within the Society of United Irishmen itself. Reminiscing on some of his former allies, the “hucksters, merchants, and bankers,” he commented that

...when the fitness and capability of Ireland for independence were discussed, the above classes were always with the government. I remember being present at one of these discussions. Mr. Henry Joy McCracken was the only man present who supposed self dependence possible. His arguments had little effect on the company. One—the chief difficulty with those who opposed his opinion—was in reference to naval protection. I said that Ireland was the eye of Europe—it required no naval protection; it was the connecting link in the chain of the commerce of the two hemispheres.

When we parted, McCracken blamed my rashness, and bade me never use such language while Ireland remained as she then was; “for,” said he, “there are many mercantile men, and some of them were in that very company, who are efficient members of our society, and who, rather than see their shipping interests or commercial establishments, on the east and north-east of this Island, lessened in value, by the increased traffic on the western coast, would see the whole island, and every vestige of our liberty, sunk into the sea.”

“Well,” said I, “Harry, these are men that will put the rope on your neck and mine, if ever they get us into their power.”

“Are you afraid of being hanged, Jemmy?” said he.

“It would ill become one who has pledged his life for his country to shrink from death in any shape,” I replied; “but I confess, I have no desire for that distinction.”

“For my part,” said he, “I do not desire to die of sickness.”

In 1796 Hope went to Dublin as a delegate of the Belfast Society of United Irishmen, one of two men sent there “to disseminate our views among the working classes.” The two were promised funds (which they never received) and willing contacts (who, when met, actively discouraged them). Nevertheless Jemmy soon settled in the Liberties, to live and work at his trade as linen-weaver and, more importantly, to organise and agitate for the cause of the United Irishmen.

Hope was able to form connections with Counties Meath and Kildare, which soon extended to other counties. With his help, a national organisation was soon formed. He reported back to Belfast and was again sent to Dublin to organise the workers. Under his direction, societies were formed throughout the city and in the Liberties. During this period he also travelled throughout Counties Cavan, Monaghan, Armagh, and Leitrim, organising local societies and distributing the constitution of the United Irishmen.

With Hope back in Co. Antrim, the rising of the United Irishmen in 1798 was hindered by the conscious inaction or misunderstandings of their then commander, who resigned at the height of the revolution. This line was also followed by many of the officers, especially “those who were called colonels,” the great majority of whom had been recruited from among relatively recent middle and upper-class members. As Hope later wrote,

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 . . . 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.

According to Hope, these officers later gave information to the enemy or neutralised the exertions of those who, like himself, were working to raise the United Irishmen in Co. Antrim. In the end, he says, only McCracken was able and willing to move things along and to raise and ready the United men for the Battle of Antrim. Hope himself played an important part in that battle and wrote a fascinating account of it for R. R. Madden’s book *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times*.

After “the people’s cause was finally lost (at least in that struggle),” as he later wrote, he refused to surrender under Cornwallis’s terms, which he felt involved “not only a recantation of one’s principles, but a tacit acquiescence in the justice of the punishment which had been inflicted on thousands of my unfortunate associates.” He remained in the North until November 1798; he then went to Dublin with his family and in the summer of 1799 was employed by a former comrade, Charles Teeling, “who was then establishing a bleach green at the Nawl, in the County Meath.”

Hope was now living in the Coombe, Dublin. In 1803 a former friend renewed their past acquaintance and attempted to convince him to quit his connection with the United Irishmen. Hope answered: “If you have fulfilled your obligation to their society, you can quit when you choose; but it does not seem to me that I have fulfilled mine yet.” His “friend” returned the next day with the Liberties Yeomen, but Hope had wisely paid his rent and fled the night before with his wife and

children.

For a number of years he was on the run, living variously in Counties Westmeath, Dublin, and Meath, always wary of the enemy but always forced to work at his trade in order to support his family with his meagre wages.

From the period of the failure of this last effort, nothing remained for me, but to baffle the designs of the enemy against myself. I went about armed, for three years, determined never to be taken alive, avoiding all connection (with a few exceptions) with men above my own rank, still working for my bread, or on a journey, in search of work, or to see my family, who were then in Dublin. I went with a brace of loaded pistols in my breast, but I never discharged them, during all that time, at any human creature, although I had repeated opportunities to have cut off Major Sirr and many other enemies, singly, with the greatest safety to myself. I never felt myself justified in shedding blood, except in cases of attack, which it was my good fortune to evade.

He then returned to the North but could find no employment with any of his former comrades, who were, however, generous in their promises. He was finally able to find employment with an English "friend of liberty," who was not, however, a member of the United Irishmen.

Jemmy Hope saw the downfall of the United Irishmen in the reliance on France and on the influx of rich farmers, shopkeepers and aristocrats that occurred after this became evident and from whom leaders were subsequently chosen:

The seeds of corruption, it was evident to me, were sown in our own society, but I was unable to convince my acquaintances; my observation was only useful to myself, and prepared me for the worst, which realized my dreariest forebodings, without, however, sinking my spirits in the least, or making me regret any step I had taken. Although I executed the part assigned me in every moment cheerfully, I was always prepared for defeat, for none of our leaders seemed to me perfectly acquainted with the main cause of social derangement, if I except Neilson, McCracken, Russell, and Emmet. It was my settled opinion that the condition of the labouring class was the fundamental question at issue between the rulers and the people, and there could be no solid foundation for liberty, till measures were adopted that went to the root of the evil, and were specially directed to the restoration of the natural right of the people, the right of deriving a subsistence from the soil on which their labour was expended.

In the very thick of the organisational and military battles, Jemmy Hope realised that what he called "the foundation of Ireland's freedom" lay in the people's right to work. He locates the struggle for work physically in the soil, as it were, showing the social struggle within the context of and as part of the struggle for liberty, the national struggle. Hope's class analysis of the causes of the '98 revolt prefigure James Connolly's analysis of this inextricable interweaving of the social and national struggles in Ireland.

Reflecting, shortly before his death in 1847, on the momentous times that he had experienced and had helped to shape, Jemmy Hope, the working-class revolutionary of 1798, wrote what could fittingly have been his epitaph, words that, after more than 150 years, still ring true and still inspire:

The power that has, through life, preserved me, is doing the work, to which my poor efforts were directed. It is farther in advance than I expected to live to see it. It is past the power of human resistance, to frustrate it. Its progress is employing every intelligent Irish mind. Every step throws fresh light on the subject, that engages it, whether of success or defeat. The mind of the nation lives and grows in vigour. Its object is still before it; and as one of its promoters sinks into the grave, another is still forthcoming. Even self-interest, that was so strong against the nation's interest, is coming round to the latter. Hope for success, under all circumstances—have your heart. You may live to see Ireland what she ought to be; but, whether or not, let us die in this faith.

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