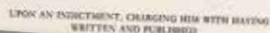


an' a' that

radicalism, revolt & realignment



Ulster-Scots Community Network

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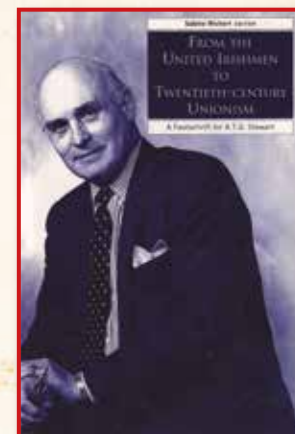
*For a' that, an a' that,
It's coming yet for a' that,
That Man to Man, the world o'er;
Shall brothers be for a' that.*

This famous poem penned by Robert Burns in 1795, and described by James Kinsley (an authority on 'The Bard') as occupying 'a central place in the psalmody of radicalism', encapsulates the values of the French Revolution which inspired the intellectual leadership of the United Irishmen.

Introduction

The purpose of this publication is three-fold. First, it seeks to examine the life of Dr William Drennan and his role in the formation of the Society of United Irishmen. Secondly, it provides an account of the events of the Rebellion of 1798. Finally, it considers, in the words of W. E. H. Lecky, the doyen of nineteenth-century Irish historians, 'the defection of the Presbyterians from the movement of which they were the main originators.'

Although the late Dr A. T. Q. Stewart is almost certainly best known for *The Ulster Crisis* (1967) and *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster 1609-1969* (1977), being born into a strongly Presbyterian family of bakers and confectioners, he had a life-long fascination with the Presbyterian radicalism of his ancestors, the origins of the United Irishmen and the 1798 Rebellion. We get a glimpse of this in a delightful essay entitled 'The Ghost of Betsy Gray' which was Dr Stewart's contribution to a volume published to mark the bicentenary of the 1798 rebellion in County Down.



The essay opens with Dr Stewart recalling family Christmases at the home of an uncle in the 1930s. The uncle, married to his mother's sister, was a Belfast businessman and veteran of the Battle of the Somme. At some point during the course of the day the uncle would take down an old volume from his shelves and declaim in mock-heroic tones 'Betsy Gray, or the Hearts of Down!' Stewart observes: 'Many Christmases would pass before I pondered the incongruity of this yoking of Unionism and the United Irishmen, the Battle of the Somme and the Battle of Ballynahinch'.

As J. C. Beckett observed in *The Making of Modern Ireland* (1966) Wolfe Tone was 'in close touch with the Presbyterians of Ulster' and 'had helped to found the United Irishmen'. This is significantly different from crediting Tone with the foundation of the organisation. It was Dr Stewart

who explored William Drennan's long and under-appreciated role in this formative event in an essay entitled "A Stable Unseen Power": Dr William Drennan and the Origins of the United Irishmen" in Essays presented to Michael Roberts (edited by John Bossy and Peter Jupp) in 1976. This was a subject to which he returned at greater length in A Deeper Silence: *The Hidden Origins of the United Irishmen* in 1993.

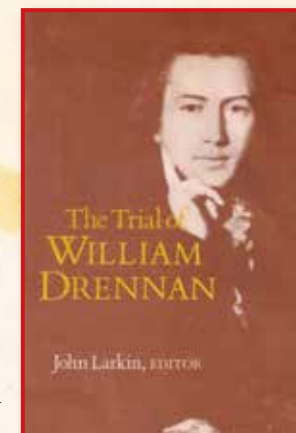
In *The Summer Soldiers: The 1798 Rebellion in Antrim and Down* (1995) Dr Stewart produced his masterly account of these tumultuous events in the Presbyterian heartland of eastern Ulster. And at the very outset of his academic career, almost sixty years ago, he sought to explain 'The Transformation of Presbyterian Radicalism in the North of Ireland, 1792 – 1825' (1956), in his unpublished MA thesis.

A. T. Q. Stewart died in Belfast on 17 December 2010. As his former students would readily acknowledge, he was a gifted and conscientious teacher. In the words of the obituary in *The Independent*: 'He was elegant, dispassionate, entertaining and illuminating' and he left 'an invaluable legacy'.

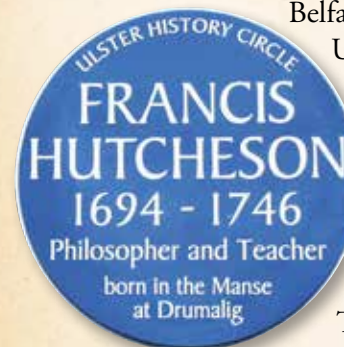
This publication is intended too to serve as a tribute to a modest and unassuming scholar, a great prose stylist and a gentleman of unfailing courtesy.

Dr William Drennan: *the true founder of the Society of United Irishmen*

William Drennan, a Belfast Presbyterian doctor and poet of radical views, is usually credited with being the first person to call Ireland 'the emerald isle' (in his poem 'When Erin first rose'). Drennan was also the main originator of the Society of United Irishmen, an idea which matured in his mind between 1780 and 1785. The Drennan Papers, Drennan's extensive correspondence with Martha McTier, his sister, are an invaluable source for the Belfast politics of his era.



William Drennan was born on 23 May 1754. Like so many of the United Irishmen, Drennan was a son of the manse. His father, Revd Thomas Drennan, was the minister of First Presbyterian Church, in Rosemary Street, Belfast, the wealthiest and most liberal congregation in Ulster. Thomas Drennan, described by modern Ulster historian Ian McBride as 'an elegant scholar', had been the friend and assistant of Francis Hutcheson, the Ulster Presbyterian philosopher who held the chair of Philosophy at the University of Glasgow and almost universally regarded as 'the Father of the Scottish Enlightenment'.



The American Revolution gave radicalism a tremendous *fillip* in Ireland, especially in Ulster, in the 1770s and early 1780s. Harcourt, the Lord Lieutenant, observed: 'The Presbyterians in the north are in their hearts Americans.' A graduate of both Glasgow and Edinburgh universities, as a medical student at Edinburgh William Drennan followed closely the course of the American War of Independence. The grievances which propelled so many Ulster Presbyterians into the United Irishmen were essentially the same as those which had driven thousands of their co-religionists during the course of the eighteenth century to carve out a new future for themselves in the new world.

The Volunteer movement, which came into existence to defend Ireland against French invasion while the British army normally stationed in Ireland was engaging the American colonists, gave rise to demands for free trade, legislative independence, parliamentary reform and 'Catholic emancipation'. Radical politics flourished, especially in Ulster. Drennan in his pamphlet, *A Letter to Edmund Burke* (1780), described how he believed 'the levelling of all civil distinctions of rank and fortune, necessary in martial evolution and manoeuvre' had created 'an independence and republicanism of spirit' in 'the lower ranks of the community'. Although a measure of free trade and legislative independence were achieved by 1779 and 1782 respectively, it proved difficult to sustain a comparable level of interest in and enthusiasm for parliamentary reform and 'Catholic emancipation'. Reform, Drennan was obliged to concede, became 'unfashionable' in 'genteel company'. Drennan's *Letters of Orellana, an Irish Helot* (1785), originally a series of articles published in the *Belfast Newsletter* at the end of 1784, was an attempt to breathe new life into a radicalism which was faltering. Drennan's ideas for a new radical journal throughout 1784 and in the summer of 1785 for a secret quasi-Masonic society more radical than the rather aristocratic Reform Club in Dublin, his prototype for the United Irishmen, were further attempts to revive the radical spirit.



The revolution in France gave radicalism a second wind in the early 1790s. In 1791, prompted by the second anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, Drennan

revived his idea and the society was formed in Belfast in October of that year. Wolfe Tone was present at the meeting at which the society was formed, but only as a visitor and guest. Drennan's suggested name for the society was the Irish Brotherhood but Tone's suggestion, the Society of United Irishmen, was preferred. Contrary to popular opinion, the lapsed Anglican was not the prime mover in the Society's formation.

The principal aim of the Society of United Irishmen was the reform of the Irish Parliament, which Drennan regarded as 'not merely the removal of an evil' but a step which would transform the spirit of Irish life. The centrality of reform of the Irish Parliament to the United Irish project is evidenced by the wording of the United Irish test, drafted by Drennan:



I, A.B., in the presence of God, do pledge myself to my country that I will use all my abilities and influence in the attainment of an impartial and adequate representation of the Irish nation in parliament...

Many mistakenly regard Wolfe Tone's formulation of 1795 espousing republican separatism as the classic and definitive statement of the aims of the United Irishmen:

To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government, to break the connection with England, the never-failing source of all our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country - these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions and to substitute the common name of Irishmen in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter - these were my means.

This was not even remotely an accurate statement of the original aims of the United Irishmen. Indeed, Tone had not always subscribed to the view that England was 'the never-failing source of all our political evils'. Two years previously Tone had publicly disavowed republican separatism.

While some United Irishmen did embrace separatism, most probably did not. Drennan regarded himself as a republican but appreciated that many of his colleagues did not share his enthusiasm. Drennan had a very full appreciation of the innumerable ties that linked Ireland and Great Britain. Among these were 'the sociality of manners, language and law'. He also believed any conflict between Great Britain and Ireland would be a civil war.

A suspicion that Roman Catholics might prove to be most unreliable allies pervades Drennan's correspondence. He feared that the Roman Catholics had 'two strings to their bow'. They could make common cause with the United Irishmen in order to extract concessions from the government and they could also do business with the government directly. Thus, in Drennan's estimation, Roman Catholics had the best of both worlds. While Drennan was perfectly willing to concede that this was 'good, and perhaps fair, archery', he feared that the Presbyterian United Irishmen could well find themselves abandoned by their putative allies. Drennan's fears, arguably, were ultimately realised.

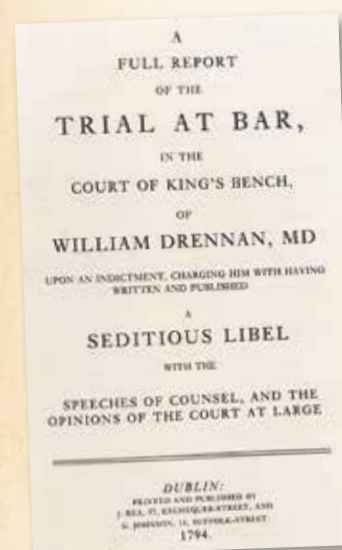
The founding of the first society of United Irishmen in Belfast was followed by the rapid formation of societies in Templepatrick, Doagh, Randalstown, Killead and Muckamore, all hotbeds of Presbyterian radicalism in County Antrim. The first United Irish society to be founded in County Down was formed at Saintfield by Revd Thomas Ledlie Birch, the town's Presbyterian minister, on 16 January 1792. Three further societies were formed in Belfast. There was no branch of any significance outside Ulster except the Dublin Society, which was also the only one to possess a large and religiously mixed membership. The Dublin Society was also unique in that it enjoyed a modicum of support from the aristocracy and gentry.

Although middle class Presbyterians provided the leadership and Presbyterian tenant farmers and labourers provided the movement's rank and file in Ulster, not *all* Presbyterians supported the United Irishmen. *Many* did not. For example, the Revd William Bruce, the man to whom Drennan outlined his ideas for a new political society in the summer of 1785 was not a United Irishman in 1798. The minister of the First (New Light) Congregation, Belfast, and principal of the Belfast Academy was loyal to the Crown and served with the yeomanry.

Drennan described the original Society of United Irishmen, with some justice, as 'a constitutional conspiracy'. Initially, the Society was an open and legitimate organisation with aims that were perfectly constitutional. After the outbreak of war with revolutionary France in 1793 a nervous Government clamped down on those espousing the ideals of a country with which it was at war. In January 1794 Archibald Hamilton Rowan, the proprietor of the *Northern Star*, the United Irish newspaper, was tried on a charge of distributing a seditious paper, fined £500 and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. In June that same year Drennan was put on trial for seditious libel but the eloquence of John Philpot Curran secured his acquittal.

On 10 May 1795 the United Irishmen met secretly in Belfast and adopted a new constitution. In effect, driven underground, the Society transformed itself into a clandestine revolutionary and military organisation. Many Belfast Presbyterians stepped back. Drennan's trial greatly dampened his revolutionary ardour. Others recoiled too, often as a result of events in France, especially 'The Terror'.

The brutal disarming of Ulster by General Lake from March 1797 onwards and the hanging of William Orr of Farranshane, a substantial County



General Lake



Antrim Presbyterian tenant farmer (noted for his hospitality and said to be worth £400 a year), in October 1797, however, had precisely the opposite effect on many others. Orr was charged with administering the United Irish oath to Hugh Wheatly, a private in the Fife Fencibles. Although Orr was an United Irishman, he was found guilty as a result of the testimony of witnesses who had perjured themselves and a jury that was intoxicated. Orr, who proclaimed that he went to

his death 'in the faith of a true Presbyterian', became a martyr. The United Irishmen regarded Orr's death as judicial murder and a mourning card was widely circulated throughout eastern Ulster, bearing the words 'sacred to the memory of William Orr ... an awful sacrifice to Irish freedom on the altar of British tyranny, by the hands of perjury through the influence of corruption and the connivance of partial justice'. Drennan responded by composing 'The Wake of William Orr', often regarded as his best poem. 'Remember Orr!' proved a potent slogan in mobilising support for rebellion in Antrim and Down in 1798. Orr's death was of infinitely greater value to the United Irish movement than all its French-inspired idealism and ideology.

Although Drennan had exclaimed in 1788, 'I almost wish there was a hearty rebellion', when rebellion erupted a decade later Drennan's role was merely that of an observer. The rebellion of 1798 was radically different in character from what was envisaged and desired by the largely

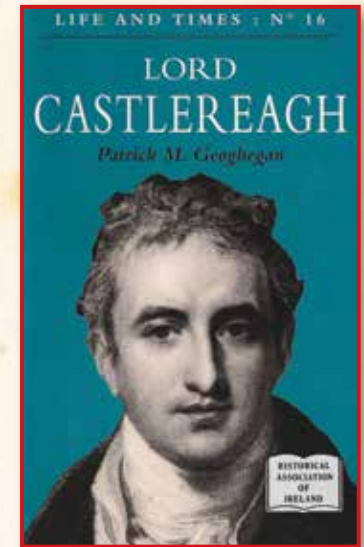


middle-class, mainly Protestant (and, in Ulster, mainly Presbyterian) and anti-clerical United Irishmen. In south Leinster the rebellion had many of the hallmarks of a holy war. In Antrim and Down the Presbyterians, with very little Roman Catholic support, largely stood alone. Ironically, the rebellion in Ulster was largely suppressed by Roman Catholics serving in the militia and Protestants serving in the yeomanry. Thus, paradoxically, the United Irish ideal was most closely realised in the forces of the Crown.

The most important consequence of 1798 was the Act of Union. The Union abolished the quasi-independent medieval Irish parliament. As the United Irishmen had originally sought the reform of this Parliament, many United Irishmen were not unhappy at its abolition, especially as it held out the prospect of reform, 'Catholic emancipation' and the liberalisation of trade. By depriving so many boroughs of their parliamentary representation, the Act of Union was, in effect, a significant measure of parliamentary reform. Trade was liberalised. The only failing was that 'Catholic emancipation' was fatally delayed for a generation.

In many respects not a great deal separated the aspirations of the United Irishmen on one hand and those of Pitt and Castlereagh, the principal architects of the Union, on the other. Therefore, one should not be unduly surprised by the fact that Samuel Neilson and Archibald Rowan Hamilton warmly welcomed the union. They were not alone.

Drennan did not welcome the Union initially, writing three pamphlets against it. On 4 August 1800 he wrote: 'Strange coincidence that the day in which my country died should be the happiest day which I have spent on this earth'. The event that made him so happy was his wife's news that she was pregnant with their first child.





Royal Belfast Academical Institution, Belfast

Drennan did not abandon his radicalism, a fact demonstrated by his *Letter to Charles James Fox* (1806), which was redolent of the Ulster radicalism of the 1780s and 1790s. He continued to support 'Catholic emancipation' and maintained his interest in parliamentary reform but he became reconciled to the Union, recognising its great reformist potential. By December 1811 Drennan was advising the readers of the *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, the literary journal he had launched in 1808, to 'Be Britons with all your souls – and forget your father called himself an Irishman'.

Drennan was heavily involved in establishing Belfast Academical Institution. The foundation stone of the Institution was laid in July 1810. In 1814 he delivered a speech at the Institution's launch in which he defined its progressive ethos. Drennan's radicalism remained a source of serious concern to the Irish administration in Dublin, so much so that it was probably a factor in the withdrawal of the Institution's annual grant of £1,500 between 1817 and 1829.

Drennan died in Belfast on 5 February 1820 and was buried in the Old Clifton Street Burying Ground. With deliberate symbolism his coffin was borne to the grave by three Roman Catholics and three Protestants.

In 2002 the Ulster History Circle placed a blue plaque on the wall of the Central Hall, Rosemary Street, Belfast, site of the manse in which Drennan was born, to commemorate Drennan's life.

The 1798 Rebellion:

'a Jacobinical conspiracy' chiefly pursued with 'Popish instruments'?

In Ulster the 1798 rebellion, or 'Turn Oot' in Ulster-Scots, occurred in the Presbyterian heartland of Antrim and Down. Presbyterians provided the leadership. Presbyterian tenant farmers and labourers provided the movement's rank and file.

More than a score of Presbyterian clergy were directly implicated in the rising, and of these (according to Ian McBride in *Scripture Politics*), three were executed: Robert Gowdie of Dunover (near Ballywalter), James Porter of Greyabbey and Archibald Warwick of Kircubbin. The Revd James Porter of Greyabbey, a brilliant satirist and author of 'Billy Bluff and Squire Firebrand', a series of dialogues between two very dim Irish conservatives which appeared in the *Northern Star*, was hanged in front of his own meeting house. Archibald Warwick (who appears in W. G. Lyttle's *Betsy Gray* as William Warwick) was hanged in Newtownards in a thunderstorm, four months after the end of the rebellion. However, the Revd W. T. Latimer of Eglisli, the Presbyterian historian, in August 1912 insisted that Robert Gowdie was not executed and there is evidence to suggest that Latimer was correct because Gowdie, it would seem, only died in 1802.

Eighteen Presbyterian ministers or probationers were imprisoned for various lengths of time and more than twenty either fled or were exiled to the United States, notably the Revd Thomas Ledlie Birch of Saintfield (who escaped the noose through the intervention of his brother George who was a close friend of Lord Castlereagh) and David Bailie Warden, a probationer of the Presbytery of Bangor. During the summer of 1798 Lord Castlereagh's men hunted Warden, the son of one of his father's tenants, round the shores of Strangford Lough. Seventeen years later Warden and Lord Castlereagh met at the Congress of Vienna, Warden then being the diplomatic representative of the United States government and Castlereagh being the (British) Foreign Secretary. One Presbyterian minister, the Revd Arthur McMahon of Hollywood, ended up serving in the Irish Legion of the French Army.

While many Presbyterians were deeply implicated in the 1798 rebellion, this



is not to suggest that *all* Presbyterians supported the United Irishmen. Many did not.

Originally an open organisation with aims that were perfectly constitutional, driven underground by Government repression, in May 1795 the Society of United Irishmen met secretly in Belfast and reconstituted itself as a clandestine revolutionary and military organisation. Many Presbyterians stepped back. Others recoiled as a result of events in France, especially after the onset of 'The Terror'.

Although normally regarded as a single event, there is much merit in regarding 1798 as a series of very loosely connected events, almost like the 'Revolutions' of 1830 or 1848 in Europe.

The rebellion lacked overall co-ordination and, as a result, varied enormously in character from area to area. The arrest of virtually the entire United Irish leadership in Dublin on 12 March 1798 and the arrest on 19 May of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, one of the few United Irish leaders with a military background, shaped the nature of the rebellion in south Leinster when it erupted on 23 May. It was disorganized, incoherent and sectarian.

The two Father Murphys – Father John Murphy of Boulavogue and Father Michael Murphy of Ballycarnew – led the rising in south Leinster. The paraphernalia of Roman Catholicism was more in evidence than the symbolism of the United Irishmen. Protestants would appear to have been murdered because they were Protestants rather than on account of their politics. Roman Catholic loyalists – and such people did exist – were often left unharmed and unmolested. For example, at Rathangan, County Meath, nineteen Protestants were massacred but Roman Catholic loyalists were spared. In July 1798 John Colclough, whose uncle was hanged for his role

in the rebellion in Wexford, wrote to a friend in Ulm: 'Though I can hardly think it was the original intention of the United Irishmen to murder all the Protestants, for many of the heads were of that persuasion, yet when the mob rose, they murdered almost all of them'.

In December Colclough was still traumatised by the recollection of the savagery of the events in the county almost six months earlier:

You cannot, nor did I, conceive it possible that man could be so ferocious, and I am convinced that, had this country remained another week under them, a single Protestant, in particular a gentleman of any kind, could not have been left alive.

Although 'post-revisionists' would have it otherwise, it is virtually impossible (and not simply on the basis of John Colclough's testimony) to view the rebellion in south Leinster as being other than largely sectarian rather than political in character. Theological fanaticism played its part.

Between 30 May and 21 June Wexford was completely under the control of the insurgents. On 5 June between one hundred and two hundred Protestants (and some Roman Catholic servants) were burned to death in a barn at Scullabogue. On 20 June the insurgents in Wexford 'executed 70 Protestants on the bridge over the River Slaney.

On 26 June Jeffrey Paul reported to his wife Jane: 'I saw the bridge like a slaughter house thick with the blood of those 70 Protestants.'

These incidents cannot easily be conjured away and have coloured Protestant and Presbyterian perceptions



Scullabogue

of 1798 down to the present day. They occupy much greater prominence in Ulster Protestant and Presbyterian consciousness than either the Battle of Antrim or the Battle of Ballynahinch.

Lord Castlereagh, who had become acting Chief Secretary in March 1798, characterised the rebellion as 'a Jacobinical [i.e. a French revolutionary-inspired] conspiracy throughout the kingdom, pursuing its object chiefly with Popish instruments' but such a description had less validity in Ulster because,



Wexford

although a 'a Jacobinical conspiracy', the rebellion in Antrim and Down was essentially a Presbyterian one and had none of the hallmarks of a *holy war*.

The rising in Ulster was as uncoordinated as south Leinster and for similar reasons. On 5 June the Revd Dr William Steel Dickson, almost certainly the United Irish leader in

Down, was arrested by the authorities. Four days previously Robert Simms, who had been the first secretary of the Belfast Society of United Irishmen, resigned as adjutant general of Antrim because he refused to rise before the arrival of French help.

Henry Joy McCracken, who had been the founder of Belfast's first Sunday school, replaced Simms in Antrim. Dickson was replaced by Henry Monro, a Lisburn linen draper and a direct descendant of Daniel Monro who in turn was a cousin of Robert Monro, the commander of the Scottish covenanting army in Ulster in the 1640s. Although of Ulster-Scots ancestry, Monro was an Anglican.

In Antrim 4,000 United Irishmen captured Randalstown and Ballymena (with shouts of 'Hurrah for the United Irishmen!' and 'Up with the green and down with King Geordie!') on 7 June. Without realising it the insurgents were initially successful at the Battle of Antrim town. However, when they mistook fleeing dragoons for an attacking force, the Army of Antrim dissolved into a mob. The last insurgents to leave the town was the force, known as the 'Spartan Band', commanded by Jemmy Hope, a working class United Irishman of Covenanting stock and proto-socialist.

After the Battle of Antrim the dead were brought from the town in blockwheel carts and buried by the cartload close to the shore where the Sixmilewater flows into Lough Neagh. 'Where the devil did these rascals come from?' the officer in charge of a burying party asked the driver of one cart. An unfortunate wretch in the cart feebly answered: 'I come frae Ballyboley.' He was buried along with the rest.

Having defeated the insurgents in Antrim, General Nugent was able to turn his attention to the United men of Down who had swung into action after two days' procrastination. On 9 June the County Down men ambushed the York Fencibles and some yeomanry at Saintfield and gained a victory over them. On 'Pike Sunday', 10 June, Revd Thomas Ledlie Birch allegedly preached to the insurgents at their camp at Creevy Rocks, taking Ezekiel 9:1 as his text:



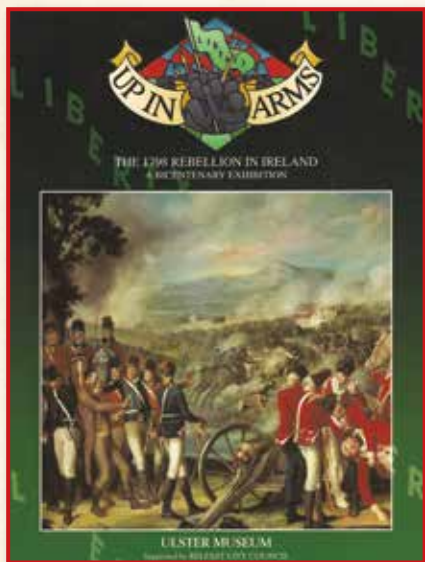
Battle of Antrim

'Cause them that have charge over the city to draw near with his destroying weapon in his hand.' That same day the yeomanry at Portaferry repulsed a large body of insurgents but others succeeded in capturing Donaghadee. On 11 June the insurgents captured Ballynahinch. On 12/13 June Ballynahinch was to be the scene of an unequal contest which would bring the weeklong United Irish revolt in eastern Ulster to an end. Nevertheless, Henry Monro's force of 7,000 fought bravely and well. The insurgents, by the sheer ferocity of their attack, repulsed the Monaghan Militia, despite their superior firepower. The turning point in the Battle of Ballynahinch was an incident almost identical to the insurgents' mistake in Antrim: the United men assumed that a bugle call signalled the arrival of Government reinforcements. In reality, the bugle call signalled a retreat. Both sides began to retreat but the army realised more quickly than the United men what was happening and the tide of battle started to flow in the Government's favour. The deaths of Betsy Gray, her fiancé, Willie Boal, and her brother, George, immortalised

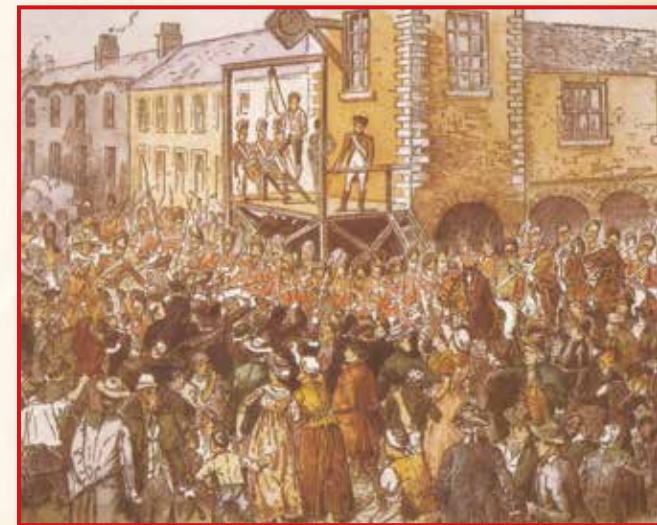
in W.G. Lyttle's novel, *Betsy Gray, or the Hearts of Down* (1886), are emblematic of the harsh treatment meted out to the insurgents after the battle.

Both McCracken and Monro escaped from their respective battlefields but were subsequently captured by the authorities. Monro was hanged beside his home and business premises in Market Square, Lisburn on 16 June. McCracken was hanged outside the Market House (at the corner of Cornmarket and High Street) in Belfast on 17 July. Both men faced their ordeal with courage.

As a twelve-year-old, James Thomson



The hanging of McCracken



of Spamount, near Ballynahinch, who would achieve great distinction as a mathematician at Glasgow University and become the father of Lord Kelvin, visited the United Irish camp at Ednavady Hill on the eve of the battle. Thirty years later he recalled in the *Belfast Magazine* that the Presbyterian tenant farmers and agricultural labourers of County Down had put on their Sunday best to make their protest in arms against the venal and corrupt parliament in Dublin. In both Antrim and Down the Presbyterians largely stood alone. There was very little Roman Catholic support for the rising in Ulster.

Some have claimed that Roman Catholics took exception to Presbyterian United Irishmen singing Psalms. Others have claimed that Roman Catholics were antagonized by Monro's alleged call to establish 'a Presbyterian government'. Neither constitutes wholly convincing explanations. As a member of the Church of Ireland, it is highly improbable that Monro ever made such a call. In truth, Roman Catholics simply proved to be unreliable allies, as Dr Drennan feared they would prove to be. They shrewdly calculated that their interests would be best served as spectators rather than as participants.

As we have already noted, the rebellion in Ulster was effectively suppressed by Roman Catholics serving in the militia and Protestants serving in the yeomanry. Thus, the paradox that the vision widely attributed to Wolfe Tone of 'the unity of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter' was more closely realized in the forces of the Crown.

The rising in Connaught was prompted by the arrival of General Humbert's

French force at Killala Bay on 22 August. The United Irishmen were weak in Connaught and the local peasantry rallied to support Humbert in the mistaken belief that he was a crusader on behalf of the Pope and 'the blessed Virgin'. After a brief but rather impressive campaign, which included the defeat of a Government force at the 'Races of Castlebar' on 27 August, Humbert surrendered at Ballinamuck, County Longford, on 8 September. There were few Protestants in Connaught and Humbert imposed strict discipline on his followers, so although the trappings of sectarianism were strongly in evidence, there were no sectarian massacres.

The final act of the 1798 rebellion was played out in October when Wolfe Tone arrived with a French squadron which was defeated off the coast of Donegal.

The rebellion of 1798 was radically different in character from what was envisaged and desired by the United Irishmen. The Society of United Irishmen was a largely middle-class movement, largely Protestant (and mainly Presbyterian in Ulster) and anti-clerical in tone. Yet, the course of events was heavily influenced by the sectarian passions of the Roman Catholic peasantry of south Leinster under clerical control.

The most important consequence of 1798 was the Act of Union which paradoxically realised many of the aims and aspirations of the United Irishmen and abolished the Irish parliament.

W. E. H. Lecky's Conundrum:

"The defection of the Presbyterians from the movement of which they were the main originators ..."

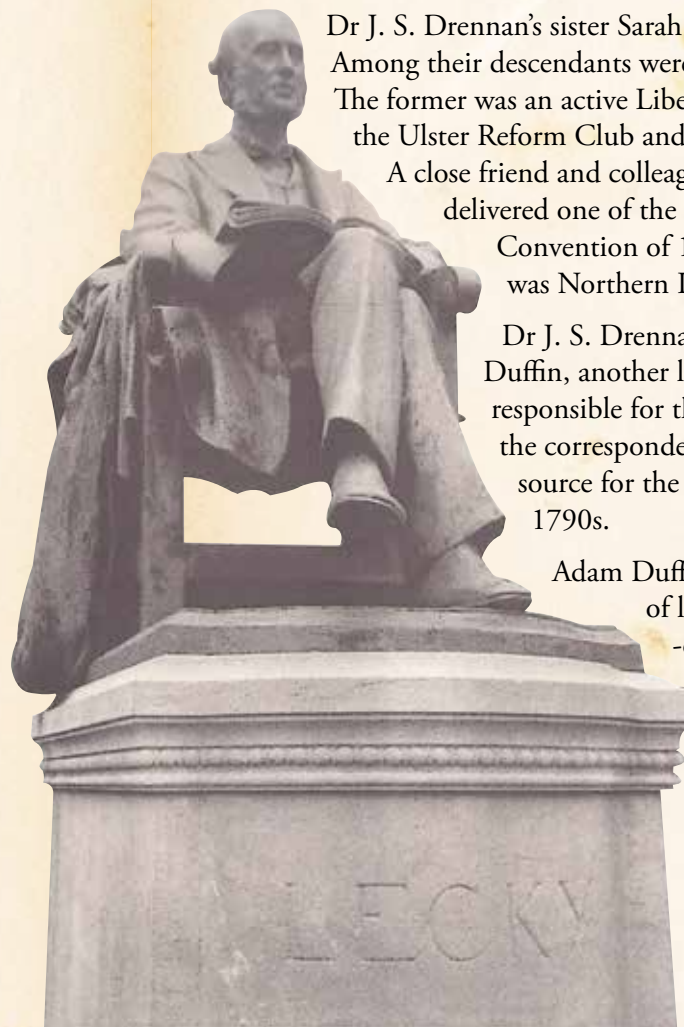
Almost exactly a century after the founding of the United Irishmen in Belfast Dr William Drennan's son, John Swanwick Drennan, attended the Ulster Unionist Convention of 17 June 1892 and, a poet, like his father, wrote verses to celebrate Ulster Unionist resistance to Home Rule prior to the election of July 1892 and the formation of Gladstone's fourth administration.

Dr J. S. Drennan's sister Sarah married a John Andrews of Comber. Among their descendants were Thomas Andrews and J. M. Andrews. The former was an active Liberal Unionist, being president of both the Ulster Reform Club and the Ulster Liberal Unionist Association.

A close friend and colleague of Thomas Sinclair, he similarly delivered one of the best speeches at the Ulster Unionist Convention of 1892. The latter, Thomas Andrews' son, was Northern Ireland's second Prime Minister.

Dr J. S. Drennan's daughter Ruth married Adam Duffin, another leading Liberal Unionist. Ruth was responsible for the preservation of the Drennan letters, the correspondence of her grandfather and an invaluable source for the study of Belfast radical politics in the 1790s.

Adam Duffin's own papers are a source for the study of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ulster Unionism. His son, C. E. Duffin, was to serve as a 'B' Special. It must be emphasised that it was not only Dr William Drennan's descendants who were strong and committed Unionists. Drennan's descendants are a paradigm for the wider Presbyterian community. Alexander



Crawford, the great grandfather of Fred Crawford, the Larne gunrunner, was a close friend of Henry Joy McCracken and shared his political outlook.

To this day, many solidly Unionist families in Antrim and Down remain proud to boast of ancestors 'oot' in 1798, although to Unionists elsewhere this is often incomprehensible.

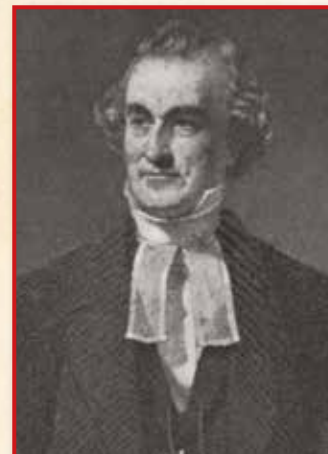
'The defection of the Presbyterians from the movement of which they were the main originators, and the great and enduring change which took place in their sentiments', wrote the famous historian of eighteenth-century Ireland, W. E. H. Lecky, 'are facts of the deepest importance in Irish history and deserve very careful and detailed examination'.

In undertaking any such examination it is important to recognise that not all Presbyterians were United Irishmen in the 1790s any more than all Presbyterians were unionists in 1885. It is also only fair to observe that many United Irishmen, although republicans, were radicals rather than nationalists.

It is also important to note that there was a discernible shift in Presbyterian attitudes during the 1790s. Thomas Percy, the Bishop of Dromore, observed 'a wonderful change ... among the republicans of the north'. When in May 1795 the Society of United Irishmen transformed itself into a clandestine revolutionary and military organisation many Belfast Presbyterians stepped back. Drennan's trial for seditious libel greatly dampened his revolutionary ardour. Others recoiled too, often as a result of events in France, especially 'The Terror'. The course of the 1798 rebellion in south Leinster, especially the massacre at Scullabogue, County Wexford, had a profound impact on many Ulster Presbyterians. In a letter to the Marquis of Downshire in June 1798 a Belfast loyalist gloated that:

The number of disaffected fellows now in this Town under Arms for the Protection of their property would astonish you ... To see Presbaterian [sic] Ministers, with the rich Republican Shopkeepers, sitting in the guard Room at daylight in the Morning with their Guns, &c. had in my Eyes, a wonderful appearance.

Rev. Dr. Henry Cooke



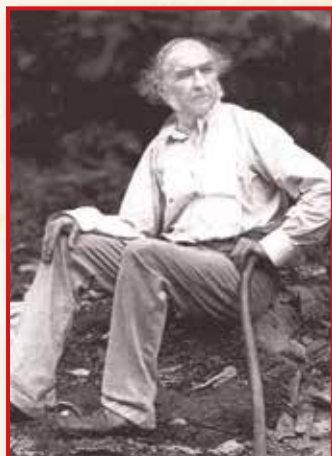
Some have attributed a change in the political sentiments of Presbyterians to the rise of evangelicalism and the influence of Revd Dr Henry Cooke. In the doctrinal controversies within the Presbyterian Church in the 1820s Cooke emerged as a pillar of orthodoxy and an avowed opponent of heresy. In 1830 Cooke triumphed over Revd Henry Montgomery, the headmaster of Belfast Academical Institution and his liberal Presbyterian opponent, in the

second Subscription controversy. Although it was (and still is) perfectly possible to be a liberal in theology and a conservative in politics and vice versa, Cooke was both a theological conservative and a political Conservative. However, if the religious and political aspects of Cooke's career are disentangled, it becomes apparent that, whereas Cooke was extremely successful in the religious sphere, he was conspicuously less successful politically.

Cooke's views on the Church of Ireland, the national education system and tenant rights differed from those of his co-religionists and reveal the limits of his political influence. In the General Election 1868 an ailing Cooke urged his co-religionists to vote Tory – against their natural inclination – to avert the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. On the whole, his fellow Presbyterians would seem to have disregarded his advice because the Ulster Liberals had their best election for years.

Although Cooke is often held responsible for the fusion of conservative evangelicalism and Conservative Unionism and accused of leading the Presbyterian community away from a liberal past towards a conservative future, the process certainly did not happen in his lifetime. On the issue of the Union, Henry Montgomery, the liberal Presbyterian leader, was as strongly committed to its maintenance as Cooke.

William Gladstone



Some would contend that no 'great' or 'enduring change' took place in the sentiments of Ulster Presbyterians at all. What had changed was the nature of the state in which they lived. In 1888, J. J. Shaw, a Presbyterian barrister, future Recorder of Belfast and a former academic at Magee College in Londonderry, in a publication entitled *Mr. Gladstone's Two Irish Policies: A Letter to an Ulster Liberal Elector*, provided his explanation of the conundrum which perplexed not only W. E. H. Lecky but William Gladstone and Irish nationalists then and now.

W. E. Gladstone's first policy is set out in a speech he delivered in Aberdeen in 1871. In that speech Gladstone said: 'I have looked in vain for the setting forth of any practical scheme of [Irish] policy which the Imperial Parliament is not equal to deal with'. Thus, Mr Gladstone's first Irish policy was reform.

As a reformer, Gladstone became the hero of many (perhaps even a majority) of Ulster Presbyterians as he pursued the theme of equal treatment for all under the Union. Presbyterians and Roman Catholics enthusiastically co-operated in pursuit of religious equality and land reform between 1868 and 1886. In his publication Shaw observed: 'the policy seemed to us statesmanlike and liberal ... It was to be carried out by bringing Irish law and Irish institutions into harmony with the interests and feelings of the great bulk of the Irish people'.

W. E. Gladstone's second policy was, of course, Home Rule, his conversion to which was disclosed to an unsuspecting world, possibly prematurely, by Herbert Gladstone, Gladstone's youngest son, in interviews published in the *London Standard* and the *Leeds Mercury* on 17 December 1885. At this juncture Shaw was still hostile to Home Rule but by the General Election of 1892 Shaw had changed his mind, abandoning Liberal Unionism for Gladstonian Liberalism and support for Home Rule. However, in 1888

as a Liberal Unionist, Shaw addressed his 'Ulster Liberal Elector' in the following terms:

You are not, nor am I, ashamed of the fact that our ancestors were United Irishmen [Shaw was born and grew up in Kircubbin, County Down]. We do not fear to speak of '98. Had we lived in '98 we should probably have been rebels ourselves, just as our rebellious forefathers, were they now alive, would be contented and loyal subjects of the empire.

The 'declared and real objects of the United Irishmen' were 'Catholic emancipation, a reformed parliament, a responsible executive, and equal laws for the whole Irish people'. The United Irishmen only 'took up arms' because 'they saw no hope of attaining these objects through an Irish parliament'. However, these benefits, Shaw explained, everyone enjoyed as citizens of the United Kingdom as the result of the Act of Union. However, Shaw feared that might not be so under a Home Rule parliament dominated by one faction of the Irish people.

Presbyterians and Roman Catholics alike had been excluded from political power and influence by the Protestant (i.e. Church of Ireland) Ascendancy in the old Irish parliament that had existed prior to 1800. Shaw, as an Ulster Presbyterian, could not view with equanimity the prospect of a return to ascendancy government, which is what Presbyterians believed Home Rule would herald. Presbyterians feared renewed exclusion from power and influence, this time at the hands of a Roman Catholic ascendancy. 'If our descendants rebelled against Grattan's Parliament', asked Shaw, 'will their descendants be happy and contented under Mr Parnell's?'

An important element of the United Irish critique was that England impeded Irish trade and retarded Irish economic development. Many Ulster Presbyterians were pleasantly and agreeably surprised to find that Belfast and its environs flourished economically under the Union. Belfast in the 1790s was a market town with harbour facilities but during the course of the nineteenth

century it became a great port and one of the major industrial powerhouses of the world, boasting by 1914 'the greatest shipyard, rope works, tobacco factory, linen mill, dry dock and tea machinery works in the world.'

As early as 1834 Emerson Tennent, who was one of Belfast's two MPs, in a speech widely regarded as one of the finest delivered in the House of Commons for years, eloquently countered Daniel O'Connell's speech in favour of repeal of the Union with the observation: 'The north of Ireland had, every five years, found its trade doubled since the Union'.

In 1841 the Revd Dr Henry Cooke similarly repudiated O'Connell's case for repeal of the Union by recourse to Belfast's experience under the Union:

Look at the town of Belfast. When I myself was a youth I remember it almost a village. But what a glorious sight does it now present - the masted grove within our harbour - our mighty warehouses teeming with the wealth of every climate - our giant manufactories lifting themselves on every side - our streets marching on, as it were, with such rapidity that an absence of a few weeks makes us strangers in the outskirts of our town. And all this we owe to the Union... In one word more, I have done. Look at Belfast and be a Repealer, if you can.

When the Union came under threat from the mid 1880s onwards, Belfast Chamber of Commerce played an important role in combating the Home Rule threat. The Chamber stressed that Ulster's wealth and prosperity was due to the 'security and protection' afforded by Parliament since the Act of Union and the 'frugality and enterprise' of its people. These were sentiments fully shared by Belfast's disproportionately Presbyterian industrial and commercial elite.



Appendices

[A] A document drafted by Thos. Smyth, Secretary of a committee of United Irishmen near Ballynahinch, County Down, 1795

What evils will be removed and what advantages gained by a reform of Parliament.

- 1st Tithes will be abolished and every man will pay his own clergy.
- 2nd Hearth-money – that abominable badge of slavery and oppression to the poor – will cease.
- 3rd We will not thereafter be taxed to pay pensioners and sinecure placemen to vote against us. The consequence of this will be that tobacco for which we now pay 10d. Per lb. will then be had for 4d. – Aye for 4d. – and every other article of imported goods cheap in proportion.
- 4th We shall have no excise laws: the merchant and shopkeeper will get leave to carry on his business quietly, without the intrusion of plundering revenue officers.
- 5th The expense and tediousness of the law will give place to prompt and equal justice – Gratis.
- 6th County cesses would not be squandered in jobs among the parasites of agents; and 23 gentlemen sitting in a Grand Jury room, would cease to impose £10 or £12 thousand per annum, upon the inhabitants of a county without their consent. Is it not astonishing that Irishmen patiently suffer themselves to be assessed annually to the amount of £400,000 by 750 esquires nominated by an officer of the Crown? If this abuse was reformed we would have good roads and cesses.
- 7th Churches cesses would be no more for every profession [i.e. denomination] would support its own houses of worship as well as its own clergy.

- 8th Customs at fairs would be abolished and a free passage to and from them would be had without having the sanctity of an oath profaned by scoundrel bailiffs.
- 9th The press would be unshackled and a man might publish his sentiments without the terror of a Bastille; every man would have an opportunity of knowing his rights for a newspaper which now costs 2d. would then be sold for a half-penny.
- 10th The honest farmer would be protected in the enjoyment of all his appurtenances against the intrusion of moss-bailiffs and bog-trotters, the present ridiculous idea of obligation to a landlord would be done away and contract would then appear as it really is mutual.

A brief commentary

This document is simultaneously both informative and frustrating. The emphasis on social and economic grievances indicates that it owed much to the agitation of the Hearts of Steel in the early 1770s. The document is designed to appeal to both Presbyterian radicals and Roman Catholics alike.

It is most emphatically not a republican document but it is a radical one.

The targets of its ten propositions are landlordism, the Established Church (i.e. the Church of Ireland) and central Government. The document aspired to a future when the relationship between landlords and tenants would be purely contractual. It desired an end of landlord domination of local government through Grand Juries. It looked forward to the abolition of tithes and church cess in support of the Established Church and each religious denomination supporting its own clergy.

It envisaged the abolition of excise taxes and contended their loss would be made good by the abolition of pensions and sinecures. It also envisaged the abolition of hearth money (a tax on fireplaces in houses) and customs at fairs (toll charges on each animal sold at a fair). The document inadequately fails

to explain how central Government would be funded in the future without these revenue streams.

Much of this document's content would not have found favour with the United Irishmen's middle class Presbyterian leadership who it appears were happy to attack what they considered privilege but not property. Thus, on one hand, they would have been anxious to abolish tithes, church cess and hearth money but, on the other hand, they would have had absolutely no sympathy for interference in the relationship between landlords and tenants because they were often landlords and large farmers themselves. Many leading United Irishmen were members of the legal profession and would have taken a dim view of the idea of 'justice' being 'free'.

The document is frustrating in that it is simply dated 1795. Was it produced before the United Irishmen's transformation from 'a constitutional conspiracy' into 'a clandestine revolutionary and military organization?' The document strikes the modern reader as perfectly constitutional in tone and tenor but the authorities at the time may not have regarded it in the same light. Not least, because we know from the Roden manuscripts that Thomas Smyth was arrested in his own house by the Revd Mr Clelow and Captain Price (of Saintfield) and 70 or 80 copies of the document were found in his possession. Furthermore, we know that on 29 January 1797 he was being held in Down jail.

The key question in many respects about this document is whether one would really wish to die for its content. By 1798 many may have felt that the various grievances were definitely not worth dying for. Many more may have reached that conclusion in the aftermath of the Battle of Ballynahinch. James Campbell, the County Antrim weaver poet, makes the same point in his poem 'Willie Wark's Song':

*In Ninety-eight we arm'd again,
To right some things that we thought wrang*

*We gat sae little for our pains,
It's no worth mindin' in a sang*

[B] The dying declaration of William Orr of Farranshane

To the Public, – My friends and fellow-countrymen – In the thirty-first year of my life, I have been sentenced to die upon the gallows, and this sentence has been in pursuance of a verdict of twelve men, who should have been indifferently and impartially chosen; how far they have been so, I leave to that country from which they have been chosen to determine; and how far they have discharged their duty, I leave to their God and to themselves. They have, in pronouncing their verdict, thought proper to recommend me as an object of humane mercy; in return, I pray to God, if they have erred, to have mercy upon them. The judge who condemned me, humanely shed tears in uttering, my sentence; but whether he did wisely in so highly commending the wretched informer, who swore away my life, I leave to his own cool reflection, solemnly assuring him and all the world, with my dying breath, that that informer was forsworn.

The law under which I suffer is surely a severe one; may the makers and promoters of it be justified in the integrity of their motives, and the purity of their own lives – By that law I am stamped a felon, but my heart disdains the imputation.

My comfortable lot, and industrious course of life, best refute the charge of being an adventurer for plunder; but 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 persuasions in the most orderly and least sanguinary means of procuring redress – if those be felonies, I am a felon, but not otherwise. Had my counsel (for whose honorable exertions I am indebted) prevailed in their motions to have me tried for high treason, rather than under the insurrection law, I should have been entitled to a full defence, and my actions have been better vindicated; but that was

refused, and I must now submit to what has passed.

To the generous protection of my country I leave a beloved wife who has been constant and true to me, and whose grief for my fate has already nearly occasioned her death. I have five living children, who have been my delight. May they love their country as I have done, and die for it if needful.

I trust that all my virtuous countrymen will bear me in their kind remembrance, and continue true and faithful to each other, as I have been to all of them. With this last wish of my heart, nothing doubting of the success of that cause for which I suffer, and hoping for God's merciful forgiveness of such offences as my frail nature may have at any time betrayed me into, I die in peace and charity with all mankind.

Note

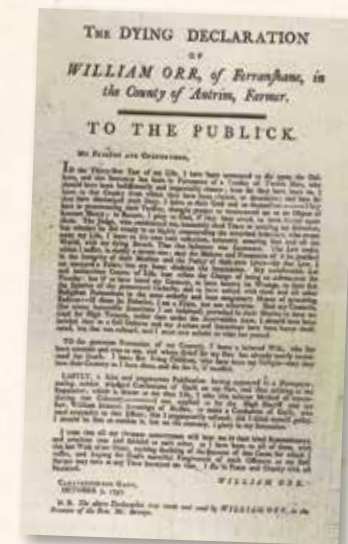
As A. T. Q. Stewart observed in *The Summer Soldiers* (1995), Orr's dying declaration 'had been thoughtfully printed in advance'.

[C] The Wake of William Orr by William Drennan

Here our worthy brother lies;
Wake him not with women's cries.
Mourn the way that manhood ought;
Sit in silent trance of thought.

Write his merits on your mind:
Morals pure and manners kind;
In his head, as on a hill,
Virtue placed her citadel.

Why cut off in palmy youth?
Truth he spoke, and acted truth.
Countrymen, unite, he cried,
And died—for what his Saviour died.



God of Peace, and God of Love,
 Let it not thy vengeance move,
 Let it not thy lightnings draw,—
 A nation guillotined by law.

Hapless nation! rent and torn,
 Thou wert early taught to mourn,—
 Warfare of six hundred years!
 Epochs mark'd with blood and tears!

Hunted through thy native grounds,
 Or flung reward to human hounds;
 Each one pull'd and tore his share,
 Heedless of thy deep despair!

Hapless nation—hapless land,
 Heap of uncementing sand!
 Crumbled by a foreign weight;
 And by worse—domestic hate.

God of mercy! God of peace!
 Make the mad confusion cease;
 O'er the mental chaos move,
 Through it speak the light of love.

Monstrous and unhappy sight!
 Brothers' blood will not unite;
 Holy oil and holy water
 Mix, and fill the world with slaughter.

Who is she with aspect wild?
 The widow'd mother with her child,
 Child new stirring in the womb!
 Husband waiting for the tomb!

Angel of this sacred place,
 Calm her soul and whisper peace;
 Cord, or axe, or guillotin'
 Make the sentence—not the sin.

Here we watch our brother's sleep;
 Watch with us, but do not weep;
 Watch with us through dead of night,
 But expect the morning light.

Conquer fortune—persevere!—
 Lo! it breaks, the morning clear!
 The cheerful cock awakes the skies,
 The day is come—arise!—arise!

Further Reading

In addition to the works by Dr A. T. Q. Stewart mentioned in the introduction, the following publications are of interest:

Jean Agnew (ed.) *The Drennan-McTier Letters* (3 vols, Dublin, 1996)

Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity, 1789-2006* (Oxford, 2007)

Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism: The Historical Perspective, 1610-1970* (Dublin, 1987)

Tom Dunne, *Wolfe Tone, Colonial Outsider: An analysis of his political philosophy* (Cork, 1982)

Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: the United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, 1982)

David Hall, *A battle lost and won: the Battle of Antrim* (Antrim, 1998)

Finlay Holmes, *Henry Cooke* (Belfast, 1981)

Finlay Holmes, *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (Dublin, 2000)

David Hume, *'To right some things that we thought wrong': The spirit of 1798 and Presbyterian radicalism in Ulster* (Lurgan, 1998)

David Hume, *Eagle's Wing* (Newtownards, 2011)

John Larkin (ed.) *The Trial of William Drennan* (Dublin, 1991)

Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish radicalism in the late eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1998)

Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2009)

Donal McCartney, *W. E. H. Lecky, Historian and Politician* (Dublin, 1994)

R. B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution, 1760-1801* (Oxford, 1979)



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