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Leaders of '98: Murphy and McCracken A Comparison of the 1798 Rebellion in Wexford and Antrim

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LEADERS OF '98: MURPHY AND MCCRACKEN
A COMPARISON OF THE 1798 REBELLION IN WEXFORD AND
ANTRIM

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty
Of the
College of Arts and Sciences
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the
Requirements for the Degree
Of
Master of Arts
In History
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By


David Carton

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between the Irish nationalist risings in Wexford and Antrim in 1798. The Antrim Rising was a largely ideological movement that was influenced by the beliefs of the United Irishmen; in contrast, the Wexford Rising was a reactionary movement that was influenced by the leadership of Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue. An analysis of the differences and similarities of these two leaders serves as the primary mode of analysis. McCracken restructured the United Irishmen in Belfast into a secret revolutionary society, as Murphy mobilized rebel forces in Wexford and inspired a military uprising. This thesis seeks to uncover the similarities and contrasts and ultimately, the reasons for the eventual British victory. The objective is to identify the degree of reliance that these movements had on one another, especially the influence the United Irishmen had over the rebellion in Wexford. Could the methods employed in Ulster have worked in Wexford? Was the Wexford rebellion a reactionary uprising in opposition to the atrocities of the British, or was it motivated by the beliefs and actions of the United Irishmen in the North?

Sources include eyewitness accounts from significant participants in the events of 1798: Miles Byrne, Sir Richard Musgrave, Rev. James Gordon and Richard Robert Madden provided great insight into the political, religious, and personal motivations of principal players, Murphy and McCracken. Madden's work chronicles the history of the United Irishmen from their origins in 1791, through their military reorganization, to their military efforts in 1798.

While unsuccessful in their immediate aims, both rebellions played major roles in the formation of present-day Ireland, affecting the psyche of the Irish people and influencing a sentiment of nationalism and republicanism that permeated through generations of Irish people, especially those in the North.



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To Renata, por todo tu amor, apoyo y paciencia.

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Introduction

The year 1798 witnessed Ireland in a period of ideological dichotomy, underpinned by two varying campaigns of rebellion, both of which were trying to achieve independence from Britain. The first modern republican movement in Ireland, the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland produced two strands in Irish politics which dominated the 19th and 20th centuries in Ireland. The situation in Ireland during this period of revolutionary philosophy developed extremely volatile and unstable conditions as the oppressive British rule in Ireland pushed the native Irish further and further to the brink of rebellion. The plight of the Irish and this revolutionary undercurrent was essentially influenced by events in France and in North America. The American Revolution concerned basically matters of national independence and the notion of a republic, but in 1789 the revolution in France introduced the concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity. These concepts carried with them the radical revolutionary vision of a fundamental reorganization of the whole of society, including the violent abolition of monarchy and the creation of a republic. The new French model emerged as the ideal of an enthusiastic group of Irishmen, most of them young members of the Protestant and Presbyterian middle-class and in 1791, overcome with yearnings for independence, they founded the Society of United Irishmen in Belfast. The United Irishmen developed into a brotherhood, an assemblage of like-minded republicans and

radicals, united by the common goal of Irish independence. A.T.Q. Stewart describes the influence of the French Revolution on Irish affairs, *A Deeper Silence, the Hidden Origins of the United Irishmen*, when he writes;

“The French Revolution changed the politics of Ireland in an instant, dividing society into Aristocrats and Democrats. The Aristocrats were those, of whatever station in life, who believed that the Constitution was like a living tree, to be reformed by gentle pruning, or left alone. The Democrats were those who, like the French, believed in taking an axe to the root and starting all over again”.¹

The original founders of the United Irishmen were largely influenced by the works of the European Enlightenment, by the progress of the French Revolution and by Thomas Paine’s pamphlet, “*The Rights of Man*”, published in 1791 as a response to Edward Burke’s pro-monarchist “*Reflections on the Revolution in France*”, as Paine’s pamphlet became essential reading and doctrine for these emergent members of the United Irishmen.

The scope of this paper will investigate the two different facets of the 1798 Irish rebellion that existed in the country during this time. One in the northern county of Antrim, a largely ideological movement, generated by the influence of the United Irishmen, and the other in Wexford, a reactionary movement largely led by Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue, a romanticized figure in Wexford that rallied the county to arms. A comparison will be drawn between Fr. Murphy in Wexford and Henry Joy McCracken in the North,

¹ A.T.Q. Stewart, *A Deeper Silence: The Hidden Origins of the United Irishmen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 143. A quote from the Autobiography of Wolfe Tone used by Stewart.

McCracken, a member of the United Irishmen in Belfast, who helped to restructure the Society into a secret society with revolutionary motivations.

Parallels can be drawn between both efforts, but this paper will attempt to uncover the main contrasts and ultimately the reasons for the eventual British victory.

The relationship between the two rebellions exists as a major aspect of this study. The objective is to identify the degree of reliance that one movement had on the other and to reveal the sum of influence the United Irishmen actually had over the rebellion in Wexford. Could the methods employed in Ulster have worked in Wexford or was the disparity of ideologies between both too great? Was the rebellion in Wexford just a reactionary uprising in opposition to the atrocities of the British or was it a rising of ideals motivated and inspired by the beliefs and actions of the United Irishmen in the North? These questions that will be addressed in this study.

Chapter one will provide the backdrop to the 1798 Rising in Ireland. Politically and socially, Ireland had maintained a stagnant state of animosity and disillusionment caused by centuries of violent oppression and displacement by British rule in Ireland. Chapter One will chronicle these disruptive causes, but also trace the short term causes which primed Ireland for revolution.

Chapter two will explore the religious and political background and contribution of Henry Joy McCracken to the genesis of the United Irishmen and also his motivations and ambitions in Belfast. The chapter will explore

McCracken's involvement as a pivotal element in the original formation of the United Irishmen and also its restructuring into a secret military organization.

Chapter three investigates the motivating factors of revolution in Wexford and Fr. John Murphy's position concerning the introduction of the United Irishmen in Wexford. The position of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Wexford stood aghast by the degree of influence the United Irishmen threatened to exert over the people of Wexford and as these people continued to defy the decrees of the Church, an important social issue developed in Wexford as this situation presented the Catholic clergy with a significant dilemma, to adhere to the demands of their ordination and denounce any movements pertaining to revolution, or join the ranks of their parishioners and participate in the military rising in Wexford.

Chapter four and chapter five will examine the military aspect of the Rising in Wexford and Antrim, detailing specific battles and engagements that had immediate consequences in the outcome of the Rising. Strategic decisions by the leading members of the military operations in both regions will be analyzed. Fr. Murphy's contribution to the military effort will also be examined and compared with what McCracken attempted to achieve in Antrim.

Chapter six will attempt to tie both risings together, presenting the findings of this study, while also examining the short term and long term implications of the 1798 Rising in Ireland. Legacies of McCracken, Murphy and the United Irishmen will also be explored as their achievements and

limitations are analyzed and compared to provide the evidence to clarify how significant the link was between both Risings, or whether they were actually influenced by one another at all.

While ultimately unsuccessful in their immediate aims, efforts made in Wexford and in Antrim played major roles in the formation of present day Ireland, affecting the psyche of the Irish people and influencing a sentiment of nationalism and republicanism that permeated through generations of Irish people, as many of these attitudes still reverberate in the North of Ireland. These long term repercussions and consequences will also be examined, as the legacy of the leaders of the 1798 rebellion lay in the longevity of the impact of the rebellions motivations. Murphy and McCracken both embodied their respective rebellions and careful comparison of the two will reveal a fresh look at the relationship between the sophisticated ideals of the United Irishmen and the motivated revolutionaries in the southeast of the country.

Chapter One

Background of the United Irishmen and the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland

The Rebellion of 1798 grew from a critical mass of political frustration, radical republicanism and suppressive oppression, but the animosity of 1798 was generated by long term causes that stretched back as far as the twelfth century. The invasion of Ireland by Norman feudal lords in the twelfth century motivated England's ruling classes to battle over control of Ireland. Motivations being both economic and strategic, Britain's primary goal revolved around augmenting their position and status through land rights and taxation, as the prevention of Ireland becoming a base from which rival European powers or contenders for the English throne could attack England became paramount. The Irish, later joined by descendants of the early invaders, which assimilated into Irish society, put up a fierce resistance. But the merciless and callous wars waged by the Elizabethan British in the 16th century, followed by the intensity and cruelty of Cromwell's forces in the 17th, ultimately subjugated the Irish and dragged the country under English rule. The English rulers maintained control of Ireland by force and aggression. The establishment of a settler population by garrison alienated the Irish as Lowland Scottish farmers colonized parts of the north of Ireland, and Cromwell's soldiers were rewarded with grants of land throughout the

country. The annexation and British occupation of Irish land had destroyed and shattered the Irish social system, with the native upper class suffering particularly severely, coerced onto poorer land and reduced to tenant status.²

The 17th century in Ireland witnessed three major episodes of conflict that would have significance on the Irish mindset. At the beginning of the period, in 1601, the native Irish and their Spanish allies were defeated at the battle of Kinsale. The English victory led to the crumbling and disintegration of the venerable and esteemed Gaelic order. In 1603, this defeat forced the chieftains of the North to desert the country and seek refuge on the European continent, a period recognized as the Flight of the Earls.

In the mid-seventeenth century, a civil war broke out in England, between the Royalists and the Puritan faction. Many in Ireland sympathized with the defeated Royalists, as the Puritan forces subsequently caused the reign of the Stuarts to end and the execution of the English king, resulting in the emergence of the English commonwealth. These political circumstances in England favored an attempt by Ireland to break away from English domination during the period of upheaval in the neighboring island. For this reason and also because of the attacks on English settlers by the native Irish, the people suffered the Cromwellian invasion and the resultant punitive military campaign. A further forty years passed and once again the Irish sympathies lay on the side of absolute monarchy, as James II struggled against

² Liz Curtis, *The Cause of Ireland: From the United Irishmen to Partition* (Dublin: Color Books Ltd, 1994), 4.

the Dutch, a nation led by William of Orange, who stridently contested the English throne. The Irish suffered yet another defeat and as a result of the Treaty of Limerick in 1691, the majority of Irish landowners reluctantly left the country. Large numbers of them took up positions in Continental European armies and earned the name, the Wild Geese.³

In contrast with the previous hundred years, the 18th century in Ireland experienced no major wars or military campaigns. The remaining native Irish descended into a dispossessed people almost without leaders. For a time they felt not only defeated but also demoralized, and the English administration based in Dublin, committed itself to maintaining this condition of disconnection. All tendencies or predispositions to rebellion continued severely in check, especially by means of the anti-Catholic penal laws introduced from England a few years after the century commenced. W.E.H. Lecky suggests that the laws, while intensely castigatory, they were significantly less harsh than those governing Huguenots in France, or the restrictions imposed on heretics or other dissenters in Spain during the inquisition but “it was the distinguishing characteristic of the Irish Penal code that its victims constituted three fourths of the nation, and it was meant to demoralize as well as to degrade”.⁴ Lecky’s writings on the matter suggest a sympathetic tone towards the British policy in Ireland, probably influenced by

³ Emily Lawless, *The Story of a Nation* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895), 67.

⁴ W.H.E. Lecky and L.P. Curtis Ed, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century: Abridged with an Introduction by L.P. Curtis* (London, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 81.

his Protestant background. Catholics in Ireland were ultimately forbidden from; standing for Parliament or local councils, holding positions in the Civil Service, producing books or newspapers, taking out or giving mortgages, marrying a Protestant or owning any arms or even a horse that was worth more than five pounds. Also the ownership of land had many restraints and restrictions, as when a Catholic died, his estate was divided among all of his children, but if a son became a Protestant he inherited his father's entire estate. In reality, the strictness with which the laws were applied varied from place to place, and the worst aspects of the system were relaxed to some extent by Henry Grattan's parliament in Dublin. Yet in theory, if not in practice, the Penal Laws remained in force until well into the following century. The existence of the Penal Laws contributed to generate clear, unambiguous and dangerous distinctions between the Catholic majority and the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland. It is important to note that Presbyterians also suffered under the austerity of the Penal Laws, but to a lesser extent than the Catholics. The prohibitive Test Act of 1704 had locked political shackles on the Presbyterian Dissenters as Mary McNeill writes in her book, *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken, 1770-1866: A Belfast Panorama*, "the Act had made it necessary for all persons holding public appointments to take Communion in the Established Church within three months of assuming office".⁵ The results of this were drastic for the Presbyterian community as the

⁵ Mary McNeill, *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken 1770-1866: A Belfast Panorama* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press.1960), 62.

position of Presbyterian ministers had been further convoluted by the refusal of some to take the Oath of Abjuration, an oath pledging support for the sitting British monarch and denouncing any support for the Stuarts or any other pretender to the throne.⁶ This evolved into an extremely problematic situation for the Presbyterian clergy as they were now extremely vulnerable to accusations of Jacobite sympathies. Demands for parliamentary reform and for genuine Irish independence began to emerge, mainly among a minority of Protestant parliamentarians. A Patriot Party, led by Henry Grattan and inspired by the American colonist's success, demanded a larger degree of autonomy for the Dublin parliament.⁷

One of the primary reasons for these governmental efforts to eradicate Catholicism from the country was the continuing British fear of the prospect of the revival of Jacobite spirit that had been defeated in the 1690's. It was feared that the abiding existence of Catholic roots among the people might lead to a revival of the spirit of rebellion against English authority. Catholic sympathy for the Stuart monarchy and the original Jacobite ethos was evident among the exiled Irish on the continent and their descendants, many of them active in the service of armies of nations frequently at war with England.

In addition to the underlying threat of a Jacobite presence, the authorities in Dublin were forced to contend with the existence of secret agrarian societies. Especially in the south of the country from the 1760's, a

⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁷ Daniel J. Grahan, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1997), 15.

group known as the White Boys was formed principally to protect, as far as their illegal status would allow, the interests of the tenant farmers against the landlords and their agents. The authorities were unable to suppress these societies, and by the 1790's further groups had formed along sectarian lines, such as the southern Rightboys, and the Peep O' Day boys and the Catholic Defenders. At the same time, Grattan's relatively liberal parliament made various legislative efforts to alleviate the rigors of the Penal Laws. Although such limited measures were welcome to a persecuted Catholic population, they were no closer to the ideal of Catholic emancipation. If anything, the small amount of relief from these harsh conditions served to make the victims of oppression even more aware of the restrictions under which they were forced to live.⁸

The French Revolution of 1789 was essentially the turning point in the history of the world. The Declaration of the Rights of Man, publicized by the Constituent Assembly in France in August of that year, became the call to rebellion for those who resented privilege all over Europe. In Ireland, reaction to the developments in France was at first generally favorable but later atrocities turned many, particularly the conservative Protestant elite and the Catholic Church, against it. In Ulster, however, the Presbyterians supported the ideals of the revolution and Bastille Day was celebrated more cheerfully and enthusiastically in Belfast than anywhere else in Britain or Ireland. Here, reformers such as Dr. Willam Drennan, a Presbyterian proponent of radical

⁸ Ibid., 20.

reform, preached equal rights for all religions, hinting that only in a fully independent Ireland could this be achieved. In 1791, a group of mostly Presbyterian radicals in Belfast, including Samuel Nielson and Henry Joy McCracken, established the Society of United Irishmen hoping to unite Protestant, Catholic and Presbyterian in their struggle.⁹ They dedicated and committed themselves to the cause of seeking the diminution of Ireland's dependence on Britain, the reform of parliament and the end of religious discrimination, eventually evolving into the pursuit of a republic. Though it was not initially part of their program, they would sway increasingly to the pursuit of absolute and total independence from Britain. They were joined by a group of Protestants based in Dublin, including Theobald Wolfe Tone, Thomas Russell, James Napper Tandy, John and Henry Sheares, Archibald Hamilton Rowan and Thomas Addis Emmet.¹⁰ These men would be the torch bearers for the Society in its efforts to develop into an organization capable of influencing the public mindset toward revolution.¹¹ Madden comments on the significance of the Northern faction when he suggests that; "The Revolution in France had a great influence on the public mind in Ireland; but, in all probability, the rebellion of 1798 would have taken place, had the revolution

⁹ William Drennan, a Presbyterian from Belfast was one of the founding members of the United Irishmen in Belfast. His anti-sectarian religious beliefs served as the foundation for his own radical political ideas. Samuel Nielson, a Presbyterian founding member of the United Irishmen in Belfast, he established, founded and became editor of the politically motivated newspaper the *Northern Star*.

¹⁰ Gahan, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 17.

¹¹ Theobald Wolfe Tone was a prominent figure in the formation of the United Irishmen. A Protestant from Dublin, he became a lawyer and a political activist. Russell, Tandy, Rowan and Emmet were founders of the United Irishmen in Dublin and vocal proponents of Catholic Emancipation in Ireland.

never been affected".¹² The necessity for reform, and the need for the security of parliamentary independence, was strongly felt and first acted upon by the Northern Presbyterians.¹³

Prominent Catholics and some bishops became increasingly vocal on this issue also, the younger, more radically inclined insisting on the right to vote and to sit in Parliament. The older, more conservative elements, however, counseled patience and gravitated to the side of caution. In spite of spirited denunciations from the conventional conservatives in the Catholic community, the Catholic Relief Act was pushed through Parliament and Lord's by Prime Minister Pitt's influence in February 1793, ironically, three months after Louis XVI was guillotined in France.¹⁴ The Relief Act contributed considerably to the political privileges and rights of Catholics. Catholics were now exempted from all penalties for non-attendance at the Established Church service, and cottages were exempted from the Hearth tax. Catholics were deemed capable of holding civil or military offices or places of trust or profile under the Crown and those with a property qualification were allowed to vote. As a qualification for these privileges, every member of the Church of Rome was required to swear an oath of allegiance prescribed by Parliament in 1774, and to take another oath avowing his detestation of the principle that it is lawful to murder or injure any person under the pretence of his being a heretic; declaring his belief that no deed in itself unjust, immoral

¹² Richard Robert Madden, *The United Irishmen Their Lives and Times V2* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1858), 174.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁴ Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 232.

or wicked can be justified on the grounds that it is done for the good of the church, or in obedience to any ecclesiastical authority; affirming that it is not an article of the Catholic faith that the Pope is infallible, and testifying that the individual adjured will not exercise any privilege, to which he may be entitled, for the purpose of disturbing or weakening the Protestant religion and Protestant government in the Kingdom¹⁵.

To solidify the status quo in government, the Relief Act stipulated that Catholics could not elevate to their own country's parliament, could not become members of the bench, sheriffs, privy councilors or general officers in the armed forces. Resentment among politicized and informed Catholics no less than among liberal Protestants, continued to fester. Frustrated in their demands by a faction of ascendancy extremists, they bristled with anger. At the very same time, the governing ascendancy advanced into a daily state of fear. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church welcomed the Catholic Relief Act as a significant step in the pursuit of legislative and political reform, and acceptance of the Act's requirements and oath was urged upon all Roman Catholics. At the same time, Dublin's ascendancy Parliament decided to implement a restraining act called the Convention Act. This forbade the formation or gathering of all and any assemblies professing to represent a large section of the Irish people. The Catholic Convention Act was ultimately dissolved but to Wolfe Tone, the new acts consolidated the government's grip

¹⁵ Nicholas Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue 1753-1798* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1991), 16.

on power in Ireland.¹⁶ Daire Keogh writes of the impact of the Relief Act and the subsequent Convention Act of 1793, “From that point onwards the Catholic position became increasingly polarized, and in many cases the pastors were left with the unenviable options of following their flock or being left isolated”.¹⁷ The Society of United Irishmen was now seriously navigating towards a new and radical course, a course supported by fellow members who were abandoning moderation and spiraling towards revolution. The society’s articles of association were changed into an oath of secrecy and fidelity. Its goal of reform and emancipation were being discarded for armed revolt, rupturing of the link with England, and the founding in Ireland of a republic on the principles epitomized by the revolutionary administration of France.

For some conservative moderates, in political terms, the Catholic Relief Act was almost as significant an event as the revolution in France, as now Catholics with particular property qualifications had the right to vote in county and regional elections, though still only for Protestants. For the more radical and fundamental factions in the country, developments were not moving fast enough and the speed of reform was too slow for the increasingly vociferous and competing voices demanding it. Catholics were still not allowed to sit in parliament or to hold offices of state. Keogh suggests;

“The joy which accompanied the 1793 Relief Act soon evaporated as Catholics considered what had been withheld. The concessions were indeed significant, but partial relief

¹⁶ Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 199.

¹⁷ Daire Keogh and others, eds. *The United Irishmen Republicanism, Radicalism and Rebellion* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), 124.

failed to satisfy the demands of many activists for total emancipation; to them possession of a share in the franchise without the right to sit in parliament made no sense whatsoever. Tone aptly described their anger when he declared that if the Catholics deserved what had been granted; they also deserved what had been withheld".¹⁸

The combination of these factors and the growing polarization of political thought among the Catholics led to an increasing schism of the Catholic community: as the Committee dissolved itself, large number of radicals naturally gravitated towards the United Irishmen. By the summer of 1793, Catholic agitation had become widespread and the clergy, finding themselves on the periphery of the sweeping wave of revolutionary attitudes, were in no position to enforce any control or direction over the course of events, as the previous two years had brought the country to an unprecedented level of politicization. The emergence of more politicized and more radical fragments of the population among different religious persuasions alarmed the government which in 1793 disbanded the Volunteers, originally formed to defend Ireland against foreign invasion during the American war of independence and which had become increasingly vocal in its demand for full Irish independence.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., 133.

¹⁹ The Loyalist historian, Sir Richard Musgrave comments on the Volunteers in *History of the Insurrection of County Wexford A.D. 1798: Including an account of Transactions Preceding that Event, with an Appendix with authentic detail of the conduct of Sir Richard Musgrave with a full refutation of his slander against.* (Dublin: Stockdale, 1803) 45. "During the American war, at one time, nearly all the troops on the Irish establishment were drawn off to support that unfortunate contest. The combined fleet of France and Spain were riding triumphant in the channel, and our shores were every moment threatened with a formidable invasion. In this perilous situation Ireland was advised by the British ministry to defend herself as well as she could, as she was now left no other resource. The latent spirit of the

Many of the Volunteers, especially in Ulster, promptly transferred their allegiance to the United Irishmen, as the point must be made that Irish nationalism was not monopolized by the Catholic population, as many of the prominent leaders were of course Protestant.

The significance of the British declaration of war on the revolutionary French government in February 1793 impacted the Irish effort greatly, as from that point on; any support for France was interpreted as aiding the enemy and, ultimately treason. The Irish authorities took the usual steps to prepare for war, the most important of these being the creation of a much enlarged militia, with regiments from every county functioning as the national army. Outside east Ulster, the rank and file was composed mainly of Catholics, with Protestant officers.²⁰ Arming Catholics could not have been contemplated a generation earlier and this indicated that the authorities felt that because of the reform and the concessions of the Relief Act, the Irish could be trusted to support the king. During this process, the government, with the open support of the Protestant Ascendancy and with at least the inferred support of the Catholic bishops, moved against groups suspected of sympathizing with the French, among them the Society of United Irishmen which was consequently banned and any membership prohibited. Some chose to withdraw from the

nation was roused at the approach of danger. Upwards of one hundred thousand heroes instantly appeared, self-clothed, self-armed, perfectly equipped and appointed, ready to oppose, with dauntless courage, the menacing foe that would rashly venture to insult their coast. These were the ever memorable and ever glorious volunteers of Ireland."

²⁰ Philip Harwood, *History of the Irish Rebellion 1798* (London: Chapman and Elcoate, 1844), 17.

society but most became more radicalized due to the actions of the government and adopted an outright republican agenda.²¹

Tensions were rising considerably and any intimidation attempts in Ireland were more frequently being met with increasing retaliatory pushback, especially in Wexford. These developments were ultimately counter-productive for British efforts of suppression as the United Irishmen would eventually prosper from the increased radicalization of the populace. There was a considerable amount of violence at a local level in Ireland during the century, but until the 1790's there was no movement which could effectively feed popular feeling into a unified cause. Tensions in Wexford were beginning to increase and in July 1793 a country crowd marched on Wexford town to demand the release of prisoners arrested for protesting against the repressive tithes in the county. The military opened fire on the crowd and a detachment of the 38th Wexford Regiment of militia ambushed the fleeing hundreds at Bettyville. Eighty were shot down and five captured men were tried and hanged, one being an innocent bystander. After witnessing and surviving this unprecedented violence the compulsion to protect themselves by arms became widespread. The manufacturing of pikes started to take place in secret and on a large scale and the Society of United Irishmen was to reap the harvest of this growing fear.²²

²¹ Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of the Irish Identity 1760-1830* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 61.

²² Nicholas Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue 1753-1798*, 16.

While authorities were engaged in dealing with internal matters, outside the country events took place which had a healthy influence on historical evolution within Ireland. During the American Revolution, the North American colonists had demonstrated that a determined people could successfully oppose a stronger enemy and throw off oppressive foreign rule. Many liberal Irish, with a mind toward national independence, took inspiration from the American Revolution and hoped to emulate the example it offered. Henry Grattan's relative success Parliamentary reform in the early 1780's had been moving towards breaking links with Britain, as the 1782 Constitution was seen as a major victory for the Irish Popular Party. The creation of the Volunteer militia to help defend the island in the event of an invasion, contributed to the proclamation in Dublin of national independence.²³ This declaration at the time was more an idealistic gesticulation than a practical step in the political life of the nation, however, it did alert the government towards the direction in which national affairs were evolving and was a major step in the development of the United Irishmen. It further revealed the increasingly insecure and unstable situation in Ireland with regard to English interests. Lecky suggests;

"The victory which had been achieved by the Irish Popular Party in 1782 was a great one, but many elements of disquietude were abroad. An agitation so violent, so prolonged, and so successful could hardly be expected so suddenly to subside, and it is a law of human nature, that a great transport of triumph and of gratitude must be followed by some measure of reaction. Disappointed ambitions, chimerical hopes,

²³ Lawless, *History of a Nation*, 122.

turbulent agitators thrust into an unhealthy prominence, the dangerous precedent of an armed body controlling or overawing the deliberations of Parliament, the appetite of political excitement to which Irishmen have always been so prone, and which ever grows by indulgence, the very novelty and strangeness of the situation, all contributed to impart a certain feverish restlessness to the public mind”²⁴

For certain members of the United Irishmen, their aim was limited to attaining the necessary reforms that would offer political and social equality to Catholics. As one of the founding members, Theobald Wolfe Tone’s aim was to “bring Irishmen of all persuasions, Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, into a movement for far reaching reform”²⁵. Tone, an enthusiastic and talented radical republican from a Protestant middle-class background, believed that for the commercial and professional classes, many of whom were Presbyterians, to win freedom to restructure society; their primary objective must be to remove from power the ascendancy upper class, which was capable of holding power simply due to the fact that it was buttressed by British power. In her book, *The Cause of Ireland*, Liz Curtis adds that Tone’s fundamental belief was “that the influence of England was the radical vice of our government, and consequently that Ireland would never be either free, prosperous or happy, until she was independent; and, that independence was unattainable, whilst the connexion with England existed”²⁶. Tone recognized that on their own the Presbyterians were not a sufficiently significant force to capsize the collective power of the ascendancy in Ireland and Britain. Tone’s

²⁴ Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 195.

²⁵ Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 15.

²⁶ Liz Curtis, *The Cause of Ireland: From United Irishmen to Partition*, 7.

belief was that for any chance of success, the Presbyterians must create an allied, unified front, with the Catholics and advocate for each others rights.

A.T.Q. Stewart notes that Tone's theory is summed up in his autobiography;

“To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government, to break the connection with England, the never-failing source of 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 Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter – these were my means”.²⁷

Despite Tone's credence of the Presbyterians' compulsion to unite with the Catholic struggle, Lecky notes that this was not in fact the Presbyterians' primary motivation, and that parliamentary reform and not Catholic emancipation was their immediate objective. Lecky adds;

“It is no doubt true, that the primary objective of the Presbyterians was not Catholic Emancipation but parliamentary reform; that they had in general very little natural sympathy with Catholics; that their true and governing motive was the conviction that the existing system of oligarchical and English ascendancy could only be destroyed by a cordial union of the whole Irish people”²⁸.

Lecky's claims are contradicted by Mary McNeill, as she writes that the Presbyterian Volunteers were ardently concerned with the issue of Catholic enfranchisement. She writes, “Here for the first time, were Irishmen prepared to struggle not only for their own liberty, but for that of their Catholic brothers, who since the Penal enactments had enjoyed no legal status in the

²⁷ Stewart, *A Deeper Silence*, 152.

²⁸ Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 249.

country at all".²⁹ She continues to add that, "It is true to say that the growing sympathy in Belfast for the Catholic cause was based entirely on grounds of political morality and social justice".³⁰ While Tone professed very little sympathy with organized Catholicism and its hierarchy, vehemently opposing the Pius VI's denunciation of the French Revolution, he passionately advocated political rights for Catholics, and as a result he was invited to become secretary of the general committee of the Catholics of Ireland, a campaigning organization founded by Catholic bishops, clergymen and other prominent Catholics in society.

By 1791, opinions were beginning to become increasingly radical and extreme. William Drennan was foremost among these radicals and he was significantly outspoken in voicing his separatist ideas for Ireland. A.T.Q. Stewart cites a letter from Drennan in 1791 underlining his notions for the future of Ireland;

"It is my fixed opinion, that no reform in parliament, and consequently no freedom, will ever be attainable by this country but by a total separation from Britain; I think that this belief is making its way rapidly, but as yet silently, among both Protestants and Catholics, and I think that the four quarters of the kingdom are more unanimous in this opinion than they themselves imagine".³¹

The letter continues on to urge the necessity for revolution to cast off the incumbency of Irish political and civil grievances. Drennan was of the opinion

²⁹ Mary McNeill, *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken 1770-1866*, 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

³¹ Stewart, *A Deeper Silence*, 149.

that the prosperity of the country depended more on liberty than on peace and for reform to last and to have sufficient meaning and purpose, revolution was vital;

“I think that revolutions are not to be dreaded as such terrible extremes, and that it is the highest probability, it would be as peaceful here as in France, as in Poland, as in Ireland itself in the year '79, provided the great irresistible voice of the whole declared itself explicitly upon the subject. I believe a reform must lead rapidly to a separation, and a separation as certainly to a reform: both are means, and both are ends”.³²

Apart from extreme radicals like Drennan, many other members of the United Irishmen, found it impossible to ignore the ideological currents reaching Ireland from mainland Europe. The authorities in Ireland reacted quickly to this and began to view and examine the society's embryonic radicalism with hostility and aggression. A general rising in Ireland would be difficult to contain and defeat, but if the Irish were also able to benefit from a direct French intervention, the outcome could potentially have disastrous consequences for the British Empire. Even if the Irish struggle for independence was eventually unsuccessful, it would tie England's hands with regard to British intervention in continental affairs.³³ An insurrection in Ireland would essentially occupy British attentions away from foreign affairs deemed more pressing. For this reason the British felt that diligence was necessary to prevent such an event from occurring. The authorities also feared

³² Ibid., 149.

³³ Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of the Irish Identity*, 101.

collusion between the United Irishmen and the agrarian secret societies, as they were evidently considered to be the most precarious of the dissident elements active in the country at the time. The United Irishmen were soon after their establishment declared illegal. The authorities immediately initiated and implemented an operation of persecution and suppression against the known or merely suspected members of the organization.³⁴

Military commanders throughout the country were charged with carrying out a policy of search and suppression. The forces at their disposal consisted of the regular army, the native Irish militia, various corps of yeomanry and soldiers in English service. Instructed by the government to discover United Irishmen and their supporters using any means possible, many of the soldiers obtained a reputation for cruelty and brutality. Aiding the official forces in their activities were many volunteers from the recently formed Orange Societies. Formed by Loyalist Protestant elements in opposition to the mounting influence of the Catholics and above all, the United Irishmen, these societies soon earned the condemnation of more tolerant fellow Protestants due to their treatment of the Catholic population of the country.³⁵ John Joyce suggests in his book, *General Thomas Cloney, Wexford Rebel of 1798*, that Thomas Cloney's account of the Orangemen's presence at the battle of Enniscorthy affected the intensity of the reprisals after

³⁴ Edward Hay and Richard Musgrave *History of the Insurrection of County Wexford A.D. 1798: Including an account of Transactions Preceding that Event, with an Appendix with authentic detail of the conduct of Sir Richard Musgrave with a full refutation of his slander against* (Dublin: Stockdale, 1803), 62.

³⁵ Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 335.

the rebel defeat.³⁶ In quoting Cloney, Joyce further suggests that, “the rage of the Orange party was unbounded, and they openly threatened the indiscriminate slaughter of all those who were reputed to be disloyal persons”³⁷. Various persons belonging to the ruling classes, who were more sensitive to the situation at the time, maintained that the explosion of Orange societies and the behavior of their members were causing serious consternation among the common people. In their willingness to aid the military, the Orange societies contributed to the creation in Ireland of an atmosphere favorable to insurrection.

The military in particular bore a considerable share of responsibility in this respect. The policy of encouraging excesses by allowing a free hand to troops had the effect of driving a harassed people deeper into opposition against the authorities. The Catholic Church through its hierarchy condemned the United Irishmen movement, as it had preached against the agrarian societies a few decades earlier. This had relatively little influence on people who were forced to submit to subjective persecution and suffering. The introduction of martial law throughout the country in March 1798, instead of further containing the rising tide of rebellion, made matters worse. Thomas Cloney expressed his feelings on the official policy of the authorities in his memoirs of 1798 when he wrote;

³⁶ General Thomas Cloney was a United Irishman who fought in Wexford during the 1798 Rebellion.

³⁷ John Joyce, *General Thomas Cloney Wexford Rebel of 1798* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1988), 12.

“Martial law defines the duties of the general or inferior officer as clearly as the statute or common law defines the duty of the Civil Magistrate, but, in the year 1798 martial law in Ireland was defined to be the will of the individual general officer attached to the troops of the yeomanry; hence there might be seen at that period in every part of Ireland, where military men were quartered, some victims of private malice or official caprice, writhing beneath the lash of a regimental drummer or suspended from a gallows, without being previously subjected to the solemn mockery of a court martial”.³⁸

Cloney’s distaste for British policy is evident here as he displays his contempt for the indifference of British violence.

The war between England and France in 1793 led to a division in the United Irishmen along the lines of which course would be the most effective to achieve their aims. Some believed that it was absolutely essential for the French to come to act as disciplining agents before they would initiate a revolution. The opposing theory was that the ordinary people without the help of the French under the leadership of the United Irishmen would be capable of achieving success by a revolution. This internal debate came to light in 1796 when the French very nearly landed in Bantry Bay. Daniel Gahan summarizes the events at Bantry Bay, “Disastrous weather destroyed the expedition: twenty of the thirty-five ships returned home, fifteen made it into the bay only to be storm-bound there for a week while only 400 troops landed and they

³⁸Thomas Cloney, *A personal narrative of those transactions in the county Wexford, in which the author was engaged, during the awful period of 1798*. (Dublin: James McMillan, 1832), 193.

were wiped out by the local yeomanry”.³⁹ The Irish government, however, had shown itself to be insufficiently prepared for a foreign invasion and the Bantry Bay episode compelled the government to analyze the positioning of their troops, which up until this point, had been extensively dispersed all over the country. The militarization of the United Irishmen was beginning to gain impetus. This would ultimately mean that the conversion and restructuring of what had been simple political societies into military societies was now necessary. Madden writes of the militarization of the United Irishmen that;

“The military organization was engrafted on the civil and originated in Ulster about the latter end of 1796 and Leinster at the beginning of 1797. By the new organization, the civil officers received military titles: the secretary of each society was called a petty officer, each delegate a captain having sixty men under his command. A military committee was appointed by the Dublin executive in February, 1798; its duty was to prepare a plan of cooperation with the French”.⁴⁰

The British by 1797 had created a new force of part-time soldiers which they called the Yeomanry. Commissions in the Yeomanry were given from the Crown and were paid for by the government. Furlong refers to the establishment of the Yeomen as an institution “arming the property of the country”.⁴¹ Furlong’s description is an ironic use of language as this is similar to how Grattan described the Volunteers at their founding.⁴² The interpretation made by many, in relation to the Yeomanry, was that the new force was a

³⁹ Grahame, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 25.

⁴⁰ Richard Robert Madden, *The United Irishmen Their Lives and Times V2* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1858), 282.

⁴¹ Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 20.

⁴² Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 186.

means whereby Protestant loyalists could be legally armed for action against Catholics; an interpretation which had an uneasy resonance in Wexford.

Recruiting for the Yeomanry units exceeded the government's expectations. Catholics joined the Yeomanry units also, many in a deliberate United Irish policy of infiltration and exploitation of the opportunity to undergo military training.

By 1796, the Irish government was aware that affairs in Ireland were spiraling in the wrong direction and engaged in extreme measures to maintain its grip on the country. A new government act, called the Insurrection Act, or Felony Act was introduced in 1796 which allowed the Lord Lieutenant to continually rule through martial law in districts and areas that were estimated to be so troubled that they required harsh military supervision. It imposed the death penalty for administering an unlawful oath and life imprisonment for taking such an oath.⁴³ The passing of this Act signifies government sentiment at this time.

The political and social climate at the time primed Ireland for revolution. The Irish people were a subjugated people, religiously persecuted and consumed by fear and disillusionment, which yearned for leadership and liberty. The United Irishmen seized this opportunity and by 1798 the country was unavoidably headed for rebellion. The resentment and discontent of the Irish people was only exacerbated by the extreme hardship imposed by the

⁴³ John Killen, *The Decade of the United Irishmen Contemporary Accounts 1792-1801* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1997), 77.

authorities. Consequently, the British methods of intimidation and subversion simply fanned the flames of Irish determination and fortitude. The British underestimation of Irish resolve would prove costly in 1798 as support for the United Irishmen in Ulster and Leinster bloomed.

Chapter Two

Henry Joy McCracken and the United Irishmen in Belfast

"I do not desire to die of sickness" Henry Joy McCracken

By the late eighteenth century, Belfast was still small in size, but the city was developing a powerful reputation as a hub of cultural, literary and political activity. By 1737, Belfast was circulating a newspaper, *The Belfast News-Letter*, as the city's significance would see it not only double its population but to support the Volunteer movement, embrace the United Irishmen, and cradle, not only an industrial revolution, but a cultural revolution that ignited an explosion of musical, scientific and political activity that saw the city be affectionately and appropriately titled, "The Northern Athens". It was the focal point of new ideas and concepts, inspired by the revolutions in America and France, and concentrating on contributions of the most advanced and enlightened political thinkers of the time period. Principally Presbyterian, a sophisticated outlook creating a hybrid of local patriotism and nationalism would generate and underscore a pivotal period in Irish history. As Harwood wrote; "Belfast was the metropolis of northern dissent and liberalism as the politics of Belfast were an important element of Irish history at this epoch. It

had been the source and center of the Volunteer movement, and it was now again to take the lead in stirring and guiding the public mind of Ireland".⁴⁴

Described as spirited and popular, Henry Joy McCracken was born into a successful family of extensive influence in Belfast society, but among the matters most occupied his mind; his own progress to prosperity and his life of privileged circumstance was secondary. A hugely significant influence on Henry was his experiences among the congregation of the Third Presbyterian Church. Here the Rev. Sinclair Kelburne, an enthusiastically articulate cleric, vibrantly advocated a Christian doctrine which involved the fundamental principles of political liberty, social responsibility and religious tolerance. Active on the part of the encouragement of education, the improvement of social conditions, and the removal of the civil and political disabilities from which Presbyterians suffered in some degree, and Catholics to an appalling extent, McCracken was ultimately enveloped in the preaching of Kelburne. Madden writes of McCracken's manner and character in his *Memoir of Henry Joy McCracken*;

"In his character most of the excellent qualities of his parents were combined. In early childhood he was adventurous and enterprising, courageous, and possessed of great quickness of perception. The absence of selfishness and timidity, which usually secures for a boy an influence over his companions, had made him a great favorite amongst them. In more advanced years, the simplicity of his character was strongly contrasted with the sterner qualities of courage and steadfastness of purpose. One who knew him well, describes him as a

⁴⁴ Philip Harwood, *History of the Irish Rebellion 1798* (London: Chapman and Elcoate, 1844), 54.

person who united in a degree seldom witnessed, tenderness of heart with intrepidity of spirit".⁴⁵

A portion of the Presbyterian community, relieved of the Test Act which, by requiring all candidates for civil or military positions to take the Sacrament according to the rites of the Established Church, had excluded them from every influential office, lamented the Catholic situation as they were still rigidly excluded from the minutest share in political life as well as from the law, the army and the civil service. The benevolence shown towards Catholics, so clearly expressed by the Belfast Volunteers in 1784, had rescinded with the crumbling of the Volunteers and had essentially largely died down. Worse still, increasing animosity between Protestants and Catholics was percolating through Ulster, especially in county districts of Antrim and Down. The industrial revolution in Belfast had drawn many Protestants into urban areas as steadily Catholics filtered into the unoccupied areas, resulting in the propagation of a bitter resentment from their Protestant neighbors. Local quarrels were the outcome of this migration, and typically the magistrates and the local authorities, all members of the Established Church, made minimal attempts to restore order and regulate the persecution of the Catholics in Ulster.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Madden, Richard Robert, *Antrim and Down in '98: The Lives of Henry Joy McCracken, James Hope, William Putnam McCabe, Rev. James Porter, Henry Munro* (Glasgow: Cameron and Ferguson, 1893), 7.

⁴⁶ Jonathon Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), 209.

The social and civil issues of Belfast during this time motivated McCracken to become politically involved. Initially, finding a method of transforming Parliament into a representative body, preoccupied McCracken, and this brave notion of reform was one of the chief subjects of constant discussion between him, Samuel Nielson and other members of Kelburne's church.⁴⁷ The ardency of these wistful reformers, many of which were members of the Volunteers, led to a secret committee of dedicated liberals which managed the radical politics of Belfast. It consisted of Nielson, William and Robert Simms, Thomas McCabe, Will Tenant, Samuel McTier, and Gilbert McIlveen. Henry McCracken, though in their confidence, was not officially a member of the committee. He was developing a reputation for possessing a deeply introspective and reflective habit of mind, as Fitzhenry noted; "He had an enviable reputation as a man who gave his opinion only when it was well considered, and was readier to act than to promise action. He lost no opportunity of making contact with oppressed workers, Catholic or Protestant, whose condition concerned him more than his own business profits".⁴⁸

Symptomatic of this era and the radical sentiment streaming through Belfast was the extraordinarily significant impact of Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*, an affective response to Edmund Burke's denunciation of the Revolution in France. Already several reformers had issued replies to Burke,

⁴⁷ As noted in Chapter One, Nielson was a founding member of the United Irishmen and the founder and editor of the political newspaper, *The Northern Star* in Belfast.

⁴⁸Edna Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*. (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1936), 46.

but it was Paine who captured the public imagination. Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*, published in 1790, had been a brilliant pamphlet, not only aggressively denouncing the developments in France and exalting the English political system, but scrutinizing the total and entire political attitudes and philosophy on which the notions of equality, revolution and the rights of man were based. Burke's view of society portrayed it as a multifaceted fusion of institutions and traditions which were unmovable and averse to manipulation or transformation. Eric Foner suggests in his book, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, that Burke believed that;

"The accumulated wisdom of the past" he maintained "was a far better guide to political behavior than abstract prattling about the rights of men, which had the dangerous tendency to overthrow long-established institutions and to upset the principles of natural subordination which stable government required of the body of the people".⁴⁹

Burke had been a reformer and an advocate of the American cause in the 1770's and of relieving the political disabilities of Catholics and Presbyterians. Paine's reaction was, *The Rights of Man*. Simultaneously a justification of the French Revolution and an outlining of the general principles of republican government, Paine very deliberately contrasted the new French system of government with what Paine felt was an antiquated system in England, as Foner describes the contrasts, "the broad French suffrage with the narrow and capricious British franchise, the frequent

⁴⁹Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 214.

assemblies based on equal electoral districts with the seven year Parliaments and system of rotten boroughs, the French guarantee of freedom of conscience with the disabilities faced by religious Dissenters in England".⁵⁰ Foner further suggests that, "The Burke-Paine debate was the classic confrontation between tradition and innovation, hierarchy and equality, order and revolution".⁵¹ The ultimate consequence of Paine's pamphlet and how his work facilitated itself to influence the United Irishmen is provided by R.B. McDowell in his book, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution 1760-1801*; "Paine was an irreverent and acute critic of both the established order and of Burke, and by outlining the faults of the old regime in France and the limitations of the existing order in Great Britain, by showing how the equal and natural rights of man were protected in the new French constitution and by sketching a programme of sensible social reform, he provided radicals with an iron ration of principles and objectives."⁵²

In Belfast, the moderate liberals, a considerable degree of which descending from the landowners of the old Volunteer movement, were alarmed by the mounting deluge of democratic sentiment. Represented by Lord Charlemont, they attempted to harness this intensifying strand of political activity with the establishment of the Northern Whig Club in 1790. The Club commenced emphatically and McCracken was one of its inaugural members. But while it declared its aim to further Parliamentary reform, it

⁵⁰ Ibid., 215.

⁵¹ Ibid., 214.

⁵² R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution 1760-1801* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 352.

clearly excluded Catholics from the objects of the club, and Charlemont's privately expressed hope that the Club "by holding out a congregation to the true believers of Belfast, would be a means of fixing, and even recalling many who might otherwise wander from the faith".⁵³ The Club very early became a political lightweight and those members of which that possessed a more serious and ardent spirit for their ideals quickly abandoned the club as it could not serve their purpose.

Meanwhile, the radical reformers in Belfast were invigorated by the introduction of Thomas Russell.⁵⁴ Thomas Russell would prove to be a very prominent recruit, he imbued McCracken with his advanced ideas, in which he had been comprehensively defined from his relationship with Tone, he gravitated naturally and predictably to McCracken's faction and, as Edna Fitzhenry writes, "it was to McCracken and Russell that Nielson, in the summer in 1791, first suggested the formation of a club which should unite Irishmen of all creeds in an effort to secure a reformed and independent Parliament".⁵⁵ According to Madden;

"In the winter of 1790, McCracken's acquaintance with Russell had commenced. Their political sentiments were in unison, and in a short time their intercourse ripened into the closest friendship. Russell's position in society, and those personal qualities of his which seem to have been of a kind eminently qualified to make a favorable impression on those he came in contact with, gave weight to his opinions, and an influence to his principles, which soon established their ascendancy over the mind of McCracken".⁵⁶

⁵³ Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*, 50.

⁵⁴ See note on Russell, Chapter One, page 10.

⁵⁵ Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*, 51.

⁵⁶ Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 9.

Madden comments on the contribution of McCracken and Russell; "In the formation of the first society of United Irishmen in 1791, Russell found in him a coadjutor, whose activity, intelligence, and integrity were perhaps more useful to the Society than the exertions of any other agent, so far as the successful exertion of considerable influence went, over the middle and working classes".⁵⁷ While McCracken's views, opinions and contributions were greatly respected in terms of the formation of the Society, his name is not mentioned in any of the proceedings, or in any of the accounts of the Society's early leaders. Despite this, McCracken was a pivotal element of the establishment of the United Irishmen, as Madden explains that,

"In Societies of the kind with which McCracken was connected, the most active, the most useful, and least selfish, and unswerving in their principles are not un-frequently those members who keep in the background in all public displays, being either distrustful of their own powers, or of the persons who are about them, and neither thrust themselves into high places, nor thwart the measures of those who attain to them. McCracken was contented to do the work of his Society and to leave its honors to those who sought them".⁵⁸

McCracken's passion for true brother-hood and peace between Catholics and Protestants was cradled by the promising developments that were transpiring. Russell's relationship with Wolfe Tone would be critical to the evolution of their philosophy. When Tone published his *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, his name became a household word in

⁵⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 10.

Ulster and synonymous with the cultural and radical drive in Belfast. ATQ Stewart refers to Tone's pamphlet as a piece of work more often mentioned than quoted, as it contains much which a devout Catholic might find offensive, even those opponents of Catholic emancipation who so irritated Tone might have hesitated to describe Irish priests as "men of low birth, low feelings, low habits and no education".⁵⁹ Stewart quotes Tones aspirations;

"The emancipated and liberal Irishman, like the emancipated and liberal Frenchman, may go to Mass, may tell his beads, or sprinkle his mistress with Holy Water; but neither one nor the other will attend to the rusty and extinguished thunderbolts of the Vatican or the idle anathemas which, indeed, His Holiness is nowadays too prudent and cautious to issue".⁶⁰

The pamphlet had a profound impact and was exceptionally successful in Belfast, where a huge edition was printed and distributed all through Ulster by both Catholics and Presbyterians. And, as Stewart also suggests, it was precisely because Tone's *Argument* was so well received, however, that these developments took place at all, and it was for this reason that the new Society was inaugurated in Belfast rather than Dublin. Tone's *Argument* ultimately had two consequences of importance, it brought Tone to the attention of the radical and more forward-looking elements of the Catholic Committee, and it enraptured the radical and pro-emancipation northern Dissenter Presbyterian of Belfast, coming as it did so close on the heels on the publication of Part One of Paine's *Right of Man*.⁶¹ Tone's status in the North rose emphatically

⁵⁹ A.T.Q. Stewart, *A Deeper Silence*, 152.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

and he was swiftly elected an honorary member of the First Belfast Volunteer Company and invited to contribute to the efforts of the secret committee in founding a club that would in agreement with the desires of McCracken, Neilson and Russell. On the 14th of October, 1791, Neilson invited Russell and Tone to meet the members of the secret committee at dinner at Barclay's Tavern, where they drew up the constitution of the United Irishmen and agreed unanimously to the resolutions framed by Tone. John Killen writes that, writing to his brother in law, Samuel McTier, on 21st of May 1791, Dr. William Drennan outlined a plan for founding a secret society dedicated to political reform in Ireland. John Killen cites this letter in his book, *Decade of the United Irishmen*, according to Drennan, "it should be a benevolent conspiracy – a plot for the people, the Brotherhood its name – the Rights of men and the greatest happiness of the greatest number it's end – it's general end Real Independence to Ireland, and republicanism it's particular purpose".⁶² Killen also reaffirms that;

"The society of United Irishmen was founded on 14th October 1791 in Peggy Barclays Tavern, Crown Entry in Belfast. Among the founding members were the leading men of Belfast society: William Sinclair, Samuel McTier, Samuel Nielson, Robert and William Simms, Gilbert McIlveen and William Tennant. Tone and his military friend Thomas Russell were sworn in as members and attended the first meeting of the society of United Irishmen on the 18th of October 1791".⁶³

⁶²John Killen, *The Decade of the United Irishmen: Contemporary Accounts 1792-1801* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1997), 1.

⁶³Ibid., 1.

Tone's set of resolutions that were adopted by the society, are provided by Madden;

"We think it is our duty, as Irishmen, to come forward, and state what we feel to be our heavy grievance, and what we know to be its effectual remedy. WE HAVE NO NATIONAL GOVERNMENT; and we are ruled by Englishmen, and the servants of Englishmen, whose object is the interest of another country, whose instrument is corruption, and whose strength is the weakness of Ireland... We require a cordial union among ALL THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND and a complete and radical reform of the representation of the peoples in parliament. We acknowledge that no reform is practicable, efficacious, or just, which shall not include Irishmen of every religious persuasion".⁶⁴

Tone and Russell consented that the reform of a corrupt system of government, although necessary, would not satisfy the radical appetite for change and that the ultimate aim of the United Irishmen should be to establish a Republic. Oliver Knox writes on this issue in his book, *Rebels and Informers, Stirrings of Irish Independence*, that;

"One of the chief practical arguments, which kept Tone, Russell and the 'men of the most distinguished public virtue' with whom he talked so late into those Belfast nights, turned on whether it was better to press on with parliamentary reform ahead of Catholic emancipation, or vice versa, or to take the two great questions together. If the struggle for parliamentary reform took precedence, then the campaign for emancipation might flag. Tone himself was sure that the two struggles should be simultaneous".⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Richard Robert Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times, with several additional memoirs and authentic documents, heretofore unpublished, the whole matter newly arranged and revised, Volume 1* (Dublin: J. Duffy, 1858), 233.

⁶⁵ Oliver Knox, *Rebels and Informers: Stirrings of Irish Independence* (Dublin: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998) 53.

It is highly probable that McCracken shared this view, as in a letter to his sister in July 1797 while Henry was imprisoned, McCracken reveals much of his distaste for the Government; "It is impossible to say, or to account for any proceeding of Government, as they appear the most capricious set of mortals on the face of the earth, without either principle or wisdom it is probable that they may be ashamed of confining men fourteen months for nothing".⁶⁶

Despite the obvious contempt and derision for the government, he was reticent about his republicanism until the time should seem ripe for revolutionary action. What he did insist on from the outset was the principle of religious liberty in the widest sense of the term. He desired no gradual reform, but the complete emancipation of Catholics, which was in harmony with the objects of the new society. This had never been demanded from a Protestant body in Ireland.

While Tone, as Assistant Secretary to the Catholic Committee, was organizing the Catholics in the South, McCracken was unobtrusively organizing opinion among the Catholic and Protestant workers about Belfast. He had plenty of opportunities for this work in the ordinary course of business, as a great part of his time was spent in riding about the country interviewing merchants. Neilson, meanwhile, was chiefly occupied in trying to harness the force of liberal Protestant thought by public meetings in Belfast. Neilson would meet opposition from this segment of the Protestant class as

⁶⁶ Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 17. Letter to his sister Mary while imprisoned in 1797, taken from the memoir of Henry Joy McCracken.

many felt that Protestants were not ready to grant, nor Catholics ready to receive this reform; "It was the old question of whether people who have never known freedom are fit to have it, and to the eternal credit of the United Irishmen, they insisted that no reform can ever be adequate or just, unless all Irishmen of every description, shall be equally and fairly represented".⁶⁷

Neilson, realizing that the conservative and moderate element of the *Belfast News-Letter* would simply temper the stirring embers of Belfast politics, put his efforts into the founding of the *Northern Star*, to serve as a radical communication to the people of Belfast. *The Northern Star* had two pressing intentions; to provide a complete account of events in revolutionary France and to expose and undermine Government policy of encouraging the sectarian conflict which had developed into pitched battles between the Protestant Peep O' the Day Boys and the Catholic Defenders. The paper's positive doctrine was union between Irishmen of all creeds and immediate emancipation of Catholics. Its ultimate aim, though more implied than declared, was to transform Ireland into a Republic independent of English rule. *The Northern Star*, to which McCracken sometimes contributed, impacted Belfast instantly. Government resentment would inevitably result, as both the paper and the Society of United Irishmen were both wholly legal in their aims and conduct.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*, 55.

⁶⁸ Killen, *The Decade of the United Irishmen: Contemporary Accounts 1791-1801*, 73. The *Northern Star*, May 27-30, 1796.

While the United Irishmen continued in their efforts to stimulate public feeling, they kept extremely close quarter with the development of sectarian affairs as instances of conflicts between the Peep O' the Day Boys and the Defenders increased. Examples of violence were witnessed all over Ulster, but in the greater part of areas such as County Down however, Protestant attitudes were softening and the Protestant/ Catholic question was improving, and the Catholics themselves were offering to provide soldiers for the Union Regiment of Volunteers if Belfast would provide the officers. McCracken was quietly doing his share of peacemaking and, though he kept in the background, was in constant touch with the latest plans and developments of the United Irishmen.⁶⁹

Significantly, 1794 saw McCracken exert his efforts in distributing the United Irishmen's ideologies to the working and middle classes. McCracken's opinions on the direction of the newly formed United Irishmen would not deter him from fulfilling his duties. He made his suspicions of the idea of foreign military aid known as he was the first to identify the potential of debacle in the suggestion of securing foreign aid for an Irish revolution. Such a design blatantly made the United Irishmen increasingly vulnerable to treachery, as it put too many men of commercial interest in clinical positions, who had joined the United Irishmen either to garner the profits of a foreign market, should that be secured, or to transport important information to the Government in order to guarantee the continued protection of a British fleet.

⁶⁹ Harwood, *History of the Irish Rebellion 1798*, 142.

Further possible effects of the foreign aid policy were that it could push leaders, whose sincerity could not be doubted, to cease to show the self-reliance necessary for prompt action. McCracken was one of the few who opposed Tone, holding firmly to the opinion that Ireland should not rely on France and could prevail in the struggle for complete independence without the intervention of a foreign power.⁷⁰ Despite this basic disagreement on policy, McCracken not only joined the newly reorganized United Irishmen, but augmented his activities and it was ultimately his fortitude and determination to pursue his ambitions without neglecting his ideals or the ideals of the Society, which brought him into prominence.

The reorganization of the Society involved a new oath of membership, which contained significant changes, including the introduction of secrecy in the Society's dealings. The new oath read;

“In the awful presence of God, I, do voluntarily declare that I will preserve in endeavoring to form a brotherhood of affection among Irishmen of every religious persuasion, and I will also persevere in my endeavors to obtain an equal, full and adequate representation of all the people of Ireland. I do further declare that neither hopes, fears, rewards, or punishments shall ever induce me directly, or indirectly, to inform, or give evidence against any member, or members of this or similar societies, for any act or expression of theirs done or made individually, or collectively, in or out of this Society, in pursuance of this obligation.”⁷¹

The unambiguous omission of any reference of parliamentary reform implies the Society's new aim of the establishment of a Republic,

⁷⁰ Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 239.

⁷¹ Richard Robert Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times, V.1*, 259.

parliamentary reform featuring so notably in the original oath. The careful wording of the refurbished oath was aimed at placating the moderate faction of the population who were not yet prepared to express the full measure of their revolutionary motivations. McCracken's drive was now clear and he was one of those who had no reservations about an unequivocal undertaking. On a mission to Cave Hill, McCracken, Tone, Russell, Robert Simms and Neilson, at MacArt's Fort, took a solemn obligation "never to desist in our efforts until we had subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted our independence".⁷² Kevin Whelan describes the United Irishmen in his book *The Tree of Liberty*, as he puts forward that;

"The United Irishmen were bearers of the European Enlightenment freely importing ideas from England, Scotland and France. They believed that they were moving in tandem politically with the inevitable laws of historical evolution, which would sweep away the existing Gothic political situation. Accepting the Enlightenment's claim to eliminate particularism in favor of universalism, the United Irishmen's function would merely be to spread this message from European core to European periphery and from top to bottom of the Irish political spectrum".⁷³

Rev. James Gordon writes in his accounts of the 1798 rebellion that;

"The organization of the society of United Irishmen, which for some time was quite of a civil nature, is represented as having commenced in the spring of 1792, and as having been completed in Ulster on the tenth of May 1795. In the autumn of the following year, when a reform of parliament, the ostensible with all, and with some the real object, was regarded as not otherwise attainable than by force, the association began to assume a military form; and in April 1797, the number of men

⁷² Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*, 71.

⁷³ Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of the Irish Identity 1760-1830* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 59.

in Ulster alone, enrolled for insurrection, was, beside others doubtless ready to assist them, stated at nearly a hundred thousand, provided, some with fire-arms, others with pikes, a store of ammunition and some cannon".⁷⁴

The reorganization of the United Irishmen now clearly indicated that radicalism had been transformed, moving from reform to an underground revolutionary position. The United Irishmen in Ulster were now on a new course and as Philip Harwood explains in his *History of the Irish Rebellion of 1798*, there were some very clear and distinct differences connected between the original society and the new reconfigured version. Harwood writes;

"The United Irishmen of 1791, though they ultimately produced, are not to be confounded with the United Irishmen of 1798. These two societies were widely different in their respective constitutions, objects and modes of proceeding, the latter having been organized only when the former was broken up by violent government interference. The United Irishmen of 1798 were a secret society, with separation from England and Republican government for their end, and armed rebellion, with French aid for their means. The United Irishmen of 1791 looked not beyond the limits of the constitution, sought only an honest government by Kings, Lords and Commons, their aim was an equal and just representation of the whole people in parliament, their proceedings were open and legal, and the responsibility of all that followed rested with the wicked government which made the best men in Ireland rebels".⁷⁵

The original organization of the United Irishmen had, in the North, been composed almost entirely of Presbyterians; though they diligently attempted to work cooperatively with the Catholic Committee, as the United

⁷⁴ Musgrave, Sir Richard and Rev. James Gordon, *History of the Rebellion in Ireland in the Year 1798, &c. containing an impartial account of the proceedings of the Irish revolutionists, from the year 1872 till the suppression of the rebellion*. (Dublin: William Porter, 1801), 50.

⁷⁵ Harwood, *History of the Irish Rebellion 1798*, 58.

Irishmen had, in 1793, afforded a regal welcome to those delegates from the great Catholic Convention who had passed through Belfast on their way to London to request relaxation of the Penal Laws. A measure of relief that dismayed Tone as from his point of view, this relief offended his republican sensibilities as he felt demands for reform had wilted into request, as Harwood's writes that;

"There was deep and dexterous policy in Mr. Pitt's management of this Catholic question of 1793.⁷⁶ Enough was given to take off the edge of popular discontent, to thin the ranks of disaffection, and save Ireland to the empire; yet what was given was so given as to damp the people's confidence in themselves and their leaders, depress the tone of popular feeling, and break the strength of any new popular movement".⁷⁷

It had been decided to systemize co-operation with the Catholic Defenders in the North. For this work McCracken was selected. He was a tactful negotiator, his pleasant manner had made him popular, and he was already known among the Catholics as an unwearied worker on their behalf. To him, therefore, was entrusted the responsibility of coordinating the two bodies. Madden writes;

"The principal service in which McCracken had been employed was in exercising his influence over the Defenders in getting them to consent to join the United Irishmen. The former were Catholics, the latter chiefly Presbyterians. The Defenders were at first opposed to republican principles, their chief end and aim was, as their name implied, defense against their prosecutors, who under the color of zeal for the Protestant

⁷⁶ William Pitt was Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1783-1801.

⁷⁷ Harwood, *History of the Irish Rebellion*, 79.

religion, promoted their own selfish interests by means of plunder and rapacity".⁷⁸

Unquestionably, there was a connection between the two organizations and many Defenders who joined the United Irishmen would almost certainly have been attracted less by their non-sectarian agenda than by their anti-government and separatist positions. As the Defenders were innately of devoted Catholic origin it was most unlikely the Defenders would have had much sympathy for republicanism, especially since that was the gospel of a French regime which, despite the granting of freedom of worship, was still practically at war with the Catholic Church. The Defenders of Antrim, Down and Armagh became a regular association, those in each county appointing their own leadership which chose a deputy to communicate with the Directory of the United Irishmen. McCracken worked in all three counties and was later appointed deputy for the Defenders of Antrim. So successful was he in winning Defenders to join the ranks of the United Irishmen that he had, in 1798, a specially organized force of 7,000 Catholics to act as a forlorn hope in case of need – one third of the entire fighting force of Antrim.⁷⁹

The measures taken by McCracken had bolstered the United Irishmen. His ability to detect and counteract the intricate systems of espionage adopted by the Government at the time the United Irishmen was reorganized marked him as a unique asset to the Society. His level headed nature allowed him to

⁷⁸ Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 13:

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

discount the transparent expressions of enthusiasm inspired at convivial gatherings, and had the foresight to consider only what men felt when they ~~were~~ as he said, “fresh and cool in the morning”. “He preferred to keep his head clear and his tongue quiet, reckless about his own interests and safety he might be, but never ash in speech or action where others were concerned”.⁸⁰

The introduction of James Hope to the cause of the United Irishmen was a revelation. Hope was a weaver, a self-educated philosopher and perfectly incorruptible. Hope had been a member of the Roughfort Volunteers, and joined the United Irishmen in June 1795, when they had already become a secret society.⁸¹ Hope’s introduction to the cause of the United Irishmen and his contribution to it can be viewed as equally as significant as the introduction of Thomas Russell. From private meetings with Hope, Madden has written that; “his private character is most excellent; he is strictly moral, utterly fearless, inflexible, and incorruptible. The most eminent leaders of 1798 had a thorough confidence in him”.⁸² Neilson, McCracken, Russell and other leaders enthusiastically evaluated his worth and value to the cause; and while adopted entirely into their confidence, he endeavored under the direct orders of both Russell and McCracken. He was, however, in McCracken’s opinion, more outspoken than diplomatic in declaring the views they both held as to Ireland’s ability to govern and defend herself. McCracken, with his keen eye for character, his level head and nimble wits, was more than a match for

⁸⁰ Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*, 77.

⁸¹ Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 96.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 87. From interviews Madden conducted with James Hope.

the efforts of Government agents to corrupt the United Irishmen of every rank from the key men in the system to the least important members of the smallest groups. McCracken was essentially the driving force behind the Muddler's Club, the center of counter-espionage for the United Irishmen. Typically, the Club convened at Barclay's Tavern. The Club proved so successful in countering hostile designs and increasing the membership of the United Irishmen, that even though it was broken up in 1796 owing to treachery, McCracken urged its revival under another name and it was carried on for two more years. The marvel was that, honeycombed with spies as it was, it contrived to be of any use at all. It was discovered, but too late, that Belle Martin, the serving girl of the Tavern, was selling every scrap of information she could glean.⁸³

As Madden suggests, long before Government officials swooped on the Northern leaders, McCracken was well aware they were being closely watched.⁸⁴ He was a marked man on account of his campaign against Orange magistrates. Neilson's newspaper, *The Northern Star* had generated resentment and Russell, too, had worked on behalf of the persecuted Catholic families. The difficulty facing the authorities was to collect sufficient evidence on which McCracken, Neilson and Russell could be arrested and convicted, as public support of Catholics was not an offence that could be used to charge them directly. Government officials, foiled in several attempts

⁸³ Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*, 79.

⁸⁴ Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 14.

to entrap the United Irish leaders in the North, decided to arrest them first and find suitable witnesses afterwards. The frustration of the authorities was clear as this policy disbanded due process and encroached on the civil rights of the United Irishmen leaders. This imposition of the authorities was not any form of religious or civil bigotry, but simply seen as a strategic necessity and a desperate attempt to control the conspirators and prevent and cull the expanding perforation that separatist sentiment had made in their authority in Belfast.⁸⁵

From the autumn of 1796 to the spring of 1797, the principal United Irishmen in Ulster were arrested and sent to Newgate and Kilmainham prisons in Dublin. On the 10th of October, 1796, Henry McCracken was arrested and sent to Newgate.⁸⁶ The arrest of McCracken did little to dampen any republican sentiment. Newgate was beset with United Irishmen, and despite the awful conditions that were presented to prisoners in these institutions, McCracken's presence proliferated the feeling of republicanism as it intensified in confinement. McCracken's correspondences with his family throughout his incarceration display a determined will and fortitude. McCracken would spend the following fourteen months imprisoned. As his health deteriorated in jail, his burning ambition to contribute to a cause far greater than his own nurtured. Imprisoned without trial, McCracken's views and ideals fostered a renewed motivation. For Henry Joy, his internment was a

⁸⁵ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Summer Soldiers: The 1798 Rebellion in Antrim and Down* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1995), 55.

⁸⁶ Killen, 84. A report in *The Times* of London reported on the 20th October of McCracken's arrest.

symbol of British tyranny and oppression. Ever mindful of his role and responsibility as a leader, his character would become the personification of the most profound and symbolic movement in this period of Irish history. Like Fr. Murphy in Wexford, and contrary to his privileged background and religion, McCracken was a man of the people, a devout servant of the cause of Irish republicanism, a charge that would not desist and would thrust McCracken into the fray as one of the most influential Irishmen of his generation in the history of Ireland.

Chapter Three

Fr. John Murphy and the United Irishmen in Wexford

July 14 1789 saw the world and its accepted norms tuned on its head. This day witnessed the government prison, the Bastille, stormed and captured by the Parisian revolutionary forces, causing in France an explosion of upheaval to rip through the country. The foundations of existing power were attacked with sustained ferocity, as the cemented systems of authority were razed by anti-monarchist republican fervor. Developments in France spurred a fear in the minds of those in power in England and mainland Europe. R.B. McDowell writes of the impact of the French Revolution in his, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution 1760-1801*; "The French revolution was not only momentous in its immediate effects and implications, it was highly spectacular. The stage was a great country, lying at the center of European civilization: the participants spoke and acted as men and women conscious they were making history before the eyes of their contemporaries."⁸⁷ The execution of Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette, symbolizing the revolution and its ultimate aims and intentions, reverberated around the world, stirring fear and panic in the upper echelons of the Roman Catholic Church, and moving the Pope to look on worryingly as no tradition, norm or pillar of the Catholic faith escaped desecration and destruction. The devastating effect

⁸⁷ R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution 1760-1801* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 352.

upon European society which the French Revolution had could only be matched in theory by the fall of Rome; the terror, with which the revolution's advancement was considered, even in England, a country politically and fundamentally stable, was incomparable in modern times. Ultimately, if the politically influential sections of English society were uneasy, the political ascendancy in Ireland, already conscious of the Catholic majority in Ireland, and ever conscious of their suppressed hostility, were extremely on edge over the lack of power they could yield over the escalation of the situation. This fear would not confine itself solely to the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, as the Catholic reaction in Rome to what was transpiring violently in France had deplored the Catholic Church and compelled the Church to urge their congregations to oppose any campaign or movement that could be deemed violent or revolutionary in its orientation. This was extremely evident in county Wexford during this time period, as the position of the clergy in Wexford was a pivotal issue in the events surrounding Wexford's involvement in the precursor to 1798. Harwood writes;

"The effect of the French Revolution on Ireland was rapid and decisive, in rousing the different sections of the Irish people from their stupor into which they had sunk since the failure of the Volunteer Reform Convention of 1783. It attracted the sympathies and kindled the zeal of the Dissenter of the north, who was already, in virtue of his creed, more than half a republican; it breathed new life into the Catholic of the south, whose long-standing predilections and political traditions had always laid him peculiarly open to French influence".⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Harwood, *History of the Irish Rebellion 1798*, 54.

It took some time for the significance of the French Revolution to percolate down to the Catholic congregations of Wexford. Despite this delay, trends were gaining momentum and escalated to stimulate unrest. The general election of 1790, of which Catholics were excluded, was a toughly contested affair, fought with caustic animosity in Wexford. Purely viewed as adherent spectators, the extremists were victorious over the liberal party which was battling on behalf of the Catholic community. This smoldering resentment resulted in the formation of the Catholic Committee, formed to win civil liberties, a body which was treated by the government with suspicion and hostility.⁸⁹

There has been much debate surrounding the extent and the degree of influence the early clubs of the Society of United Irishmen had wielded in County Wexford prior to 1798. Madden, referring to William Putnam McCabe and his attempt to organize county Wexford, states that the Wexford people were apathetic and that the organization made no way in that county, even continuing to comment in his accounts of McCabe's memoirs that "the people of that county were nearly a distant race from the inhabitants of other parts of Ireland".⁹⁰ Musgrave also writes of the United Irishmen presence in Wexford;

"It would be contrary to the truth to say there were no United Irishmen in the county of Wexford; but every statement worthy of credit, that has ever appeared, their numbers were comparatively fewer in this than any other county in Ireland; and such as were of that description here seem to have been privately sworn in the detached unconnected manner of the

⁸⁹ Charles Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798: It's Causes and its Course* (Dublin: Constable and Robinson, 1998), 15.

⁹⁰ Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 176.

first progress of that business, before it assumed the form of regular organization".⁹¹

Musgrave's account of the insignificance of the United Irishmen in Wexford suggests that the eventual rising in Wexford was generated by other factors, unlike in Ulster, which was being mobilized by the efforts of the United Irishmen. These accounts seem inaccurate as a reasonable United Irish presence emerged in the northern parts of the county. Patrick Kavanagh makes efforts to discredit Musgrave's accounts when he writes in his *Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, that "no statement put forward by such a man can be regarded as deserving of any credit, being notorious for his virulent and reckless mendacity, heedless of what assertion he made to vilify a people for whom he cherished a most envenomed hatred".⁹² Kavanagh further cites T.D. McGee, commenting that "the most formidable indeed the only really formidable one, broke out in the county of Wexford a county in which it was stated there were not 200 United Irishmen, and which Lord Edward Fitzgerald had altogether omitted from his official list of counties organized in the month of February".⁹³ Kavanagh summarizes his opinions on the United Irishmen's presence in Wexford by concluding on the matter;

"From these conflicting statements it is not easy to deduce any very definite conclusion; but having weighed them all we may

⁹¹Edward Hay and Richard Musgrave, *History of the Insurrection of County Wexford A.D. 1798: Including an account of Transactions Preceding that Event, with an Appendix with authentic detail of the conduct of Sir Richard Musgrave with a full refutation of his slander against* (Dublin: Stockdale, 1803), 55.

⁹²Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798: Derived from every available written record and reliable tradition* (Dublin: M.H. McGill and Son, 1880), 70.

⁹³Ibid., 70.

hazard an opinion that the organization consisted in the county for a considerable time before the outbreak of the insurrection, but made little progress, owing both to the opposition offered to it by the priests as a secret society, and to the peculiar character of the Wexford people who have always been averse to secret societies of every description".⁹⁴

In spite of the debate surrounding the actual size of the United Irishmen presence in Wexford, significant was the fact that those who would eventually be found in positions of leadership in the United Irishmen organization in Wexford, were supportive, liberal minded men, consisting of representatives from both Protestant and Catholic denominations, they were eager to create in Ireland a nation where all Irishmen could exist in a position of political equality by means of Parliamentary reform and emancipation. These constitutional objectives were what motivated these United Irishmen in Wexford. Even though it was a minority of them in Wexford, they had taken the oath as United Irishmen, and did so with solely these constitutional objects in mind. This certainly applies to Bagenal Harvey, Thomas Cloney and Anthony Perry.⁹⁵ Despite this, the overwhelming issues for the majority of agrarian population of counties such as Wexford were primarily economic, rather than political or religious. Security of land tenure, the

⁹⁴ Ibid., 70.

⁹⁵ Beauchamp Bagenal Harvey, a liberal Protestant barrister from Wexford who became a member of the Dublin Society of United Irishmen. Thomas Cloney, from Moneyhore in Wexford, joined the United Irishmen and became a colonel in the United Irishmen army shortly before the outbreak of the rising. Anthony Perry, from Inch, near Gorey was a Protestant farmer who was responsible for the organization and recruitment of the movement in Wexford.

regulation of rents and the distressing burden of tithes owed to the Protestant Church were the pressing questions that faced the people of Wexford.

The Dublin Society of United Irishmen was joined by these supporters of the liberal Protestant party and a branch of the United Irishmen was established in Gorey towards the end of 1792 and its inauguration was announced to the Dublin Society on December 21st. It came in line with the resolutions set forth by the societies in Dublin and Belfast. It was one of the first branches in the provinces and was joined by more enthusiasts from the Protestant liberal party. The early members of the United Irishmen in county Wexford were all respected, widely connected men from the upper class.⁹⁶

The Catholic Relief Act of 1793 resulted in many significant consequences for county Wexford. As influential leaders of the Catholic Church in Ireland hailed the Relief Act as a progressive step forward, they stressed the importance of the Act and its conditions by all Catholics and urged its acceptance among the Catholic community. This position taken by the Catholic Church ultimately offended Wolfe Tone and his republican ambitions. During this time, the passing of the Convention Act by Dublin's Ascendancy Parliament prohibited the gathering of any assemblies claiming to act as any major representation of the Irish people. This led to the dissolving of the Catholic Convention and would be one of the major events that would steer and direct the United Irishmen away from its original aim of mere Parliamentary reform and swing its ambition to armed revolution and the

⁹⁶ Madden, *The United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times*. V.1, 226.

establishment of a new republic, as Wexford was to become one of the most thoroughly involved counties in the new direction of the United Irishmen.⁹⁷

Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue felt the political restlessness of 1780's Europe while studying the priesthood in the Spanish city of Seville. Born and raised in the small town-land of Tincurry, Fr. Murphy's family, like so many rural Irish families of the time experienced the irritants of rent to a Protestant landlord for confiscated land and the payment of tithes to the minister of the Established Church.⁹⁸ These experiences would engrain a hardened opinion of British occupation in Fr. Murphy. Ordained by Bishop Sweetman in Wexford Town in 1780, the Catholic Clergy in Wexford and especially the Diocese of Ferns where Fr. Murphy was situated remained heavily loyal to the exiled Stuart monarchy and opposed to the rule of the Protestant Ascendancy, a regime which Bishop Sweetman considered a de facto monarchy in England, stolen by King George.⁹⁹ The death of Bishop Sweetman and the ultimate change in direction in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Wexford had significant implications for the rising in Wexford. Bishop Sweetman's replacement, Dr. James Caulfield inverted totally the convictions on which Sweetman had presided, emphasizing that the Catholic Church must reconcile itself to political realities of the time. Clearly the antithesis of Sweetman's liberal Jacobian sympathies, Caulfield's conservative position stood in the

⁹⁷ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*, 197.

⁹⁸ Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 3.

⁹⁹ Bishop Nicholas Sweetman was Bishop Caulfield's predecessor in the Diocese of Ferns. Loyal to the Stuart monarchy, Sweetman refused to recognize the Protestant monarchy in England and was imprisoned on one occasion on suspicion of supplying arms to the exiled Stuart family.

way of any revolutionary sentiment that would percolate through Wexford at this time.¹⁰⁰

While the undercurrent of unrest and uprising trickled through the rural areas of Wexford, Fr. Murphy's single-minded loyalty remained with Bishop James Caulfield and his conservative policy.¹⁰¹ The United Irishmen were now beginning to impact the sympathies of the people of Wexford, and Bishop Caulfield, who publicly castigated the United Irishmen as French, revolutionary, free Masonic and Protestant, was aware of the radical influence such a society could have over an unrepresented and oppressed people.

Warning from the altar against membership of oath bound societies had only educated ridicule and derision from the congregations of Wexford. Caulfield aim was to convince the people that compliance with the British government was emphatically propounded as being the crucial duty of every Catholic in Ireland, and Fr. Murphy, as well as every other Catholic priest under Caulfield's direction, was ultimately obliged, with orders from his bishop to bring his parishioners in line with this policy. Kavanagh explains Murphy's motivations during this difficult period;

"Father John had indeed opposed the organization of the United Irishmen, not as may be supposed, from any lack of patriotism, but because he deemed it unlawful, as unable to effect what it aimed at, while he trusted that in time the English Government might adopt a policy more just and merciful towards his unfortunate country".¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 9.

¹⁰¹ Bishop James Caulfield was Bishop of the Diocese of Ferns from 1786-1814. Succeeded Bishop Sweetman, introducing his conservative policies to align with the demands of the Established Church.

¹⁰² Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 79.

During 1795 events transpired that would change the approach of the United Irishmen and provide them with a renewed appeal and attraction to the people. Two developments in particular were critical. In January, Earl Fitzwilliam, a member of the more liberal Whig faction in England, became viceroy of Ireland; and, secondly, that summer the Orange Order was founded. Fitzwilliam's appointment was greeted with optimism by the Catholic community. As the Catholic Emancipation Bill was now gaining momentum, it was hoped that Fitzwilliam's political background would see him use his influence to complete the passing of the Bill. Fitzwilliam did attempt to instill some sort of authority over the Irish Protestant Ascendancy but they were ultimately successful in having him recalled to England and consequently, any hope of speedy reform went with him as a petition to the king to have him reinstated was rejected. *The Northern Star* lamented his development as it reported that Fitzwilliam's departure would "be remembered as the most ominous and fatal to the interests of Ireland that has occurred within the present century."¹⁰³ Initially a setback for the Catholics, the eventual effect of this development was to politicize a great many more Catholics and generate in them, more than ever, separatist and revolutionary ideas. The second development, which happened in the south Ulster heartland of sectarian hatred, would have a drastic and sweeping impact on the course of the

¹⁰³ Killen, *The Decade of the United Irishmen: Contemporary Accounts*, 58. *The Northern Star*, 26-30 March.

Rebellion of 1798. The United Irish aim of achieving Catholic emancipation was naturally directed at incorporating a degree of legislative independence at a local level that would be of a predominantly Catholic representation, and engineer an end to the Protestant Ascendancy and the rule of the Catholic majority by the Protestant minority. While one reaction of this was for the British Government to encompass a legislative Union, rendering emancipation politically harmless as Catholics would be maintained as a marginal influence in the united parliament in Westminster, a second reaction, the forming of the Orange Order in Armagh in 1795, would have far more immediate and dangerous consequences for the Catholic population. The Orange Order was in essence and in its origin, a determined and dedicated resolve on the part of a militant section of Protestants in the North, to establish a local predominance by violently intimidating and terrorizing the Catholic population.¹⁰⁴ As growing sectarianism was now tangibly clear, feuds developed rapidly, and in the counties where Protestants were in a majority, the Catholics were ruthlessly oppressed. The point must be made however; that when the movement extended into other areas where Catholics predominated, Catholics reciprocated what was happening elsewhere.¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, the origin of this sectarian anarchy was a reaction to the threat that was posed to the Protestant ascendancy during this time. The Orange society multiplied its branches nationally and its aims were to expand, but the real

¹⁰⁴ Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 327.

¹⁰⁵ Jonathon Bardon, *A History of Ulster*. (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), 158.

aspect of the Orange Society which inspired fear on a national extent was the oath taken by all recruits to the Orangemen. "In the awful presence of God, I... do solemnly swear that I will to the utmost of my power support the king and the present government; and I do further swear that I will use my utmost exertions to exterminate all the Catholics of the Kingdom of Ireland".¹⁰⁶ The founding of the Orange Order was granted the blessing and endorsement of the local landlords. The continuing sectarian warfare in Armagh was stretching south as displaced Catholic began to settle in Northern parts of Leinster and Connaught, transporting with them, the Defenders, the Catholic response to the Orange Order. The Orange/Defender feud belonged in many ways to a world utterly alien to that of the United Irish struggle against monarchy and religious intolerance. But it was an issue which underlined the public debate over the Catholic question that was so much on the minds of the politically active and, politically aware of the country. Eventually all three struggles, the Orange/Defender struggle, the Emancipationist/Ascendancy struggle and the Republican/Monarchist struggle would begin to feed off one other.¹⁰⁷

Also during 1795, events on the continent made the rising tensions in Ireland all the more serious. Daniel J. Gahan in, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798* notes that;

"Up to the end of 1794, the French revolutionary armies had been fighting for survival and foreign troops, British and

¹⁰⁶ Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty*, 59.

Austrian included, were occupying various positions around the perimeter of the country. Only along the frontier with the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium) had the French actually driven the invaders back and themselves invaded a foreign territory. On Christmas Eve 1794 they followed up these advances with an invasion of Holland. By the end of 1795, the French armies had crushed most of the internal uprisings and had signed peace treaties with Prussia and Spain. The tide was turning in France's favor and she made it clear that she was serious about expanding the revolution".¹⁰⁸

Kevin Whelan, in *The Tree of Liberty* remarks that;

"The roots of the 1798 rebellion lay in the tangled web of late eighteenth century politics and the ambivalent position of Ireland within the British state. Too far away to be easily assimilated like Scotland or Wales, too near to be let float free like America. Ireland's anomalous constitutional settlement gave it its own parliament, but with strings attached which suggested that ultimate political power would reside in London".¹⁰⁹

To the British government and to the Protestant ascendancy faction in Ireland, these were disturbing developments and they would make the situation in Ireland all the more disconcerting.

During the course of 1796, the United Irishmen movement grew rapidly. Modestly sized at the beginning of the year, by the end of the year it had achieved remarkable success among the Presbyterians of eastern Ulster. The movement was now drifting towards revolution and a large part of the Presbyterian population was involved. The movement also acquired a broad

¹⁰⁸ Gahan. *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 22.

¹⁰⁹ Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty*, 99.

appeal among the Catholic population of Leinster, the very area in which the openly sectarian Defenders were winning a lot of recruits at the same time.

Daniel J. Gahan believes that "as the United Irishmen became a mass movement, a case could be made that the organization had a different character in the heartland of Leinster from that in Eastern Ulster".¹¹⁰ The fact remains, however, that the founding members and most of the leaders, regardless of their religion, were still attracted to the non-sectarian and republican dream that had inspired them from the start. In the meantime, the Catholic population remained frustrated by the failure of the government to grant political emancipation.

As the United Irish revolutionary movement was beginning to gain genuine credibility and support, the most important developments of 1796 were Wolfe Tone's activities in Paris. Wolfe Tone had conveyed remarkable diplomacy and political ability to convince the French government to deploy General Lazarre Hoche to Ireland with 15,000 troops at the end of the year.¹¹¹ Hoche sailed from Brest on 15th of December and the fleet arrived at Bantry Bay a few days before Christmas.¹¹² Despite the failure of the expedition due to disastrous weather, the Bantry Bay episode gave the authorities a warning and they decided to crush what they rightly regarded as attempts by France to secure a second front, before a second expedition could be landed. The rapid execution of this operation denied the United Irishmen the opportunity to

¹¹⁰ Gahan, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 29.

¹¹¹ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*, 288.

¹¹² Thomas Pakenham *The Year of Liberty: The Great Irish Rebellion of 179* (Dublin: Phoenix House, 1992), 7.

mobilize and therefore the United Irishmen were fortunate enough not to have revealed to the authorities their actual size and strength. If they had, it is reasonable to assume that the British reaction to such a threat would have been dealt with in a much swifter manner. With the orders to disarm and decommission the United Irishmen in Ulster, martial law was ultimately declared over a wide area by General Gerard Lake, as his forces proceeded with terrible brutality, employing various methods of torture and executions to gain his objective. By the fall of 1797, United Irishmen numbers had been badly damaged and General Lake's pre-emptive strike, many members fleeing the cause due to fear and intimidation. This was a major blow and as a result may have been a key factor in their ultimate failure.¹¹³

As the movement was being impeded in one region, it would only to gain momentum in another. As Lake was employing any means necessary in Presbyterian Ulster in 1797 to control the United Irishmen, the recruitment of members began to make unexpected progress in the south of the country, especially among Catholics. Increasing numbers of Catholics of the moderate persuasion, disillusioned by the emancipation movements' collapse, joined the United Irishmen, even in the face of opposition from the bishops to secret societies and their hostilities to the goals of the United Irishmen. United Irishmen propaganda was now permeating to the masses in Wexford in the form of ballads and pamphlets, the most effective of which was Paine's "*The Rights of Man*", which indoctrinated the message that change was not just

¹¹³ Madden, *The United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times. Vol 1*, 293.

sought-after, but possible and that it could be achieved only through active revolution. By the end of 1797, the United Irish presence was sufficiently significant enough to compel magistrates to proclaim a section of the northern part of the country to be in a state of rebellion. The government in Ireland now set out feverishly to eliminate the United Irishmen and their cause.¹¹⁴

Conditions promoting revolt were festering rapidly. The Irish Parliament was dissolved in July and a general election was called. The campaign which went on throughout the high summer months was fought with a political bitterness exceeding the personal enmities of the previous general election in 1790. As in 1790, the loyalist extremists advocated the full rigor of English and Ascendancy supremacy and were violently opposed to any further concessions to Catholics. Opposing them still were the liberal Protestants actively supporting Catholic emancipation and civil rights. The Catholic community itself became polarized between young radicals bursting for change by force if necessary, and the conservative elder segment insisting on a low profile, watch and wait policy. In the end, the liberals, anxious for reform, were beaten.¹¹⁵

The frustration suffered in the election result was rendered far worse by the greatest economic catastrophe which decimated Wexford's entire grain industry as new malting legislation which was introduced resulted in social repercussions in Wexford. In addition to an increase of duty and an increase

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹⁵ Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 224.

on malt and malt-house licenses, the decision was reached to end the carriage bounties on corn shipped to Dublin. This legislation had dire effects in seafaring Wexford where shipping of malt alone had earned annually one sixth of all the Dublin bounties on grain and flour. As major segment of society were affected, new regulations for the licensing of Malt-houses caused the closure of great numbers of the malting houses in Wexford as they were deemed too small to receive a license to operate. This suffering had a domino effect, trickling down the levels of labor and distribution, extending to laborers who lived by farm work, malting or sailing and the main industries in tillage farming were compelled to consider new enterprises and forms of business.¹¹⁶ A notable change occurred in attitudes in Wexford and the collapse of the price of corn had been one of the pivotal turning points along the course to revolution as a visible change took place in the manner and outlook of the lower classes in Wexford.

Wexford now bristled with preparations for organized uprising. Anthony Perry was the county organizer, a charge he undertook with urgency and diligence, targeting especially in the parishes around north Wexford. The parish priests up to this point had rallied in support of Bishop Caulfield's denunciations of the United Irishmen, but there were a number of them that felt it prudent, given the climate of insurrection which was developing in the county, to consider joining the cause of the United Irishmen. Eventually, members of the church would become active in the recruitment of members

¹¹⁶ Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969), 158.

around the county as both Fr. Edward Sinnott of Kilrush and Fr. Thomas Dixon of Blackwater became United Irish activists and recruiting officers. Both were detected by the bishop, bitterly castigated and suspended.¹¹⁷

The spring of 1797 witnessed a spasm of new political activity in Fr. Murphy's parish of Boolavogue, and Boolavogue and Monageer became focal points of an intense United Irish recruiting drive as the arm of the authorities did not prevent the United Irish growth in Boolavogue. Boolavogue had now become massively politicized and for Fr. Murphy, the swing in emotion in Wexford was alarming. For Bishop Caulfield, the situation in Europe, which the Catholic Church recognized as deteriorating, was starting to worryingly have an increased affect on the people of Wexford, as waves of revolutionary and republican fervor began to take a hold in Wexford. While the United Irishmen had not sufficiently infiltrated Wexford to generate a rebellion, Caulfield still felt that the social and political climate in Wexford was extremely susceptible to revolutionary and violent provocation. Napoleon Bonaparte's encroachment on the Papal States compelled Caulfield to reiterate the dangers of the developing situation as he continued to impress on his clergy the importance of rejecting French notions of revolution, which Caulfield could see was gaining significant ground in Wexford.¹¹⁸

The Catholic clergy in Wexford, under the strict decree of Bishop Caulfield, maintained adamant opposition to the aims and ambitions of the

¹¹⁷ Charles Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798: It's Causes and its Course* (Dublin: Constable and Robinson, 1998), 24.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

United Irishmen. Caulfield was naturally aware of the conflicting pressures facing his clergy as the discipline and demands of the Church added tension to their loyalties. Family members and friends were joining the ranks of the growing numbers of United Irishmen in Wexford, and it became increasingly difficult for these priests to separate their loyalties. Fr. John Murphy most definitely assessed his own loyalties in this time period, as his brother joined the society in the spring of 1797. Fr. Murphy was also questioning his overall view of Caulfield. Deference to a distant London monarch and the preached benefits of his government would have appeared as vacuous nonsense to a man of Murphy's sensibilities.¹¹⁹

With the proclamation of martial law over the county Wexford in March 1798, the prospect of military violence urged Fr. Murphy to contemplate a responsive course of action. The threat of violence in the county was typically handled with conservatism by Bishop Caulfield, as he instructed Fr. Murphy, and all other curates in the county to direct their parishes to surrender their weapons and to denounce the United Irishmen and their aims, as still the views of the clerical hierarchy were largely determined by their abhorrence of French ideals which were the inspiration of the United Irishmen.¹²⁰

The situation in Wexford was now dire. Confronted with the possibility of British retribution under martial law in Wexford, Murphy

¹¹⁹ Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 25.

¹²⁰ Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798*, 24.

reluctantly followed the decree of Bishop Caulfield and complied with Lord Mountnorris, who had implored Murphy and his parish to surrender their arms and urged the parish to accept the oath of allegiance to the Crown.¹²¹ The oath subsequently read;

“I do sincerely promise and swear, upon the Holy Evangelists, that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to his majesty King George the third, and to the succession of his illustrious family to the throne. That I will, to the utmost of my power, support the constitution as by law established. That I will use every possible exertion to prevent and suppress all tumult, riot or secret conspiracy. That I am not a United Irishman and that I never will take the oaths of the United men....”¹²²

This compliance with local law by the local population was seen as a partial victory for the government and the threat of martial law and violence seemed to be averted, vindicating temporarily the judgment of Bishop Caulfield. It had, however, been an episode which stirred anger within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Wexford, as Murphy's reluctance to take the oath of allegiance to the Crown, drew further uncomfortable attention on Boolavogue, especially from Bishop Caulfield.

Fr. Murphy was reprimanded for his stand and threatened with dismissal from his position at Boolavogue. Consequently, this had a chastening effect on Murphy as he accepted the reprimand and carried out his superior's policies and instructions to direct his parish to disarm and avoid any rebellious inclinations. In the north of the county throughout the remaining

¹²¹ Lord Mountnorris (George Annesley) Landlord for the parish of Monageer.

¹²² Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 33.

days of 1797 and the early days of 1798, the preparations of the United Irishmen went ahead. The French Directory had nominated April as the month for their invasion and the Wexford United Irishmen understood that the coming spring had been finally fixed for the simultaneous rising. Miles Byrne remembers the preparations;

“Nothing could exceed the readiness and good will of the United Irishmen to comply with the instructions they received to procure arms, ammunitions etc., notwithstanding the difficulties and perils they underwent purchasing those articles. Every man had firearms of some sort, or a pike; the latter weapon was easily had at this time as almost every blacksmith was a United Irishman”.¹²³

As Fr. Murphy was attempting to enforce the wishes of his superiors, the United Irishmen were finalizing their preparations for the French invasion which was expected that spring as there was to be a simultaneous nationwide uprising.¹²⁴ From a strategic point of view, Wexford County was itself a logistically valuable part of the country. Geographically, it was open to the sea and defended by rivers and mountains. The Scullogue Gap, the Bunclody Gap and the Arklow Gap were the only major exit or entry points through the mountains which rimmed the outer edge the county.

While Wolfe Tone was still in France by early 1798 seeking French aid in the form of a military expedition to Ireland, the United Irishmen by now had established firm footholds in almost all of the counties of Ireland, and were expecting a rising during the course of the year. The British government

¹²³ Miles Byrne, *Memoirs of Miles Byrne Volume 1*. (Dublin: Munsel and Co. Ltd, 1803), 23.

¹²⁴ Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty*, 39.

through its administration at Dublin Castle under the viceroy Lord Camden and the Chief Secretary, Thomas Pelham was being advised that insurrection was expected and that a French landing was also expected. The Irish Protestant Parliament at College Green, Dublin, was demanding even more repressive measures to be taken against the United Irishmen. The army commander in chief was Sir Ralph Abercromby while the field commanders included General Lake in Ulster, General Sir James Duff in Limerick and Tipperary, General Sir John Moore in West Cork, General Sir Charles Asgill in Kilkenny and Laois and General Sir Ralph Dundas in Kildare.¹²⁵

During this time Lord Edward Fitzgerald, a veteran of the American Revolution was entrenched in preparations for war.¹²⁶ He was the head of a newly formed military committee which was to provide planning and senior officers for the United Irish Army. Regardless of French involvement, Lord Edward would be the Irish army's commander. In February 1798, he drew up an order sheet for the adjutant generals identifying his subordinates each county, co-coordinating training and supplying as much information as possible to aid in the planning of any subsequent military campaign that the situation would demand. Tilyard writes;

“Lord Edward wanted a complete picture of each county. He needed to know where there were woods that would afford shelter to troops without tents, he demanded information on where men could conveniently fuel, straw and forage, where there were bogs to hide in, towns to stay in, flour mills to find

¹²⁵ Ambrose Madders, *'98 Diary: Ireland in Rebellion*, 1997, 12.

¹²⁶ Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Irish Aristocrat and revolutionary who fought in the American War of Independence. Became a member of the Irish Parliament and joined Grattan's Irish Patriot Party.

food. He also wanted to know if there were government troops stationed in the counties and if the enemy, as he now habitually called both the British army and officials of Dublin Castle, moved about or was stockpiling weapons".¹²⁷

The country was at this stage in a state of smothered, disorganized rebellion with constant sectarian fighting and brutal reprisals by government troops. Many United Irishmen seemed prepared to rise, encouraged by their own propaganda to believe that with or without foreign help they would soon be able to remove the oppressive British government. As developments continued to progress, disaster struck the Leinster Directory of the United Irishmen on March 12th as the British authorities swooped on a meeting held at Oliver Bond's house. Thirteen members of the Directory were arrested and imprisoned as the authorities gathered other incriminating information that would render the remaining identities and operations of the United Irishmen extremely vulnerable.¹²⁸

Had conditions of normality existed, these developments would have surely brought the movement to a complete halt, but spasmodic and spontaneous eruptions all over the country occurred as the rural United Irishmen strove to keep the fabric of their society in cohesion. Powers were soon given to the armed forces which went beyond the restrictions of martial law, as any attitude recognized as being sympathetic to revolution was to be treated with the harshest measures unless they surrendered their arms. As

¹²⁷ Stella Tillyard, *Citizen Lord Edward Fitzgerald, 1763-1798* (London: Vintage, 1998), 242.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

Bishop Caulfield still stood firm on the side of caution, he continued to warn that only the most determined opposition to tumult and oath bound societies was to be entertained. Fr. Murphy continued in his compliance with his Bishop's wishes to have all the parishes surrender arms and come into compliance with the local authorities. A very delicate situation for the people of Wexford, and Boolavogue in particular where United Irishmen activity was brimming, as the handing over of weapons not only rendered the people defenseless against any hostilities that they could expect to experience, it also clearly highlighted them as rebels and made them vulnerable to identification as participants making ready for revolution.

The proclamation of Wexford under martial law in March 1798 coincided with the arrival of the North Cork Militia, and the public face of punishment, as all officers of the regiment were all men with apparent involvement with the authorities and promoted the extension of the Orange Order. Musgrave notes that; "On the 30th of March 1798, all Ireland was put under Martial Law, and officially declared to be in a state of rebellion, by a proclamation from the lord lieutenant and Privy Council of the realm. In this proclamation the military were directed to use the most summary method of repelling disturbances".¹²⁹ Musgrave continues to comment on the introduction of the North Cork Militia to Wexford;

¹²⁹ Edward Hay and Richard Musgrave, *History of the Insurrection of County Wexford A.D. 1798: Including an account of Transactions Preceding that Event, with an Appendix with authentic detail of the conduct of Sir Richard Musgrave with a full refutation of his slander against* (Dublin: Stockdale, 1803), 57.

"The Orange system made no public appearance in the county of Wexford, until the beginning of April, on the arrival there of the North Cork Militia, commanded by Lord Kingsborough. In this regiment, there were a great number of Orangemen, who were zealous in displaying their devices; having medals and orange ribbons triumphantly pendant from their bosoms. It is believed, that previous to this period, there were but few actual Orangemen in the county; but soon after, those whose principles inclined that way, finding themselves supported by the military, joined the association, and publicly avowed themselves, by affirming the devices of the fraternity".¹³⁰

The ensuing period of violence in County Wexford decimated the local communities. Kavanagh describes the impact of the North Cork Militia in Wexford;

"These cruel mercenaries were adepts in the villainous arts by which the most peaceable people are roused into vengeful retaliation; and the unfortunate people amongst whom they came found that even the native yeomen might be exceeded in cruelty. The latter, indeed, soon became emulous imitators of the new comers, and evinced that they lacked not the will to rival them in deeds of ruthless cruelty. Never surely in any civilized country were such scenes beheld as were now enacted under the eyes, and with the sanction, of the English government. The chief actors in those scenes of blood were the infamous North Cork, and to the diabolical ingenuity of their leader must be attributed the invention of the pitch-cap"¹³¹⁻¹³².

¹³⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹³¹ The Pitch-cap was in the shape of a conical cap. Into this cone, boiling pitch was poured and the receptacle was then upturned and pressed down on the prisoners head. The boiling liquid then ran down the face and into the eyes and mouth. The victim was held and when the pitch was cooled the cap was wrenched off taking the hair and scalp.

¹³² Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 71.

The introduction of the North Cork Militia and the methods which they employed to suppress the disturbance in Wexford seem to have been the catalyst that prompted violent response from the people in Wexford.

Despite the violence, Fr. Murphy still held faith in the mercy of the authorities and continued in his pleas to his parishioners to disarm and hand over all weapons to Mountnorris. He worked ceaselessly amongst his people to achieve this, and succeeded in getting many of them to hand over newly forged pikes of various qualities, on the condition that protection was guaranteed in writing by Mountnorris. Fr. Murphy relied on the power of Mountnorris possessed and remained convinced that this man would secure the life and property of any who surrendered his weapons. This was Fr. Murphy's solution and he strove tirelessly to get every weapon in his own parish handed over to the proper authorities. It was blatantly clear to Fr. Murphy that deliberate killing and raids were being carried out over a wide area in county Wexford. To Fr. Murphy's personal concern, there was added the grim determination of the United Irishmen in Boolavogue to retaliate to the indifferent violence being experienced in Wexford. The last restraints on rebellion were withering away, but there remained the apparent stumbling block that the exertion expended by Fr. Murphy to get his parishioners to hand over arms in exchange for written guarantees of protection. The events and atrocities occurring in Wexford during this time compelled Fr. Murphy to seriously consider his position and its full implications. He was not yet a rebel in arms, but developments were increasingly transpiring to ensure that he soon

would be. The event that would solidify Fr. Murphy's position as a rebel leader was the encounter with The Camolin Yeoman Cavalry and Lt. Bookey Harvey at The Harrow on the 26th of May. A fateful night which transformed Murphy from simple Curate to revolutionary leader, Murphy and a small protective group of Boolavogue rebels engaged the Yeomanry in a skirmish, killing Bookey and defeating the Camolin Cavalry.¹³³ A hugely significant event which thrust Fr. Murphy into the rebellion, Bookey was one of the gentry, owner of a mansion at nearby Rockspring, a commissioned officer in the yeoman cavalry, prominent and landed, his death turned Murphy into an outlaw, a rebel insurgent and a wanted man. His life, station and loyalty were now forfeit. He was now a rebel in arms against a monarch to whom he had taken an oath of allegiance, rebels without the means of defending themselves, for he had persuaded the people surrender their arms in return for guarantees of protection that were now not only worthless, but in the nature of the situation, signed death warrants.

¹³³ Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798*, 52.

Chapter Four

The Rising in Wexford

*"It would be better to die like men, than to die like dogs in
the ditches" Fr. John Murphy*

The date set for the rising in Dublin was the 23rd of May 1798; with the primary targets were Trinity College, Parliament House, The Bank and The Custom House. The subsequent objective of the plan was for insurgents in Dublin's surrounding counties, including Dublin, Wicklow and Meath to advance on Dublin city in support of the Dublin rebels. The third element of the plan was that the outer crescent of counties, North Meath extending down to Kildare, Carlow, Wicklow and Wexford would then commence their insurrection. The signal for the rising was to be the interception of the mail coaches leaving Dublin for Munster, Connaught and Ulster. These interceptors objective was to basically sever British communications to the rest of the country, ultimately leaving Crown forces in Dublin isolated and surrounded and thus preventing any troop reinforcements from converging on Dublin providing aid from the major military bases situated in Ulster, Connaught and Munster.¹³⁴

In the days immediately preceding the scheduled date for insurrection, the rebel forces experienced a significant blow as on the 21st of May 1798; the

¹³⁴ Madders, '98 Diary: Ireland in Rebellion, 15.

United Irishmen commander Lord Edward Fitzgerald was arrested and was seriously wounded in the course of his arrest. Another setback was the arrest of John and Henry Sheares in Dublin. Following the arrests, house burnings and torture began to escalate as the authorities' campaign to suppress the imminent revolution gained a renewed impetus.¹³⁵

On Wednesday, 23rd of May, the forces of the United Irishmen in Meath, Dublin, Wicklow and Kildare, in accordance with the agreed plan of attack, assembled at their assigned strategic locations as it had been proposed that the stopping of the provincial mail coaches leaving Dublin was to signal the start of the rebellion. By this stage the government was beginning to make increasing progress infiltrating the hierarchies of the various branches of United Irishmen around the country as it was on this day that the leading United Irish organizer in Wexford, Anthony Perry of Inch was arrested and tortured in Gorey, Co. Wexford by the North Cork militia. Perry, a Protestant, had remained in his local yeomen cavalry unit as a matter of deliberate policy after Catholic members had been dismissed from the ranks. An open display of protest to the ruthless severity of the treatment inflicted by the North Cork Militia had uncovered Perry and he was ultimately remanded.¹³⁶ The Pitch-Cap, was now the primary implement of extracting information, and it was by this torture Perry was coerced to name all the principle leaders of the United Irishmen in Wexford and South Wicklow. A devastating development for the

¹³⁵ Tilyard, *Citizen Lord*, 247.

¹³⁶ Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798*, 43.

Wexford leaders as the government policy was decapitating the rising in Wexford. Furlong writes that;

“The signed revelations by the tortured United Irish chief meant that the administration of the United Irishmen in Wexford was betrayed. Bagenal Harvey, John Colclough, Robert Graham and Thomas Howlett were amongst the several named along with one of the most popular and dominant figures in the county, Edward Fitzgerald of Newpark. The civil and military executives of the conspiracy were exposed, they were now open to arrest, prosecution and conviction”¹³⁷.

Also on the evening of the proposed rising, the United Irish leader Samuel Nielsen was arrested in Dublin. As the leaders of the military campaign were being arrested, the original plan still managed to take place, but with only two mail coaches being stopped, The Northern Mail at Santry and the Munster Mail at The Curragh. In County Dublin, insurgents had gathered at the Naul, Dunboyne, Santry, Rathfarnham, Dalkey, Tallaght and Rathcoole. On the night of May 23rd, the rebellion broke out, generally in Co. Kildare. The principal Kildare leaders were Micheal Reynolds, William Aylmer, George Luby and Hugh Ware. Battles involving hundreds of insurgents were fought at Prosperous and Clane, where Captain Swayne and fifty militia men were killed at Prosperous. At three o’ clock in the morning on Thursday 24th of May, Micheal Reynolds led 2000 insurgents in an attack on Naas. After an hour long battle the attack failed with the death of 300 insurgents. On this day the rebellion spread to North Co. Wicklow with fighting at Ballymore, Straffan, Dunlavin and Baltinglass. The next night,

¹³⁷ Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 44.

1000 insurgents led by Micheal Hayden, attacked Carlow town. Suffering heavy losses, the attack failed. In Co. Wicklow, 28 insurgent prisoners were executed.¹³⁸ The news of the executions spread to South Wicklow and Wexford.¹³⁹

Murphy's defeat of the Camolin Cavalry had ignited the rising in Wexford. As he had been originally opposed to the United Irishmen and their movement and methods, it is unlikely that he could have been operating in tandem with what was occurring elsewhere in the country.¹⁴⁰ Despite Boolavogue being a hive of United Irish activity during the preceding months, Murphy had distanced himself from it preferring to adhere to Bishop Caulfield's anti-revolutionary decrees. The engagement of the Camolin Cavalry and the death of Bookey had now rendered him totally embroiled in the revolutionary effort as a military leader. Aware that the death of Bookey would incur reprisals from the authorities, Murphy immediately took to the task of rearming the Boolavogue rebels. Murphy's efficiency as a military leader was astounding. His decisiveness and clarity as a commander were remarkable considering he had never received any military training and all Murphy controlled was a meagerly armed crowd with no experience in conflicts such as this. The acquisition of arms was now paramount for Murphy and his forces. The 27th of May saw Murphy lead a large party on an attack on Glebe House, near Kilcormack, with the intention of obtaining possession of

¹³⁸ Madders, *'98 Diary: Ireland in Rebellion*, 16.

¹³⁹ Tilyard, *Citizen Lord*, 249.

¹⁴⁰ Fr. Murphy's engagement with the Camolin Cavalry is described in Chapter three.

badly needed arms. Dickson writes that the Rev. Robert Burrowes, who was Rector of Kilmuckridge, had in his possession a considerable armament of rifles and ammunition and his house at Glebe was also protected by a force of around ten yeomen, which were quickly dispatched with.¹⁴¹

Following the acquisition of weapons and the burning of Glebe House, Murphy continued on in the direction of Oulart, eventually arriving at Oulart Hill, Murphy demonstrating his military prowess here realizing the strategic significance of engaging any enemy from an elevated position. Kavanagh accounts for Murphy's movements at this juncture;

"John Murphy's force, considerably augmented, amounting to about 3,000 men, badly armed, indeed, but filled with a determination to conquer or die, set out about mid-day on Sunday, the 27th, for the Hill of Oulart, where they arrived around noon. This course their leader chose, to give the people of the neighboring parishes an opportunity of joining his standard".¹⁴²

It is important to note that the standard of Fr. Murphy was not synonymous with the standard of the United Irishmen. The underlining principles of the United Irishmen included a secular view that Ireland should be governed regardless of religious persuasion. The rising in Wexford was in one sense, a reaction to the sectarian issues that were exasperated by the aggravation of the North Cork Militia. A resounding issue for Murphy and his forces was the terrifying reputation of the North Cork Militia. The corps of Militia was now notorious throughout the county for their ruthlessness and

¹⁴¹ Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798*, 60.

¹⁴² Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 87.

barbarity. Synonymous with Pitch-capping and seen as monsters and savages, there existed a genuine fear that the reputation of the militia alone would be enough to defeat the common insurgent forces. The threat of the North Cork Militia would ultimately generate two reactions, fear and resolve. To this affect, as the Militia approached from Wexford, desertion was not an issue on Oulart Hill. Murphy's battle plan for the confrontation was basic as he employed the topography of the landscape to his advantage.

"Across the brow of the hill where it looks towards the old village of Oulart, about a mile distant, there extends a breast-high ditch, forming a dividing line between two of the small fields into which the cultivated surface of its rounded summit is divided. Behind this convenient breastwork Fr. Murphy stationed all the best armed men of his force. Of this small force the majority had pikes, but others were furnished with no more efficient arms than scythes and pitchforks".¹⁴³

The battle would ultimately transpire as a major victory for the Boolavogue insurgents. Thomas Cloney records the results of the engagement with the North Cork Militia at Oulart Hill;

"Concealed behind the fences of a ditch, while others lay in ambush in a sort of trench, allowed the military to approach within a few yards of their main body, when they rushed suddenly on them and killed with their pikes 195 men and their Major, Lombard, and four other officers; Lieutenant-Colonel Foote, a Sorjeant, two Privates and a Drummer, out of the whole division, only escaping to Wexford, while of the Insurgents only five were killed and two wounded. The number of the peasantry who shared in this victory, scarcely exceeded the number of the slain Militia; no doubt that the advantageous

¹⁴³ Ibid., 89.

ground, the close quarters, and the formidable weapons, of which they made so good a use, contributed to their victory".¹⁴⁴

The Battle of Oulart Hill was a massive event in the Wexford Rising.

The insurgent's victory against the North Cork Militia gave great credibility to the movement in Wexford and it provided the people with a sense of belief and an urgency that was not present before. It also further catapulted Murphy's status as a military leader. Interestingly, an account in Charles Dickson's *The Wexford Rising in 1798, It's Causes and It's Course*, seems to imply that Murphy's role in the Battle of Oulart Hill was somewhat peripheral. The account provided by Dickson is from a participant in the battle, Peter Foley;

"The Reverend John Murphy was our principal leader and indeed to do the gentleman justice, at this time he was but of little use to us. We were all novices in the art of war. Even Mr. Ed Roach, a man of education and of courage, and so far as the discipline of the local cavalry went, he was qualified to command, but he and a few others were engaged in council and preventing desertion. I may say we had no commander but we were well determined to stand together."¹⁴⁵

Despite this account, Murphy's role in the battle of Oulart Hill was undoubtedly substantial as both Kavanagh and Cloney have attributed Murphy's strategic positioning and military proficiency as major contributors to the eventual triumph. His reputation was now growing and the burden of command was now totally assumed as the entire Boolavogue force viewed

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Cloney, *A personal narrative of those transactions in the county Wexford, in which the author was engaged, during the awful period of 1798* (Dublin: James McMillan, 1832), 12.

¹⁴⁵ Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798*, 63.

him as their undisputable leader. One other important result of this encounter was the increased acquisition of weapons, including muskets and ammunition. This well-planned and well-executed engagement by the rebels was the first time in the Rising that a rebel force won a pitched battle making Oulart Hill the most significant defeat of Government forces since the outbreak of the rebellion four days earlier. The Battle of Oulart had two immediate results for the yeomanry. Alarm and despondency was now swelling considerably among the loyalist inhabitants of Wexford as the other result was the intensification of the activity of the yeoman cavalry who scoured the surrounding country on missions of reprisal which was now left unprotected as the most able bodied men had left to fight with the insurgent forces. Ultimately, the actions of the insurgents would incur a zealous campaign of retribution among the yeomanry. The Rev. James Gordon describes rebel movements and intentions after the battle of Oulart Hill. Gordon's loyalist sentiments permeate through his writings on the matter which clearly counter sentiments offered by Kavanagh;

"While the country exhibited a scene of distress and consternation – houses in flames, and families flying on all sides for asylum: the loyalists to the towns, others to the hills, the body of rebels under Fr. John, marched from Oulart, flushed with victory, and perpetually augmented on its way by new accessions. They first took possession of Camolin, a small town six miles westward of Gorey, the loyal inhabitants of which had taken refuge in the latter; and thence advanced to Ferns two miles further, whence the loyalists had fled, six

miles southward to Enniscorthy, whither they were followed by the rebels".¹⁴⁶

Murphy, realizing the importance of momentum and morale continued on in the direction of Enniscorthy, gathering weapons and ammunition along the way and setting up camp on Ballyorrill Hill, commanding an extensive view and a suitable halting ground for resting the men. The capture of Enniscorthy would have been of vital strategic importance to Murphy. Its central location in the county of Wexford could provide a suitable base to launch attacks on border towns such as Bunclody and Gorey. Miles Byrne states that this move by Murphy afforded "a better opportunity to the brave and unfortunate country people to escape from their hiding places and come to join his standard" and that "he was joined by crowds, and amongst them many of those splendid young men who so much distinguished themselves in every action afterwards against the enemies of their country".¹⁴⁷ Kavanagh reflects on Murphy's improvisation and ingenuity in his strategic approach to Enniscorthy;

"Father John, who on every occasion evinced a military genius, suggested that the best plan, and that most likely to be attended with success, was to drive a number of cattle, that were herded in the rear of the column, to the front, and thence to goad them onwards towards their enemy's ranks by a chosen body of pike-men, and that they might themselves safely follow in the rear of the maddened herd. This stratagem was tried and

¹⁴⁶ Sir Richard Musgrave and Rev. James Gordon, *History of the Rebellion in Ireland in the Year 1798, &c. containing an impartial account of the proceedings of the Irish revolutionists, from the year 1872 till the suppression of the rebellion* (Dublin: William Porter, 1801), 111.

¹⁴⁷ Miles Byrne, *Memoirs of Miles Byrne Volume 1* (Dublin: Munsel and Co. Ltd, 1803), 38.

proved completely successful. The Kings troops, completely routed, fled with the utmost precipitation".¹⁴⁸

Throughout May 29th the Wexford rebels maintained their momentum. Their colonels and captains at Vinegar Hill watched with satisfaction as units came in from all over the county. The rebel armies swelled to at least ten thousand men during the day and by evening, all colonels were present, with the exception of those from the very south of the county. However, Bagenal Harvery, the adjutant-general, and two important colonels, Edward Fitzgerald and John Henry Colclough, were still prisoners in Wexford Town. The United Irishmen of Wexford had now taken possession of the entire central half of the county and had strategically isolated Wexford Town between its camp at Vinegar Hill and the Irish Sea.

While developments in Wexford were extremely encouraging in the preliminary days of the rising, importantly, up to this point, in spite of the fact that the Belfast mail coach was the first to be stopped on May 23rd, there was still no military action in Ulster. The Directory in Ulster was experiencing growing splits in its ranks as the more militant and radical factions of the organization in Ulster were demanding immediate military operations. On the 29th of May, however, the Ulster Directory convened to discuss plans of operation. This meeting spiraled into a tempestuous affair between the leadership, who had thus far been very slow to call for a rebellion, and the more radical of the Directory increasingly eager to engage in an immediate

¹⁴⁸ Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 96.

uprising. The militant faction triumphed in the struggle, and supplanted the incumbent leaders by voting in a new Directory. In passing their first resolution, they ordered that the adjutants-general of Antrim and Down should meet the next day to finalize the plans for mobilization in the two counties. Despite General Lake's decommissioning of the Ulster Presbyterians, there still existed a rumbling fear among the authorities in Ulster of a Presbyterian uprising, as they were well-known to have been prevalent among the driving forces of the United Irish movement.¹⁴⁹ The absence of military action in Ulster had not resulted in any complacency on the part of the authorities, as government officials were well aware of the presence of the United Irishmen, not only in Belfast, but also in the surrounding counties in Ulster.

The second week of the rebellion was witnessing further spectacular success for the Wexford rebels as the rebellion continued to unravel in the midlands and the United Irishmen of Ulster continued to hesitate. In Wexford, the central event was the capture of Wexford town, the largest seat and the largest garrison in the county.¹⁵⁰ With Wexford town under rebel control, Wexford would have been the perfect port town for an unopposed French landing. With the evacuation of the British forces out of Wexford, the rebels took possession of the town, leaving the rebel forces in control of the county, excluding a chain of towns around its northern and western perimeter, Gorey, Bunclody, New Ross and Duncannon. The geographical location of these

¹⁴⁹ Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 27.

¹⁵⁰ As the insurgents captured Wexford, they had brokered a deal for the release of Harvey, Fitzgerald and Colclough.

towns is significant. Gorey and Bunclody are border towns with Wicklow and Carlow respectively. New Ross was a gateway to Munster and Duncannon is located in close vicinity to port access. To claim complete military control of the county these towns needed to be secured.

Over the five days between the morning of Thursday 31 May and the evening of Monday 4 June, the rebellion was evolving into an exclusively a Wexford affair. United Irish units were nowhere else in the field apart from the small scattered detachments in the hills of Wicklow and North Kildare as early defeats had battered morale in the early stages. During this period the Wexford men were torn between the initial excitement of the prospect of participating in an influential and significant revolutionary movement, and the period of confusion they experienced once the reality of their situation became apparent and finally to renewed hope once they had triumphed over the government's attempts to crush their insurrection. By the night of June 4th, they were at the pinnacle of their success in military terms; they were also however still completely alone in terms of rebellion. There was still no sign of the French, nor any sign of progress in Ulster.¹⁵¹

By this stage the Wexford rebels had now achieved a feat that in their mind must have compared to the storming of the Bastille in France. The question now facing the primary leaders of the military movement in Wexford was how to proceed with what they had attained. As order was restored to the town United Irish officers called their immense army, now numbering perhaps

¹⁵¹ Madders, *'98 Diary: Ireland in Rebellion*, 25.

fifteen thousand men out to Windmill Hill, a high point on the western edge of the town, where they held a council of war. A command structure was established, with Bagenal Harvey named as Commander-in-chief for the county, with the various United Irish colonels in charge of regiments and battalions. Another decision made was to divide their forces into two separate divisions. Fr. Murphy was to take his division and march them north, towards Gorey and Bunclody, joined by colonels such as Edward Roach, Edward Fitzgerald and Anthony Perry. The other column was to move west, toward New Ross and the Munster gate way, led by Harvey himself, supported by Thomas Cloney, John Kelly and John Henry Colclough.¹⁵² The intention at this point appears to have been to reduce government garrisons around the perimeter of the county and to revive the rebellion further afield by example or even to await contact from the rebel forces they presumed were still in a strong position in the midlands and in Wicklow. The northern division, under Murphy, marched back to Vinegar Hill, part of it camping there, the other part continuing on to Carrigrew. The division under Harvey made less progress, partly because he spent several hours attempting to reassure old loyalists who had not been arrested that they would have a place in the new regime.¹⁵³ A fundamental error appears to have been made by the Wexford War Council in the appointment of Harvey. His ineptitude as a military leader was beginning to become apparent and his indecisiveness was stifling the rebel effort. Harvey

¹⁵² Cloney, *A Personal Narrative*, 29.

¹⁵³ Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798*, 90.

had been a landed Protestant and while his ideals and position made him a valuable asset to the cause, essentially a United Irishman of the Belfast ilk, engulfed by his anti-sectarian and republican values, he was misplaced as a military leader and would have been better served being preserved for the political warfare that would logically follow a successful military campaign. He maintained an air of confidence which translated into complacency as he had been very casual about his preparations for the march west. Concerning Harvey's appointment, Kavanagh reaffirms the insurgency's hesitancy surrounding Harvey's abilities; "Though they had consented to the appointment of Harvey as commander-in-chief, they had formed a true estimate of his capability, and justly placed far more confidence in the man who had often led them to victory, Father John."¹⁵⁴

At this stage, the rebellion was now solely a Wexford operation as government forces had suppressed any uprising in the midlands. Still, the Ulster movement continued to be divided between its officer class, hesitant to make a move, and its rank and file anxious to seize the moment and rise. Attempts in Ulster to ignite a rising by replacing the Directory had so far been in vain, a development that was causing McCracken increased uneasiness.

On June 1st, the Wexford rebels experienced their very first setbacks as the government forces made renewed but tentative attempts at suppression. The cumbersome southern division, which had camped at Taghmon the night before, was slow to leave in the morning and only managed to reach

¹⁵⁴ Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 116.

Carrickbyrne Hill, a point about six miles from New Ross, by evening.

Another example of Harvey's inefficiency, as the importance of New Ross was clearly undervalued and underestimated by the southern division leader.

In comparison, the northern division, with Murphy at the helm was much more decisive. Its Vinegar Hill column, controlled by Mogue Kearns, attacked Bunclody early in the day, but was defeated. Likewise, the Carrigrew column, marching towards Gorey was engaged by a detachment of militia moving south from the town and was also defeated and retreated back to Vinegar Hill to reassess what had been an unexpectedly spirited resistance from government forces.¹⁵⁵ The Council's strategy to divide the forces and attempt to penetrate the county's borders was a good one, but essentially the inefficient delegation of leadership would be a major reason for the lack of progress. The course of events in Ulster ensured that Wexford would continue to be alone in their resistance.

The colonels of the Antrim organization met at Parkgate to discuss their situation. Despite vigorous calls for an immediate rising from among some of the leaders themselves and from rank and file members who had contact with them, they chose caution and dispersed without making a firm decision.¹⁵⁶ It was deemed in Ulster that the Leinster columns had not made adequate progress and therefore news from Leinster was not sufficiently encouraging to take the chance of initiating a rebellion likely to fail.

¹⁵⁵ Seamus S De Val. *Bunclodi: A History of the District down to the beginning of the Twentieth Century* (1966), 127.

¹⁵⁶ Stewart, *Summer Soldiers*, 66.

Essentially, lack of action in Ulster was directly affecting affairs in Wexford.

With the uprising in the midlands suppressed and the roads to Munster and Connaught firmly under government control, the need for a second front was huge. The lack of military movement in Ulster allowed government forces to simply police Ulster without the preoccupation of large scale military engagements. While the revolutionary undercurrent still swept through Belfast, there was still no tangible uprising that required any military engagement, ultimately allowing government forces to concentrate its affairs in Wexford. A rising in Ulster would have created a second front in Ireland and would essentially have diluted government forces in the South, alleviating pressure on the Leinster Column.

Interestingly, in Wexford Town and in the large portions of the county that were under rebel control, a rudimentary system of emergency government was established. A governing Directory was set up and arrangements were made to supply the town and the camps with food and small companies of rebel volunteers served as a police force. Outside the town there was great confusion but the rebels countered this by organizing small parties to guard all the important crossroads and a communication system was established to link what was now functioning as the capital of a sort of Wexford Republic, with its troops and camps several miles away.¹⁵⁷ This development is fascinating as the notion of republicanism and the motivation of a government reform were initially a Northern notion, with the Wexford people more involved with

¹⁵⁷ Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798*, 89.

economic, religious and legislative reform. Coincidentally it was in Wexford that the concept of republicanism was now being freely employed.

As the Ulster rising remained dormant, the 2nd of June would be an important day for the Presbyterian United Irishmen. As Antrim colonels met again to discuss an uprising, the faction insisting on waiting French aid succeeded again. Impatience was growing and as condemnations of cowardice rained in from the militant faction, McCracken seized the initiative and garnered support for rising with or without French help. As McCracken was always against the notion of French intervention he now saw the opportunity to launch an insurrection in the North. It would take him several days to bring his plan to fruition but the tide in favor of rebellion had now finally turned in the region.¹⁵⁸

In Wexford Town, the situation in the country as a whole was becoming clearer. The failure to break through the government strongholds around the county was an ominous sign for the Wexford rebels. In the Southern part of the county, Bagenal Harvey had an army numbering at least ten thousand men ready to launch an attack on New Ross. Again, Harvey's delaying allowed New Ross to receive reinforcements from Waterford. A significant mishap from Harvey as the importance of taking New Ross was strategically imperative to the rebel cause. Harvey's shortcomings are critically examined by Kavanagh;

¹⁵⁸ Stewart, *Summer Soldiers*, 66.

"Harvey, was of all men probably the most unfit for so desperate an enterprise; his figure diminutive, his voice tremulous. He was a Protestant barrister of fortune; good tempered and of good private character; and was selected from being Lord of Bargy Castle and of considerable demesne in the county of Wexford. Of individual courage he had sufficient, but of that manly heroic intrepidity which converts danger into enthusiasm and is indispensable to the leader of such an army and such a cause, he was altogether unsusceptible."¹⁵⁹

It was the day after Lord Edward's death as the insurgents attacked New Ross. Philip Harwood details the battle of New Ross, providing the reasons for its possible success and the reasons for its ultimate failure, writing that initial attempts to rout the town were successful, the Crown forces under General Johnson fleeing the town on two occasions. It was at this stage that the indiscipline of the Irish army saw them loot and riot the town, drinking and scattering in disorderly fashion, encouraging the British forces to regroup and reclaim the town and drive the insurgents back out of New Ross.¹⁶⁰ Serious losses for the insurgent forces were heavily felt. The battle of New Ross was a critical event in the war in Wexford. Had the rebels been victorious there was the possibility of being able to rally United Irishmen in western counties to their cause. A victory in New Ross, coupled with Murphy's victory at Tuberneering the day before, and the prospect of an imminent rising in Ulster would certainly have prolonged the rising and given the rebels a new impetus. New Ross was the clinical battle in opening Munster to the rebel forces. The failure to capture New Ross was an excellent

¹⁵⁹ Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 130.

¹⁶⁰ Harwood, *History of the Irish Rebellion 1798*, 182.

opportunity missed by the rebels. The responsibility for the lack of discipline and order within the ranks of the rebels duly lay with the inadequacy of Harvey as commander and was ultimately replaced as leader of the Western division by Fr. Philip Roche.¹⁶¹ A massive setback for the rebels, victory at New Ross would have added a renewed dimension to the rebellion in Wexford. Kavanagh provides his opinion on the significance of the battle of New Ross;

“The battle of New Ross, with respect to its incidents and extensive results, was one of the most important of the insurrection. Ross is surrounded on three sides by steep hills, and on the fourth by a river, dividing it from the southern counties, and having a long wooden bridge. The possession of Ross, therefore would open a communication with the southern insurgents,¹⁶² who were prepared to rise en masse the moment their friends should occupy that town; and the city of Waterford, and probably the whole of the western and southern counties, would have risen in their favor.”¹⁶³

The Battle of New Ross is also important as it produced more numerous and more brutal atrocities than had been seen in what had already been a brutal war up to this point. The vicious treatment and murdering of wounded soldiers, prisoners and non-combatants after the battle by government soldiers was ultimately met with a similar retaliation by rebel troops. Such merciless atrocities were not the monopoly of government

¹⁶¹ Philip Roche was a curate in Ballyfad, near Gorey, where he came into contact with the United Irishmen. After the outbreak of the Rising Roche was appointed the rank of colonel and after the capture of Enniscorthy he was placed on the organizing committee of the Wexford rebels that were camped on Vinegar Hill.

¹⁶² The Southern Insurgents mentioned here are the rebels situated in Waterford, Tipperary, and Cork. Victory at New Ross would have opened up a channel from Wexford into these counties.

¹⁶³ Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 130.

soldiers as the rebels at Oulart Hill had shown the same propensity to kill prisoners, but rebel parties had never resorted to killing women and children.

This line was crossed after the battle at New Ross as loyalist prisoners detained by rebel forces at Scullobogue were later executed, including women and children. The atrocities that transpired at Scullobogue hardened loyalist sentiment and distanced any Catholic sympathizers that might have existed in the Protestant community. Musgrave records the incident;

"It is an invariable maxim that cowardice and cruelty are closely allied. This was most strongly exemplified by the barbarous conduct of the runaway murderers who fled from the battle of Ross to Scullobogue, where a number of prisoners were confined in a barn to which these savage miscreants set fire, and made every person within its walls, nearly eighty in number, perish in the flames. One hundred and eighty-four are confidently asserted to have been victims on this melancholy occasion, besides thirty-seven shot and piked."¹⁶⁴

Kavanagh makes efforts to justify and explain the motivations of the insurgents at Scullobogue. Both Kavanagh's and Musgrave's history of this time period are in no way impartial. Musgrave's loyalist sympathies contrast starkly with Kavanagh's, a Franciscan monk, influenced by the leadership provided by the Catholic clergy during the rising;

"The burning at Scullobogue has often been cited as an instance of fiendish cruelty. If it proves anything, it is that there were men among the insurgents as cruel and cowardly as amongst their enemies, but their number must have been much smaller in proportion, nor do we find that the insurgent leaders encouraged their followers to the perpetration of such excesses,

¹⁶⁴ Edward Hay and Richard Musgrave, *History of the Insurrection of County Wexford A.D. 1798: Including an account of Transactions Preceding that Event, with an Appendix with authentic detail of the conduct of Sir Richard Musgrave with a full refutation of his slander against* (Dublin. Stockdale, 1803), 156.

but, on the contrary, that they did all in their power to prevent them. For one black deed such as the one in question, we can cite hundreds on the part of the partisans of English rule, committed, not in the madness of passion, but with cold-blooded deliberation."¹⁶⁵

While Musgrave's account is neither neutral nor objective, the protruding result of the massacres was that the ideals of the United Irishmen were now being tested. While death is an inevitable condition of armed conflict, the United Irish values were now being discarded in certain ranks of the Wexford effort. The models of the United Irishmen declared and desired religious freedom and republicanism. Atrocities such as the Sculobogue incident were generated by sectarian attitudes similar to what was being experienced in Ulster between the Defenders and the Orangemen and were ultimately deplored by Harvey and other members of the United Irishmen in Wexford. These events seem to highlight that the rising in Wexford was for the most part stimulated by religious agitations and not predicated on ideals of republicanism such as in Ulster. The reciprocation of indiscriminate violence was now being exerted as chances of expanding the Wexford rebellion were fading. Meanwhile, in Ulster, McCracken and his officers were spreading the word of the impending rising. As developments were promising for the militants, the arrest of Rev. William Steele Dickson, the United Irishmen's adjutant-general in County Down dealt a severe blow to their plans.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 138.

¹⁶⁶ Stewart, *Summer Soldiers*, 67.

On the 6th of June, McCracken and his Ulster United Irishmen finally decided to strike. Their well conceived plan consisted of rebel units mobilizing in their respective districts, meeting at several lager centers and then converging on Antrim town. This would allow them capture important government figures in the county and take a strategically important town from which they could launch a larger attack on Belfast. McCracken assumed that similar mobilizations would take place in other eastern and central Ulster counties and that all United Irish armies would eventually coalesce to march on Dublin and link up with the United Irishmen forces in Leinster. Unfortunately they were only vaguely aware of the setbacks in Dublin and in the midlands but McCracken and his lieutenants seem to have been sufficiently confident of successes elsewhere in the country and of the prospect of a French landing to take what surely looked like a considerable risk at this point. As had happened in the Leinster mobilization, the spy network had succeeded in making the Antrim garrison aware that a rebel attack was imminent.¹⁶⁷

In Wexford Harvey was trying desperately to redeem the situation created by the events at New Ross and Scullabogue. His army had largely melted away and he made attempts to rebuild it by issuing a directive ordering all able-bodied men to report to various rebel camps. It was essentially his effort at a mass conscription in the fashion of revolutionary France but its main consequence was to reveal a leader who realized all was lost unless he

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 69.

could rally his followers to one last desperate effort. Harvey also attempted to ensure that rebel troops would avoid atrocities by decreeing the death penalty for those who murdered prisoners.¹⁶⁸ The Protestant community in Wexford had been beset by the threat of an alleged impending sectarian massacre. The fact that the United Irishmen were non-sectarian and that Harvey himself, as well as other rebel officers were Protestants seem to have done little to quell these rumors. By the evening of Wednesday 6th June, only county Wexford was not in government hands. However, what the establishment had feared above all, an uprising among the Presbyterians in Ulster, was within hours of breaking out. And if there was one thing that might yet save the rebellion at this stage, it was a successful rising in Ulster, especially when a powerful rebel movement was still active in south Leinster.¹⁶⁹

The authorities were very aware of the seriousness of the predicament in Wexford, as all major military forces were directed towards Wexford in an attempt to contain the rebellion. The authorities in Dublin were forced to admit that the policy of containment was proving to be unexpectedly difficult. It was disturbing for them to have to admit its failure so far to suppress a popular rising that was threatening to sever Ireland's connection with England as they were also fearful of the fact that it required only direct intervention by the French, to turn the tide of the rebellion in favor of the United Irishmen. These sentiments are illustrated in a letter written by Lord Castlereagh's to

¹⁶⁸ Cloney, *A Personal Narrative*, 45.

¹⁶⁹ Gahan, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 67.

Thomas Pelham on 8 June 1798; "The rebellion in Wexford has assumed a more serious shape than was to be apprehended from a peasantry, however well organized. Their numbers are very great, their enthusiasm excited by their priests, and the face of the county so broken and enclosed that regular formations are impracticable."¹⁷⁰

On the 9th of June, two weeks after the Battle of Oulart and seventeen days since the risings in Kildare and Meath, the Gorey Hill rebels attacked Arklow in what amounted to their final attempt to win a morale boosting victory and to break out of their county. Had they succeeded, even at this stage, they might still have posed a serious threat to Dublin itself. At the same moment, the Down rebels mobilized and began to take control of the northern and central part of their county. Had they succeeded over the next few days, they might have revived the Antrim rising and might even have managed to march on Dublin from the opposite direction. These events would prove critical for the authorities in Dublin Castle.

The government launched its campaign to crush the Wexford rebellion finally on Saturday 16th June, three weeks after the first rebel mobilization in the county. General Lake approached the challenge with great caution and in its early phases the invasion of the county and the effort to destroy the rebel forces was stunningly successful.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Terence Folley Ed. *Eyewitness to 1798* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1996) 45. Memoirs and correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh, June 8, 1798.

¹⁷¹ Madders, *'98 Diary: Ireland in Rebellion*, 38.

Thursday 21st June would emerge as a decisive turning point in the outcome of events in Wexford. At this stage in the uprising, the only real hope lay in the success of a French landing to sufficiently supply sorely needed arms and ammunition and, most importantly, to provide experienced leadership. As it was believed that a landing was imminent, it was contrived that a final battle with the superior English forces was to be avoided until aid arrived. Despite the delay of the French, the fact remains that the decision to engage the English at Vinegar Hill was a fatal mistake. The eventual defeat at Vinegar Hill and the ensuing retreat resulted in the scattering of insurgent forces, extreme casualties and a significant rise in desertion rates as this defeat signaled the virtual demolition of insurgent forces. Significantly, Thomas Cloney provides an opinion that might have affected the outcome of the battle of Vinegar Hill. He writes in his personal narrative;

"Had a proposal been acceded to which was made on Vinegar Hill the evening before the battle by some of the leaders to pour down on Lake's army at Solsborough, where in consequence of extraordinary fatigue, by forced marches, they lay prostrate on the ground and unable to offer any formidable resistance, they would certainly have defeated they General, for several officers who were there with General Lake assured me, if they had been attacked that night from Vinegar Hill, they must have been inevitably destroyed."¹⁷²

Another reason for the eventual defeat at Vinegar Hill was the failure on the part of the insurgents to make appropriate preparations to fortify and solidify their position, a situation which had caused Fr. Murphy great alarm

¹⁷² Cloney, *A Personal Narrative*, 71.

when he arrived at Vinegar Hill. The insurgents had occupied the hill for three weeks previous to June 21st and amazingly, the question of defense had not been dealt with. Miles Byrne writes of his surprise when he arrived at Vinegar Hill;

"Scarcely anything had been done to make it formidable against the enemy; the vast fences and ditches which surround it on three sides and which should have been leveled to the ground for at least a cannon shot, or half a mile of distance, were all left untouched. The English forces availing themselves of these defenses advanced from field to field, bringing with them their cannon which they placed to great advantage behind and under the cover of the hedges and fences, whilst our men were exposed to a terrible fire from their artillery and small arms without being able to drive them back from their strongholds in those fields."¹⁷³

Another factor which affected the outcome and clearly would have been of great concern to Fr. Murphy and the rest of the insurgent leaders, was the fact that Philip Roche had not yet arrived and would not arrive until the following day, his arrival coinciding with the resultant retreat from the battlefield by the rebel forces.¹⁷⁴

When this incredibly uneven encounter came to an end, the insurgents decided to retreat along the Wexford road towards Darby's Gap. In the course of the retreat, hundreds of fleeing rebels, women and children were slaughtered by pursuing English troops. The massacre was intense and as Cloney describes, the carnage was brutal and horrifying;

¹⁷³ Miles Byrne, *Memoirs*, 129.

¹⁷⁴ Roche was in command of the Southern division and was late in arriving from the south to join the battle at Vinegar Hill.

"The dead and dying were scattered promiscuously in the fields, in the dykes, on the roads, or wherever chance had directed their last steps. In one place we beheld some men with arms and some with legs off, and others cruelly mutilated in various ways; horses with their necks broken, and their cars with women and children under them, either dead or dying in the road and ditches, where in their precipitate flight they had been upset."¹⁷⁵

The situation in Wexford was now petering on hopelessness for the rebels. The amount of casualties suffered during the Vinegar Hill engagement had not only pierced their military numbers, but morale was now extremely low. Moreover, the defeat at Vinegar Hill had robbed the insurgent forces of one of their primary encampments, as insurgent forces had been situated there for the three weeks since the outbreak of the conflict. Also, the central location of Enniscorthy offered them a strategic foothold in an important part of the county. Now as the rebel forces retreated south in the direction of Wexford town, their chances of achieving their objective of penetrating the county borders and spreading the rebellion to other regions of the country looked increasingly bleak.

It was during the course of the retreat that Fr. Murphy decided that would have significant implications. As the depleted group neared Wexford town, Murphy decided to take his faction of Boolavogue followers and split from the main group which was being led by Edward Fitzgerald and Anthony Perry. Murphy had been joined by Myles Byrne in his castigation of

¹⁷⁵ Cloney, *A Personal Narrative*, 72.

Fitzgerald for not just his lack of foresight in his decision to engage the British at Vinegar Hill, but also his forces lack of diligence in preparing the defenses surrounding the Hill to an appropriate level. Essentially, Murphy's confidence in the other leaders was beginning to seriously wane. Meanwhile, the chain of command in Wexford town was unraveling under the pressure of British progress. Thomas Dixon and a band of the more militant faction of the rebels were challenging for power in the hierarchy of the rebels in Wexford and testing the authority of Keogh. Dixon and his followers demanded the full extermination of loyalist prisoners and any soul with loyalist sympathies. As Keogh and his followers were now considering the prospect of negotiation with the British authorities this viewpoint was treated with indignation by Dixon which ultimately resulted in the massacre and murder of loyalist prisoners on Wexford Bridge.¹⁷⁶ Now, as at Scullobogue, the ideals and principles of the United Irishmen that had been imported from Ulster and advocated by such men as Bagenal Harvey were discarded by the extreme radicals of the movement that demanded retribution for previous atrocities. The systematic torture and murder of these prisoners damaged the credibility of the movement. One of the original causes of the rising in Wexford has been viewed as a reaction to the brutality of the British, these actions by Dixon and his followers at Wexford Bridge now dragged the cause down to a level to what had motivated the uprising by repeating the actions of the British. Such travesties were deplored by Fr. Murphy and were openly denounced as his

¹⁷⁶ Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798*, 154.

hope now was that those responsible for such barbarity would eventually be held accountable. At this critical juncture, with the rebel forces depleted and the integrity of the cause placed in jeopardy by the actions of Dixon, Fr.

Murphy still pushed on in the hope that he could pierce the county's borders and reignite the rebellion in Leinster.¹⁷⁷

Murphy's mission northward would yield success. His following were extremely loyal and to this end they would faithfully follow him wherever he desired. His word was now gospel to them as his leadership had allowed is status among the troops to elevate from admiration and respect to reverence. He was the personification of the uprising and the rebel force that he commanded had dutifully placed all of their hope in him and his decisions.

Kavanagh writes of Murphy's influence over the insurgent forces;

"Father John continued to be the idol of the brave men whom he led, and who admired in him the perfection of their own courage. Always fighting in the foremost ranks, ever ready to cheer and rally those who wavered in the fight, skilful and cool after the battle after the battle to improve the victory, kind to console and warm with his own heroic ardor the humblest of his followers when their spirits, less lofty and less firm than his, drooped under the calamities of unequal war. His matchless daring excited the admiration even of the bravest. The men fought like lions in his presence, and seeing him fearlessly exposing himself where danger was most rife, they were emulous of imitating a leader of evinced such a noble contempt for the perils of the fight."¹⁷⁸

He marched forward with a determined and renewed spirit.

Significantly, he was able to plot a route north which would allow him to

¹⁷⁷ Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 140.

¹⁷⁸ Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 148.

break government posts and advance into the county of Kilkenny with the hope that the sight of a spirited insurgent army would rally further rebels in neighboring counties rimming Wexford. His comprehensive victory at Castlecomer gave the advance added hope. It was at this point that Fr. Murphy's forces were physically, emotionally and psychologically spent. As they marched from Castlecomer in the direction of Laois, the fatigue of Murphy's men was developing into a serious hindrance to their advance. It was with this situation that Murphy decided that it was prudent to reach Laois and claim a strategic military position that would allow the rebels to recuperate safely. Although the march from Castlecomer was not impeded by any enemy, the exhaustion of the rebels had made it necessary to halt the march sooner than was expected. Murphy's original plan to reach Athy in county Laois that day was seen as imperative as he had been made aware of the presence of thousands of rebels that were eager to join the standard of Fr. Murphy.¹⁷⁹ Had this been achieved, then Murphy would have been successful in uniting the most prominent element of the southeast movement with an apparently considerable force in the midlands. Murphy's primary mission now was to rearm his battalion. This made the reaching of Athy exceptionally important as any engagement with cavalry would predictably decimate his forces and essentially end his campaign.

Fr. Murphy's advance would soon come to an abrupt halt. As his entrance in Laois was met with the prospect of additional numbers of rebels

¹⁷⁹ Miles Byrne, *Memoirs*, 167.

arriving to fight under Murphy's standard, ironically it would be the desertion of his newly acquired Collier force that would impede his progress. The Collier force had joined his ranks in Kilkenny, a significant force which had invigorated Murphy by their enthusiastic participation, and without which the victory at Castlecomer might not have been attained. This desertion seriously battered the hopes of Murphy's forces, which were now battle weary and exhausted from the previous days exertions. It was here that Murphy resigned himself to a harrowing fate. Disillusioned and demoralized by the lack of rebellious zeal from his compatriots in the midlands of Leinster, and ultimately isolated and threatened by the prospect of growing British military presence in the area deployed to halt Fr. Murphy's progress, Murphy ordered his regiment to withdraw to the Blackstairs Mountains, through the Scullogue Gap. Scouting reports had informed him of British forces that had surrounded his camp during the night. This news had convinced Murphy that any efforts to progress to Athy were now hopeless. Murphy's decision to separate himself from the group here seems extraordinary. Leaving Myles Byrne in charge of the rebel forces that had so staunchly given Murphy their support, entrusting him with their freedom and their lives.¹⁸⁰

Murphy had now placed himself in an extremely vulnerable position. He made his way along the foot of the Blackstairs Mountains, avoiding the roads and main highways, being granted shelter and provision by loyal homesteads along the way. It is difficult to ascertain for Murphy's decision to

¹⁸⁰ Miles Byrne, *Memoirs*, 170.

part with his regiment here. Miles Byrne, writing with clear deference for his leader, reveals his own confusion surrounding Murphy's reason for detaching himself from the group, as he suggests that it is unaccountable how he would become separated from the main body of forces as all of their movements were decided on by Murphy. Byrne was convinced that Murphy would have rejoined the group at the Scullogue Pass.¹⁸¹ Mystery surrounds Murphy's movements at this point. As he had planned the successful passing through Scullogue Gap, he was not present to lead them through. His absence had been the fodder for much debate. Many had believed that he had been killed in a skirmish while retreating. While Furlong suggests that Murphy became separated from the group in the early morning fog as the main body of the group retreated, Kavanagh confirms that the loss of Murphy's leadership had severely and irreparably damaged the rebel forces.¹⁸²

Murphy would ultimately meet his fate. On 26 June, Murphy and Gallagher were captured near Kilcomney Hill. Instantly identified as a Catholic priest, he was remanded and brought to Tullow in County Carlow, the garrisoned town under the authority of General Duff. Hastily tried and convicted, both Murphy and Gallagher were sentenced to death. Efforts to extract information from both were in vain. Flogged and tortured, Murphy refused to concede any intelligence that would betray his cause. Interestingly, Murphy's tormentors were ignorant of the fact that they were holding one of

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁸² Rev. Patrick Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 215.

the primary leaders of the rebellion in Wexford. Clearly identified as a Catholic priest, Murphy's role and identity as commander of one of the most successful regiments of the insurgent army was never uncovered by the Yeomen at Tullow during Murphy's persecution and subsequent execution.¹⁸³ In what seems to be in typical fashion, Murphy's integrity and determination was never compromised during his torture. Furlong's deferent account of Murphy's last moments paint a harrowing but heroic picture of what Murphy was forced to endure at Tullow as the price of his endeavors;

"John Murphy was then made fast. His rags were ripped off him. Some of the yeomen proposed that he be burned alive, but most of them were content that he be flogged in the hope that he might yet have information of value to offer. Soon the swish cracks of the whip rained down on his bare back. The yeomen might as well have been flogging a corpse. They took it in turns to flog him, but it made no difference. John Murphy had nothing to say. Then they did him a great mercy. They hanged him until the life left his body."¹⁸⁴

Fr. Murphy's body was eventually cut down and placed in a barrel of pitch and set on fire on the doorstep of a local Catholic family in Tullow, an inglorious end to one of the most prominent leaders of the 1798 effort. Amazingly, Fr. John Murphy, the most wanted, the most notorious insurrection leader, likened by Sir Richard Musgrave to Atilla, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, was executed in the center of Tullow without being

¹⁸³ An account of Fr. Murphy's arrest and execution is provided in a special bicentenary booklet that has been reproduced during the Comoradh '98 campaign in Wexford in the summer of 1998 to commemorate the 1798 Rising. The source is listed in the bibliography as Bicentenary of the 1798 Rising, and the committee members which produced this source are listed.

¹⁸⁴ Furlong, *Fr. John Murphy of Boolavogue*, 162.

recognized or identified by the enemies in whose hands he was captive. His victories at Oulart Hill, Tuberneering and his foray into Carlow and Kilkenny mark him out as the prime military stalwart of the 1798 rebellion. Fr. Murphy was originally, a reluctant participant simply wishing to comply with the vows of his ordination. Abstaining from the influences of the United Irishmen prior to the rising in Wexford, Murphy was rapidly catapulted into the conflict as a man of military ability, influential leadership, compassionate disposition and stellar determination and ambition. No leader commanded the hearts and minds of the local people on a par with Murphy. Fearless and dedicated in his mission to liberate his people, Murphy's contribution to the campaign in Wexford in the summer of 1798 is one of the great legacies of the entire revolutionary effort.

Chapter Five

Rising In Antrim

"These are the times that try men's souls" Tom Paine

McCracken's health had suffered following his internment at Kilmainham and after this struggle with illness, McCracken plunged himself back into preparations for rebellion in the north as revolutionary attitudes were becoming increasingly anxious for action. The United Irish leaders had recovered from the bitter disappointment at the defeat of the French fleet that had set out to aid them the previous October and they were cheered by the acquittal and release in January of a number of State prisoners brought forward for trial in Dublin. This was regarded as a victory over the government. As word arrived from France that another expedition was making preparations to land in April 1798, the Ulster Directory of the United Irishmen ordered their forces to remain in a constant state of readiness in anticipation of a rising at the end of February.¹⁸⁵ At this time, McCracken was in Dublin to maintain contact with the National Executive there and report back any developments that were taking place.¹⁸⁶

As attitudes in the North grew increasingly satisfied that the Dublin Directory had recovered sufficiently from this setback and was confident of a

¹⁸⁵ Gahan, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 57.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 27.

French invasion later in the spring, the mercantile element of the northern directors were less resilient and still decided on the side of caution. These were the type of people which McCracken was skeptical about from the onset, feeling their commercial interests would dilute and blind their republicanism. For McCracken, these merchant members of the United Irishmen did not possess the necessary dedication or commitment to achieve success. Tensions grew within the ranks of the northern leadership, and as the National Directory had taken the decision to initiate a rising regardless of French intervention, the Ulster council consequently voted out of office its own Directory for having failed to take any action to adequately prepare the rebel forces for insurrection, and ordered their Adjutant-Generals to prepare a plan of campaign.¹⁸⁷

McCracken returned to Belfast reporting the final plans of the National Directory, informing the Ulster leaders that the signal for simultaneous risings all over Ireland was the stopping of the mail coaches to Belfast, Athlone, Cork and Limerick on the 23rd May. Interestingly, on the 21st May, all government army forces in Belfast were summoned to attend a concert in the Assembly Rooms at The Exchange. McCracken proposed the plan to surround the Exchange, which was accessible from the streets on all four sides, and seize the officers as hostages. This plan, if executed successfully, would have paralyzed the military in the north, but the Belfast leaders refused to act.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Madden, *The United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times Vol 1*, 291.

¹⁸⁸ Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 28

This decision was indicative of the ineffectuality and indecisiveness of the Northern leaders. A considerable opportunity lost, an attack on the ill-prepared army forces would have given the northern effort a great initiative and would have granted them the control of a major strategic point in the north.

The seizure of the mail coaches at Santry, Naas, Lucan and the Curragh did little to motivate the northern leaders to make a move. By now the men of Down were ready for action and only waited for assurances of cooperation from Antrim. McCracken, Deputy for the chief of the Antrim Defenders, was well aware of the impatience festering within the people. He knew the people were aggravated to the point of desperation; otherwise it is likely he would himself have counseled caution. Fitzhenry quotes McCracken, "If it had not been for the free quarters and the flogging, there would have been no rebellion after all, for it is not easy to get people to turn out of their comfortable homes, if they have any comfort in them".¹⁸⁹ On the 3rd June McCracken's appointment as Adjutant-General for the Antrim division was made official. The 7 June was fixed for the rising in Antrim and Down and this McCracken adhered to. He had three days to prepare his plans, circulate them to his colonels and make contact with the United Irishmen of Down. Jonathon Bardon writes of the situation among the northern rebels at this time in his *A History of Ulster*;

"The northern revolutionaries were utterly disorganised when the insurrection began in the south on the night of the 23 May. Even when the peasantry of Kildare, Carlow and Wexford

¹⁸⁹ Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*, 115.

swept to victory, the Ulster leaders could not agree to act; and it was only when Henry Joy McCracken arrived from Dublin that the most determined decided to rise on 7 June."¹⁹⁰

With the arrest of Rev Steele-Dickson, the Adjutant-General of Down, McCracken found himself as the Commander-in-Chief of the United Irishmen army in Ulster the day before the rising was to commence. All of these developments in the days immediately preceding the designated date of insurrection clearly display a state of confusion and disorganization among the military operations of the northern army.¹⁹¹

He sent his plan by courier to the colonels of Antrim and Down. The town of Antrim was to be his chief objective, as it was the primary communications hub of the British in Ulster because it commanded communications with Down, Tyrone and Donegal, and most significantly, the governor of Antrim, Lord O'Neill was to meet all the magistrates there that day and their capture would have been a masterstroke as it would help neutralize the officers of the authorities. Simultaneous attacks were to be made on Randalstown, Ballynahinch, Saintfield, Newtownards and Portaferry. Each colonel with five hundred men under his command, was to seize the most readily accessible British military post and sever it from communications by leaving armed parties to prevent dispatches, advance to Donegore Hill, just north of Antrim to reinforce McCracken, who was himself occupied assembling the troops at Killead, Templepatrick, Carmoney and Donegore and

¹⁹⁰ Bardon, *History of Ulster*, 232.

¹⁹¹ Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 34.

lead the attack on Antrim.¹⁹² The lack of any experienced military leaders in the Ulster rising contributed significantly to the eventual outcome. The attack on the Antrim aimed at severing communications had strategic importance, but McCracken had no intention of attempting an assault on his home town of Belfast, now the second largest garrison in the country and the original focal point of the revolutionary drive that motivated the rising.¹⁹³

The efficiency of British infiltration through its network of informers again handed Nugent the initiative as three United Irish colonels betrayed the entire plan to General Nugent as the messenger dispatched to Munro in County Down also proved unfaithful. Despite this, McCracken's campaign very nearly succeeded. Had McCracken received a command post earlier in the year it is very possible that an Irish Republic would have been declared in Ulster, most probably centered in Antrim town and would have made a considerable effort at maintaining its existence. McCracken issued the following orders to the Army of Ulster, "Tomorrow we march on Antrim, drive the garrison at Randalstown before you, and haste to form a junction with the commander in chief...Henry Joy McCracken, *The First Year of Liberty*, 6th June, 1798."¹⁹⁴

On Thursday 7 June, the United Irishmen in Ulster finally rose. The first action took place at Larne on the Antrim coast, about twenty miles from Belfast. Local rebels mobilized and executed a surprise attack on Larne's

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁹³ Bardon, *History of Ulster*, 56.

¹⁹⁴ Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*, 119.

unprepared garrison early in the morning. The soldiers were soon driven back into the barracks in the center of the town where they held out for several hours and eventually managed to retreat safely to Carrickfergus ten miles from Belfast. The Larne rebels then marched out in the direction of Antrim town and were joined by other units which had neutralized the garrisons of towns nearby.¹⁹⁵ Jimmy Hope gives his opinions on how events had transpired preceding the Ulster rising;

“The South had been forced into resistance on the 21st of May preceding, but the North had been kept inactive until the beginning of June by the men appointed to command; whether from prudence, cowardice, or concert with their opponents, is best known to themselves. McCracken, who was one of the first founders of the Union, and the only one who was not then in the power of the enemy, drew up and signed the fighting orders for the 7th of June, and sent them to the offices who had been appointed, and were expected to direct the movements of the people, but they declined to act”.¹⁹⁶

The consternation in the North among the leaders of the Ulster rebels was really quite unexplained. As Mary McNeill suggests, the North had been the epicenter of the entire republican movement and for them to be so unprepared for military action was unacceptable to people such as McCracken and Hope.

McNeill writes;

“To even the most unsympathetic the poignancy of the situation must be apparent. That the North – cradle in Ireland of ideals of freedom and justice far in advance of general acceptance – the home of men willing before an others to lay down their lives to attain them – the Province that had provided the pattern of military preparedness – that the north should at

¹⁹⁵ Stewart, *Summer Soldiers*, 130.

¹⁹⁶ Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 47.

this critical moment present a spectacle of paralyzed chaos, is almost unbelievable."¹⁹⁷

By early that morning larger rebel columns were formed at meeting points all over the central and southern parts of the county. They attacked and overwhelmed government forces at Randalstown and Ballymena and by afternoon were converging in large numbers on Donegore Hill overlooking Antrim town, McCracken's main objective for the day. By mid-afternoon he had about 4,000 troops assembled on the hill and this was by far the most impressive rebel mobilization to take place in the rebellion up to then as the Wexford rebels at Kilthomas and Oulart did not exceed 1,000 on May 27th.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, the northern rebels had been extraordinarily efficient in their conduct and relatively restrained in their treatment of prisoners. This was a behavior that would contrast starkly with developments in Wexford as scenes such as Scullobogue would not occur in the North.

However, despite initial successes, the attempt to seize Antrim town turned into a disaster. Rebel units were still on their way towards the town when McCracken decided to attack with the force he already had. An error in judgment from McCracken as a larger force would have allowed him to surround Antrim instead of concentrating his attack on a single approach. The garrison of about 300 men put up stiff resistance but they were finally forced back, being eventually rescued from rout by a detachment of dragoons. At one

¹⁹⁷ McNeill, *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken*, 171.

¹⁹⁸ Gahan, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 72.

point the dragoons themselves began to retreat but the Randalstown rebels arriving in the town at this stage and seeing the dragoons rushing towards them thought they were charging rather than retreating and began to flee in disorder. The setback had a domino effect. Seeing the Randalstown column broken, some of McCracken's men lost their resolve and when more government forces sent by General Nugent arrived, they too faltered and were driven back out of the town, retreating to Donegore Hill. Word of the reverse spread rapidly and by nightfall many of the units coming into Antrim town from outlying areas turned about and dispersed to their homes, thinking the cause was lost. The initial advance on Antrim was decisive and direct. The rebels descended on the town with purpose and belief.¹⁹⁹ Ultimately, the resilience, professionalism and fortitude of General Nugent's forces proved too strong and the rebel advancement disintegrated. Madden writes; "McCracken's conduct in the engagement mainly contributed to the success of the first attack. In an hour after entering the town he was master of the town".²⁰⁰ Unfortunately for the northern rebels at Antrim, this level of success could not be maintained. Luke Teeling, a participant in the conflict gives an account of the bravery of Hope's "Spartan Band", in the battle of Antrim. The Spartan Band was the name given to Hope's regiment;

"Our division still maintained its position, which, from its determined and heroic courage, McCracken had designated "The Spartan Band". This was commanded by the faithful Hope, a man whose talents were far above his fortunes, and

¹⁹⁹ Harwood, *History of the Irish Rebellion 1798*, 207.

²⁰⁰ Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 47

whose fidelity, as well on this occasion as in subsequent calamities of his country, would have honored the days of ancient chivalry."²⁰¹

That evening, the garrison in Antrim began a campaign of terror like those which had already taken place many times in the South, swiftly executing anyone on suspicion of having rebel sympathies and summarily discarding their bodies in mass graves.

Significantly, Catholic participation in the Antrim and Derry risings was minor. Catholics, unlike the rising in Wexford, had not joined the ranks of the military forces in the North in large numbers and ultimately Presbyterians constituted the greater mass of the rebels. Despite this, the United Irishmen had forged alliances with the Defenders in some areas and at Randalstown a large Defender contingent marched alongside the Presbyterians. Elsewhere the Catholic population, although it had been marginally involved in the movement in the North, remained aloof once the rising started, most likely influenced by the threat of reprisals in the event of failure. This was one of the major results of the campaign of oppression and intimidation inflicted on the Catholic communities by the Orange men. Consequently, the first major republican movement in Ulster remained essentially a Presbyterian affair which Catholics, for the most part, avoided. This was an important consequence as the authorities in the North had always relied on a religious divide between Catholics, Presbyterians and Protestants to maintain their grip

²⁰¹ Ibid., 39.

over the masses in Ulster. The lack of major Catholic participation in the Ulster rising was a major factor in its eventual failure.

While McCracken's Antrim strategy seemed sound, concentrating all of his energies on Antrim neglected other possibilities around the county. The gathering of the government magistrates in Antrim on the 7th made Antrim a very attractive target, but a glaring oversight by McCracken remains.

Ballymena was a smaller town, not as strongly garrisoned; it lay just ten miles north of Antrim as it was also situated in an area that was extremely sympathetic to the rebel cause. A.T.Q. Stewart comments on this in his book, *The Summer Soldiers*;

"In concentrating all their attention on the strategic importance of Antrim both the rebels and the army had overlooked the importance of Ballymena, just ten miles farther north. Ballymena, the 'middle town', was flanked on the east by a number of districts with a strong Volunteer tradition, and there was an unexpectedly high turnout of insurgent levies, which were able to occupy the town, and, over the next two days, establish a crude form of republican government, through a committee of public safety on the French model".²⁰²

The establishment of a provisional Republican government in Ballymena, buttressed by Volunteer support in the area would have created a situation similar to what developed in Wexford town when that town was taken by the southern rebels.

As the day ended the rebels had managed to take possession of most of county Antrim. However they had not followed up their mobilization in Derry

²⁰² Stewart, *The Summer Soldiers*, 121.

with any military successes and they had failed disastrously to take Antrim town, the key to McCracken's strategy. At this point, General Nugent, the government commander in the North had decided to keep his forces concentrated in and around Belfast and had sent out far fewer reinforcements than available towards the rebel held areas. As a result, in spite of the dispersals that had already taken place, there was every chance that the Antrim rebels might soon regain momentum and once again threaten Antrim town and even Belfast.²⁰³ From General Nugent's perspective though, the fact that no rebellion broke out in county Down on June 7th was important. By this time, the county's United Irishmen colonels had all been arrested along with William Steele Dickson, thus neutralizing the United Irishmen in that area and controlling any threat from the southern part of Ulster. This would be significant for McCracken, as his ultimate aim was to eventually march south and join with the rebels in the South. Despite the fact that his forces had been decimated at Antrim, the actuality that southern Ulster was under government control obviously made this objective extremely difficult to achieve.

In Dublin Castle, Lord Camden and General Lake had maintained their attention focused on Wexford, as the situation in the North had not been sufficiently threatening to require a transfer of focus to the North. In the South of the county important changes took place in the command structure. Edward Roche was to replace Harvey as commander in chief of the southern forces as Harvey had proved an inadequate selection as a military leader, and Fr. Philip

²⁰³ Gahan, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 72.

Roche was to replace Harvey as commander of the Carrickbyrne division. Fr.

Roche's task was solely to coordinate the military effort, which was beginning to falter and rapidly issued a proclamation requiring that all Wexford people take up arms and fight in the name of liberty.²⁰⁴ This suggests that he no longer saw the Wexford rebels as part of the larger United Irishmen movement but rather as fighting alone; hence the more centralized command structure and the call to arms on behalf of an ideal.

On June 8th, the rebellion in county Antrim, in spite of its impressive efforts the day before, displayed serious signs of unraveling. General Nugent had a clear and unambiguous understanding of the circumstances of the rebels, as his declaration of an amnesty for rebel participants who disarmed, promising that only the leaders would be held accountable, had handed him a significant incentive. This, in combination with the previous day's disorder and confusion drastically weakened McCracken of any initiative he had gained. A second assault on Antrim town looked less likely as rebel camps all over the southern part of the county were paralyzed and in some cases were even beginning to dissolve, as rebel forces in Ulster were at this stage no more than a scattered mess.²⁰⁵ Nugent's amnesty was too attractive to rebel who now struggled to see any promise in further military operations. Due to mass arrests of United Irish colonels in Down, this lack of leadership resulted in the failure of any rebel mobilization in other parts of Ulster, including Down. In

²⁰⁴ Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty*, 210.

²⁰⁵ Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 390.

an ironic repetition of the Leinster rebellion, the United Irishmen of one region were preparing to risk all in open rebellion just as the tide was turning against their companions who had already risen in another, as Henry Munro was making valiant efforts to provide much needed leadership and organization to the rebels in the eastern part of county Down. Madden writes in his memoirs of Henry Munro;

“Munro was declared Adjutant-General of the men of Down, with the acclamation of the multitude. Munro immediately proceeding to Ballinahinch, and making the latter his headquarters, in conformity with the views of McCracken, whose object was to gain possession, simultaneously, of the most important towns of Down and Antrim, and by this means to open and maintain a communication with the insurgent forces in Wexford, Carlow and Kildare.”²⁰⁶

Sunday the 10th of June is the day that is remembered as Pike Sunday in Co. Down. The rebellion in Down began at Saintfield, under Munro, in the middle of the county, when an insurgent unit attacked the town and forced the small garrison to withdraw to Belfast. From there word of the rising spread rapidly to the rest of the eastern part of the county and by evening rebel detachments had taken possession of Newtownards which had also been abandoned by its garrison. Other rebel units had managed to mobilize in the Ards peninsula and had launched an unsuccessful attack on Portaferry. As night fell, the rebel forces in Down were still rather scattered and uncoordinated but they had already taken possession of much of the northern and eastern part of the county. The government forces had offered little

²⁰⁶ Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 229.

serious opposition since Nugent was anxious to keep a firm grip on the area surrounding Belfast.²⁰⁷ Had the Antrim rebels not steadily dispersed during the day, the threat from Down would have looked far more formidable. As it was, it still amounted to a serious challenge to the northern commander, given that the Down insurgents would block his access to Dublin were they to succeed. At this stage, rebel units were beginning to mobilize in the southern part of the county, expecting to join in the march on Dublin in the next few days.

In north Wexford the rebel army marched off Gorey Hill, making its way toward Arklow, arriving in front of General Needham's trenches, at the same time that the Down rebels were seizing Saintfield and spreading the word to rise in the parishes. The rebel forces opened their attack on Arklow with a small artillery bombardment that did little damage, then throwing their forces simultaneously at the eastern and western ends of the town. The attackers did not make their way into the town itself, apart from some units that threatened the bridge from the eastern entrance, but fierce fighting developed along the western and southern perimeter where General Needham's men were well dug in. Several mass assaults on this part of the defenses failed to break through. The battle ebbed to and fro and with Needham planning an evacuation the garrison managed to hold firm.²⁰⁸ The Wexford rebels had failed to take a vital town once again. The defeat was as

²⁰⁷ T. Packenham, *The Year of Liberty: The Great Irish Rebellion of 1798* (Dublin: Phoenix House, 1992), 72.

²⁰⁸ Miles Byrne, *Memoirs*, 105.

devastating as New Ross but the Gorey Hill division had not tasted defeat up until that point, and as Charles Dickson writes; “The failure at Arklow was the beginning of the end. Thereafter the isolation and encirclement of County Wexford proceeded without serious opposition.”²⁰⁹

The battle at Arklow was the last major offensive operation launched by either Wexford division. From this point on, the Wexford rebels would adopt a much more cautious and essentially defensive posture. This was a sensible strategy in the circumstances. For Lord Camden and General Lake there existed two conditions that needed to be fulfilled before they would eventually move against Wexford; rebellion had to be crushed elsewhere and reinforcements had to arrive from England.

These setbacks at Arklow and Antrim had made it unlikely that the rebels could do much without some form of foreign intervention and aid. A small French expedition was preparing to sail to Ireland at this point and Wolfe Tone was to accompany it. However, it would not be ready for weeks yet and in the meantime Bonaparte had long since consigned his Irish strategy away from priority and was sailing with his fleet to Egypt. The reality now was that whatever revolutionary forces in Ireland were to achieve they would have to achieve it alone. Oliver Know comments on this situation in his book;

“The reported death of the noble fellow Fitzgerald, and the failure of the North to break into coordinated rebellion, produced in Tone an unusual lowness of spirits. He was also coming to realize that Napoleon was not, after all, going to mount any major expedition to Ireland. There would be forays,

²⁰⁹ Dickson, *The Wexford Rising 1798*, 134.

yes, but nothing of the scale to bring true Tone's dream of independence: no great military campaign. The East was now in Napoleon's eye: Egypt or even the great prize of India."²¹⁰

The next week was to see the collapse of the Ulster rebellion. The Antrim rising was now over and the rebels in county Down were still scattered in several concentrations all over the county. Rebel units had taken possession of Bangor on the coast about ten miles from Belfast, giving them control of most of the northeastern part of the county, but as large numbers of insurgents flocked to the rebel camp near Saintfield, they were now under the leadership of captains, not colonels, as the United Irishmen had not had enough time to rebuild the command structure since the arrests of those the week before. This led to indecision and delay which ultimately cost them dearly. With a thousand men at Blaris and an even larger contingent in Belfast, Nugent was well placed to go on the offensive whenever he chose.²¹¹ In Wexford, rebel positions were just as precarious as the units in county Down as the Gorey Hill division was still in the process of recovery due to the disaster at Arklow the day before.

June 12th would develop into a fateful day for the rebels in Co. Down. Insurgent forces were hesitantly massing around Ballynahinch, their inability to mobilize efficiently handing General Nugent the initiative. General Nugent's decisiveness here was crucial. He quickly assembled his units to surround the rebel positions and effectually seal off possible escape routes.

²¹⁰ Knox, Oliver. *Rebels and Informers: Stirrings of Irish Independence* (Dublin: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998), 255.

²¹¹ Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 393.

Munro's forces, now in an extremely vulnerable position, actually outnumbered the government forces but their lack of heavy artillery shortened their odds drastically of defeating General Nugent's army in a pitched battle. These ominous signs ultimately led to mass desertions, many of which were the Defender contingent which had joined Munro's ranks. Despite these developments, Munro led his forces in an attack on Ballynahinch, eventually being overcome by the force of General Nugent's assault.²¹² As rebels retreated, General Nugent unleashed his cavalry on the rebels, and as Madden writes, "This was the last effort of the United Irishmen in the field."²¹³ A devastating defeat of the northern rebels, this engagement ultimately ended the rising in Ulster. The Ulster rebellion had dissolved completely and General Nugent's forces were now executing an operation to search out and arrest leading insurgent leaders and urging rebel units to abandon the cause and return home. In Wexford the rebel cause continued to suffer from the frustrations forced upon it by General Lake's policy of containment.

The pressure being felt by the remaining northern leaders was immense. Many were now fugitives on the run from General Nugent's campaign of retribution which was sweeping through Ulster. Bardon compares General Nugent's actions in the north with those of General Lake's in Wexford; "The reprisals following the Battle of Ballynahinch were fearful, yet Nugent behaved with more humanity than Lake in Wexford. Indeed news

²¹² Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 237.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 237.

of atrocities against Protestants at Scullabogue and on Wexford Bridge did much to dampen swiftly the embers of revolt in the north.²¹⁴ The northern rising was ultimately a plethora of missed opportunities capitulating with the failed attack on Antrim that decimated McCracken's army and pummeled morale. The persistent hesitancy of the Ulster Directory clearly had impeded any momentum that the rising could have gained, as without the intervention of McCracken on the May 29th, the rising in Ulster might not have occurred at all. The progress that was being made in Wexford required a similar effort to explode in the North. The creating of a second front would have stretched the British forces and provided the southern rebels with a focal point and a new motivation.²¹⁵

McCracken's movements after the battle of Antrim, similar to Murphy's in Wexford, were resilient and defiant, as both Murphy and McCracken continued to lead their local forces in a resentment of local conditions. Following his retreat from Antrim, McCracken knew that the only hope his army had now was to make efforts to make contact with the situation in Wexford and try to somehow join his northern forces with the rebels in the south. McCracken's objective now was to march south and join the struggle there. The prospect of launching an attack on Ballymena was increasingly unappealing as morale would not support another attack. By this stage, General Nugent had placed Belfast under the strictest martial law.

²¹⁴ Bardon, *History of Ulster*, 236.

²¹⁵ Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 36

As General Nugent tightened his grip around Ulster, McCracken now felt it was prudent to leave Ireland and attempt to seek refuge in America. Sanctuary in America would allow him to regroup his efforts in safety, surrounded by other United Irishmen in exile. McCracken would eventually be arrested as he was recognized in an attempt to escape to America from the port of Carrickfergus. McCracken's fate was now set. Identified and recognized as one of the principal leaders of the United Irishmen in Belfast, McCracken was very hurriedly charged with committing treason and sentenced to be executed. McCracken's trial was riddled with fake testimony and coerced witnesses, but like Murphy at his interrogation, attempts to extract information from McCracken were useless; McCracken was not prepared to betray his convictions, his ideals and his cause, and was hanged at the Belfast's Cornmarket on the 17th of July, 1798, three weeks after Fr. Murphy met a similar fate in Tullow.²¹⁶ McCracken's composure at the time of his execution is remembered by eye witness John Smith who was present at McCracken's death;

"The brave young fellow stood for a moment beneath the gallows, his eyes following the retreating figure of his devoted sister. He then turned his gaze upon the crowd, and seemed as if he would address them. Hoarse orders were given by the officers, the troops moved about, the people murmured, a horrible confusion ensued, and in a minute or so the manly, handsome figure on which the impression of nobility was stamped, was dangling at a rope's end. The body was soon cut down, and the only favor extended to it was freedom from mutilation."²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Bardon, *History of Ulster*, 236.

²¹⁷ Fitzhenry, *Henry Joy McCracken*, 148.

McCracken had been the symbol and the driving force of the republican spirit in the North, which he hoped would transcend the religious divide in Ulster and his death, would ultimately signify the end of the rebel rising in Ulster. His contribution did not materialize as a successful or even significant military effort, but his legacy was cemented in his commitment to the creation of a secular country and the emancipation of all its citizens, regardless of their religious persuasion. Not a nominal leader of the United Irishmen at their genesis, his role in the movement personified the Society and would single him out as one of the most identifiable figures of the struggles of this time period in Ireland. His vision for Ireland was incorruptible and with the exception of Wolfe Tone, Henry Joy McCracken remains as possibly the most prominent contributor to the fight for independence. Motivated by an ideal, his role in the struggle was not out of a necessity like Murphy's. Murphy's introduction to the conflict was a reaction to the violence he was encountering in Wexford. After 1795, McCracken's primary objective was insurrection and after his release from Kilmainham, the stimulation of agitation in the north was his principal goal. McCracken's role was not thrust upon him by an unexpected engagement like Murphy. His role was intentionally and purposefully calculated, as separation from Britain and the establishment of a sovereign republic in Ireland fuelled his ambition. James Hope, who fortunately survived the testing times of 1798, wrote of poignantly as an old man of McCracken;

"His memory is still fresh in the hearts of those who knew him. Forty winters have passed over it, and the green has not gone from it. I had an opportunity of knowing many of our leaders, but none of those I was acquainted with resembled each other in their qualities and then principles, in the mildness of their manners, their attachment to their country, their forgetfulness of themselves, their remembrance of the merits of others, their steadiness of purpose, and other fearlessness, as did Henry Joy McCracken."²¹⁸

²¹⁸ Richard Robert Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98*, 53.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

On Wednesday the 4th of July, led by Miles Byrne, a column of remaining Wexford insurgents confronted General Sir James Duff with cavalry and infantry at Ballygullen as they attempted to march north to Ulster and join forces with the insurgents in the North. The battle lasted two hours, and the insurgents suffered heavy losses. The battle of Ballygullen was the last battle of the rebellion in County Wexford.²¹⁹

As the Wexford rebels finally experienced suppression, developments continued to transpire in other parts of the country that facilitated uprising. On Monday the 6th of August, General Humbert with about 1,000 French troops sailed from La Rochelle aboard three frigates, the *Concorde*, *Franchise* and the *Melee*, commanded by Admiral Savary. The French finally arrived on Irish shores on the 22nd of August at Kilalla Bay in County Mayo in the West of Ireland. Humbert's advances and initial successes at important government garrisons such as Castlebar helped to reignite the rebel spirit in much of the local population. However, on Saturday the 8th of September, government forces surrounded Humbert at Ballinamuck near Granard Co. Longford and he eventually surrendered. On Friday October 12th, in a naval battle off the coast of Donegal, the *Hoche* and three other French ships were captured. Wolfe Tone, aboard the flagship, the *Hoche*, was immediately recognized and

²¹⁹ Madders, *'98 Diary: Ireland in Rebellion*, 47.

arrested by government forces when the fleet eventually landed at Buncrana.²²⁰ Theobald Wolfe Tone was sentenced to death by hanging.

Before his sentence, he read a long statement at his court martial in Dublin in which he outlined his actions on behalf of the United Irishmen. In the early hours of Monday the 12th of November, Tone attempted to take his own life by cutting his throat with a pen knife. On Monday the 19th of November, Wolfe Tone, the principal leader of the United Irishmen in 1792, died.²²¹

The death of Wolfe Tone consequently signified the end of the United Irish movement of 1798, but the war which the movement had launched had a long afterglow, revitalizing itself in different facets as it was the inspiration for the Emmet Rising of 1803. The most immediate short-term results of the Rising manifested in the cruel and prolific instances of retribution that were experienced by local people, felt most severely in the affected counties of Wexford, Antrim and Down. These outbreaks of murder and arson left parts of these regions even more devastated than had the war itself.²²² For several years, rebel bands of several sizes held out in the mountains and woodlands of Wicklow, Wexford and Carlow. The government's campaign of repression lasted for years. Occasional executions of former rebels took place into the early years of the new century as the generation that had fought in the summer of 1798 lived the rest of their lives in its shadow, suffering greatly for their involvement.

²²⁰ Ibid., 59.

²²¹ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*, 399.

²²² Gahan, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 105.

In the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, the newly appointed Lord Cornwallis set about organizing a political union between Great Britain and Ireland.²²³ The appointment of Cornwallis was as an important development for the local populations of Ireland. His moderate approach compelled him to put an end to the bloodletting that had emerged as a feature of government control after the suppression of the rising.²²⁴ Such a measure was laden with complications, as this was seen as a means of strengthening and protecting the Empire. Naturally, distrust for government still existed among certain groups in Ireland, and despite the fact that the rising had been suppressed; anti-government sentiment still rippled among 1798 veterans. Eventually, on the 18th of February 1800, the Union was carried in the Irish House of Commons, and the Act was given the royal assent on the first day of August 1800. The first meeting of the newly created imperial parliament took place on the 22nd January 1801. King George III's speech to the House of Lords expressed "his satisfaction at such a crucial time in the European war to avail himself of the advice and assistance of the parliament of his United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland."²²⁵ The Act of Union was the most important immediate result of the 1798 rebellion. It had been hoped that the passing of the Act of Union would aid in the continuing pursuit of Catholic emancipation, but these

²²³ Killen, *Decade of the United Irishmen: Contemporary Accounts 1792-1801*, 7.

²²⁴ Lord Cornwallis was a major figure in the American Revolution. Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington after the American Revolution and was noted for his moderate and temperate views. His main objective in Ireland was to achieve a political and peaceful union with Ireland.

²²⁵ Killen, *Decade of the United Irishmen: Contemporary Accounts 1792-1801*, 189. King's speech at the First session of the First Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. 22nd January 1801.

hopes were ultimately dashed, as in a letter to General Dundas, King George stated that he would not support such concessions under any circumstances.²²⁶

The Act of Union abolished the parliament in Dublin and made Ireland an integral part of the United Kingdom.

While hostilities between France and England came to an end and the turn of the century, Robert Emmet, brother of Thomas Addis Emmet, in collusion with Thomas Russell, had been planning another rising along the lines influenced by the United Irishmen. Robert Emmet connected with restructuring the United Irish organization, considering it to consist at this stage solely of a military command.²²⁷ Emmet's attempts to reinvigorate the United Irish movement in 1803 ultimately proved unsuccessful, as on July 23rd 1803, his band of followers wilted away in the face of resistance from government opposition. Tried and executed on charges of treason, the deaths of Robert Emmet and Thomas Russell signified the end of the United Irishmen, as the organization at this stage ceased to exist in its accepted form. The liberal and democratic objectives of a secular approach to politics and an egalitarian notion of the rights of man among all denominations and classes of Irishmen proved fruitless. From the inception of the United Irishmen in 1791 up until the Act of Union in 1801, Irish society was enduringly politicized and

²²⁶ Ibid., 190. Letter from King George III to General Henry Dundas, 7th February, 1801

²²⁷ Marianne Elliott, *Robert Emmet: The Making of a Legend* (London: Profile Books, 2003), 31.

polarized, as distrust and hatred proved more enduring than the idea of a union of Irishmen.²²⁸

Disconnected and disillusioned, many members of the United Irishmen sought exile and refuge in various countries across Europe and America. David Wilson, in his book, *United Irishmen, United States; Immigrant Radicals in the Early Republic*, comments that the United Irishmen were radicals that failed to develop a consistent or coherent social program and that they had a stronger sense of what they were against than what they were for.²²⁹ According to Wilson, the defeat of the 1798 Rising and the subsequent failure of the 1803 Rising discredited revolutionary nationalism for a generation.²³⁰

As the United Irishmen of 1798 dwindled, their legacy grew as the campaign for Catholics to have the right to enter parliament, that campaign launched by Daniel O'Connell in the 1820's, inspired many of the old rebels, among them, Thomas Cloney became heavily involved in O'Connell's movement.²³¹ While O'Connell followed a parliamentary program for reform and Catholic emancipation by constitutional means, the legacy of figures such as Tone and McCracken and other leaders of the 1798 Rising and the United Irishmen would greatly influence the emerging and increasingly republican Young Irelander movement of the 1840's and the Fenians who emerged a

²²⁸ Killen, *Decade of the United Irishmen: Contemporary Accounts 1792-1801*, 9.

²²⁹ David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States. Immigrant Radicals in the Early Republic* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 9.

²³⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

²³¹ Cloney, *A Personal Narrative*, 243.

generation later. The 1798 Rising and its leaders remained as the model that this new radical attitude would emulate.²³² The independence movement of 1916-1922, although different in its approach and values from the movement of the United Irishmen, ensured that 1798 would remain sacred in Ireland for generations to come. The 1798 rebellion was about achieving national independence, but this was not the single aim. It carried a deeper meaning. The United Irishmen wanted to follow in the footsteps of the French and create a society of equality, tolerance and liberty, as they wanted Ireland to have its own place and standing in the world and to take its place among the nations.

The religious backdrop of the 1798 Rising can be typified by the historiography of both Musgrave and Kavanagh, as both historians have viewed the events of the 1798 Rising through the prisms of their respective religious persuasions. Kavanagh's work and his depiction of the United Irishmen portray them as a type of surrogate for the Fenian movement. Kavanagh asserts that when the Rising erupted, the United Irishmen were absent and that they had left Wexford to suffer the affliction alone.²³³ Kavanagh's simplistic message is that Fr. Murphy alone was at the heart of the Wexford Rising, ultimately demonizing the United Irishmen as a Masonic society. Kavanagh essentially suggests that Fr. Murphy was the heroic leader of a passive and defenseless people under attack solely due to their religious

²³² Kevin Whelan. *The Tree of Liberty Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of the Irish Identity 1760-1830* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 166.

²³³ Kavanagh, *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, 194.

persuasion. Musgrave's loyalist politics and Protestant sympathies are prevalent in his accounts, especially in his descriptions of the clerical rebel leaders.²³⁴ The notion of the Wexford Rising as a religious crusade is underlined by Kavanagh but refuted by Madden as he deconstructs the sectarian interpretation of the rebellion linking the number of Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic leaders and balancing the role of the Catholic clergy in the south with that of the Presbyterian clergy in the north.²³⁵

Despite Madden's efforts to discount the sectarian nature of the rebellion, a major factor in the development of the rising in Wexford was the impact of the North Cork Militia and the subsequent reign of violence that was inflicted on much of the Catholic population in the county. The original idealistic aim of the United Irishmen movement had been to abolish the harmful distinctions between Protestant and Catholic. However, the rising in Wexford developed to underline these religious and social differences. Religious conflict complicated and intensified the rebellion in the South and possibly contributed to the relatively rapid suppression of the rising in the North. Lecky suggests the presence of the Catholic clergy in leadership positions marks the Wexford Rising as a religious war of sorts, citing the battle of Vinegar Hill, explaining that a degree of religious hatred was a greater motivating factor than any form of political or civil resentment.²³⁶

²³⁴ Musgrave, *History of the Rebellion in Ireland*, 148. Musgrave describes Fr. Murphy as a fanatic and a bigot.

²³⁵ Madden, *The United Irishmen; Their Lives and Times. Vol 1*, 342.

²³⁶ Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 381.

The degree of influence exacted over the Wexford Rising by Catholic clergymen contrasted starkly with the forces of the North. The leaders in the North were all members of the United Irishmen, none of whom were Catholic; the Presbyterian McCracken in Antrim, and Presbyterian Munro in Down. The impact of the United Irishmen was implicit in the Northern effort. The arrest of the Leinster Directory had culled the impact of the United Irishmen in Wexford, leaving the Ulster Directory to provide the major United Irish representation in the Rising. The arrest of the Leinster Directory had provided the authorities with details of the United Irish presence around the country and it is an irrefutable fact that before this period, there were fewer United Irishmen in the county of Wexford than any other part of Ireland.²³⁷ This clearly suggests that both facets of the 1798 Rising were motivated by contrasting factors. The concept of republicanism, parliamentary reform and religious emancipation was born in France and transmitted into Belfast politics by the United Irishmen, especially by their Presbyterian members. These were the driving forces of the movement in the North, while in Wexford motivating factors seem to have been much less abstract, as A.T.Q. Stewart writes that the rising in Wexford had; “the fervor of a religious crusade, fuelled by ancient hatreds of class and creed...No one expected a rising in Wexford, where there was little United Irish organization. What really puzzled the authorities was the lack of any outbreak in Ulster.”²³⁸ While

²³⁷ Hay, *History of the Insurrection of County Wexford*, 122.

²³⁸ Stewart, *Summer Soldiers*, 59.

sectarianism and religious hatred did not dominate the motivations of the entire rising in Wexford, as Protestants such as Bagenal Harvey and Anthony Perry were prominent figures among the Wexford rebels, religious sentiments served to influence the peasantry involved in the rebel forces as religious emancipation more than republicanism drove their intentions. This was evident in massacres at Scullobogue and at Wexford Bridge. The execution of Protestant and Loyalist prisoners highlighted religious animosity, as these massacres were reprisals for past atrocities experienced by Catholics previous to the outbreak of the rising. The massacre of Loyalist prisoners in Wexford also underlines the lack of influence the United Irishmen possessed over the Rising in Wexford, as such violence went against the basic idealism and objectives of the United Irishmen, who pursued an advanced ideal of a secular nation free from religious divisions. The Rising in Wexford had widened the sectarian divide between Catholics and Protestants, greatly damaging any short-term goal of religious harmony in the region.

The results and achievements of both Risings reflect these motivating factors. The religious push in Wexford provided the Wexford rebels with a spiritual cause. The unambiguous schism between Catholics and Protestants, augmented by the Orange Societies at a local level, gave the Wexford rebels a clear and unmistakable goal. This reflected in military victories at Oulart Hill as the North Cork Militia which opposed the Wexford rebels, represented the oppression and persecution experienced in Wexford. The Rising in the North was directed against Government authorities, fighting for the cause of the

United Irishmen. Abstract causes such as republicanism were not as conveniently identifiable to local participants as was the reaction to violent oppression that transpired in the Wexford Rising. For this reason, the Wexford rebellion can be viewed as a reactionary and retaliatory insurrection.

Ultimately, Wexford possessed a more dedicated fighting rebel force than the North. The large-scale desertions and the short time frame of the military effort in the North would suggest this, as the Wexford rebels maintained a prolonged effort and even attempted to establish contact with the Ulster rebels late into the summer of 1798.²³⁹

The two major elements of this study, Fr. Murphy and Henry Joy McCracken emerged from the events of 1798 with enduring legacies. While the extent of Fr. Murphy's involvement in the Rising was confined to the summer months of 1798, McCracken had been heavily involved in creating an insurrectionary situation in Ireland from as early as 1791. Heavily involved in the original formation, the eventual military reorganization of the United Irishmen, and restructuring of the Society into a secret underground movement, McCracken's influence over the rising in the North was massively important. Fr. Murphy, in contrast, had largely avoided the political maelstrom of the late 1790's, concerning himself with providing the safety and well-being of his parishoners in Boolavogue due to the impending threat of government reprisals, while McCracken served as one of the primary protagonists of the Northern effort, strenuously attempting to cool relations

²³⁹ Gahan, *Rebellion! Ireland in 1798*, 98.

between Catholics and Protestants in rural Ulster as his recruitment of both denominations to the standard of the United Irishmen signified both McCracken's and the United Irishmen's secular philosophy.

Both McCracken and Fr. Murphy symbolized what their respective Risings stood for. McCracken embraced the maxims of the United Irishmen. His Presbyterian background gave him the middle ground between the Catholic-Protestant agitations, as he concentrated his efforts on bridging the gap between the two. McCracken's personal political outlook rode in tandem with those of the United Irishmen, and despite the fact that he was not initially in a position of leadership in the Society, McCracken personified what the United Irishmen represented and was the embodiment of their ambitions. Fr. Murphy's role as a prominent military leader in Wexford gives credit to the notion of a religious crusade in Wexford. His romanticized legacy portrays a man of immense courage and incorruptibility. Fr. Murphy had no affiliation with the United Irishmen but his denunciation of the sectarian massacres in Wexford suggests that his own outlook was not totally unlike the humanitarian ideals of the United Irishmen.

Contrasts drawn between McCracken and Fr. Murphy are understandable, McCracken was a Belfast Presbyterian from a liberal and middle-class background and Fr. Murphy was a Catholic clergy man from rural Wexford who initially worked hard to comply with the conservative decree of his ordination. Despite these contrasts in background and outlook, the contributions of both McCracken and Fr. Murphy were so significant in

the development of the rebellion that the Rising in either part of the country might not have occurred at all without them. The Ulster Directory of the United Irishmen had shown no sign of insurrection until the appointment of McCracken as General for the Antrim division. His influence was the catalyst for insurrection in Ulster after the hesitancy of the Ulster Directory had impeded any progress that had been made in the previous months. Fr. Murphy's engagement with Bookey's Regiment and the Camolin Cavalry ignited the rising in Wexford. Rebel detachments and skirmishes had already occurred in various areas around Leinster, but Fr. Murphy's defeat of the Camolin Cavalry on May 26th signified the beginning of the insurgency in Wexford. Just as the varying contributions and achievements of McCracken and Fr. Murphy typified and symbolized the aims and motivations of their respective risings, their deaths equally symbolized the end of meaningful operations in both Antrim and Wexford.

The failure of the 1798 rebellion set Ireland back a century, and in some respects, two. Separate nations that could develop were hastily scrapped with the Act of Union, which was welcomed by the Catholic Church and some progressive voices as the best means of getting rid of a corrupt and reactionary government in Dublin. Daniel O'Connell, Henry Grattan and others were right in seeing that view as a major strategic error nonetheless. It took 120 years to reverse the Union and to achieve an independent state, and 150 years to achieve a fully fledged Republic in 26 counties. Despite their flaws, the United Irishmen achieved more through their civic republicanism, even

temporarily, in attempting to unite elements of the different religious traditions on the island into one national political identity than any of their successors.

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