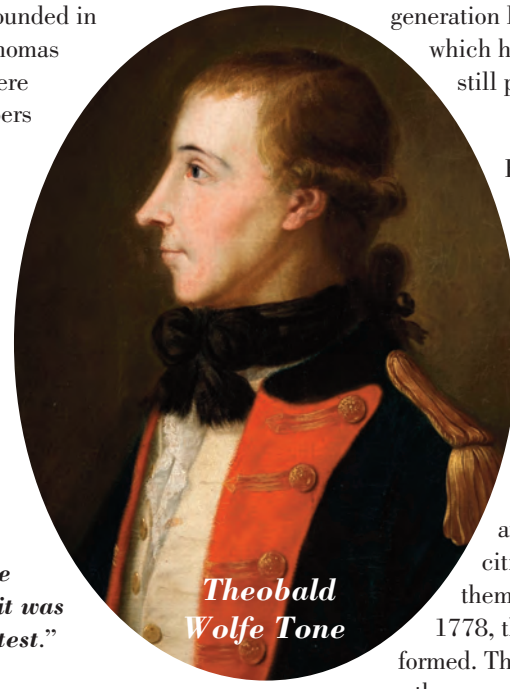
Local Involvement In The United Irishmen

By Robert Morrow

Great events nationally and internationally often have repercussions at local level and so it was that our area felt tremors from the American War of Independence, the French Revolution and more directly from the United Irishmen's Rebellion of 1798.

"To unite the whole people of Ireland…these were my means"
– Theobald Wolfe Tone.

The Society of the United Irishmen was founded in 1791, in Belfast. With the exception of Thomas Russell and Theobald Wolfe Tone, who were Church of Ireland, all the founding members were Presbyterians. The suppression of Dissenters and Catholics was not acceptable to these men, and, influenced very heavily by the American War and the philosophy which inspired the French Revolution, they resolved to free Ireland from British rule. Henry Joy McCracken famously swearing: "never to desist in our efforts until we had subverted the authority of England over our country, and asserted our independence".


Theobald Wolfe Tone

"I am assured…the major part of the American Army was Irish and that…it was their valour that determined the contest." (Lord Mountjoy, 1784)

Many of those at the forefront of Washington's army during the American War of Independence were indeed Irish and predominately Presbyterians, the descendants of Ulster stock and, it was because of this, that the events happening far across the ocean, resonated so much more strongly in Ulster, than in any other part of Ireland. Ulster Presbyterian emigration to America had begun as a trickle but, when in 1719 a Presbyterian minister, Rev. James McGregor of Aghadowey, led his congregation to New Hampshire to escape religious intolerance, tithes, and exorbitant rents, the flood-gates of emigration from Ulster opened and many thousands followed his example. Those emigrants, and their descendants, would go on to fight for American independence and, the victory they won, would inspire the United Irishmen a generation later, for the many grievances which had prompted their emigration, still pertained here.


Lord Mountjoy

During the American Revolutionary War, as the standing army was called to fight in America, Ireland was left largely undefended. With no army to defend the country, it was feared the French might try and invade Ireland, as an ideal backdoor to an invasion of Britain. Although Ireland now lacked an army to defend it, the government couldn't afford to finance a militia. So, the citizenry decided to defend Ireland themselves and on St. Patrick's Day 1778, the Belfast Volunteers were formed. Their example quickly prompted many others across Ireland to do likewise.

James Caulfield, Earl of Charlemont, was an enthusiastic Volunteer, and urged many to form their own companies. His friend was one Francis Dobbs, who lived at Acton, and under his leadership the local Tyrone's Ditches and Acton Volunteers were formed in 1779.

These Volunteers were democratic in their organisation, with commanders elected from the ranks but while the prospect of a rich land-owner happily serving as a private appalled and alarmed many landlords, for the time-being they set aside these concerns to defend their country.

Volunteers at Market Square Lisburn, 1782, celebrating the Dungannon Convention

By 1782, when the threat of invasion receding, the Volunteers' interests turned more towards politics and a great convention took place at Dungannon on February 15th, that year. Delegates from 147 Volunteer companies attended and debated issues of the day. They met in the Presbyterian Church on Scotch Street where Francis Dobbs, as secretary, was a leading figure. During the convention Dobbs outlined his vision for a 'new Ireland', which included many very radical proposals, including government payments for Catholic and Presbyterian clergy. In that era of repressive laws Dobbs' ideals were very attractive to some and when seven years later the French Revolution broke out, the ideas of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" received a very enthusiastic hearing in Ireland, particularly in Ulster where there was widespread dissatisfaction.

In his article entitled *'Pre-Famine Poverty in the Parish of Aghaderg'* published in *'Before I forget'*, Number 2, 1998, John Joe Sands gave graphic details of the levels of poverty here. During the 18th century, in the parish of Aghaderg, for a great many poor people, the level of destitution was such that for them famine was almost an annual occurrence. Lists of those receiving *'poor charity'* at Loughbrickland in the 18th century were very

> ***"For the voice of America came o'er the wave, Crying woe to the tyrant and hope to the slave!"***
>
> Thomas Davis

extensive. Such was the number of beggars visiting from door-to-door, that the giving of alms was banned in 1774 and replaced by the *'licencing'* of a specific number of beggars, who were made to wear badges. They had to apply for these badges and their application had to be supported by a local sponsor. For example in 1783 a priest, Father John Mallon, sponsored local man Loughlin Burns of Loughadian townland in order for him to obtain a *'Poor Badge'*.

Many aspects of the Penal Laws still applied to both Catholics and Presbyterians and for example, the fact that Presbyterian marriages were not recognised as legal and that tithes still had to be paid to the Church of Ireland for its upkeep, were sources of extreme

resentment. Presbyterians in particular felt aggrieved and when, in 1768, a list of those in Aghaderg who refused to pay any tithes was drawn up by the church authorities, the most of those on the list were Presbyterians.

An incident that happened in a local Presbyterian church a few years later, in 1772 is evidence of this resentment. During a service, and after the minister's refusal to read what was described as *'a written treasonable paper'*, a member of the congregation, named Francis Beck, stood up and read the paper aloud to the rest. It stated that they should refuse to pay more than one penny per acre for any tax. Beck was charged with treason. He had to flee the area. He was hunted by the authorities and a reward of £5 offered for his capture.

In the years following the ending of the American War, there was much unrest and sectarian conflict in the countryside, where the Protestant 'Peep o' Day Boys' and the Catholic 'Defenders' frequently clashed and atrocities were committed on both sides. The conflict was most intense in North Armagh in particular where several thousand Catholic families were driven from their homes.

So it was against this background of unrest that the United Irishmen was founded in Belfast in 1791. As their name suggested they wanted an end to this bitterness and division. They were driven by 'Enlightenment' principles and radicalism, and their aim was to establish an all-inclusive, secular republic. They were tired of waiting for constitutional reform. From Belfast the Society spread to Dublin and across rural Ireland. Their goals were freedom for all religions, the right for every man to have a vote, regardless of religion or wealth, and an independent republic. But, of course, not everyone agreed with these aims for the 1790s also saw the formation of the Orange Order.

Locally one of the most interesting local characters much involved in the United Irishmen was **Alexander Thomas Stewart of Acton House**. A direct descendant of Charles Poyntz and the local landowner, he it was who was responsible for the establishment of the village of Poyntzpass. He established a monthly fair in 1785 and in 1789 he built the new Acton Parish Church in Poyntzpass. Then in 1792 he granted a lease to Father John Maguire for the building of a Catholic Church.

He was greatly influenced by the ideals of the United Irishmen and became an enthusiastic member and activist being given the rank of Adjutant-General of the organisation in Co Armagh.

Stewart made no secret of his commitment to the United Irishmen's cause. It was very public and was very clearly shown when in 1796 he travelled to Maidstone in

Alexander Thomas Stewart

Emblem of the United Irishmen

Kent, to give testimony as to the good character Rev. James Fivey, a Catholic priest, who with two others was arrested and accused of High Treason. They were said to be on their way to France and were plotting with the French for an invasion of Ireland. It was alleged that Rev. Fivey's name was altered from Quigley to avoid arrest. *(Fivey being the anglicised version of Quigley or Ó Coigligh. His address was given as Kilmore, Co. Armagh, which is interesting as a branch of William Fivey's family of Union Lodge owned property there.)* Over 100 witnesses were examined at the trial among them Alexander Stewart who testified strongly to the

good character and law-abiding nature of the Rev. Fivey. While his two co-conspirators were found not guilty, a piece of paper, said to have been found in Fivey's pocket, addressed to the Executive Directory of France was his undoing. He was found guilty of treason and hanged.

So the authorities were obviously well aware of Stewart's sentiments and he was kept under surveillance, as the following letters, quoted by William J Fitzpatrick, in his book, ***'The Sham Squire and the informers of 1798'*** published in 1866, show. Fitzpatrick refers to Stewart as follows: *'The conspiracy was not confined to the men who had nothing to lose. Among those who staked their lives and fortunes on its issue was Mr Stewart of Acton, a gentleman of large property.'*

Dublin Castle, June 24th 1798

My Lord: The information upon which I granted a warrant against Mr Stewart, stated him, a very short time previous to the rebellion, to have accepted the situation of adjutant-general for the county of Armagh in the Rebel army. Your lordship's knowledge of the public mind of the north confirms me in a hope I have for some time entertained, that there has a salutary change of sentiment taken place amongst the Dissenters. I am not sanguine enough to hope that Mr Stewart can, in so short a space of time, have become a good subject; however, under all the circumstances, it appears to me desirable that Mr Stewart should, at least for the present, remain at large, under his bail, as taken by your lordship. Should any circumstance arise to make it advisable to proceed otherwise, I shall have the honor of communicating on the subject with your lordship before any steps are taken.

I have the honor to be, Your lordship's very obedient servant,

Castlereagh

However, he was soon apprehended again, as evidenced by Bentinck's letter to Nugent

Armagh, July 27th, 1798.

Dear General Nugent: I send under the charge of one of our quartermasters, Mr. Stewart, a prisoner who was a man of very good property at the time he was apprehended under a warrant from Lord Castlereagh.

I was at the time so convinced that all the leading people of this town whom I had known to be violent United Irishmen about a year and a half ago, with the exception of one or two, had now changed their opinion, that upon their offer of very large bail I took upon myself to liberate him, and informed Lord Castlereagh that I had done so. And it is my opinion that the having liberated this man when I did contributed very much to keep the people here in good humor, and, as far as I can learn, they never had any intention of rising.

Mr. Stewart confessed to me privately that he was a United Irishman, which confession appears to me (as being unnecessary and infamous to himself) is a proof of his innocence as to an insurrection. I send you Lord Castlereagh's letter to me. When I liberated him, I of course knew nothing of the charge against him, and since his release I cannot discover that he has been concerned in any way whatever with the Rebels.

You have a man of the name of Jackson at Belfast whom I apprehended here, and against whom, by a letter from a Mr Hamilton at Belfast, there appear to be no charges. It is of very material importance to the tranquillity of this part of the country that he should not return. He has always been remarkably active among the people; he is in all particulars very like Munro, who was hanged at Lisburn. He is the great leader here.

I am, dear general, yours truly,

W. Bentinck

So while Alexander Stewart was released on bail, when the rebellion broke out in May 1798 he was very closely watched and did not take part in the actual rebellion.

A great weakness, which undermined the plans of the United Irishmen, was that the organisation was riddled with informers.

In a 'Top Secret' letter to John Reilly of Scarva, dated 11th March, 1798, Lord Downshire wrote as follows:

"An order goes from General Nugent to search every house in or about Scarva to take up arms, ammunition etc. Mr Watson, you and Fivey will give every assistance and take every precaution that nothing is left undone that should be done. Be secret and expeditious. The orders to the officers are very plain and intelligible and positive. The order for the officers is not to be opened until 5am in the morning. Poyntzpass, Banbridge and Loughbrickland are all in your predicament …."

The district was evidently ripe for revolt, but General Nugent was well informed and knew all about it.

The *'officers'* in question belonged to the Welsh Fencibles. When they arrived in the Fourtowns in Autumn 1797, they set to razing the houses of locals, irrespective of their political beliefs. So as a result of the arrest of Alexander Stewart and the pre-emptive action take in March by the Fencibles, just six weeks before the outbreak of hostilities, local involvement was largely suppressed.

It was part of this operation which led to the arrest of one John Shanks of the Fourtowns. According to an article by Colin Johnston Robb which appeared in *The Irish News* in 1958, John Shanks was born around 1775 in the Fourtowns and worked for a while in Newry as a

shop-boy. He was influenced by United Irish thinking and when he came home, he joined a group of United Irishmen, called 'The Fourtowns Boys'. Their pikes made by the local blacksmith, whose name was Kerr.

During the Fencibles' raids John Shanks was captured and sent, under guard to Newry, his old place of work, where he was to be tried and very probably hanged. On the road, however, it appears that the guards stopped at the Sheepbridge Inn for drink and Shanks, seizing an opportunity, escaped. He was chased across the country but managed to elude his pursuers. He eventually took ship to America, settling in Baltimore, Maryland, not returning home until 1807 when things had died down a bit. When he got home, he found work as a weaver with William Dinsmore of Loughadian and married a young woman named Ringland in 1810. He died in 1825 and was buried in the Fourtowns Presbyterian Church graveyard.

There is a local tradition, too, that during their raids, the Fencible soldiers desecrated the Old Acton Parish Church and the old Ballyargan Chapel, by stabling their horses there and another local tradition suggests that Newry Harriers' annual Boxing Day Hunt, which begins

> ***"Whether we succeed or fail, let us try to deserve success!"***

at Sheepbridge Inn, commemorates John Shanks' escape and the chase after him across the country.

So when the rebellion broke out in May 1798 it seems that local involvement was minimal. In Ulster, the major fighting took place in Antrim and Down. Turning out in their Sunday best, thousands of all faiths answered the call-to-arms, although most were Presbyterians. *"Whether we succeed or fail, let us try to deserve success!"* were Henry Joy McCracken's words to his men before the battle of Antrim. The rising enjoyed some initial success in Antrim under McCracken, but it essentially collapsed in the county after the attack on Antrim town failed on June 7th. In Down, the battle of Saintfield was an initial victory, but things went downhill from there after the Loyalist forces were able to properly organise. At Ballynahinch on June 12th, Henry Munro led his men against the Loyalist militia and British army. It was a total defeat, with the folkloric heroine, Betsy Gray, being cut down alongside her brother and her lover, who'd both accompanied her to battle. William Prunty (Prontë), uncle to the famous sisters of the same name, was also present at the battle under Munro. Another defeat at Portaferry on June 11th was the death-knell for the rising in Ulster.

The leaders had planned for a country –wide rising with French support, but the promised French support came too little, too late and when the French, eventually landed in Mayo, the rebellion in Ulster was over.

Britain used the rebellion as an excuse to give Ireland more 'security', and an Act of Union with Britain was pushed through in 1800, coming into effect in 1801, abolishing the Dublin Parliament.

Hangings, banishments, conscriptions, and transportations ensued all over Ireland in the rising's bloody aftermath. Ever the revolutionary, Henry Joy McCracken, in a letter to his sister on June 18th, 1798, suggested that the real division in Ireland was class, not religion. Just under a month later, on July 17th, he was hanged in Belfast. Munro had been hanged a month earlier, on June 15th, at Lisburn, right opposite his own front door, in full view of his wife and sisters.

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland didn't come out of the rising with a good image in the eyes of the Government. As a result, the Presbyterian Synod was taken over by a conservative, loyalist, minority, in the rebellion's aftermath. They sent an address to the King, proclaiming their loyalty and denouncing the actions of their *"deluded brethren"*. Despite this, they couldn't change the fact that sixty-three Presbyterian ministers were involved with the United Irishmen, including Rev. James Porter of Greyabbey. After the rising, Porter was hanged, like Munro, in sight of his home. Local people were attacked, intimidated, and killed for suspected involvement. Many were forced to flee to America.

Charles Hamilton Teeling a Lisburn Catholic and United Irishman, wrote an account of his escape after the rising, which was published in 1828. Teeling's journey brought him close to here. He describes his flight through the Mournes pursued by the troops and how he managed to cross the Canal somewhere south of Jerrettspass and make his way to the home of a friend Eiver Magenis at Camlough. From Camlough, Magenis conducted him to the home of an acquaintance Father Edward Campbell at Ballyargan.

On their journey from Camlough to Ballyargan, across the high hills of Lissummon and Carrickbrack –which Teeling described as 'rugged mountains' – they had panoramic views of Co Down. They saw evidence of the Fencibles activities for from their vantage point they could see dozens of little cottages ablaze as the soldiers combed the Co Down countryside for arms and rebels. He wrote: *"The morning sun had given a fresh aspect to nature, and freed from the chilling damps of night, we enjoyed the rich expanded prospect, which lay far to the east before us. The fruitful valleys extending to the right, rich in pasture and abounding in corn. The rugged mountains on the left…"*

The Battle of Ballynahinch

Rev Campbell, who had known Teeling in Belfast, welcomed him warmly and made arrangements for his safe onward journey. He gave him a present of two little silver buckles as a memento and saw him safely on his way.

Teeling survived, but many didn't. Plenty were hanged, like Henry Joy McCracken in Belfast. Others were transported to penal colonies in Australia or, as mentioned, allowed to exile themselves to America; Thomas Addis Emmet went to New York, John Morrow was sentenced by Judge Mackay at Lisburn to never again return to Ireland, and John Magrath went to South Carolina; the latter fathered Andrew G. Magrath, the last Confederate Governor of South Carolina.