

# 1798 Rebellion – Ireland

## Introduction

The rebellion of 1798 is one of the most violent and tragic events in Irish history in the last four hundred years. From the start of the summer to when the harvest should be taken in September nearly 30,000 people died, many of them women and children. The rebellion was fought by peasants armed with weapons that they made themselves against an army armed with cannons. The United Irishmen rebellion is set in a time of fear yet also of hope.

## Causes of the Rebellion

The factors that brought around the events of 1798 ranged from religious discrimination, influence of the American and French Revolutions, the ideals of republicanism and unresolved land issues.

The Irish Parliament in 1790's was comprised of landed Protestant gentry despite that Catholics provided the vast majority of the population. The Penal Laws although not enforced as strongly as in the previous century still provided a barrier for the increasing Catholic population. Political and economic power lay in the hands of Protestant landlord class. All influential sectors of society such as the army, banking, education and business were closed off to Catholics and Presbyterians.

From its beginning, many of the Society's leaders were concerned with liberty and republicanism more in principle than in fact; as Protestant gentry themselves, they had much to lose by giving the vote to Ireland's more numerous Catholics. They sought "an equal representation of all people in parliament". Only a few prominent leaders advocated strong action against the Protestant landed gentry, among them one of the Society's founders, Wolfe Tone.

The main leaders of the United Irishmen were men from professional backgrounds who were middle classes. As France and Britain went to war again in 1793, the British government began to fear what the United Irishmen were saying and of their admiration for France. As a result the organisation was declared illegal and forced underground. Government informants were planted in the United camp, several of whom reached prominent status within the organization, and such activities paid off as the rebellion came to fruition.

An attempt to restore control of the country in 1797 by allowing the army to treat the ordinary people very harshly backfired as many innocent people were targeted and they lost the respect of the local population. The government now declared martial law, the army was given its head and searches, floggings and hangings became common place.

Eventually, at the end of March, 1798, United Irishmen activities forced the government to declare a state of martial law and country-wide searches for rebel arms began the army was given its head and searches, floggings and hangings became common place. The ensuing military campaign was in many regions a horrible ordeal for Ireland's citizenry. Although huge numbers of pikes and guns were confiscated, General Lake, believed in the heavy use of force, and the searches were characterized by torture, house-burning, plundering, and executions. The experience of pitch caps and public whipping on portable triangles (a wooden frame to which victims were tied before being flogged and tortured) were fresh in people's memories

## Wolfe Tone

Theobald Wolfe Tone was born in Dublin on 20th June 1763. Educated at Trinity College, he studied law and was called to the Irish bar in 1789. He got married to a sixteen year old girl called Matilda Witherington in 1785.

He believed the existing Parliament in College Green was corrupt where Protestant landed gentry kept their power at the expense of Catholics and Presbyterians. The French Revolution had shown that people were able to overthrow a corrupt monarchy and improve the life of ordinary people by giving them power.

He felt as an Irish Protestant that the way that the Catholic majority were treated with absolute slavery and the Presbyterians were discriminated by the powerful Protestant Ascendancy. Other Protestants were of a similar mind and they set up the United Irishmen rebellion in Belfast.

His great aim was to unite Irishmen of all religions, initially he wanted the Irish Parliament to have more independence from Britain but later grew to believe that complete separation was what was required. Towards this end, he published several pamphlets including one entitled "**Argument of Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland**" which endeared him to Catholics and liberally minded Protestants alike. Deeply impressed by the ideals of the French Revolution, he travelled to Belfast on 17th October 1791, and a few days later, along with Thomas Russell and Napper Tandy, founded the Society of United Irishmen in that city.

Wolfe Tone, although a Protestant, was appointed secretary of the Catholic Committee in July 1792. Later that year he organised a Catholic Convention which was instrumental in compelling the government to pass the Catholic Relief Bill of 1793. Equal rights for Catholics now became one of the main aims of the United Irishmen and this, they felt, could best be obtained in an independent Irish Republic based on the French model.

In grave danger of arrest, Wolfe Tone left for America in June 1795 and from there he went to France in an effort to get military assistance for an United Irishmen Rebellion. Arriving in Paris in February 1796, he so impressed the French Directory that plans for a military expedition were soon got under way. On December 15th 1796, along with one of France's finest soldiers, General Hoche, Tone set out from Brest with over 40 ships and 14,000 men and sailed for Ireland. Arriving at Bantry Bay in Co. Cork, this first French expedition was dogged with ill-luck as severe storms prevented their landing on the Irish coast. Scattered by the gale force winds, the expedition had no option but return to France in January 1797 with a very disappointed Tone aboard.

When the rebellion broke out, Tone was in Paris and attempted to get to Ireland to take part in the rebellion he helped to organise. He set sail again for Ireland with 3000 men that left Dunkirk in Oct 1798, not knowing that the rebellion was finally over. The British Navy captured his ship and he was brought to Dublin for trial. He committed suicide to cheat the hangman after his request to be shot like a soldier was refused.

He is regarded as the **Father of Irish Republicanism** and is commemorated every year in Bodenstown, Co. Kildare

***"We have come to the holiest place in Ireland: holier to us than the place where Patrick sleeps in Down. Patrick brought us life, but this man died for us. And though many before him and some since have died in testimony of the truth of Ireland's claim to nationhood, Wolfe Tone was the greatest of all that have died for Ireland whether in old time or in new. He was the greatest of Irish nationalists. I believe he was the greatest of Irish men. And if I am right in this I am right in saying that we stand in the holiest place in Ireland and that the holiest sod of a Nation's soil is the sod where the greatest of her dead lies buried."***

That is the first paragraph of the address delivered by Pádraig Pearse at Bodenstown on June 12, 1913.

## **Rebellion in Leinster**

Kildare was the scene of the earliest fighting and the rebels met with much initial success. On the first day of the uprising the rebel army suffered many losses throughout the county; despite their superior numbers, the poorly-trained United troops were no match for garrisons of regular soldiers.

However, having closely escaped a defeat to the insurgents' pikemen at Old Kilcullen, General Dundas, the commander of the Irish army in the area, was sufficiently unnerved to call for a large-scale withdrawal of his troops. Concentrating his forces at Naas, Dundas left much of Kildare defended only by loyalists and thus open for the United Irishmen to conquer.

The retreat was a disaster for the army. Within only a few days, much of Kildare and parts of neighbouring Queen's County, King's Country, Carlow, and Meath were under rebel control. Their victories were often accompanied by the killing and plundering of Protestant loyalists who tried to defend their homes, but such atrocities did not go unavenged: loyalists executed rebel prisoners in cold blood throughout the uprising, and General Duff and his militia troops slaughtered several hundred unarmed rebels at Gibbet Rath to avenge the destruction of Kildare town. The rebels had been in the process of giving up their arms to General Dundas, who was offering amnesty to the United forces in return for their surrender. Dundas' peacemaking was ruined by the massacre, and the rebellion in Kildare continued.

Later in the month, Cornwallis proposal of a general amnesty met with considerable success and many insurgents returned to their homes. The more dedicated United Irishmen, however, besieged by new army reinforcements and driven out of their camps, fled to the mountains of Wicklow and the bogs of Kildare; by July the rebellion had become a guerilla war on a small scale.

Cornwallis' amnesty and the arrival of British reinforcements had succeeded in suppressing the rebellion. On July 23rd, the rebel group at Timahoe in Kildare surrendered – the last major concentration of United troops.

## **Rebellion in Wexford**

Rumours of United successes and of the atrocities committed by both sides spread like wildfire across the country but in Wexford, these rumours had a dramatic effect.

The full force of martial law had not been enforced in Wexford; the county was quiet in the months leading up to the rebellion. The United army there was thus relatively well-armed and well-populated when the revolution began, but it still suffered from a severe shortage of guns and had few skilled marksmen among its ranks.

When the rebel forces emerged they were led by two Catholic priests Father John Murphy and Father Michael Murphy. The rebels armed with pitchforks scythes and pikes routed a military column at Oulart on 26th May and soon after took Ferns and Gorey. Enniscorthy was captured on the 28th May. Wexford was surrounded and British reinforcements were wiped out by a large group of Wexford pikemen at the Battle of the Three Rocks. The rebels finally occupied Wexford on the 30 May. In Wexford town, a new flag was raised on May 30th and a republic was established. The entire county with the exception of New Ross was in the hands of the rebels.

By June, the rebels were in control of several towns in Wexford and along the Wicklow border, and major rebel encampments were established at Carrickbyrne, Enniscorthy, Gorey, and Wexford town itself.

The fiercest battle of the entire rebellion occurred on 5 June 1798 in New Ross, Co. Wexford. The rebels were led by Bagenal Harvey, a Protestant landlord. The rebels breached the defences but had to retreat. The loyalist troops looted the town over several days, hanging and shooting suspected rebels. The death toll amounted to over 3,000.

When the news reached Scullabogue, small town near New Ross, an angry mob killed over 100 loyalist prisoners including women and children by locking them in a building which was then set alight. Bagenal Harvey resigned as commander of the rebels discouraged at the defeat in New Ross and disgusted by the Scullabogue atrocity. The command was taken by Father Philip Roche.

Another rebel force led by Fr. Michael Murphy attacked Arklow but the town held out and Fr. Murphy was killed leading a charge at the cannon.

On the days before June 21 the rebels made their way to at Vinegar Hill in Wexford, the main rebel camp not realising that General Lake with British reinforcements were closing like a noose. The Irish pikemen were no match to artillery or cavalry and many 100's were slaughtered on the field.

On 21 June General Lake attacked the main rebel camp at Vinegar Hill, Enniscorthy. Some rebels escaped through a gap on the south side between two battalions of British soldiers and went to the Three Rocks camp above Wexford town. When Lake finally attacked Vinegar Hill it was mostly the camp followers, women, children and the sick who remained and all were killed.

The rebel camp there, as the other camps, was a hodge-podge of people; large numbers of Catholic refugees followed the United army to protect themselves from loyalists and the army. These hangers-on hindered troop movements, though, and many insurgents left the camps in order to provide for their families.

For many rebels who escaped Vinegar Hill, the choice was to return home and face the risk of being arrested or to go on the run in the hills of Wicklow and Carlow.

## **Rebellion in Ulster**

The 1790's were not pleasant times in Ulster. Sectarian strife was now rampant, especially in Ulster, with secret oath-bound societies springing up everywhere. The Protestants had the 'peep-o-day boys' and the Catholics had the Defenders. Following a fight at Loughgall in Co. Armagh in 1795 the Orange Order was founded to protect the rights and interests of the Protestant community. These were made up mainly of men from the Orange Lodges while most of the Defenders enlisted in the United Irishmen.

Similarly, in Ulster, the birthplace of the Society and once its greatest source of strength, there was no sign of rebellion. Only a week later did the Belfast Executive, led by Henry McCracken and Samuel Orr commit to the uprising.

The ideals of the United Irishmen joining republicans of all religions did not succeed to a great extent as distrust between Presbyterians and Catholics prevented a close alliance of forces. Towns like Randalstown and Ballymena were captured but keeping them proved difficult to the rebels. Other towns like Ballynahinch and Newtownards fell to the rebels but as with what was happening elsewhere, the British Army armed with Cannon made short work of lines of advancing pike men. Many of the rebels were killed and the remainder forced to retreat including Betsy Gray a United Irish volunteer who rallied on the pike men on several occasions.

After some initial success in counties Down and Antrim, though many northern United leaders were arrested based on information provided to the government by yet another informant, Nicholas Magin; thereafter, some rebel groups surrendered to General Nugent in return for amnesty, while others were defeated by newly-arrived British reinforcements. The rebellion in Ulster was suppressed.

## **French Involvement**

Napoleon had decided that Egypt held more interest and wealth to him than Ireland but he did see merit in causing trouble for the British in their backyard. He and the French Directory authorized 1100 soldiers and weapons to arm 5000. The French set sail from Rochefort with three ships called Concorde, Franchise, and Médée which landed at Killala in Mayo on August 22th. Here, they established a republic of their own under the Presidency of John Moore of Castlebar. He next attacked Castlebar which was held by General Lake. However, Lake and his men had to retreat and the event became known as The Races of Castlebar. The Viceroy, Lord Cornwallis took control of the government forces.

Humbert had intended to march into Ulster but changed his route and went through Leitrim to meet the rebels of Longford & Westmeath. Humbert fought against government forces at Ballinamuck on 8 September but was defeated after a brief engagement.

Humbert and his French were treated with the civility and courtesy demanded by the conventions of war to gallant prisoners after an honourable defeat.

It appears the same generosity was not afforded to the Irish. It seems that many of the Irish were cut down where they stood, or driven into the bog south of the hill where they were hunted down and slaughtered. Captured Irish officers, even those bearing legitimate commissions in the French army, were seized and hanged as traitors.

Many of the captured rebels were transported to Botany Bay and others were forced to join the British army and navy. Several hundred were sent into the Prussian army.

## **Consequences – Results**

The factors which brought around the events of 1798 ranged from religious discrimination, influence of the American and French Revolutions, the ideals of republicanism and unresolved land issues.

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From its beginning, many of the Society's leaders were concerned with liberty and republicanism more in principle than in fact; as Protestant gentry themselves, they had much to lose by enfranchising Ireland's more numerous Catholics. They sought "an equal representation of all people in parliament". Only a few prominent leaders advocated strong action against the English oligarchy, among them one of the Society's founders, Wolfe Tone. Tone detested his fellow Protestants' hypocrisy, writing that

***"we plunge them [the Catholics of Ireland] by law, and continue them by statute, in gross ignorance, and then we make the incapacity we have created an argument for their exclusion from the common rights of man!"***

Government informants were planted in the United camp, several of whom reached prominent status within the organization, and such activities occasionally paid off.