



Dr Carol Baraniuk writes –

“Their aims were to unite Protestants (Anglicans), Catholics and Dissenters (Presbyterians) as Irishmen, to work for a reform of Parliament and to try to achieve greater independence for Ireland from Britain. Tone certainly desired the complete separation of the two countries.

The term ‘United Irish’ should not be confused with later movements to bring about a United Ireland in the wake of the partition of the island in 1921. Tone’s intention in choosing the name for the Society of United Irishmen was to encourage Irish people to embrace a common cultural and national identity regardless of their different religious affiliations.

In addition, the Society accommodated members who held a wide spectrum of political opinions and originated from a variety of social backgrounds: reformers, revolutionaries, self-taught labourers, middle-class manufacturers and scholars.”

Whilst imprisoned in Scotland after the Rebellion, Rev William Steele Dickson (formerly of Ballyhalbert and Portaferry) wrote down the names and church denominations of 20 leaders of the United Irishmen – there were 10 Anglicans, six Presbyterians and four Catholics.

There were very clear connections between the United Irishmen of Down and Antrim, and groups in Scotland who had similar objectives. This document outlines some of these links.

The history

Faced with a hostile, aloof government, the people of 1798 in Antrim and Down felt that they had no option but to take up arms in an effort to overthrow tyrannical authorities - just as their emigrated relatives had successfully done in America in 1776.

The commercial potential

It is a dramatic, tragic story which was popularised in 1888 by WG Lyttle (1844 - 1896) in his famous novel “Betsy Gray or Hearts of Down”, which dramatises the facts of the events of 1798 in a creative, gripping novel. Lyttle is buried at Bangor Abbey. The book has been reprinted many times - the most recent printing of which was by the Ulster-Scots Language Society in 2008. With no promotional campaign and by word of mouth alone 1000 copies were sold within weeks. They describe the reprint as “our best seller over the past 2 years”.