



1798 Rebellion in North Down and the Ards: The Scottish Connection

Introduction

If you visit the Ards area of County Down today you may well notice a sign in the Ulster-Scots language proclaiming 'Fair faa ye tae the Airds': 'Welcome to the Ards'. The Scots arrived in large numbers to settle in this district during the Plantations era of the early seventeenth century and many villages along the Ards Peninsula have in recent years restored their historic Scots place names, such as Talbotstoun for Ballyhalbert and Hard Breid Raa for North Street in Greyabbey, or Greba. The Scottish connection has long been cherished by the people of this area; many regard Scotland as their ancestral homeland and its people are certainly their near neighbours. From the eastern edge of the Peninsula, which borders the Irish Sea, the Scottish hills and coastline are often clearly visible; indeed with a good pair of binoculars it's sometimes even possible to watch Scots farmers operating their tractors in the fields.

In earlier times, a key shipping route between Ulster and Britain was the North Channel: the narrow strip of sea between Donaghadee and Portpatrick in southern Scotland. For centuries migrant workers crossed the Channel in both directions in search of employment, whether as seasonal labourers at harvest times or as weavers in the developing textile industries.

1600s Ulster - People, Ministers and Covenant

But the links are deeper even than those forged from linguistic similarity or practical necessity. The early seventeenth century Scots settlers established their Presbyterian religion, with its democratic form of church government, throughout the North of Ireland. A few generations later their ranks were swollen by Covenanters, members of a fiercely independent sect within Presbyterianism who had suffered severe persecution in Scotland during the reigns of Charles I and Charles II. Essentially the Covenanters in Scotland and in Ulster were radicals in their religion and in their politics.

In the Scottish National Covenant of 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 they swore to uphold the principles of the reformation and to oppose the interference of the King in church government.

According to historian Ian McBride, the Covenant of 1643 'was designed to protect the gains made by the Calvinist reformation in Scotland and to export the Presbyterian model of church government to England and Ireland'. It constituted 'a radical programme for the re-ordering of society on a Calvinist basis'. Within this model the 'civil magistrate's authority was limited to secular affairs and the king was a member of the church like any other person'.¹ The Solemn League and Covenant was brought to Ulster in April 1644, overseen by the first Presbyterian minister of Ballywalter, Rev James Hamilton. Over the following three months it was signed by thousands of people



at 26 locations across Ulster - in the Ards and north Down it was signed at Hollywood, Bangor, Newtownards, Comber, Killyleagh and Ballywalter.

Once they had arrived Presbyterians were quickly active in the field of education, believing that every person, regardless of social status or gender had the right to read and understand the Scriptures for themselves. Of course, many of these readers were not content only with the Scriptures. In the eighteenth century they established Book Clubs, early lending libraries, and read works of history, philosophy and poetry. Scottish texts were always popular, including Allan Ramsay's Scots language drama *The Gentle Shepherd* and Wallace, by the poet 'Blind

Harry', which deals with the exploits of the great hero of Scottish independence, Sir William Wallace.

1700s Ulster – the Anglican Ascendancy

The authorities in the eighteenth century were not in general kindly disposed towards literate, articulate and democratically-minded people from the working classes. Although philosophers of the Enlightenment throughout Europe had begun to express the theories of individual rights and freedom of religion that we take for granted today, most governments were authoritarian in outlook and legal systems reflected this. Ireland had its own Parliament that sat in Dublin, but it was dominated by the Ascendancy:

Anglicans, who did not represent Catholics, the majority in Ireland as a whole, or Presbyterians, who made up the majority of the population in Ulster. For much of the eighteenth century these groups suffered discriminatory Penal Laws, and even when these were relaxed, both continued to feel marginalised. Both also continued to be required to pay the hated tithe: a tax amounting to ten percent of income levied by the Anglican church. In addition, the Test Act of 1704 required anyone holding public office, or a commission in the army or militia to provide a certificate verifying that he had received Holy Communion according to the rites of the Church of Ireland. This struck in particular at the Ulster Presbyterian business community's dominance of municipal corporations. The combined effect of such measures encouraged many Presbyterians to seek the freedom from government interference that was offered in the frontier zones of the New World. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the American colonies asserted their independence of the mother country in 1776, Scotch-Irish Presbyterians were often in the vanguard of the revolutionary forces.

The Age of Revolution comes to Ulster

The American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 seemed to demonstrate to other nations that governments could be challenged successfully by the People. By the 1790s one of the most popular texts circulated among readers in the Ulster Book Clubs was the American Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* which set out in a very accessible style the arguments for liberty and democracy. Also devoured with



great enthusiasm were the works of the young Scots ploughman-poet, Robert Burns, who wrote verses in the broad 'Scotch' tongue used by the Ulster-Scots themselves. His poetry, including pieces such as 'Is there for honest poverty', which stressed the value of the individual regardless of social status, inspired and encouraged many early democrats and reformers among the labouring and middle classes.

Such radical thinking had already filtered down to many ordinary Presbyterians via the Scottish connection. As with the Ulster-Scots ministers of the early 1600s, most Presbyterian ministers were trained at Glasgow University where the philosopher Francis Hutcheson, born at Saintfield in County Down and often credited as the 'father of the Scottish Enlightenment', influenced generations of Ulster students with his teachings. These teachings included the citizens' right of resistance to an unjust, oppressive government. Sects such as the Covenanters which were more conservative, or Bible based, in theology than were Hutcheson's disciples also had a long history of opposition to a hostile state, and in their case attitudes were sharpened by the memory of persecution.

Another text which exerted a powerful influence on Ulster Presbyterian thinking was *Lex Rex*, or *The Prince and the Law* which had been written by the Covenanter minister Rev Samuel Rutherford in 1644. Rutherford was a friend of many of the Ulster-Scots ministers of the early 1600s, and he mounted a devastating theological and intellectual challenge to the claim to absolute authority exerted by the earlier Stuart monarchs. However, the book's sub-title reveals the author's revolutionary principles: the lawfulness of resistance in the matter of the King's unjust invasion of life and religion. No wonder, then, that prior to the Rebellion upper class English commentators clearly often felt in somewhat alien territory in Ulster: In 1787 the fourth Duke of Rutland making his Viceregal tour of Ireland observed that 'the province of Ulster is filled with Dissenters, who are in general very factious – great levellers and republicans [...]. The Dissenting ministers are for the most part very seditious, and have great sway over their flocks [...].' This opinion was endorsed by John Beresford in 1798 who writes, 'Again, the Dissenters are another set of enemies of the British government. They are greatly under the influence of their clergy, and are taught from their cradles to be republicans, [...].'²

The Society of United Irishmen

In the final decade of the eighteenth century Presbyterians in their thousands joined the United Irishmen with the aim of achieving a more democratic and inclusive government for their Irish homeland. The Society of United Irishmen was as much the brainchild of Dr William Drennan, a Belfast Presbyterian who had been educated at the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, as it was of the better known Dublin Anglican Wolfe Tone. 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, middleclass manufacturers and scholars.

Following a series of meetings during the spring and summer of 1791 the Society was founded in October 1791 at Peggy Barclay's Tavern, located in one of the entries off High Street in Belfast.

The United Irishmen in the Ards and North Down

Within a few years it had spread out across the city and into Counties Antrim and Down where Presbyterians were to be found in their greatest numbers. Members of United Irish Societies had to be protected from government and military harassment so the organisation spread under cover, its members bound by oaths of secrecy. In the same period reformers, known as radicals, were forming societies to further similar aims throughout the British Isles. Their plan was to establish and maintain contacts for support and in order to share intelligence. Once again we can see the importance of the Scottish connection with Ulster, for the reformers in Ireland clearly hoped to galvanise the support of their Scottish neighbours in pursuit of the cause of Liberty.

The Scottish Connection – “Friends of the People” and the “United Scotsmen”.

Ten months after the formation of the United Irishmen, the association known as the Friends of the People was established in Edinburgh. Its mainly middle-class and skilled working-class members wished to achieve 'equal representation of the people' but by 'constitutional means'. The movement spread quickly and became particularly strong in south Ayrshire, which almost 200 years earlier had been a hotbed of Covenanter resistance to the state. Its first convention was held in Edinburgh, in December 1792 and it is here that we see evidence of the Ulster-Scotland links. One of the delegates at the convention was the Glasgow lawyer Thomas Muir who was a friend of Archibald Hamilton Rowan from Killinchy, and of William Drennan. Muir, it was later alleged, was a member of both the Friends of the People and of the United Irishmen. In the course of the Convention the delegates heard and passed fairly moderate resolutions that called for constitutional reform. Muir, however, brought the Irish Address, penned by Drennan. The following quotation illustrates its passion and fervor which inspired some but alarmed many with the fear of French-style revolution: 'We greatly rejoice that the spirit of freedom moves over the surface of Scotland...Werejoice that you do not



consider yourselves merged and melted down into another country, but that in this great national question you are still Scotland – the land where ... Wallace fought’.

Muir was eventually forced to withdraw the Address but he visited Drennan and Rowan again in Ireland in 1793, returning to Scotland in July. That the links between Scots and Irish radicals were making the authorities nervous is evident from the fact that he was arrested at Portpatrick,

tried and eventually sentenced to transportation for fourteen years to Botany Bay, though he later escaped. While Muir was imprisoned in Edinburgh, Rowan visited him. Shortly afterwards, however, Scottish radicalism received another blow with the public execution of Robert Watt in 1794, convicted for plotting armed resistance to the state.

The Road to Rebellion

Back in Ulster, the authorities grew increasingly anxious about the movement for reform. United Irish ranks were infiltrated by government spies, known activists were imprisoned and eventually martial law was brought in as an attempt to clamp down on

United Irish schemes.

Official fears of the United Irishmen and of other radical societies throughout the kingdom were set out in a report made to the ‘Committee of Secrecy’ of the House of Commons in January 1799. The report details the activities of secret political societies that had a ‘treasonable’ purpose and which laboured ‘to propagate among the lower classes of the community, a spirit of hatred for the existing laws and government of the country’.³ What in particular was feared was the manner in which societies in different parts of the British Isles set up links and contacts to support one another.

It is clear that the Scottish connection was maintained frequently through the sea ‘corridor’ that linked North Down and Ards with Ayrshire and Galloway. By 1796 a new Scottish radical society, the United Scotsmen had begun in secret to establish a network of supporters. In many cases the seasonal workers, packmen, migrant weavers and others who crossed from Donaghadee to Portpatrick, proved to be under cover United Irish agents who were seeking to assist and advise their Scottish brethren. There were so many, in fact, that Customs and Excise officers at Portpatrick were ordered to scan the passengers disembarking at Portpatrick in the hope of detecting suspicious individuals who were to be returned to Donaghadee on the next available boat. Such precautions were not very successful, however. Ayrshire in particular, but also other areas in the west of Scotland, were infiltrated with Irish agents. The historian Elaine McFarland has shown that the term ‘planting Irish potatoes’ came to be used as code for developing new branches of the United Scotsmen, while the aristocracy of southern Scotland regarded the inhabitants of the Ards area as rather dangerous neighbours to the Scots.⁴

**Rev William Steele Dickson
(Ballyhalbert & Portaferry) and Scotland**



Rev W. S. Dickson, believed to have been the United Irish Adjutant General in County Down, certainly visited Scotland in the spring of 1798. He visited a relative in Scotland in March 1798, but on his return his luggage was seized and searched at Portaferry ‘...every thing in which dangerous concealments seemed likely to be contained, was tossed, shaken, and turned outside in, to no purpose...’ He was suspected by the authorities of visiting Scotland to “...form and promote united societies there, and a correspondence, between them and those of this country...”. The Presbyterian character of the United Irishmen of Antrim and Down was shared with their sympathisers in Scotland. In an effort to hamper the cross-water connections, the authorities in Scotland spread propaganda which exaggerated the influence of Catholics in the movement.

Dickson was arrested on 5 June 1798 and was imprisoned – first on a prison ship in Belfast Lough, and was later transferred to Fort George in the north of Scotland. Whilst imprisoned in Scotland, Dickson was asked by another prisoner if the insurrection in Ireland was a “popish rebellion” – to which he replied “such an assertion was one of the many falsehoods by which the people of Britain were deceived and misled...”. Dickson then wrote down the names and church denominations of 20 leaders of the United Irishmen – 10 Anglicans, six Presbyterians and four Catholics. Dickson handed it to his questioner and whispered “...please sir, to look at that, and then tell me what becomes of your popish rebellion?” Dickson later wrote that he “had a general acquaintance in Scotland, spent a considerable time there... I might have been promoting a connexion between the disaffected here, and people of the same description, in that country”. 5

The Rebellion Fails

Given all this activity, it came as a bitter disappointment to the United Irishmen when the United Scotsmen, for reasons not entirely clear, failed to rise en masse in support of the 1798 Rebellion during May and June of that year. Some Scots participated in a quite different way, however, as members of Scottish regiments employed to suppress the United Irish insurgents: at the Battle of Ballynahinch, for example, where the Down United Irishmen were decisively defeated on June 12/13.

Portpatrick continued to be a significant port during the Rising, not as an exit point for United Scotsmen en route to Ulster, but as a place of refuge for County Down inhabitants of all classes who wanted to escape the violence.

Undoubtedly the Rising and its suppression resulted in an appalling loss of life that disillusioned many. Presbyterians in particular were shocked when they learned of the sectarian nature of much of the fighting in the south. So when an attempt was made to re-ignite rebellion in 1803, the men of the Ards did not, on the whole, turn out. The eighteenth-century Ulster-Scots poet Francis Boyle of Gransha, County Down was not a supporter of the United Irishmen but in his poem ‘The Colonel’s Retreat’ he chronicled



the defeat of Henry Munro under whose command many men from North Down and the Ards fought at the Battle of Ballynahinch. Munro, a Lisburn linen draper of Scots descent was a sincere patriot, admired for his fair-mindedness, courage and heroic character, but he was tried and hanged for his part in the Rebellion. Boyle pleaded with his readers to learn the lesson of such events:

My friends, be admonished no more to rebel, Its dreadful effects there's no poet can tell,
It desolates countries, proves nations' o'erthrow, Brings men to the scaffold like General
Munro.

The Act of Union

With the twin purpose of seeking to pacify Ireland and to establish firm control over it, the British government brought about the Union of Britain and Ireland in an Act which took effect on 1 January 1801. It was intended that the Union should deliver Catholic emancipation, though this promise was not adhered to. In Ulster the enthusiastic support for the French Revolution that had been expressed in the parades of 1791 had now largely been replaced by distrust and fear of the threatening, colonialist ambitions of Napoleonic France. In addition, the province was still traumatised by the violence of the Rising and its brutal aftermath.

Contributions to the poetry column of the Belfast Newsletter in the Union period give an indication of how opinions were developing. In the autumn of 1800, several readers who were enthusiastic about the wellnigh completed Union project contributed verse designed to express their satisfaction. 'A Song on the Union', January 16, 1801 is exultant in tone:

Arise mighty Kingdom, Enjoy thy proud fate, and hail the blest area that renders thee
great! May each year increase Thy Prosperity's store And Union befriend thee till time
be no more.

On Jan 6, however, when the Union was only days old in law, the Newsletter turned to Robert Burns for a mot juste, or at least to a poem for which Burns had expressed admiration. Readers were offered the anonymous, ballad-like 'Keen blows the wind o'er Donnocht Head', and informed that it appeared 'in Dr Currie's edition of Burns's works printed at Liverpool'.

Here a homeless, lonely bard, wishing to escape appalling winter weather in a desolate, highland landscape, begs for shelter at the home of a kindly couple. The setting, the minstrel's bereft situation and the state of the country depicted must strongly have suggested to Ulster readers in January 1801 the condition of Scotland following the Rebellions of 1715 and 1745, but also, inevitably, the condition of their own land, post-1798. The piece concludes:



Nae hame have I, the minstrel said Sad party strife o'erturned my ha'; And weeping at the eve of life, I wander through a wreath of snaw. The message seems clear – continuing party strife will serve only to perpetuate ruin and desolation.

Other factors too played their part in the change in the Ulster-Scots' mindset that eventually caused most to become Unionists. Not all Presbyterians had supported the aims or the methods of the United Irishmen. Many sincere adherents of the faith considered rebellion as foolish at best and at worst sinful. In addition, the suppression of the Rising decimated the radical leadership, with many of the most gifted and vociferous commanders executed or exiled. Those left behind, and their children, lived to witness and to share in the prosperity brought to Ulster by the developing linen and ship-building industries, and so had progressively less desire to see the order of the state disturbed. Furthermore, the vigorous, popularist movement for Catholic Emancipation led by Daniel O'Connell may have led Presbyterians, a majority in the North, but a minority within Ireland, to fear that they might once again become marginalised in their own country. For a time at least during the nineteenth century many Ulster-Scots and, it should be said, their Scottish neighbours, came to believe that strong central government, industrialisation and the growth of Empire would offer opportunity, stability and security. Undoubtedly these considerations contributed massively to their increasingly whole-hearted identification with the United Kingdom.