

Climb The Liberty Tree

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE
ULSTER-SCOTS' ROLE IN
THE UNITED IRISHMEN'S
REBELLION OF 1798**



TEACHERS BOOKLET 2

Second Branch— Intelligence Reports

TEACHER NOTES

This unit of work allows pupils opportunities to:

- Learn about the leading characters involved in the 1798 Rebellion in Ulster
- Learn about the nature of martial law and the functioning of a secret society during a tense period in Ulster's history
- Take part in a role play
- Research using the Internet and other supplied source materials
- In pairs create and deliver a presentation supported by PowerPoint
- Design and create a poster, using Publisher
- Complete a creative writing assignment
- Reflect on their own work and how to improve it

KEY STAGE 3 CURRICULUM

The activities in this unit would fit into work on Citizenship and also into aspects of the General Learning Areas of The Arts, including Art and Design and Music; English including Media Education and Drama; Environment and Society, particularly History.

The unit provides opportunities to teach, practise and assess some of the following skills and capabilities:

- Critical and Creative Thinking Skills—creativity; managing information; problem solving/decision making
- Personal and Interpersonal Skills—self management, working with others
- Communication
- ICT

TEACHER NOTES

1 Henry Joy McCracken

Born:

High Street Belfast, 1767

Parents:

John McCracken and Ann Joy.

John McCracken was a wealthy ship owner and textile manufacturer of Scots descent.

Religion:

Presbyterian. The family worshipped in Rosemary Street, Belfast in a church on the site of the present Provincial Masonic Hall. A plaque commemorating Henry Joy McCracken is mounted over the entrance.

Siblings:

Henry was the fifth of six children. He and his younger sister Mary Ann were particularly close, sharing radical political views.

Social Conscience:

Henry was well-off and well-educated. He had attended a school run by a particularly enlightened schoolmaster who, unusually for the time, educated boys and girls together and did not employ corporal punishment. Henry grew up to take a management role in his father's cotton business but maintained an enlightened attitude to his employees and showed a genuine concern for the poor.

In 1788 he and Mary Ann established Belfast's first Sunday School, teaching reading and writing to boys and girls who would otherwise have had no education. The school was closed by the Anglican Vicar of Belfast, Will Bristow.

Henry has been described as impulsive, even rash, but also as gentle and humane.

Occupation:

Henry worked in management in his father's cotton business. This required him to travel around the country to meet suppliers and sellers. It is likely that he used this to cover his activities on behalf of the United Irishmen.

Politics:

In 1791 a Society of United Irishmen was founded in Belfast. Here most of the members were Presbyterians from the middle-classes, but membership also included some Catholics.

In their desire to achieve a more democratic society and to remove laws which disadvantaged Presbyterians and Roman Catholics they were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment then current in Scotland, from where their ancestors had migrated to Ulster. The democratic, revolutionary ideals of the French, of the rebellious American colonists, and of Tom Paine's Rights of Man were also highly influential on Henry and his radical contemporaries.

Leading members of the Society included Thomas Russell, a southerner who became Librarian at the Linen Hall, Sam Neilson, editor of The Northern Star and Robert Simms. Henry is alleged to have been a founder member, but it is more likely that he joined a few years afterwards. The Society was progressively driven underground as many of its members sought actively to mount a rebellion in Ireland with French assistance. Henry's business required him to travel around the country, buying and selling his textiles which probably provided good cover for liaisons with sympathisers.

1795: The Cave Hill Oath:

Wolfe Tone visited the Belfast Society in 1795 and on a fine June day he, Henry and the other leaders climbed to McArt's Fort on the Cave Hill where they swore an oath to subvert the authority of England, to fight for Ireland's independence and, if necessary, to die in the attempt.

The Defenders:

Henry was given the responsibility of bringing about an alliance between the United Irishmen in the north and the Catholic Defenders, a secret society operating in the countryside. He believed he had achieved this by 1796 and that the Defenders would stand with the United Irishmen in any planned revolt.

Imprisonment:

As support for the movement grew the Government sought to suppress any threat of revolution, particularly one which carried the threat of French assistance. The ranks of the Society were infiltrated by informers, and Henry and several of the leaders were imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin. He remained there from October 1797 until December 1798, becoming very ill with rheumatism due to the unhealthy conditions. Only his illness caused him to allow his uncle, the Dublin lawyer Henry Joy, to get him out on bail.

National Executive:

Henry returned to his revolutionary activities as soon as he had recovered and was one of the Ulster delegates sent to the national executive of United Irishmen in Dublin, February 1798. He remained there until May, planning a rebellion of United Irishmen and Defenders to coincide with a French invasion instigated by Tone. During this period fourteen members of the Leinster executive were arrested and a warrant issued for the arrest of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, the Dublin-based head of the United Irishmen's movement.

Rebellion:

Despite the setbacks, the Rebellion broke out in Leinster on 23rd May, 1798, followed in a few days by an uprising in Wexford.

Ulster's Response:

Robert Simms, the Adjutant-General for the Antrim United Irishmen wished to exercise caution, but on June 5th he was replaced by McCracken who issued the order for the rising to begin on June 7th. He planned to attack Antrim and take hostage a party of magistrates. Accordingly, a rebel army assembled at Donegore Hill and, under Henry's leadership, marched on Antrim where they were defeated by Crown forces.

In Hiding:

Henry and about 100 survivors hid in the Slemish area. He planned to join Henry Munro's revolt in Co. Down, but on learning of the latter's defeat at Ballynahinch he went into hiding on the Cave Hill, visiting the cottage of Mary Bodle, a labourer's daughter who had had his child in 1794.

Attempted Escape:

Mary Ann maintained contact throughout this period, bringing him clothes and money. She tried to get him away on an immigrant ship, but on his way to Carrickfergus he was recognised and arrested by four yeomen.

Trial and Execution:

The authorities were aware of how dangerous McCracken was, as he was so affectionately regarded in Belfast. Thus, after a trial on July 17, at which some very questionable evidence was used against him, he was ordered to Cornmarket, near the Market House where he had once held his Sunday School, for execution the same day. Several times, once just before he mounted the scaffold, he was offered his life in return for information about other rebels, but he refused to be such "a villain" as to take up the offer. He tried to address the crowd from the platform, but could not be heard above the noise made by the horses of the mounted soldiers.

Burial

After the execution his body was given to Mary Ann, who had engaged a surgeon to try to resuscitate him. When this failed she and her brother John, who had disapproved of Henry's politics, followed his coffin to St George's churchyard where he was buried. His remains were later disinterred and are now thought to lie in Clifton Street Cemetery, Belfast, beside Mary Ann's.

Henry inspired great loyalty and affection. One of his textile workers, William Thompson, refused to give evidence against him at his trial, despite being punished with two hundred lashes. The same man's wife offered to swear in court that she had seen Henry in Belfast on June 7th, the day of the attack on Antrim. This offer he refused. He wrote that the rebellion failed because "the rich always betray the poor", a comment which reveals much about his idealistic motivation for rebellion.

z Mary Ann McCracken

Born:

1770

Childhood:

Like her brothers and sister, Mary Ann was educated under the enlightened regime of David Manson, a progressive Belfast schoolmaster. She was particularly close to her brother Henry and together they set up Belfast's first Sunday School in an attempt to educate the children of the poor.

Politics:

Mary Ann supported Henry's radicalism. Some authorities allege that she belonged to a Society of United Irishwomen. She certainly had read and admired Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. She demonstrated her independence when, in partnership with her sister and aged only twenty, she started her own muslin business in order to have a small income to use as she pleased.

In addition to visiting her brothers when they were held in Kilmainham Gaol, she wrote regularly to Henry, encouraging him to learn French in preparation for the hoped-for French invasion in support of the Rebellion.

Active Supporter:

Mary Ann supplied clothes, food and money to Henry when he was in hiding on Slemish. She certainly braved the rough terrain of the south Antrim hills to find him there with Jemmy Hope and others after the final defeat of the United Irishmen at Ballynahinch. She continued to visit him at the cottage of David Bodle on Cave Hill and attempted to arrange an escape by sea which would ultimately take him to America. Despite her efforts, as she learned on June 8th, he was recognised and arrested on the road to Carrickfergus.

Trial and Execution:

Mary Ann continued to visit her brother in prison during the period of his trial. She also nursed back to health one of his workmen who refused to testify against him and was punished with 200 lashes.

After the guilty verdict at Henry's trial on July 17, 1798, he was ordered for immediate execution. This was because the authorities were aware of the great amount of sympathy there was for him in Belfast. Mary Ann remained with him, writing later, "I knew it was incumbent on me to avoid disturbing the last moments of my brother's life." They discussed the duty of resignation to the will of God and she arranged for him to see his own minister and the Rev. Steel Dickson.

Mary Ann cut off some of his hair for remembrance. It was taken from her by Colonel Fox who was guarding Henry as he suspected it might be used as a "holy relic" to rally further support for the United Irishmen's cause. However, it was returned to her later and a lock of it can still be seen among the papers relating to the Rebellion in Trinity College Dublin.

She accompanied Henry right to the gallows in Cornmarket at which point he kissed her and begged her to leave. In order to spare him further distress she obeyed. She was afterwards informed of how courageously he met his death, still refusing to betray his comrades in exchange for his life.

Funeral:

Mary had a surgeon attempt to resuscitate Henry, but when this proved unsuccessful she followed his coffin to its burial place in St George's churchyard. Out of sympathy for her General Nugent allowed the body a decent burial, rather than ordering the head to be severed and stuck on a spike as a warning to other rebels.

Thomas Russell:

Russell, one of the leaders and another who had taken the Cave Hill Oath was saved from execution as he had been imprisoned before the revolt broke out. Before he died Henry requested that Mary Ann should write to him that he had "done his duty". It is rumoured that Mary Ann may have been in love with Russell, though she makes no admission of this in any of her letters or journals. She did, however, visit him in Downpatrick Gaol following the failed 1803 Rebellion, after which he too was hanged.

Aunt and Foster Mother:

Shortly after Henry's execution, Mary Ann learned he had a four year old daughter. The mother was probably Mary Bodle, in whose father's cottage on Cave Hill he had hidden. Mary Ann adopted the child, named her Maria, paid for her education and spent the last years of her life in the home of Maria and her husband.

Death:

Mary Ann lived well into the Victorian era, only dying in 1866, aged 96. She continued to uphold the justice of the cause for which Henry had fought, writing some forty years later: "I never once wished that my beloved brother had taken any other part than that which he did take" and:

In considering the unsuccessful struggle in which my brother was engaged, many are too apt to forget the evils of the time: the grinding oppression under which the people laboured; the contempt in which public opinion was held; the policy which prevented its expression and intimidated the press. The only means then existing of stemming the torrent of corruption and oppression was tried and they failed, but the failure was not without its beneficial effects.

Mary is remembered in Belfast as an independent, intelligent woman and a philanthropist. In a recent essay she is called a "revolutionary and pioneer of feminism" Her grave is beside Harry's in Clifton Street Cemetery, Belfast.

3 Jimmy Hope

Born:

1764, Templepatrick, from a Covenanting family.

Education:

A sympathetic employer taught him some reading and writing.

Trade:

A linen weaver, as were so many of the United Irishmen, including the poet, James Orr.

Politics:

His views would be described as socialist today, though it was in a period before Marx and Engels articulated socialism. He was critical of the relationships between the social classes and wished to improve the conditions of working people whether in town, under manufacturers, or in the country, under landowners. The fact that Hope was so loyal to Henry Joy McCracken, a wealthy member of the manufacturing class, would seem to underline how genuinely radical Henry's own opinions were.

Hope joined the United Irishmen near Mallusk in 1795 and was elected to the central committee in Belfast. This illustrates the democratic nature of the movement. He met Russell, Neilson (editor of the Northern Star) and McCracken, whom he greatly admired. He proved a daring comrade in the days before the rebellion, on one occasion driving out of Belfast on a cart loaded with gunpowder, shot and the rebel flag, under the very noses of the military who were flogging people in the street for information.

The Battle of Antrim:

Hope and his "Spartan Band" held on longer than any other at the Battle, staying to cover the rebel retreat until they were isolated and virtually surrounded. Hope's resourcefulness got them out, however. He rejoined McCracken and went into hiding with him on Slemish. He was still with him when Mary Ann McCracken walked deep into the Antrim Hills to search for her brother.

Great Survivor:

Although Hope was suspected, not enough evidence could be found to convict him when the trials of the rebel leaders were taking place. He and his wife moved to Dublin, where he maintained his links with surviving United Irishmen and took part in the 1803 Rebellion. Once again he survived. Eventually he was able to return to Antrim and was buried in Mallusk in 1847. He named one of his sons, Henry Joy McCracken Hope.

4 William Drennan:

Born:

1754.

Drennan's father was Rev. Thomas Drennan, minister of the First Presbyterian Church, Rosemary Street.

Education:

Drennan trained to be a doctor in Scotland and moved to Dublin to practise in 1790.

Politics:

Drennan was a radical member of the Volunteers and gradually came to believe Ireland must separate from Britain to achieve a truly reformed society and government. In 1784 he proposed a new secret society which would bind its members by an oath and work for the reform of the parliamentary and social system which favoured the Anglican Ascendancy and disadvantaged Catholics and Presbyterians. He wished to call it The Brotherhood. It was Wolfe Tone who suggested it should be The Society of United Irishmen.

United Irishmen's Societies were founded in Belfast and Dublin in 1791, encouraged by the progress of the French Revolution. From as early as 1792 Drennan was aware of two groupings within the Society: those who wanted immediate reform and were prepared to fight for it, and those who favoured a more cautious approach. He himself favoured caution and was suspicious of Catholic allies in groups such as the Defenders, thinking they might deal independently with the government if it suited their purpose.

Arrest:

Drennan was tried for seditious libel as a result of some of his anti-government opinions expressed during Britain's war with Revolutionary France. He managed to secure an acquittal, but when the Rebellion broke out in 1798 he took no active part.

Act of Union:

Drennan opposed the Union when it came but later accepted it, feeling it gave the opportunity for reform.

Death:

1820. Buried in Clifton Street Cemetery.

5 William Orr:

Orr was a Presbyterian farmer from Farranshane, outside Antrim.

Politics:

Orr joined the United Irishmen in 1794 and occasionally wrote for the *Northern Star*.

Arrest:

He was charged with administering the United Irishmen's oath to two soldiers from the Fifeshire Fencibles. This was a capital offence under the Insurrection Act of 1796.

Trial:

The civil and military authorities were determined to make an example of anyone suspected of subversion. Accounts of Orr's trial suggest that he was inappropriately charged with high treason and that the jury were intimidated and plied with drink until they delivered the required "Guilty" verdict. Despite support even from Lady Castlereagh Orr was sentenced to hang.

Execution:

The scene was more like one of martyrdom. Orr was accompanied by two ministers and read the Bible on the way. As the noose was place around his neck he said: "Great Jehovah receive my soul. I die in the faith of a true Presbyterian." At the Battle of Antrim, Henry Joy McCracken wore a ring inscribed with the motto:
Remember Orr.

6. Rev William Steel Dickson

Dickson was born at Mallusk, Co Antrim and studied at Glasgow University. He was Presbyterian minister at Ballyhalbert (Ulster-Scots, Talbotstoun) on the Ards Peninsula from 1771-80, and in Portaferry from 1780-98.

Radical Views:

1776: he spoke against Britain's attack on America.

1779: he said Roman Catholics should be allowed to join the Volunteers.

1791: he joined the United Irishmen. He later claimed not to have been in favour of revolution or of a republic, but of reform.

Government Suspicion:

Dickson was under suspicion for several years before '98. In 1796 he visited Dublin. He was suspected of going south to rendezvous with the French fleet off Bantry Bay.

In early 1798 he visited Scotland and was suspected of trying to make contact with the radical reformers there.

The Government agent Nicholas Mageean named Dickson as Adjutant-General of the Co. Down United Irishmen, claiming he had been offered the post on May 17, 1798.

John Hughes, another Government informer claimed he had heard Dickson say he would make his headquarters at Ballynahinch on June 4 and wait for news of the Rising in Antrim.

Detention

Dickson was detained at Ballynahinch on June 5th. He was imprisoned first in Belfast, where he spoke to Henry Joy McCracken shortly before his execution. Later he was transferred to Fort George, Inverness until 1802.

No credible witness ever appeared to convict him on clear evidence.

7 Rev James Porter

Porter was the son of Presbyterian parents from Donegal. He was educated at Glasgow University and became minister at Greyabbey (Ulster-Scots: Greba) in 1787. He was a great scholar in the Classics and in the Sciences. He gave a series of lectures around the North in 1796, which the authorities suspected of being a cover for United Irishmen's business.

From January 1792 he was a frequent contributor to the Northern Star. He wrote ballads calling for reform. He lampooned the Church of Ireland ascendancy and the aristocracy. In 1796 he wrote The Downshire Letters, open letters in the Star, addressed to Lord Downshire, Governor of Co. Down. In them he called for political reform (Catholic emancipation) and supported the aims of the United Irishmen.

1796 Threatened French Invasion:

When Tone's French fleet was prevented from landing at Bantry Bay, Porter warned the Government in a sermon that if another invasion threatened, Divine Providence might not intervene again, but he concluded by calling on people to live peaceably and to cultivate brotherly love.

In 1797 he wrote to a friend: I am not the one to uphold the bloody Revolution of France and its grave injury to religion. A Republic in Ireland I would not favour. I am not a revolutionist.....but I call for an Ireland for the Irish.

Informed Against:

Porter had remained at Greyabbey when the rebellion broke out, but Nicholas Mageean claimed he was a brigadier-general in the Co. Down United Irishmen.

He was said to have been seen with a party of armed men on June 10th, to have given a blessing to a group of armed men and to have formed them into ranks. He was also charged with intercepting a military dispatch, though he was not formally identified. Porter was charged with Treason, Rebellion and Sedition on June 17th. He pleaded guilty and asked for mercy. His wife too pleaded for his life, but he was hanged.

He had been a very effective satirist and propagandist but, like Dickson, claimed to have been in favour of reform, not revolution and republicanism.

B. Henry Munro

Not much is known about Munro before 1798. He was a Lisburn linen merchant and his business duties around the country (like Henry Joy McCracken's) may have given him cover for United Irishmen's activities. Munro was a member of the Volunteers with a good military reputation, and a Freemason. It has been alleged that he became active as a rebel leader due to his disgust at the brutality of the forces of law and order.

Appearance:

Strikingly blue eyes and physically very strong.

Part in the Rebellion

On June 11, Munro arrived at the rebel camp at Creevy Rocks, near Saintfield, where the rebels had had some success in an encounter with the York Fencibles. His popularity is evidenced by the fact that he was almost immediately elected General.

He moved camp to Ednavaddy Hill, south-west of Ballynahinch, where he was defeated by Nugent on 12-13 June. This engagement ended the Rebellion in Ulster.

Execution:

After the defeat, Munro hid on Slieve Croob. William Holmes, a pig farmer, concealed him in the pig house, but betrayed him. He was hanged on June 16, having behaved with great dignity at his trial. Before he went to the scaffold he took communion and settled his business accounts. His last words were: Tell my country I have deserved better of her. After execution his head was stuck on a spike in Lisburn.

He had been a very effective satirist and propagandist but, like Dickson, claimed to have been in favour of reform, not revolution and republicanism.

9 Samuel Neilson

Neilson was a son of Rev. Alex Neilson, minister of Ballyroney in Co. Down. He became a woollen draper in Belfast and owned the Irish Woollen Warehouse, the largest in the town. His house was very close to Sugarhouse Entry where the United Irishmen frequently met. With 11 other Belfast businessmen he founded the radical newspaper, the *Northern Star* and became its editor. A close friend of the Drennan family, he was one of the founding members of the United Irishmen and a Freemason. His wife also came from a wealthy family. They had 8 children.

Neilson was described as “bold, manly and persevering”, a natural leader. He was involved in attempted mediation between the Protestant “Peep O’Day Boys” and the Defenders in 1792. He is credited with a key role in plotting the Rebellion nationwide. It is said that he had the idea of the interception of the mail coaches from Dublin to Belfast, Cork, Athlone and Limerick which was to have been the signal for the start of the Rising.

1795: The Cave Hill Oath:

Neilson, with Tone, Russell, McCracken and others took the Oath “never to desist until they had asserted the independence of Ireland.”

Neilson attracted the suspicions of the authorities and was arrested along with Thomas Russell at the Linen Hall Library in 1796. He was confined with McCracken and others in Kilmainham. All of them agreed that none should go free until they were released together, but Neilson’s wife tried to get him released early which led to a quarrel with McCracken. Mary Ann, however, met Mrs Neilson and assisted in reconciling the two men. Neilson was eventually released, though some 3 months later than McCracken.

Alcoholism:

Neilson appears to have developed an alcohol problem. Immediately prior to the Rebellion he was found wandering and intoxicated in Dublin, supposedly attempting to spring Lord Edward Fitzgerald, the imprisoned Dublin leader, Neilson was then arrested again. When the Rising failed he was tried on August 8th. At his trial he said: The idea of a republic and separation grew out of the severities practised by Government upon the people. Neilson was imprisoned in Fort George, Inverness, until 1802. He was released on condition that he emigrate to the USA.

10. Betsy Gray

Betsy is believed to have lived at Six Road Ends at the village of Gransha outside Bangor. She is remembered as very beautiful and brave.

Legend has it that she accompanied her brother George and her fiance Willie Boal to the battle of Ballynahinch where she fought bravely alongside them. Other stories say that she merely encouraged the United Irish troops. After the battle they tried to escape on horseback but were intercepted by a party of yeomen near Hillsborough, who murdered them and robbed their bodies. It is difficult to separate truth from legend when considering the life of Betsy Gray. Her story was movingly told by Wesley Guard Lyttle in his historical novel: *Betsy Gray or Hearts of Down*.

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