

# *climb The Liberty Tree*

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



**TEACHERS BOOKLET 6**

## TEACHER NOTES

# Top of the Tree— So What's the Point

This unit of work allows pupils opportunities to:

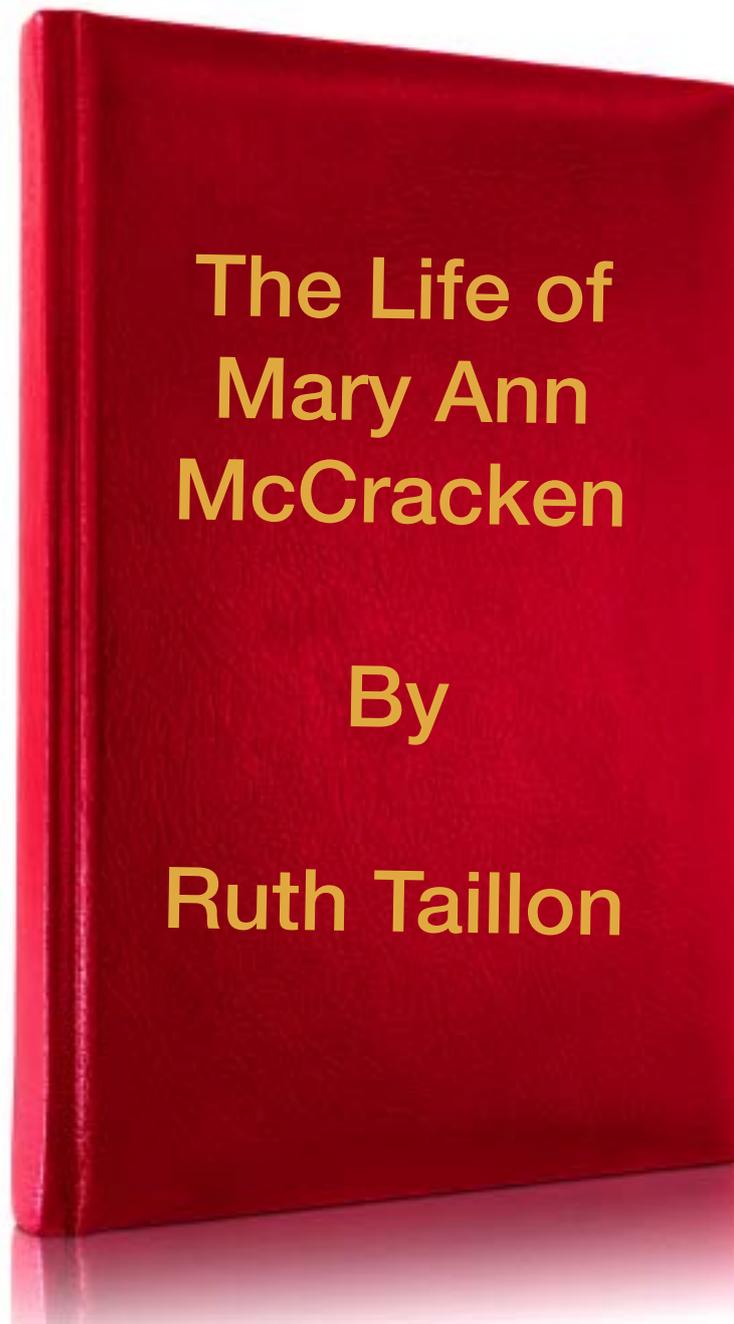
- Learn about the response of the survivors of the 1798 Rebellion to the Union of 1801
- Develop knowledge and understanding of the long, socially active life of Mary Ann McCracken
- Take part in a group discussion and make a group prediction
- Research using the Internet
- Reflect on the experience of a historical character, informed by documentary evidence
- Reflect on the effects of the use of violence to bring about political reform
- Research the Slave Trade and the Ulster anti-slavery movement using the Internet
- Create a leaflet appropriate to an anti-slavery campaign
- Work in a group to re-present information in the form of a wallchart
- Take part in a role play.

### 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



This article is based on the book by Mary O'Neill, *Mary Ann McCracken, Her Life and Times*, published by Blackstaff Press, 1960, reprinted 1997.

A copy of the article may be found on  
[www.keltaid.net/mmccracken.html](http://www.keltaid.net/mmccracken.html)

# The life of Mary Ann McCracken

## **Ruth Taillon chronicles the life of Mary Ann McCracken whose political commitment began in the early days of the United Irish movement**

The life of Mary Ann McCracken, democrat and social reformer, has been overshadowed by the life of her more famous brother, Henry Joy, although she outlived him by 68 years and was politically active until just a few years before her death at the age of 96.

Mary Ann was born in 1770, at a time when Belfast, like the rest of the country, was experiencing enormous industrial disruption and social change. Irish industry was being systematically destroyed by economic policies designed to protect the interests of English and Scottish industrialists. Mary Ann's family, however, were relatively prosperous and by the time of her birth well established and prominent in Belfast's social and commercial life. Mary Ann's liberal and far-sighted parents sent her to David Masson's progressive co-educational school, where 'young ladies' received the same education as the boys: Mary Ann excelled at mathematics.

As a young woman - in her early twenties - Mary Ann and her sister Margaret started a small muslin business. They employed a number of handloom weavers working at home. Mary Ann applied her arithmetic skills as book-keeper to the business.

The independent parliament in Dublin - dominated by the landed gentry - was a great disappointment to the Belfast mercantile community. The McCrackens were very much involved in the agitation for political reform. In 1791, Mary Ann's brother Henry Joy, with Thomas Russell, Samuel Neilson and Wolfe Tone, established the first Society of United Irishmen. Mary Ann was a confidante of her brother and his comrades, and shared both their ideas and their work. On 10 October, 1796, her brother Henry Joy was arrested.

Mary Ann's political commitment and acumen are demonstrated in her letters to Henry Joy in Kilmainham Jail. They show that she was keenly aware of the contemporary feminist thinkers, had assimilated them into her own views about the democratic movement, and that she had no hesitation about being forthright in those views. She referred in one letter to a mutual friend being sworn into the United Irishmen, and commented, "I hope his sisters will soon follow so good an example..." Her letters are full of political commentary, and news of raids, arrests and arms seizures which show that she was very much involved in the events around her. The letters demonstrate an advanced and well developed feminist consciousness. She talks of her "great curiosity" to visit some female societies of the United Irish movement, but objects to the fact that they are for women only:

“...as there can be no other reason for having them separate but keeping women in the dark and certainly it is equally ungenerous and uncandid to make tools of them without confiding in them. I wish to know if they have any rational ideas of liberty and equality for themselves or whether they are contented with their present abject and dependent situation, degraded by custom and education beneath the rank in society in which they were originally placed; for if we suppose woman was created for a companion in man she must of course be his equal in understanding...”

“Is it not almost time for the clouds of error and prejudice to disperse and that the female part of Creation as well as the male should throw off the fetters with which they have been so long mentally bound and conscious of the dignity and importance of their nature rise to the situation for which they were designed, as great events at least display, if they do not create, great abilities. I hope the present Era will produce some women of sufficient talents to inspire the rest with a genuine love of Liberty and just sense of her value... no argument produced in favour of the slavery of women that has not been used in favour of general slavery and which have been successfully combatted by many able writers. I therefor hope it is reserved for the Irish nation to strike out something new and to show an example of candour generosity and justice superior to any that have gone before them...”

In another letter, Mary Ann sent Henry Joy a book by Mary Wollstoncraft, and shows that she is not embarrassed or reticent about discussing matters of sexuality and personal relations. She discusses Wollstoncraft's views on marriage and Wollstoncraft's having married despite her previous “contempt for the ceremony”. Mary Ann attributes this to her having earlier been in a relationship with a man who she then discovered to be “living publicly with an actress”.

Margaret and Mary kept their muslin business going despite all the personal and political upheaval affecting their lives, including the arrest of some of their weavers. Their brother William also depended upon them to oversee his own factory while he was in prison. More and more people were being rounded up, and Mary Ann's letters are full of news as prisoners were being brought in from all over Ireland.

On 23 May, 1798, the signal for the rising was given. Thousands mobilised, but there was chaos in the north. Henry Joy McCracken was commander in chief when the rebels marched on Antrim. They were easily routed. Henry Joy wanted to try to get to Wexford, but was unable to get away safely. Mary Ann arranged for him to be taken on board a boat to America, but on the way to his rendezvous, he was recognised and arrested. It was 8 July, one month after the battle of Antrim and Mary Ann's 28th birthday.

On 16 July, Henry Joy was brought to Belfast; his court martial took place on 17 July. Mary Ann and her father were the only family members there to support him. The prosecutor offered a private deal in which Henry Joy would be given clemency if he would name others; it was refused outright and he was condemned to die. Mary Ann managed to see Henry Joy in the barracks, and heard him being informed he was to be immediately executed. After his death, and against the family's wishes, Mary Ann fulfilled her unspoken promise to him and brought his four-year old daughter, Maria, to live at the McCracken family home. The child's mother and her family were assisted by Mary to go to America. Maria was to live with Mary Ann until she married, and Mary Ann spent her last years in Maria's home.

In the years following the suppression of the rising, Mary Ann continued to follow political developments closely. She was acutely aware of the implications of the defeat of the democratic movement. She was opposed to the Act of Union; she was concerned about the effects it would have on poor people.

She continued also to develop her business. She was a progressive employer. In 1803, she wrote a letter to the Belfast Newsletter about factory hygiene and conditions of employment: "Workers... ought to be provided with warm coats and clothes so as to be protected against the evil effects of wet and cold, when going to and returning from their work; sufficient time should be allowed for amusement in the open air... A very serious responsibility attaches to those who employ children."

The same year, Thomas Russell returned to Belfast. He was in charge of organising in the north for another rising. The northern leadership of the United Irishmen advised the movement against the planned rebellion. Russell realised that a rising in the north was impossible. Before he could return to Dublin, however, Robert Emmet had started to fight in Dublin. Russell was forced to issue a proclamation, but only a handful in the north responded and the rising was crushed. With financial help from Mary Ann, Russell returned to Dublin to try to help Emmet escape. He arrived too late, and was himself arrested. Mary Ann immediately became involved in efforts to get Russell released. Her last letter to him demonstrated once again her refusal to bow to convention in personal matters. With Henry Joy's situation clearly on her mind, Mary Ann went on in her letter to Russell, "to request if there are any other who have claims on your affection, that you will not through motives of false delicacy scruple to mention them.."

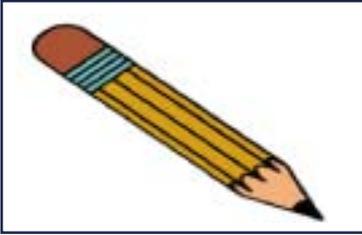
Mary Ann also took an active part in the cultural life of Belfast. In particular, she supported her foster-brother, Edward Bunting's work in collecting Irish music - both financially and by acting as his unofficial secretary. She was also a founding member of the Belfast Harp Society. The Society contributed to the revival of interest in the Irish language, poetry and literature.

The McCracken sisters struggled to keep their business open throughout the economic depression of the early 19th century. Mary Ann wrote that she could not think of dismissing the workers because no one else would employ them. In 1815, however, the sisters decided that the failing business must close. When their debts were paid, there was very little left. In a letter to a friend, Mary Ann remarked on how difficult life could be: "...the sphere of a woman's industry is so confined and so few roads lie open to her, and those so thorny..." Mary Ann's connection with the British Poorhouse had started when she was just a child, and she maintained her family's philanthropic links with the Poorhouse into her 81st year. In 1827, inspired by a visit to Belfast by prisons reformer Elizabeth Fry, a group of local women came together to work on behalf of the women and children in the case of the Belfast Charitable Society. Mary Ann was treasurer of the group for some years and in 1832 was elected secretary. They organised training in embroidery and other skills for girls, including apprenticeships with local businesses and also did after-care visits for the girl apprentices. Education, generally geared towards employment, was provided for older girls and they set up an infant school in the Poorhouse.

Mary Ann's interest in young people, and in particular the education and employment of girls and women, was pursued through other channels as well. She helped to establish the Ladies Industrial School in 1847, which was set up by the Belfast Ladies Association for the Relief of Irish Destitution. The association was a response to the Irish Famine; Mary Ann was President of the association when she died. Her philanthropic work included membership of the Belfast Ladies Clothing Society and the Society for the Relief of the Destitute Sick. She was also on a committee to abolish the use of climbing boys in chimney sweeping. At the age of 88, she was still collecting for a number of charities.

Her political commitment likewise did not falter. She had been a supporter of the antislavery movement from its early days, when the United Irishmen had called for a boycott of sugar products from the West Indies. The 89 year old Mary Ann herself stood leafleting emigrants departing for America, and she deplored the lack of anti-slavery activists in Belfast where there had once been such strong support. In the last 20 years of her life, she maintained a correspondence with Dr Madden, and made a major contribution to his definitive history of the United Irishmen. On 26 July, 1866, just a few weeks after her 96th birthday, Mary Ann McCracken died.

*Ruth Taillon is a founder member of the Mary Ann McCracken Historical Society*



How does the first quotation suggest that life has changed for the better since 1798?

Mary Ann is looking back at a time which she clearly feels was worse than the time at which she wrote this (c. 1859). She mentions oppression, contempt for public opinion, intimidation and corruption which she clearly feels are not in evidence any more. She believes the rebels tried the only method of changing things that was available at that time, and although they failed she believes their attempt had an effect in improving life for all people: “their failure was not without its beneficial effects”

Why does Mary Ann not regret what Henry did even though she still misses her brother?

She feels the action he took was justified and that he took it for the benefit of all the people of Ireland. She sees him as a hero whom she admired.

Look carefully at the final quotation. Think about the atrocities that followed the Battle of Antrim and all the executions after the Rebellion was crushed. What lesson has Mary Ann learned about using violence to bring about change

She seems to be pointing to the hurt and suffering that always follow violent attempts to bring about change. She points out that there is no certainty of success, or of achieving a good outcome immediately. The executions and floggings that followed the Rebellion may have been in her mind, but also the deaths and injuries suffered by both sides in the battles.