For J.C.

Second Edition

IRELAND
1798–1998
War, Peace and Beyond

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The Birth of Modern Irish Politics, 1790–8

We had the true faith, you see. Reason. The logical men. History was a dungeon. The people were locked into their separate compounds, full of stench and nightmare. But the dungeons couldn't stand against the force of rationalism. Let the people once unite, and we could burst open the doors, and they would flood out into the clean sunlight . . . all we've done, you see, is to reinforce the locks, cram the cells fuller than ever of mangled bodies crawling round in their own shite and lunacy, and the cycle just goes on, playing out the same demented comedy of terrors from generation to generation, trapped in the same malignant legend . . .

Henry Joy McCracken, in Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* (1983)[1]

2.1 The Origins of the Crisis

Ireland in the 1790s was a separate but dependent kingdom, united to Great Britain only through sharing a monarch, George III: the theoretical constitutional position of Ireland was similar to that of Hungary after the *Ausgleich* of 1867. Ireland boasted a separate bicameral legislature, which sat in Edward Lovett Pearce's splendid Italianate parliament house in College Green, Dublin: after 1782–3 this assembly enjoyed, at least in name, full legislative independence. There was a distinct Irish executive, headed by a lord lieutenant, and based in a sprawling administrative complex at Dublin Castle. There was a theoretically separate Irish judiciary, housed in Dublin's Four Courts, on the northern bank of the river Liffey.

But behind these elaborate institutions, and behind the florid rhetoric of the Irish parliament's patriot interest, lay the reality of British influence. The Irish parliament had, indeed, won what it was pleased to call 'legislative independence' in 1782–3; but while the strategies which secured victory had an immense significance, the limits of this triumph were soon apparent – and particularly after 1789 when, with the French revolution, an increasingly ambitious definition of parliamentary

autonomy and authority gained currency.[2] In 1782 one of the keystones of the Irish constitution, Poynings' Law (1494), had been modified in order to award the Irish parliament sole rights over the introduction of legislation (the modifying legislation was known as Yelverton's Act): in addition an antique legislative irritant, the Declaratory Act (1720), which asserted the superior status of Westminster, was repealed and, in 1783, replaced by the Renunciation Act, a measure disavowing any British legislative ambition over Ireland. These tinkerings were hailed by Irish patriots as independence, but the chasm between this rhetoric and constitutional reality was wide, and ultimately dangerous.

The Irish political system in the 1790s was affected by British influence at almost every level. Though Yelverton's Act had emasculated the Irish privy council, its British counterpart still possessed a right of veto over Irish legislation, and this meant that the British government could spike any offensive measures (in reality it rarely did so). The constitutional settlement of 1782–3 did not directly alter the condition of the Irish executive, which remained firmly under the control of the British government. The chief executive, the lord lieutenant, was a British appointee, and was throughout the period 1782–1800 an Englishman; in the same period the Chief Secretaries – in effect the government managers in the Commons – were, bar one, Englishmen, and the unique Irish appointment, Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh, was deemed by his lord lieutenant in 1797 to be 'so very unlike an Irishman I think he has a clear claim to an exception in his favour'.[3] A triumvirate of powerful office-holders – John Foster, Speaker of the Commons, John Fitzgibbon, the Lord Chancellor, and John Beresford, Chief Commissioner of the Revenue – generally (though not uniformly) exercised their formidable political influence in the government interest.

The 'insistent treatment of Ireland as a British dependency' (as Nancy Curtin has described it) was made possible both by the British-controlled executive and by the peculiarly unrepresentative nature of the Irish parliament: strict British control over patronage combined with a narrowly based and therefore susceptible parliament to tarnish further the lustre of 'legislative independence'.[4] The Irish House of Commons at the end of the eighteenth century represented chiefly the Church of Ireland landed interest. Catholics were disfranchised between 1728 and 1793, and were excluded from parliament until the 'emancipation' of 1829; Presbyterians, while possessing the franchise, were in practice scarcely represented. Of 150 constituencies represented in the Irish House of Commons, 107 were 'close' – that is, under the control of an individual or a small group of patrons. By contemporary European standards even limited parliamentary representation was a democratic luxury, and by contemporary British standards a small and irregular electorate was unexceptional. In addition, A.P.W. Malcomson has warned against the uncritical assumption that close boroughs implied inefficient or unchallenged control.[5] What was unusual about Ireland was not that landed property should be overrepresented (however unevenly), or that there should be a religious dimension to political rights, but rather that the two principles should be combined in order to exclude two powerful and wealthy confessional communities from representative politics. This

constitutional quirk was made all the more glaring given the inflated libertarian rhetoric which had preceded the achievement of legislative independence in 1782. Legislative independence therefore raised dangerous expectations in two separate, but related, spheres: the campaign encouraged the assumption that, while the British connection would remain, British influence would be constrained; and, further, it underlined Catholic and Presbyterian exclusion. The Renunciation Act (1783) has been described as 'a mere decorative flourish for which the indirect price was out of all proportion to the benefit obtained': the same aphorism might be applied to the whole settlement (1782–3).[6] Legislative independence was a Pyrrhic victory for the ascendancy parliament, bought at the price of long-term constitutional uncertainty.

Thomas Malthus, in a famous discussion of Irish demography, suggested that the political uncertainty of the 1790s was a product, not of this long-term constitutional instability, but rather of exceptional population growth.[7] In 1790 the Irish population stood at around 4 million, having doubled since the famine of 1740–1; by 1800 the population would be 5 million, an astonishing rate of growth by late eighteenth-century European standards. Explanations for this growth are never likely to be conclusive, but the widespread adoption of the potato through the eighteenth century, combined with the general economic buoyancy of the later part of the century, are clearly relevant factors. Early marriage, and (possibly) a falling mortality rate, were the immediate spurs to this population boom, but a political dimension has also been observed: the political exclusion of Catholics, an issue increasingly to the fore after legislative independence, and limited Catholic prospects for betterment, may have removed any social or economic restraint on marital fertility. It may well be that the political turmoil of the 1790s was simultaneously a cause and a result of this growth.

Economic growth, while related to the issue of population, clearly operated as an independent destabilizing influence. After the fluctuating, but generally depressed, conditions of the period 1691–1730, the Irish economy grew swiftly: agricultural output rose, trade with Britain and with North America prospered, new industries (such as cotton) and well-established industries (such as linen manufacture, brewing and distilling) all generally flourished (despite occasional, temporary downturns, such as at the end of the 1770s). It is difficult to be precise about the political implications of this growth. It may, however, be surmised that the political crisis of 1779–82, which resulted in the achievement of 'free trade' and legislative independence for Ireland, was related to contemporary economic conditions – a period of depression after sustained growth, and the creation of an early 'crisis of expectations' (such as has been identified for the 1870s). The complex inter-relationship between economic growth and political protest may be further illustrated through the example of eighteenth-century Armagh. David Miller has argued that the rise of the linen industry in late eighteenth-century County Armagh encouraged some limited Catholic economic mobility and tended to destabilize well-established family structures within every confessional tradition: the profitability of handloom weaving permitted young men to establish their independence much earlier than was

usual within small farmer society, and freed them from the restraints of the rigid, patriarchal family.[8] This social liberation combined with Catholic advance and with the rapid rise in population to stimulate the sectarian violence endemic in Armagh from the mid-1780s through to the mid-1790s.

But economic growth was linked to other evolving forms of social and political interaction. Tom Bartlett has argued persuasively that in Ireland after *c.*1770 a new moral economy was developing in the Irish countryside, underpinned by the growing 'sociability' of community activity.[9] The mounting prosperity of the countryside was reflected in the rising number of fairs and markets, and in the gradual commercialization of rural economic life. Relative prosperity therefore not only equipped many Irish people with new political and material aspirations, but also gave rise to increasing opportunities for communal mobilization and protest. Aside from the emergence of new political fora, older forms of public activity – sporting events, wakes, funerals, patterns – also now began to take on an additional significance: the politicization of funerals, for example, seems to have gathered pace in this era.

These processes of socialization were augmented and diverted by the increasing importance of military activity within everyday life: it has been calculated that between 1760 and 1820, perhaps as many as one in six Irishmen spent part of their lives in the ranks of one or other of the armed forces, and indeed it is possible that, given the stupendous demands of the Napoleonic wars, this proportion may have been higher.[10] For many this involved a liberation from the shackles of the local community, and brought – perhaps for the first time – tighter definitions of nationality and of religious identity. Indeed, it has been observed that this era also witnessed a spiralling sectarianism, or rather sectarianization, in part the by-product of these more communal forms of political expression and of the mounting conflicts between Catholics and the Protestant state: the army, for example, may have been the first arena where many Irish Catholics experienced the reality of their religious subordination.

A related range of destabilizing influences may be located in the realm of ideology. Irish interest in the American and French revolutions was immense, and the ideological fall-out from these events was no less dramatic. The rationalist, libertarian and republican ideals of, especially, the French revolutionaries found an audience in Ireland already sensitive (for the reasons already noted) to the issue of individual political rights and national sentiment. However, the direct influence of the great writers of the French enlightenment is difficult to gauge: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau can have had only a very few, privileged readers in Ireland. Popular appreciation of the ideals and events of the French revolution came, not from its intellectual architects, but rather from the press and from pamphlets. 'Illiteracy', as Nancy Curtin has observed, 'was no barrier to familiarising oneself with the polemics of a Paine or of a Tone': public readings from the newspapers and from radical literature were quite common.[11] Nor was it necessary to follow difficult abstract argument: handbills hammered home a clear-cut political message, while ballads celebrated the French revolutionary achievement in a universally

accessible fashion. Popular prophetic literature foretold the liberation of Ireland by the French. In Ireland, just as in France itself, popular political resentments were cultivated and directed by this literature. The tyranny of Irish government was underlined by the experience of the French; moreover, the Irish oppressed had now an ally in the shape of a liberated French nation.

2.2 Constitutional Radicalism to Revolution, 1791–8

The two dominant Irish political issues of the early 1790s were certainly not spawned by the French revolution, but they were nurtured through revolutionary sympathy. Parliamentary reform had been a longstanding question, dating back to the late 1740s and to the campaigns of the radical Dublin apothecary, Charles Lucas: although initially more concerned with Dublin corporation politics than with parliament, Lucas had condemned the misgovernment of the Castle and its parliamentary allies, and – after his political comeback in 1761 – had supported a septennial bill in order to limit the duration of parliament. Lucas's views, as David Dickson has noted, 'were later to influence Catholic apologists arguing for relaxation of the penal laws, and political radicals seeking parliamentary reform'.[12] The constitutional settlement of 1782–3 raised the issue of parliamentary reform in a more direct manner than had been done in the previous generation, with the Volunteers of Ulster attacking the power of the great borough owners, and a National Convention of the Volunteers, held in Dublin in November 1783, declaring in favour of a reform bill. This was presented to the House of Commons, and summarily rejected. A revival of the reform question in 1784–5 was spear-headed by a new coalition, largely urban, and embracing both Catholics (hitherto largely silent on the question) and dissenters. This fed off other resentments – the Dublin guilds wanted tariff protection, Catholics wanted the removal of disabilities – but soon fell victim to internal division (especially on the question of Catholic relief) and to a ferocious and abusive press campaign orchestrated by the Castle. The rejection of William Pitt's proposals for reform of the British parliament, presented in 1785, confirmed the comprehensive failure of the Irish reformers.

In the later 1780s the most conspicuous proponents of limited reform were the Whigs, who were bruised by their misjudgements during the Regency Crisis (they offered over-hasty support for the Prince of Wales during George III's temporary incapacity in 1788–9), and who established a formal party in the Irish parliament in 1789: this supported place and pensions bills, a responsibility bill, and the disfranchisement of revenue officers. Even though Whig clubs were founded in Dublin, Belfast and other large towns to bolster the new grouping (the Northern Whig Club denounced corrupt boroughs), the new political challenge came to nothing: the elections of 1790 brought no sweeping Whig successes, and in fact served only to consolidate the parliamentary strength of the Castle. While the Whigs appear to have found some inspiration from France in the summer of 1789 (their manifesto was published a month after the fall of the Bastille), the revolution both directly

and indirectly would prove to be disastrous for them. As the revolutionaries grew more radical and violent, so the Whigs grew ever more divided in their attitudes. Moreover, with the outbreak of war between Britain and France in 1793, the Castle sought to bolster support for the war effort through annexing and enacting some of the Whigs' policies (a Civil List Act, a Place Act, a Barren Land Act and a Hearth Tax Act). However, this conciliation was complemented – as so often in the history of Castle administration – with coercion, and three security measures were passed in the same parliamentary session of 1793: a Convention Act, a Gunpowder Act and a Militia Act. And neither the Castle nor – despite some equivocation – the Irish House of Commons was seriously interested in the prospect of parliamentary reform: a Whig reform bill, creating three member county constituencies and a uniform, if elaborate, borough franchise, was easily rejected in March 1794, with the opponents of reform arguing that such moderation had spawned eventual anarchy in France. Denuded in certain areas of policy, and blocked in others, the Whigs lost credibility, and constitutional reform initiatives fell into other, ultimately less genteel, hands.

The only substantial reform of the franchise to be won in these years came in January 1793, with the admission of Catholic 40-shilling freeholders to the county vote through Hobart's relief bill (and even the importance of this can easily be overstated, given that the Irish parliament was a borough-dominated assembly). The political leadership of the Catholic community before 1789 pursued a distinctively gradualist and (on the whole) loyalist agenda, couching limited demands for ministerial 'indulgence' in highly deferential language. The Catholic Committee, created in 1760, was the chief representative body for the Catholic community, and emerged as a mild and aristocratic institution: this went into abeyance in 1784, after the failure of the parliamentary reform initiative, but was revived in 1790–1 with the accession of new, bourgeois and radical, leaders. Eamon O'Flaherty has warned against treating the Catholic community in the late eighteenth century in crudely homogeneous terms, and indeed even the political attitudes of the Catholic clergy varied significantly: the French revolution created divisions between the episcopate and the younger clergy which foreshadowed similar tensions during the Irish land wars and revolutionary era.[13] Indeed, the lessons provided by France for Irish Catholics were ambiguous: the revolution simultaneously promoted the religious tolerance and equality which had for long been sought by Catholic representatives in Ireland, while involving an assault on the institutions and property of the Church. Revolutionary ideals therefore fired a demand for Catholic relief in Ireland, while disturbing many Catholic gentry and much of the episcopate.

By December 1791 the old aristocratic masters of the Catholic Committee had withdrawn, leaving the field to the middle-class radicals (notably John Keogh and Thomas Braughall). The deferential and loyal petitioning of Lord Kenmare, the aristocratic Catholic leader, was now replaced by the French-inspired language of right. In addition, Keogh and the new Committee complemented this radical assertiveness with strategic innovation. The Irish government and parliament were clearly unsympathetic to Catholic claims and were soon written out of the

Committee's strategy (two relief petitions, submitted by the Committee to the Irish House of Commons in January and February 1792, were rejected amidst much anti-papist philosophizing). A highly tentative reform measure – sponsored by Sir Hercules Langrishe and dubbed therefore 'Langrishe's Act' (even though it had originated with the Castle) – did nothing to defuse Catholic protest: indeed, on the contrary, for as Tom Bartlett has argued, the significance of the measure 'lay in the debate it provoked (but did not resolve) on the nature of the Anglo-Irish connection, in the jealousies and suspicions it aroused concerning the British government's Catholic game, and in the fact that it was clearly incomplete'.[14] Moreover, the bill passed into law accompanied by the elaboration and enunciation of the new idea of 'Protestant ascendancy'. Even before these humiliations the Catholic Committee had been prepared to sidestep the Irish parliament through exploiting close links with its supporters at Westminster (pre-eminently Edmund Burke) and establishing communication with the British government: Burke's son, Richard, was appointed English agent of the Committee in September 1791. The appointment of Theobald Wolfe Tone to the secretaryship of the Committee in July 1792 signalled a more defiant and radical approach; and this was confirmed by the national Catholic Convention, held in Dublin in December, which voted to petition the king for total legal equality. 'The real achievement of the Convention', O'Flaherty has argued, 'was that it succeeded in inducing Pitt to bring irresistible pressure on the Irish executive to grant the principal Catholic demand'.[15] Hobart's relief bill, admitting Catholic 40-shilling freeholders to the franchise, was the fruit of this simultaneously more assertive and subtle approach to the advocacy of Catholic rights: it was the highpoint of Catholic constitutional endeavour in the 1790s, indeed before the 'emancipation' (the term gained currency in 1792–3) of 1829. Thereafter Catholic constitutional pressure encountered an ascendancy interest increasingly concerned and defensive about the European war, and therefore more in tune than hitherto with the British government. The Catholic Committee was forced to dissolve under the terms of the Convention Act (1793): Henry Grattan's Catholic Emancipation Bill (1795) was defeated in the Irish House of Commons, and Grattan's viceregal patron, Earl Fitzwilliam, removed from office after a tenure of scarcely two months. Yet, though this half-cocked emancipation did not in fact herald a greater liberation, its significance should not be missed: Hobart called the enfranchisement 'a most important revolution in the political state of this country', and Tom Bartlett has convincingly stressed the long-term importance of the arguments and strategies which were pursued in the search for reform.[16] Ominously, the comparatively genteel power struggle that was under way in Dublin was underscored by a more naked sectarian conflict in south Ulster.

The crucial points of contact between the radical tradition of parliamentary reform and the campaign for Catholic relief came with the United Irish Society, founded in Belfast and Dublin in 1791, and with Wolfe Tone, 'mid-wife' of the Society and an influential Catholic sympathizer. The Society was at first a constitutional radical grouping, hostile to English interference in the government of Ireland, but urging the comprehensive reform of government rather than its overthrow. The

'Declaration and Resolutions of the Society of United Irishmen of Belfast', published in October 1791 and drafted by Tone, called for 'a complete and radical reform of the representation of the people in parliament', and the unity of all 'Irishmen' in order to pursue this end. The Society reflected Tone's dual enthusiasm for parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation (a combination most famously articulated in his *Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (1791)); and indeed the Dublin United Irishmen, originally largely Protestant, soon attracted an influx of Catholics, including leading members of the Catholic Committee. The Dublin United Irishmen produced a reform plan early in 1794 which fleshed out the general ideals expressed in the original declaration: equal constituencies, universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, payment of members of parliament. The Belfast United Irishmen had produced a similarly moderate reform proposal early in 1793 – 'the last act of Ulster constitutional reformism', in Dickson's description.[17] But by this time, and certainly by the time the Dublin scheme appeared, the prospects for a radical reform of parliament, never bright, had been utterly extinguished. The war had undercut the popular francophile radicalism of 1791–2, scaring many early enthusiasts. The government, sensitive to any prospect of sedition, had little difficulty in suppressing the Society in May 1794.

Many, especially northern, United Irishmen had fostered republican and revolutionary sympathies behind the cloak of constitutional radicalism (although Tone, in the opinion of Marianne Elliott, 'was not an active separatist until 1795').[18] Government suppression in 1793–4 combined with the apparent futility of a constitutional strategy to realize the latent militancy of the United Irish movement. Before 1794 the United Irishmen of Ulster were informally supervised by a committee of public welfare sitting in Belfast. But with a heightened militancy of purpose came the need for a more cohesive and secret organizational structure. A new constitution was therefore drafted late in 1794, and accepted in May 1795, in the wake of Fitzwilliam's recall, and the disappointment of constitutional reform aspirations: the new constitution created a rigid committee structure, binding small towns and rural 'half-baronies' ultimately to the Ulster provincial committee. By the end of 1796 the Society had decided to create a parallel military structure, with elected sergeants, captains and more senior officers. At the same time – 1795–6 – the United Irishmen of the north (in contradistinction to their more cautious brethren in Dublin), using former members of the Catholic Committee as go-betweens, began to court the leaders of a popular Catholic secret society, the Defenders: Henry Joy McCracken and other United Irish leaders boasted in the summer of 1796 'that there had been a junction between the leaders of the United Irishmen and the Defenders . . . there was a complete union between the Defenders and the United Irishmen'. This (in Elliott's description) 'merger' underlined the numerical strength of the northern revolutionary conspiracy, creating a movement which, in the spring of 1797, boasted a membership of 118,000 and an armoury of 7,000 guns.

The union of the United Irishmen and the Defenders was once seen as the grafting of a politicized and coherent leadership onto a less sophisticated and less well-organized mass movement. This, however, is to misjudge the probably

wholehearted nature of the union, as well as to underestimate the quality of Defenderism. The Defenders had their origins in Armagh in the mid-1780s, formed in the dual context of sectarian rivalry within the linen industry and competition for land within one of the most densely populated counties in Ireland. Increasing Catholic self-confidence, which found a particular expression in the bearing of arms, seems to have unsettled traditional sectarian relationships and to have fuelled Defenderism along with its Protestant rivals and antagonists (gangs such as the Nappagh Fleet or the Peep o'Day Boys). By 1790 the Defenders had become a secret society, organized – like the Peep o'Day Boys – along masonic lines, and spreading from south Ulster into north Leinster. Defenderism eventually percolated into the poorest strata of Catholic Dublin. Recent scholarship has tended to stress the extent to which Defenderism not only outgrew its local and narrow origins, but may always in fact have had a degree of broader political awareness: certainly it seems probable that (in Curtin's words) 'the further the Defenders were separated from Armagh, the more they lost their sectarian character'.[19] The French revolution probably helped to change, if not some of the core economic motivation of the movement, then at least its language: Defender oaths and catechisms were larded with republicanism and French sympathies. There is some evidence to suggest contact between French emissaries and Defenders as early as 1792. It has been argued that the campaign for Catholic relief (1791–3) helped to further the politicization of the Defender movement to the extent that 'the Defenders came to see themselves as the armed wing of the Catholic Committee': Defender arms raids at this time appear to have been in preparation for a final assault on ascendancy power.[20] The movement gained confidence by the concession of Hobart's Relief Act in 1793; and it garnered further support from the government's decision to conscript Catholics, by ballot, into a new militia force in the summer of 1793. However, in September 1795 the Defenders, operating outside their normal boundaries, suffered a defeat at the Battle of the Diamond, near Loughgall in north Armagh; but the aggressive response of their Protestant victors (who organized themselves as the Orange Order) drove many Catholics out of the county and thereby helped to spread a newly embittered form of Defenderism, particularly into north Connacht. By 1795 Defenderism remained a movement that was partly motivated by economic grievances – the desire for cheap land, better-paid labour, the righting of ancient land confiscations – and partly by sectarian resentment. But it was also a mass movement highly sympathetic to the French revolution, hopeful of French aid, and influenced in organization and rhetoric by revolutionary precedents. Here, then, was the basis for cooperation with the United Irishmen.

The Castle responded to this developing seditious combination with an unusual ferocity. As has been noted, even the highpoint of the Castle's reform endeavour – the measures of 1793 – was characterized as much by repression as by concession. The prospect of French intervention was as frightening for the government as it was encouraging for the United Irishmen and the Defenders; and though ministers were anxious to secure broad-based Irish support for the war through a number of minor reforms, they were equally anxious to crush any latent hostility to this

war effort. In fact the government went some way to realizing its own worst fears: the disappearance of constitutional avenues to reform undoubtedly stimulated, if it did not create, the mass revolutionary conspiracy that was in place by 1796. In that year the renewed prospect of a French invasion brought a further legislative reaction in the forms of the Indemnity Act (a measure designed to protect magistrates who, in pursuing Defenders, had acted illegally) and an Insurrection Act (a measure easing the application of a curfew in disturbed areas, and facilitating weapons searches and the arrest of suspects). In October 1796 the crown forces were augmented through the creation of the yeomanry, a body led by officially approved gentry and designed to police its own local patch: this would prove to be an important government resource during the 1798 rising, even though – as Allan Blackstock has shown – it soon became tinctured with Orangeism and progressively unruly.[21]

The much-vaunted French expedition set sail in December 1796, only to be dispersed by Atlantic gales rather than the Royal Navy: but the Castle was still shocked, for it had been ill-served by its intelligence networks. Although Lazare Hoche's French fleet had been aiming to land at Bantry Bay, in the south-west, the most likely area for a sympathetic uprising lay not in Munster but in Ulster, where the United Irish Society had established the most broadly based organization: and it was therefore in Ulster that, in 1797, the Castle concentrated its military resources. In charge of the military operations in Ulster after the end of 1796 was General Gerard Lake, a forceful commander who was not over-sensitive to political and legal subtlety. Suspected radicals were imprisoned (between September 1796 and September 1797, perhaps 500–600 political prisoners were held); weapons searches began at the end of 1796 and were scaled up in March 1797 (by 1 July 1797, 6,200 firearms in working order, and 4,400 in unserviceable condition, had been seized by Lake's troops). The houses of suspects were burnt, and troops were quartered in areas where sedition and the secretion of weapons were thought to be rife. These techniques, perfected in Ulster, were applied to the south of Ireland in the winter of 1797–8. Martial law was declared in March 1798, but it had in fact existed in all but name for months before.

The bloody disarming of first the north and then the rest of the island had a number of consequences for the conspirators. The movement was simultaneously divided and fired: the militancy of the authorities combined with the evident impossibility of constitutional change (a last reform bill was thrown out by the House of Commons in May 1797) to cow some of the rebels while underpinning the militancy of others. Arrests of prominent United Irishmen from late 1796 deprived the conspiracy of perhaps the most talented section of its leadership, while others – fearing official retribution – fled during the summer of 1797. Riddled with informants, the conspiracy fell an easy prey to the government: much of the Leinster directory of the Society was arrested in March 1798 as a result of the treachery of one of its members. The intensification of the government operations in April and May 1798 further damaged the enthusiasm of the militants, disrupting United Irish organization and removing weapons and personnel: the sheer brutality of much of this action served to (indeed was designed to) intimidate. The arrest and fatal

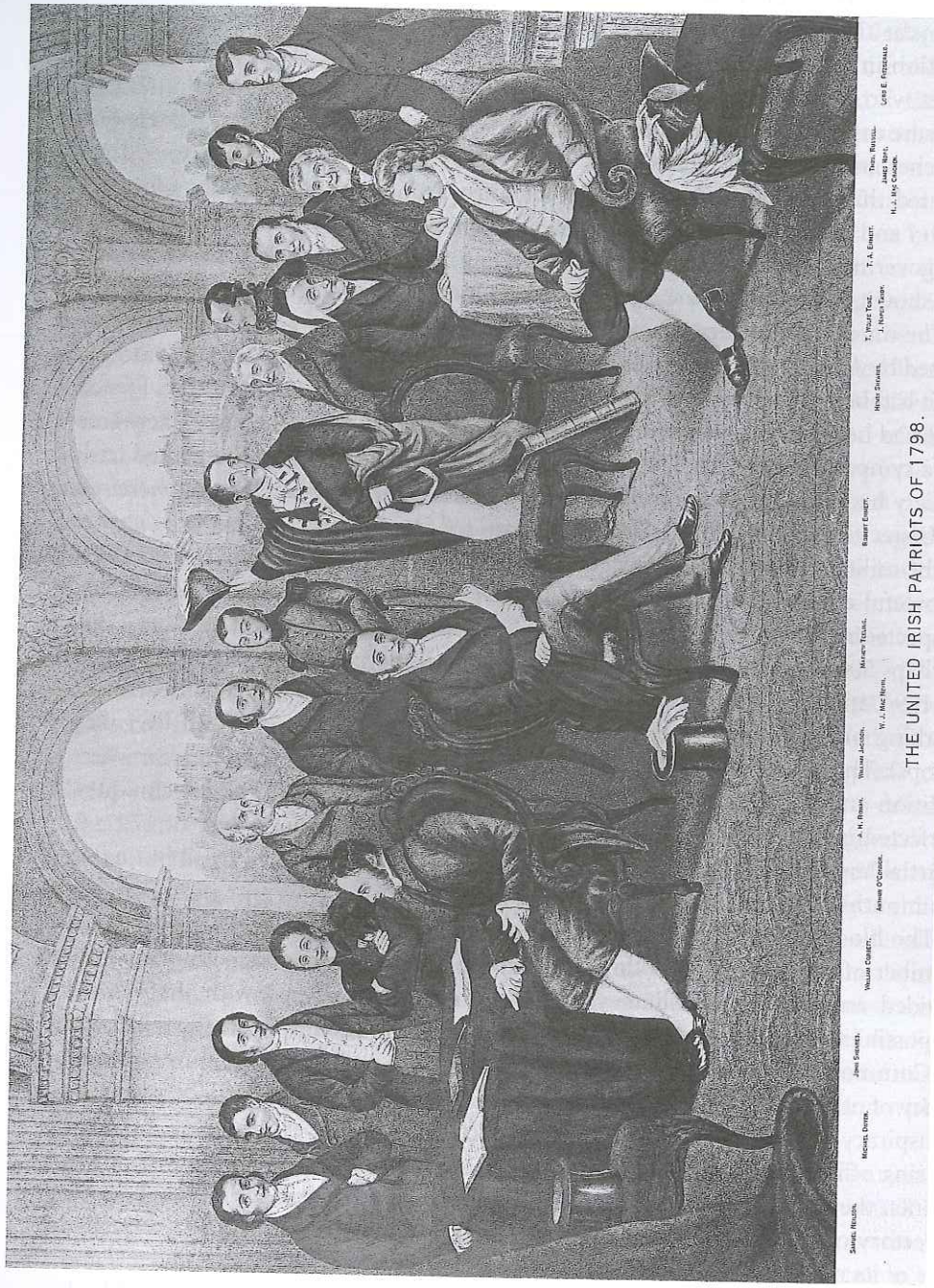

Plate 1 Leaders of the 1798 rising.
Source: Linenhall Library/Flying Fox.

wounding on 19 May of the military leader of the Society, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, brought further confusion and effectively forced the remaining disoriented leaders to choose between surrender or rebellion. It was of course a Hobson's choice. Despite the disastrous incursions made by the government into the leadership and armoury of the Society, surrender scarcely offered a more propitious alternative; and the national directory opted to rebel. In the event the Ulster leadership, cowed by General Lake and anxious for French assistance, chose to misinterpret this call, and delayed the northern uprising for a week.

The 1798 rising is to be located in the political, economic and ideological 'disequilibrium' of the 1790s, and much of this chapter has been devoted to exploring this variety of contexts. But the rising was a mass movement – at least 27,000 insurgents fought in Ulster alone – and a variety of confessional and political traditions were bound together in a not always comfortable alliance: the problem of interpreting motivation remains complex, therefore. There was clearly a generally high level of political awareness in both the United Irish and Defender traditions, and a generally high level of French sympathy and revolutionary idealism. But what made the rising so potent was that it combined an intellectually coherent, and indeed accessible, ideology of liberation with ancient historical resentments and religious prejudices. Numerous northern Presbyterians evidently fought under the United Irish banner, while remaining profoundly suspicious of their Catholic co-conspirators: as Ian McBride has remarked, 'to some extent Presbyterian radicalism represented the continuation of the war against Popery by other means'.[22] Many Defenders were evidently fired by the prospect of righting ancient wrongs, or correcting local economic injustice, even though they expressed their convictions at least superficially in a more universalist garb. The Defenders fought under distinctively Catholic emblems at the battle of Randalstown (7 June); Henry Munro, the rebel commander at Ballynahinch (13 June), and a Protestant, was accused by the Defenders of sectarian prejudice in his battle plan; Larry Dempsey, a Catholic officer of the largely Presbyterian Ballynure insurgents, sought to rouse his men with the comment that 'by J—s, boys, we'll pay the rascals this day for the battle of the Boyne'.[23] Thus if the political sophistication of the insurgents has been sometimes underestimated (and a good case has been made for supposing this to be so for County Wexford), then equally it would be imprudent to overlook religious conviction and local, communal grievance as a sustaining influence behind revolutionary conviction.[24] The root problem in approaching the '98 is that, even more than other pivotal events in modern Irish history, the evidence for the rising tends to be overlaid with later political expectations. As J.C. Beckett remarked in 1966, 'the insurrection of 1798 is seen not as it was in deed but as Tone had hoped for it to be' – and it might also be suggested that the '98 is seen in some quarters, not as it was, but as Lord Clare perceived it to be.[25]

The location and course of the rising present fewer problems of interpretation. There were three main areas of action: in Leinster, especially Wexford, in eastern Ulster, and Mayo, in Connacht. In Leinster it was planned that there would be several county revolts, which would unite in marching on Dublin. But although

Carlow, Kildare, Meath and Wexford rose in revolt, elsewhere the grand scheme broke down and the rising took the form of minor skirmishes or small-scale raids: even in Meath and Kildare, where the insurgents were more ambitious, the crown forces had little difficulty in gaining the upper hand.

The experience of Wexford was of a different nature, and Louis Cullen and Kevin Whelan have done much to explain why this should have been so.[26] Wexford offered the insurgents a rather more fertile loam than in much of the rest of southern Ireland. A peculiarly weak Protestant gentry, politically divided, was associated with a fractured and capricious magistracy: an earlier moral economy had broken down in the 1790s, as the conservative gentry grew more defensive and Orange, and as law enforcement grew at best more unpredictable and at worst more partial than hitherto. The Protestant sub-gentry was weakened by the collapse of middlemen leases. By way of contrast Catholic Wexford was prospering on the back of the late eighteenth-century agricultural boom. The survival of Catholic gentry families in the county produced a young body of politically articulate radicals who possessed unusually good links with France and who provided leadership to the insurgents. In addition the Catholic faith was in unusually good shape in the county, in terms of the high number of priests educated on the continent, church building, recruitment to the priesthood, and the impact of Catholic teaching orders: priests were more important than elsewhere in Ireland in providing rebel leadership. Good political and economic contact with Dublin completes Whelan's picture of a politically sophisticated and highly unstable community on the eve of the rising.

Given this peculiar combination of circumstances the rising in Wexford temporarily prospered. The insurgents, led by Father John Murphy, destroyed a unit of the North Cork militia on 27 May, and thereafter captured Wexford town and Enniscorthy. In Wexford town a remarkable political experiment was pursued with the creation of a 'republic', governed by a local directory, and possessing other revolutionary trappings: a committee of public safety, district committees, and even a republican navy. The rebels experienced their first serious reverse on 5 June, at New Ross, where their attack on the crown forces was repulsed; however, the decisive battle of the Wexford republic was fought at Vinegar Hill on 21 June, where the insurgents were defeated and scattered.

However, Wexford provided more than a working model of Irish republican administration: the highly sectarian nature of conflict in the county – Protestants were killed at Scullabogue and on Wexford Bridge – endowed the Wexford rising with a rather more sombre reputation and a rather more complicated political legacy. While the reality of these executions was in itself grim, exaggerated accounts circulated in Ulster and helped to jar the cautious sectarian harmony of the northern conspirators. Narratives of Wexford probably contributed to the initially dilatory nature of the northern rising. But there were other factors inducing timidity. General Lake's brutal disarming of the north undoubtedly discouraged those many United Irishmen who had been swept into the movement, and who lacked a passionate republicanism. The disruption created by Lake in the north helped to confirm the ascendancy of Dublin over the conspiracy as a whole, and this loss of initiative

may also have encouraged the caution of the northerners. The arrest and flight of the bolder northern leaders also both disoriented the movement and created space for more cautious successors – the 'foreign-aid men', such as Robert Simms, the United Irish general in Antrim, who wanted to delay action until French aid was assured. And even though there was a strain of dependence on France, there was equally widespread disillusionment in the north of Ireland with the course of French revolutionary politics: not every United Irishman saw French aid as an uncomplicated asset, given their treatment of the conquered Dutch republic and other territories.

The northerners rose when the rebels elsewhere were beginning to lose momentum. There was little coordination with Leinster, but scarcely more within Ulster itself: the insurgents in Antrim and Down rose at different times, and could therefore be dealt with separately by General Nugent, commanding the crown forces. Minor rebel successes in Randalstown and Ballymena, County Antrim, on 7 June were offset by a crushing and decisive loyalist victory at Antrim town. In County Down the insurgents were victorious in a skirmish at Saintfield on 9 June; but the gentlemanly rebel commander, Henry Munro, led his forces to utter destruction at the battle of Ballynahinch, fought on 13 June. His victor, Nugent, skilfully defused the remnants of the northern revolt through applying an amnesty to all but the rebel leaders. Munro and his Antrim counterpart, Henry Joy McCracken, were executed, as were 32 other leaders of the Ulster rising: other leaders went into exile. The official policy of clemency was not uniformly respected, but on the whole the suppression of the rising in the north was a much more restrained affair than elsewhere on the island.

Some of the evident explanations for the failure of the rising in Ulster were unique to the north. The alliance between the United Irish movement and Defenderism, originally a source of numerical strength, in fact proved unwieldy, and at times counterproductive: despite the secular ideals of the United Irish leaders, there is evidence of a damaging undercurrent of sectarian resentment in the rebel armies of the north. Some of the reasons for the northern failure were applicable to the rising as a whole. The Castle profited from excellent intelligence and a proliferation of informants within the United Irish ranks: Thomas Reynolds betrayed his own Leinster directory to the authorities in March 1798; in early June three of Henry Joy McCracken's United Irish colonels had, on receiving their general's plan of campaign, immediately passed it on to Nugent. Leonard McNally, a Dublin barrister and United Irishman, and Nicholas Mageean, a County Down farmer and United Irish colonel, were two of the most damaging informants, and Mageean in particular did much to undermine the northern preparations for revolt. Treachery was linked with timidity: many United Irishmen clearly had little faith in their ultimate prospects of success, and either counselled caution in May 1798 (like Robert Simms in Antrim) or deserted in the course of the conflict or defected to the loyalist cause. Timidity was linked to the government assault of 1797–8: the movement was, as has been observed, disrupted as well as denuded of both competent leaders and weapons. The government simultaneously goaded the conspirators into open rebellion as well as diminishing their prospects of success.

In addition the rebels made some serious miscalculations. They had an inflated view of their following within the crown forces, especially the militia, and to some extent hoped that their own lack of experience would be offset by this republican fifth column. Above all, they looked forward to timely and effective French intervention. But French military priorities were shifting in 1798 – away from the English Channel towards the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt. The French came – but to Killala, County Mayo, far removed from the main centres of the revolt in the east, and at the end of August, when both the main areas of rebel activity, eastern Ulster and Wexford, had been reconquered by the crown. Moreover, they came in small numbers and, in the opinion of Jean-Paul Bertaud, with insufficient weaponry: 1,019 French soldiers set sail, armed with 2,520 rifles – enough for their own purposes, perhaps, but scarcely enough to equip their Irish allies.[27] A minor victory was won at Castlebar by the French commander, Humbert, a battle made memorable by the panic-stricken retreat of the Irish militia; but the invaders surrendered at Ballinamuck, County Longford, on 8 September, and lost their bridgehead at Killala on 23 September. The French were 'treated as guests rather than as prisoners of war'; on the other hand, around 2,000 Irish insurgents were killed in the aftermath of Ballinamuck. A larger invasion fleet set sail before knowledge of the final collapse of the Humbert expeditionary force reached Paris, and was dispersed off the coast of Donegal in October. The French flagship, the *Hoche*, was captured on 12 October by Sir John Borlase Warren and the Royal Navy, but an additional prize lay among the sullen ranks of the prisoners landed at Buncrana: Wolfe Tone.

The capture and suicide of Tone came as a quiet coda to a rebellion that was already all but crushed. The '98 was a devastating experience – a short but bloody civil war, which involved the explosive release of pent-up economic and sectarian pressures. Estimates of the fatalities vary: it is generally held that 30,000 died as a consequence of the rising, though some contemporary calculations put the number as high as 100,000. Perhaps as many as 50,000 rebels took to the field in the summer of 1798; they faced around 76,000 soldiers of the crown. Even these lurid statistics only dimly convey the much wider impact of the rising, its prelude and suppression: the widespread destruction of property by both the rebels and loyalists, the application of an arbitrary military justice by the crown forces, and the unnerving series of trials which often involved free-ranging confessions or indictment, and which continued to 1801. The slaughter of the Irish insurgents at Ballinamuck remained long in the western folk-memory; the charnel house at Scullabogue became a minatory image for northern Presbyterians.

The rising illustrates with bleak clarity some of the central issues in modern Irish political history. The rebel movement embodied an uneasy compromise between secular ideals and a sectarian reality. The secular republicanism of the Belfast Presbyterians involved a thoroughgoing hostility towards institutional Catholicism: local Defenderism was driven in part by sectarian resentment. A highly complex rebel alliance was therefore held in place by what ultimately proved to be the rather flimsy ties of secularism and hostility to the British connection. Of course the Castle cynically played up the religious trauma of the '98 – but it merely had to gild the

putrid lily of Irish sectarian passion. Contemporary Irish republicanism has to some extent inherited this difficult combination of secular nationalism and Catholic fidelity.

John Whyte has argued, with some justice, that one of the historic causes of instability in the north of Ireland has been the distrust of Protestant for Protestant.[28] The rising illustrates neatly some of the inconsistencies within northern Protestant politics – the gap between the intellectual sympathies of northern Protestants in 1798 and their instinctive political positions. The hesitancy of many northern leaders of the '98, the prevalence of informants, suggests perhaps the dilemma of those who had been forced into more advanced political positions than they would otherwise have found congenial. These men, driven by official repression and by their intellectual enthusiasm, gave birth to violent Irish republicanism, and then in some cases shied away from their offspring. The history of the '98 in the north suggests a curious combination of heady Presbyterian republican rhetoric and a residual deference to authority. At the very least it seems to be the case that the northern Presbyterians' enthusiasm for civic virtue blinded them to the realities of winning a civil war: yeomen were rescued by the rebels from the burning market-house at Randalstown on 7 June; Henry Munro's unwillingness to launch a 'dishonourable' night raid on the crown forces at Ballynahinch on 12–13 June ensured that he and his officers went to the scaffold with the purity of their cause intact. If some of the apparent contradictions of contemporary republicanism are foreshadowed in the '98, then something of the often strained and paradoxical relationship between contemporary Protestantism and the crown is foreshadowed in the rising.

If the rising saw the birth of militant republicanism, then it made possible a constitutional union between Ireland and Great Britain: the rising induced the growth of unionist sentiment among part of the governing elite of the two islands. William Pitt resurrected his old schemes for union in the summer of 1798, and found general approval in London, and divided opinions in Dublin: he had, however, a formidable intellectual resource in the unionist Chief Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, and the Lord Chancellor, Lord Clare, 'the greatest unionist of them all', in J.C. Beckett's description.[29] But the rising not only stimulated unionist sentiment, it also helped to make a union realizable. Because of the '98 British ministerial authority in Ireland was strengthened: a greatly augmented military establishment was an all too tangible reminder of the reality of British power in Ireland (without this force Lord Cornwallis, the lord lieutenant, believed that 'all thoughts of uniting the two kingdoms must be given up').[30] And because of the '98 and the protracted instability of the country the Irish parliament came to accept, albeit reluctantly, what they had for long been told by Lord Clare – that their patriotism was a recipe for self-destruction. The rising had demonstrated both that the ascendancy was vulnerable and that it could not save itself from the revolutionary deluge: unionism was therefore a means of protecting the ascendancy from the consequences of its own limitations.

The United Irish Society staggered on after the rising, and indeed an effort was made in the otherwise unpropitious circumstances of 1799 to revive its fortunes. One of the key instigators was Robert Emmet (1778–1803), who sought to sustain the patterns of militant republicanism that had been laid down – apparently so

fruitlessly – in the 1790s. The result was a half-cocked uprising in the Dublin Liberties in July 1803, which was easily suppressed by the yeomanry, and which in the short term was notable only in so far as it claimed the life of the Lord Chief Justice, Arthur Wolfe, Viscount Kilwarden; Emmet, Thomas Russell and other leading conspirators were captured and, with only the respite of formulaic state trials, duly hanged. Emmet was subsequently enshrined in the pantheon of nation-builders, but in truth his actions subverted his professed ideals. The failure of the rising of 1803 helped to fuel the sectarianism of Irish politics, undermining the proponents of Catholic relief and weakening the possibility of a broadly based constitutional union. On the other hand, the rising was widely interpreted by Protestants as a prelude to a general massacre, and its easy defeat contributed to the bolstering of ascendancy morale. The rising therefore helped to make the union function in the ascendancy interest; and it contributed to the gradual identification of Catholicism with the national struggle. Neither outcome would have been welcomed by the 25-year-old idealist, who went to the gallows with his elitist republicanism unshaken, and with an emotionally charged message for posterity. Posterity, however, would take the form of a tenaciously Catholic democracy that had little time for Emmet's exclusivist convictions.

3

Disuniting Kingdoms, Emancipating Catholics, 1799–1850

I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder
That you would neither cajole nor ignore.
Conquest is a lie. I grow older
Conceding your half-independent shore
Within whose borders now my legacy
Culminates inexorably.
Séamus Heaney, 'Act of Union'[1]

3.1 The Union, 1799–1801

The two issues that dominated Irish high politics in the first half of the nineteenth century were interconnected and had already assumed a recognizable shape in the 1780s and 1790s: the nature of the constitutional relationship between Britain and Ireland, and the civil rights of Catholics. A form of parliamentary union had been adumbrated in the 1650s, during the Commonwealth, and had been a matter of speculation for a number of political thinkers since that time: these colonial patriots saw that the best guarantee of their rights lay in effective legislative independence, but some (such as William Molyneux) were willing to consider a union as a substitute for a flawed or defective local parliament. If there was a strain of ascendancy thought that considered union as a tolerable, but second-rate, means of guaranteeing Irish liberties, then this strain grew weaker as the eighteenth century progressed. Still, it is possible to detect lines of influence connecting not only the late eighteenth-century parliamentary patriots with earlier ideologues such as Molyneux, but also late eighteenth-century Unionist ultras, such as Lord Clare, with earlier patriotic writers: Clare increasingly came to the view that union represented not a second-rate but rather the only effective defence for the Irish Protestant nation. Neither Clare's thoughts of union, nor those of Molyneux, extended to the issue of