

The genesis of Irish nationalism - The United Irishmen and the failed revolution of 1798

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In 1795 the United Irishmen, the first Irish republicans, refounded themselves as an underground revolutionary organisation. In September of the same year, the Orange Society was established as a mass reactionary alliance of landlords and loyalist peasantry. The aim of the United Irishmen was to recreate the French Revolution in Ireland; the Orangemen's goal was to prevent it. So the "two traditions" referred to in the Downing Street Declaration both have something to commemorate this year.

The closing years of the eighteenth century were a historic turning point for Ireland. Had a democratic, bourgeois revolution succeeded it would have altered the course of Irish and British history and thereby major developments in Europe as a whole. Its failure was crucial in moulding the movements and the people that dominated the next two centuries.

In 1798 the United Irishmen were able to mobilise hundred of thousands of poorly armed peasants in a mass rising. It was drowned in blood. The Irish parliament was abolished and the Irish colonial state was forced into a political union with Britain. However, this forcible union was stillborn. It did not follow the pattern of the Anglo Scottish union of 1707. Within a few decades it plunged Ireland into the hell of Western Europe's last great famine (1845-50). The terrible suffering of those years fired a new revolutionary nationalism which looked for inspiration to the United Irishmen. It lives on in the 1990s in the IRA who claim historical continuity with the revolutionaries of the 1790s.

Origins of the Irish national movement

The formation of an Irish national movement arose out of the paradoxes of economic development in Ireland in the long 18th century (1691-1800) and the revolutionary climate internationally. Wave upon wave of conquerors Normans, Tudors, Cromwellians and finally William of Orange attempted and finally succeeded in subduing all of Ireland. After 1691, centuries of war, both against the invaders and amongst the Gaelic lords themselves, gave way to an English "peace" and to rapid economic development.

British capitalism was developing at a breakneck speed. Ireland, as close to London as many parts of Britain itself, could not but benefit from this, despite its subjection. However, manufacturers and traders in mainland Britain worked overtime to make sure that competition from Irish producers was restricted by the British state.

Ireland was ruled from Dublin Castle by viceroys directly appointed by, and accountable to, the English privy council and cabinet. Ireland, despite having its own parliament, was subject to legislation by the Westminster parliament in which there were no Irish representatives.

Parliaments had been convened in Dublin since the first French speaking Norman administration. They directly represented the occupiers of Irish land. The parliament of 1691 was exclusively Protestant indeed

Anglican. It was dominated by the landlord aristocracy of old and new planters, who settled in successive waves during 150 years. A decade after William of Orange had left Ireland with his armies only 14% of agricultural land remained in the hands of Catholic gentry. Even these were not the aboriginal Gaelic Irish but the descendants of pre reformation Anglo-Norman conquerors and planters. Some of them had adopted and continued to speak the Gaelic language. But it was their religion which stamped them as "disloyal" under the anti-Catholic Penal Laws.

The Penal Laws may have hit English Catholics as hard as they did Irish ones, but in Ireland there was one enormous difference. In Ireland they were a weapon of colonial rule by an alien ruling class with no legitimacy in the eyes of the peasant masses who made up the vast majority of the population. A son of a Catholic landowner could only inherit the family land if he converted to Protestantism. Of course, many Catholic landowners did, indeed, convert to the Established Church so as to preserve their wealth.

Despite the legal restrictions on property rights, despite denial of all political rights, it was impossible in a growing economy to prevent the gradual emergence of a trading, commercial and professional Catholic middle class over a period of half a century. They remained, however, excluded from political life and the law. This favoured the social leadership of the Catholic clergy who, in practice, escaped persecution.

The Anglican Ascendancy could generally rely on the support of the Presbyterians as a mass base for Protestantism in the face of Catholic resurgence except in the crucial decades of the 1780s and 1790s. They had little interest, however, in converting the Catholic masses to their Episcopalian creed, which served them as the title to their legal privileges. They imposed a steep 10% tax on the Catholic and Presbyterian majority for the upkeep of the Episcopalian clergy. These hated "tithes" became a key issue in local peasant uprisings throughout the eighteenth century.

One third of the population was Protestant and English speaking at the start of the century and a third of these were Presbyterian small holders, tenants and artisans concentrated in the North East. Most originated from the Scottish lowlands. They spoke Scots, a distinct language, but cognate to English. As "dissenters" they suffered political exclusion from parliament, town corporations and public office. Whereas the British State recognised the Presbyterians as the Established church in Scotland, the Irish Anglican Ascendancy excluded them politically from the "Irish Nation".

The Irish and the British Nations Great Britain was created by the union with Scotland in 1707 a new nation state. It was dominated politically by the Whig landed aristocracy, committed to protecting the interests of British merchant capitalists and industry. As against the old Tory aristocracy and the Stuart monarchy, they were landowners in the process of becoming agrarian capitalists. This union, though at first beset with problems, ultimately proved viable because of the influence of Scottish merchant capitalists and landowners in the lowlands who benefited enormously by sharing in the new industrial development and the colonial expansionism of a unified British state. No such class existed in Ireland.

On the contrary, the Anglican Ascendancy was hostile to the Whigs, a supporter of aristocracy, monarchy and the English Tories. A limited "self rule" had been conceded to the old forces of the aristocracy in the revolution of Parliament against Crown of the 1640s. Much as the new forces at work in Britain after the Cromwellian revolution and the Glorious Revolution (1688) might have wished to incorporate Ireland fully into the new British nation state, it was too great a risk. Full union was never more than an idea for most of the 18th century.

This had profound consequences for economic relations between the islands. Even more important were its effects on social development within Ireland itself. The Ascendancy drew its wealth and privilege almost entirely from semi feudal landlordism. Subjecting the poor peasantry to intense exploitation, repressing and

excluding the Catholic petit bourgeoisie, and defining themselves socially by means of an elite religion, the Ascendancy constituted an enormous obstacle to Irish social development.

Britain's mercantilist protection of its own trade certainly crippled Irish economic activity wherever the latter competed with Britain. Economically as well as politically, it continued to create and define its own nation state to the exclusion of Ireland. Ireland functioned in effect as a major agricultural supplier of Britain's needs throughout the century. This benefited the Irish landed aristocracy as much as it harmed the development of an embryonic Irish bourgeoisie. It was this internal class structure in Ireland, more than British trade restrictions, which stood in the way of the British industrial revolution being replicated in Ireland.

This class structure could slow and divert the development of the island's productive forces, but they could not stop it. Over the long 18th century the population grew from three to six million. Before the Famine in the 1840s it would rise to eight million. This growth, despite serious famine in the 1720s, reflected real economic development in agriculture and, eventually, a linen industry based on the flax crop. Irish exports of cereals and meat were vital to the growing British economy. Trade with France, Spain and the European mainland, trade with the American colonies, and the victualling of westward bound fleets greatly stimulated the market for Irish agricultural produce.

Particular measures of protection were imposed in favour of British merchants and manufacturers against Irish exporters. These were in direct response to pressure from groups of merchants in Britain rather than an overall policy to retard Irish development. Jonathan Swift directed the sharpest polemics of the early 18th century against British restrictions on Irish trade. In 1729 he summed up the sense of grievance in Ireland:

"If two thirds of any kingdom's revenue be exported to another country, without one farthing of value in return and if the said kingdom be forbidden the most profitable branches of trade wherein to employ the other third, and only allowed to traffic in importing those commodities which are most ruinous to itself, how shall that kingdom stand?"

Swift, like other critics from within the Ascendancy, was moved by the awful poverty amidst aristocratic wealth in a fertile land where manufacturing seemed to be stillborn compared to England and lowland Scotland. His answer was protectionism for the Irish economy.

Some 5,000 Protestant landlords were drawing income from rents imposed largely on poor Catholic tenants, and from the labour of a growing mass of landless families. About a quarter of this was being remitted to absentee landlords in Britain along with other revenues to the Crown. Much of this wealth was consumed unproductively, in aristocratic luxury, rather than being re invested in agriculture or industry.

Present day revisionist historians claim that Ireland's backwardness was simply due to an accident of history and geography, that it was even self inflicted. Above all, it was not a result of British colonial policy. None of England's restrictions on Irish manufacturing, shipping or trade between 1663 and 1778 had any decisive effect, according to this view. Irish nationalism takes the exact opposite view that Britain deliberately destroyed the basis for Irish manufacture by its commercial restrictions, and this was the essence of the colonial oppression of the Irish "nation".

The revisionists' act as apologists for Britain, or rather for the Irish bourgeoisie's new rapprochement with it. Nevertheless, they have a point against the nationalists. Even if there had been no mercantilist restrictions on Irish trade and manufacture, the existing social and political relations of Irish society would have continued to be the main obstacle to capitalist development.

It is generally true that particular measures restricting exports of agricultural commodities from Ireland did not in themselves reduce Ireland from prosperity to poverty. So, for example, when British Cattle Acts in 1663 and 1666 banned imports from Ireland, traders found new markets in Flanders, France, Spain and further afield.

Irish society, radically divided between Protestant landlords and Catholic rural masses, was obstructed in transforming itself along the lines which brought such evident prosperity and national unity to Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries. Semi feudal landlordism became permanently entrenched and degenerate instead of giving way to capitalist agriculture. Most importantly, early industrial development was hamstrung.

The 19th century nationalist leader Isaac Butt suggested that had England not suppressed the Irish woollen industry at the start of the 18th century the landlords "would have been enabled to get rid of their 'popish tenantry' by making sheep walks of their estates". Indeed, the rural masses would have suffered immediately by such clearances, just as in Britain, but that would have at least been an early step towards capitalist development. Instead, rural misery intensified while rents rose, meat and butter exports grew and luxuries were imported for the elite. Recurrent cycles of hunger for the masses followed bouts of bad weather until in 1741, the "year of the slaughter", about 12% of the entire population died in a horrific famine over 300,000 people in one year.

Throughout the first 40 years of the century, Ascendancy politicians and even key figures in the Dublin administration whose primary loyalty was to the Crown, repeatedly quarrelled with the British privy council and parliament and asserted the right of the Protestant "Irish nation" to determine its own laws. But all of these confrontations proved soluble through diplomacy or the manipulation of patronage.

Despite the famines, despite the Penal Laws, there was no national movement of any kind among the Catholic masses. The growing commercial Catholic middle class kept a low profile in order to survive. By mid century only 5% of agricultural land remained in the hands of Catholic gentry and then in the areas most remote from Dublin. The rural masses' hopes of liberation from their oppressors were generally fixed on a victory for European Catholic powers in a war with Britain. This delusion led tens of thousands of the most courageous and rebellious young men to escape rural misery by joining the armies of Spain and France. But Irishmen also joined the British army in large numbers and Irish economic conscripts were the mainstay of many a British army across the world throughout the century.

Social backwardness in Ireland, in contrast with rapid economic development in Britain and America, in part also explains why growing waves of Presbyterian emigrants left the northeast for the new world between 1718 and the American war of independence, perhaps more than 100,000 in all. Thousands of them enthusiastically enlisted for the colonies against Britain in 1776.

Industrial development

National income in Ireland multiplied fivefold from 1730 to the end of the century from about #1 5m to #75m while the population grew from three to six million. In the same period, rents from the landlord system grew at least six fold to about #12m. Rents were about one third of total agricultural income. About 52% of national income was "non agricultural". Urban life centred around trading ports there was only one substantial inland town, Kilkenny. The state undertook development of the roads and canals for the most part, especially from the 1760s.

Banking was well developed by the second half of the century and landlords in particular borrowed heavily to buy Government and canal stock. Merchants also played a major role in advancing credit. They were

most influential in the capital, Dublin, from which they initially controlled much of the trade in the more developed north east around Belfast.

Linen manufacture, through all stages, was the basis of economic development in the north east. At the outset of the century English capitalists were happy to suppress the Irish woollen industry but to encourage linen. Huguenot craftsmen, Protestant refugees from France, were financed to organise its beginnings among the Presbyterian settlers. As tenants of planter landlords in the north east, the Presbyterians enjoyed much more favourable leases and conditions than Catholics throughout the south.

Within a generation the processing of flax into linen became the major source of income in the north east. Spinning and weaving was done in the homestead by the families who grew the flax. The finishing process called for bigger investment in water powered machinery, by wealthier farmers who usually continued to work their farms as well.

Reliance on water power in this as in the grain milling industry meant that industrial centres were often dispersed along the river courses. Little coal was mined in Ireland and its absence discouraged iron and steel smelting. Cheap imported fuel was important to industrial development. Improvements in roads, canals and eventually railway communications into the countryside made it as easy for external imports to penetrate the country as for goods to be exported.

Linen "colonies" on the Ulster model spread through the western province of Connacht and in areas of the south around Cork, but they did not survive and develop as in the north. Nevertheless, in the second half of the century, processing of linen, wool and cotton, particularly by women in the home, was a major source of subsistence income for hundreds of thousands of often landless labourers around the country.

The prosperity of the Dublin merchants was contested by rival manufacturers and merchants in the north east who took control of the trade away from Dublin. The industry gradually centralised in east Ulster and eventually stagnated in the rest of the country. Linen's 200 years of continuous growth as a profitable export was possible, unlike the fate of wool, because of the complete absence of any restriction on it in the British market. Flour milling, sugar baking, brewing and distilling and mechanised cotton spinning were the other major industries which each sustained several hundred capitalist companies in the second half of the century.

Overall, the level of economic development, a thriving linen industry organically linked to the cottiers and small farmers over much of the country, and the rapidly growing population compared favourably with the European mainland as preconditions for the leap to capitalist industrial revolution. That leap could not be made without breaking the social power of the Ascendancy landlord system. Given the historic failure to assimilate Irish society fully into British economic and social development, the development of a successful capitalism in Ireland would also hinge on creating and protecting a unified home market and uniting the masses nationally, enabling a developing bourgeoisie to mobilise the vast resources of labour in Ireland in capitalist agriculture and industry.

The most socially coherent class of capitalists were the Presbyterian linen manufacturers and merchants of the north east. Their regional capital, Belfast, thrived as an exclusively Protestant town with the beginnings of a cultural and political life of its own, but embittered against the colonial regime which oppressed them as religious dissenters. It was this class who were most aroused by the French revolution of 1789 to take up in Ireland the fight for a republic through the society of United Irishmen.

From Parliamentary Reform to Bourgeois Revolution

The American declaration of independence in 1776 was celebrated in Ireland even among the more liberal Protestant politicians. These Irish "Whigs" argued for free trade, condemned parliamentary corruption and called for electoral reform and freedom for the Irish parliament to determine its own laws. Seats in the Irish parliament were often the property of particular landlords, the electorate comprising only a tiny stratum of propertied Protestants.

The American war itself sharpened awareness of economic restrictions on Ireland as England introduced new measures, and thus intensified hostility to English commercial control. When France entered the war and troops were withdrawn from Ireland, local gentry and great landowners organised Volunteer corps as defence militias. Ostensibly, these were to defend Ireland against the French. But soon they took on a more radical stance, becoming overtly the Irish nation under arms. Presbyterian corps led the way in allowing Catholics to join and bear arms despite official disapproval. The rank and file were generally tradesmen or prosperous artisans. Some 900 Volunteers with muskets paraded in Dublin outside Parliament House in November 1779 with slogans for "free trade or else". Angry artisans followed up with more riotous demonstrations.

The British cabinet moved to permit free trade with the British colonies. Emboldened, the parliamentary opposition under Henry Grattan pressed for parliamentary independence from Westminster. In February 1782 delegates of 143 Volunteer corps from the north met in Dungannon and denounced the British claim to legislate for Ireland, demanded free trade and an independent judiciary. The cabinet was warned that any delay in granting liberal concessions would end in the British connection being broken. Grattan was triumphant. Britain granted a Catholic relief act and a constitutional amendment. This "revolution of 1782" amounted to formal parliamentary independence for Ireland. However, no social progress of any substance came of it, nor did it imply any new attitude on the part of Britain which was merely making short term concessions to minimise dissent in Ireland in time of war.

At the time, Prime Minister Lord North privately expressed his preference to engineer a union of Britain and Ireland rather than to tinker with existing legal and commercial relations between the two countries. British capitalism no longer had a need for mercantilist policies to dominate Irish manufacture. Having undergone dramatic economic and political development since the 1707 union with Scotland, Britain was now a highly centralised state which possessed a formidable naval and military power to oversee a rapidly expanding colonial empire. Great Britain now had little to fear from fully integrating Ireland into this state. But the political difficulties of carrying out such a union still outweighed any pressing imperial necessity. War with revolutionary France in the 1790s would change that.

By the end of 1782 the Volunteers were already making clear their discontent with the constitutional "revolution". But as their movement became more centralised nationally it fell under the influence of "moderate" men and "gentlemen of property and station" who made clear to the King their loyalty to the constitution. The more radical elements had clarified their attitude in this process. One discovery was the supreme importance of fighting for equality for the Catholics or at least the Catholic middle class, if the corrupt and divisive rule of the Protestant Ascendancy was to be smashed and thereby the subordination of Ireland to Britain ended. But if these increasingly revolutionary elements were to unite an Irish Nation and thereby break its subordination to England, it would have to address the social grievances of the huge majority of the nation the Irish peasantry, both Catholic and Protestant.

Agrarian Conflict and Sectarianism Any revolutionary movement in Ireland would have to relate to, and indeed transform, the defence organisations of the peasantry. Agrarian terror in Ireland dates back to the "tories" and "raparees" who raided the estates from which colonial planters had expelled them. In the 18th

century rural resistance and vendettas were conducted by Whiteboys, Oakboys, Defenders and others.

From the 1760s onwards, organised peasant actions provoked increasing alarm. In 1763 in the north it was the most insecure Protestant tenants, faced with rent and tax increases, who conducted a campaign under the name of "Oakboys", leading to a pitched battle with the cavalry. Disturbances followed across the southern counties where "Whiteboys" and "Levellers" opposed enclosures, high rents for potato plots, and tithes. Large numbers bound themselves by oaths, levelled fences, raided houses and terrorised members of the unpopular gentry. They armed themselves with guns, billhooks and hatchets in occasional confrontations with the professional militia.

However, there were developments which acted in a contrary direction, that is, dividing Catholic and Protestant peasants, and thereby creating the mass base of a reactionary movement the Orange Societies. Poor Catholic tenants were barely capable of subsistence farming over and above meeting the demand for rent and produce. They were thus more easily drawn into the more centralised industrial production as cheap labour and were used to break competition from the independent weavers and tenants who were capable of both subsistence farming and cottage manufacture. The poorer Protestant tenants and landless labourers were squeezed by increasing rents and forced into competition with Catholic tenants for land and work as wealthier linen manufacturers bought up land.

It was after one such confrontation, in September 1795, that the "Peep o' Day Boys" created the Orange Society. Immediately it became something quite other than a local defence organisation. It began to organise Protestant tenants, yeoman farmers and artisans mostly those of the Established Church into Lodges, wherever possible under the patronage of important gentry. Its published aims were to preserve the foundations of the Protestant Establishment in Ireland won by their forefathers in the Williamite wars defence of the established church and loyalty to the monarch and constitution.

Their actual programme was one of undisguised sectarian terror, which created a widespread panic among Catholics even in areas where there were no Lodges. Though mobilising large numbers only in the north, they drew into their ranks Protestant gangs such as the "Black Mob" who operated as bounty hunters in the mountains south of Dublin. Much as the government wanted to quell disorder in the countryside, they saw that the Orangemen could be an ally against radical conspiracy and the threat of French invasion. Prior to the insurrection of 1798, the Orange societies had built up their membership to 100,000 and were patronised by Ulster grandees and aristocratic Dublin politicians.

The Catholic Middle Class

A middle class Catholic Committee was formed in 1760 to fight for the repeal of the Penal Laws. Until the crisis period of the American war they made no gains, even in getting full membership of the trade guilds. The first Catholic relief bill followed on the agitation of the Volunteers who, at first, took no position on equal rights for Catholics. It was revolution in France which made Catholic emancipation a slogan of the Protestant radicals. Tom Paine's Rights of Man was widely read and reprinted in Ireland by a committee which included several of the future organisers of the United Irishmen. It was celebrated as a defence of French revolutionary principles and an answer to the writings of Edmund Burke, the great Anglo-Irish ideologue of British counter revolutionary conservatism.

In 1790 the Catholic Committee, largely Dublin businessmen, some of them social radicals, re launched their campaign for a limited franchise for Catholics. This committee was riven by internal feuding along class lines the few prestigious gentry and Catholic landlords resenting the radicalism of the Catholic businessmen. The British government, however, proposed to the administration in Dublin measures to extend a limited franchise to Catholics and relief from disabilities connected with trade, professions,

education and marriage.

Westmorland, the viceroy in Dublin, opposed such moves and replied to Pitt in 1792 that, "if Ireland was at the bottom of the sea it might be one thing but while she exists you must rule her". What was required was, "a very strong interior management that will render Ireland subservient to the general order of the empire". This, Westmorland thought, could only be provided by Irish Protestants, "in possession of land, magistracy, and power". Concessions to the Catholics were bound to make the Irish parliament "more subservient to the feelings of the nation at large", and Westmorland asked: "Do you believe England can govern Ireland by the popularity of government?... Is it not the very essence of your imperial policy to prevent the interests of Ireland clashing and interfering with the interests of England?" The bill which was then agreed did not give any voting rights to Catholics and allowed them only into the lower levels of the law.

Whig liberalism in the Irish parliament betrayed its cowardice as the overwhelming majority reacted against the petition of the Catholic Committee for political inclusion of Catholics. The great reformer, Grattan, found himself in a minority of 25 against 208. His fundamental belief in the ability of the British constitution to guarantee its own reform was manifestly bankrupt. Yet constitutional nationalists forever after made "Grattan's Parliament" the touchstone of their methods, as against the revolutionary tradition of Wolfe Tone.

Tone's appointment as secretary of the Catholic Committee in July 1791 was of major significance. Son of a Protestant Dublin coach builder, Tone was a distinguished student of law, though he found little work. Profoundly influenced by Paine's *The Rights of Man* he soon became a leading radical. When the Belfast Volunteers decided to demonstrate on Bastille Day 1791, Tone was one of the two propagandists commissioned to draft their address. In August he published *An argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, the essential manifesto of Irish radicalism. Not only did it win Irish radical nationalism to recognise the necessity of uniting with the Catholics for their emancipation and Irish independence, it began to create that political unity by winning Tone a key organisational position in the Catholic movement.

In autumn 1791 the radicals founded the Belfast Society of United Irishmen. Its manifesto in October was drafted with Tone and based all hope of radical reform upon the inclusion of all, irrespective of religion. Dublin followed suit. Tone's own ideas, he confided in a letter seized by the authorities, were too advanced to be publicly stated the breaking of the connection between Ireland and England.

The growth of United Irishmen societies around the country, the powerful influence of the radical paper, *The Northern Star*, published in Belfast, and the tide of radical propaganda throughout the country, all terrified the administration. Under the impact of the French revolution the programme of the United societies became clearer. It stood openly for the vote for males irrespective of religion, though it was reluctant to drop the property qualification. It was for radical parliamentary reform and annual parliaments. It was for the independence of Ireland, but equivocated on whether this should be a republic or in a union of equals with Britain. Its world view was to create the economic conditions for prosperity.

As to its composition, the United Irishmen comprised the politically active sections of the bourgeoisie. In Belfast it was the radical dissenters, the Presbyterian businessmen. In Dublin it had about 350 members, professionals (56 lawyers, 24 medical men), merchants, manufacturers, printers, booksellers, shopkeepers and a few country gentlemen. The only employees were a few clerks.

When the society began to revive Volunteer militias in a new uniform of green with French cockades and to agitate for popular extra parliamentary assemblies, amidst growing Catholic agitation and agrarian unrest, the government embarked on a policy of repression. Popular assemblies and the Volunteer corps were banned. Prosecutions of United Irishmen leaders put several in jail along with the printers of their press.

When the government got evidence that Tone was considering the possibility of getting French military aid, he agreed to exile to America. Even before he sailed the police raided and shut down the Dublin society in May 1794.

This repression was a turning point since it made clear that the "legal revolution" of 1782 could not be repeated in the 1790s. The British were engaged in a life or death struggle with revolutionary France and neither would, nor could, allow the sea lanes to its colonies to be dominated by an independent power friendly to France. No compromise was possible and Irish radicals soon realised this. By the end of that same year the United Irishmen were reorganising as an underground movement of small committees, each of no more than 35, and winning the support of the agrarian Defenders across the country. It was widespread in three quarters of the country, especially strong in the north, by 1796. By then Wolfe Tone was in Paris winning the directorate of Carnot to organise the invasion of Ireland as a strategic blow against Britain.

The Road to Revolution

For three years the by now frankly republican United Irishmen grew as a mass secret organisation of a historically unprecedented kind. It had a formal membership of 280,000 early in 1798 and claimed the active support of up to 600,000, or 10%, of a national population who were for the most part illiterate and impoverished rural labourers and poor peasants. Elements of the government militia were in sympathy with the radicals in many parts of the country. The popular base of the movement was strongest in the north east. There were 23,000 members in one county, Antrim, a stronghold of Presbyterianism. In the same county their allies included 8,500 organised Catholic Defenders.

From 1795, the United Irishmen in the the north east began to recruit Catholic Defenders directly. The Defenders had broadened their support to include middle class Catholics and began to develop and train armed detachments. United Irishmen leaders saw them as a key force for revolutionary action. United Irishmen organisation at a local level nominally had a military function. However, the national leaders still discouraged actual military preparations in the hope that it might yet be possible to avoid violent confrontation.

Here their fear of a mass agrarian rising for the poor peasantry's own goals undoubtedly deterred them. Tone hotly denied that he was in favour of a "lex agraria" the expropriation of the great estates and their division amongst the peasants. But in many areas the rank and file systematically raided the gentry for arms and forged innumerable pikes in imitation of the French revolutionaries.

In 1796 the government passed an insurrection act, suspended habeas corpus and proclaimed the formation of local militias of loyal Protestant gentry (the yeomanry). They then set about visiting terror on district after district of the country. The aim was to smash the revolutionary conspiracy and force it to surrender its arms. Tens of thousands of weapons were surrendered as local activists were tortured, houses burned down and brutal troops quartered on local communities. The Northern Star's presses were smashed up by troops. This finally convinced the movement that an armed insurrection was inevitable. The stumbling block was whether to wait for French aid. The leadership were deeply divided: could their purpose be achieved by a coup with French aid or must they resort to mass insurrection? Despite their earlier declarations, in which they styled themselves Jacobins (that is, the radical wing of the French Revolution), the United Irishmen at national level were more of an uneasy alliance of Jacobins and Girondins (the more conservative wing of the French republicans).

The obvious need to rally the support of the Catholic peasantry was accompanied by profound fear of uncontrolled peasant insurrection. Hence, there were no explicit demands for the expropriation of the

landlords, for land to the peasants. Yet this was exactly what would have given political direction and coherence to a revolutionary peasantry. It would be profoundly ahistorical to imagine that even bourgeois revolutionaries would encourage a peasant revolution aimed at introducing mass peasant proprietorship. Only the most radical elements considered this option and they were firmly rejected by the national leadership. A United Irishmen organiser, and Catholic gunsmith, Watty Cox, published the extremist Union Star in which he proclaimed: "The lands which royal villainy wrested from murdered Irishmen shall be the rewards of the deliverers of their country." United Irishmen leaders such as Thomas Addis Emmet were happy for the government to ban the Union Star.

The United Irishmen leadership vacillated for two years between hopes of a French invasion, backed by a coup, and the inevitability of mass insurrection. Meanwhile, the government and aristocratic reaction mobilised with a vengeance. The local "yeomanry" armed the Protestant gentry, and some Catholics, against the threat of insurrection and French invasion which would inevitably bring destruction to all landowners. In Dublin, the professional classes rushed to display their loyalty in a 2,000 strong parade in defence of the city. Many of the yeomanry who now marched in defence of the government had previously been part of the militant, reforming Volunteers.

The failure of the United Irishmen to mobilise earlier meant that all those vacillating sections of society who had sustained the Volunteer movement were lost to the revolution. The reliance on aid from France and the fear of uncontrolled peasant revolution proved fatal.

The French, however, took Tone and the United Irishmen very seriously. In 1796 General Hoche, then one of the two or three most prominent generals, was authorised by the French Directory to lead an invasion fleet, "destined to effect the revolution in Ireland". But its sailing was delayed until the December gales began.

The fleet of forty three vessels, seventeen of them ships of the line, successfully evaded the English naval blockade and reached the Irish coast. But they were unable to land their 15,000 troops. Tone had to return in frustration to France. Never had British rule in Ireland had such a narrow escape.

But the presence of such a major invasion force was noted by both the government and the revolutionaries. It was not until the autumn of 1798 that Napoleon, now in the ascendant, authorised another expedition. French troops finally arrived in the west in August, with Wolfe Tone as a French general, but a month after the mass insurrection had been crushed.

The insurrection

In the capital, a mobilised gentry and intense repression deterred any revolutionary action. No popular revolutionary organisation in the city had survived the government terror. The national leadership in Dublin therefore hoped to take the city with armed masses from nearby districts, as the signal for a national rising. But the leaders were hunted down and arrested on the very eve of the event. Armed crowds of United Irishmen and peasantry assembled in huge numbers at many points in the east of the country on the night of 23 4 May. Those closest to the capital waited in vain for directions from Dublin, gradually dispersed and were finally scattered by detachments of troops.

In the south eastern county of Wexford on 23 May a mass untrained peasant army with United Irishmen, Catholic gentry and the renowned Father Murphy in the lead, began an extraordinary campaign, seizing towns, fighting savage battles with the yeomanry, traversing hundreds of miles back and forth across the region throughout the month of June. Finally, they were smashed and dispersed by companies of professional soldiers sent from Dublin to prevent the insurrection linking up with rebel armies near the

capital. The slaughter of many thousands of rebels harked back to the Cromwellian conquest.

The north east rose also in the first week of June. Armies under Henry Joy McCracken, a cotton manufacturer, took the richest country, Antrim, north of Belfast. Henry Munro, a linen manufacturer, took county Down, south east of Belfast. About 50,000 United Irishmen and Defenders turned out. Belfast, the seat of republican radicalism, had seen floggings and arms seizures over several months, but it was the recent rapid growth there of the loyalist Orange movement that made it possible for the English general, Nugent, to set out against the rebels without fearing the loss of the city. Offers of amnesty, combined with the threat of burning their towns and homes, finally undermined the isolated rebel armies after a week of skirmishing which claimed the lives of several hundred rebels.

Few of the many other attempted insurrections across the country rivalled Wexford, Antrim or Down in their importance or heroism. The August landing of General Humbert with Wolfe Tone and an inadequate 1,000 men in the most remote part of the west created a brief new emergency for the government. After a month of manoeuvres and skirmishes the French arrived in Dublin, but as prisoners of war. They had surrendered when promised that they would be allowed to sail for home. They were accorded full military honours. Not so Wolfe Tone, who despite his French army commission, was condemned for high treason. He took his own life rather than be hanged.

The Napoleonic wars with England had made French aid a real possibility. However, despite the extraordinary conjuncture of economic and social circumstances and brilliant achievements, the French aid arrived late, in the wrong places or their fleets suffered dispersal or shipwreck. The national leadership of the United Irishmen was broken by a network of informers and repression. The untrained rank and file of the peasantry and Catholic gentry, despite surviving years of vicious pre-emptive state terror, proved confused and directionless in open revolt. In the north east the Orange Vendee, supported by the magistrates and troops, was a growing force. In these conditions professional British troops were sufficient to decisively defeat the ill armed and undisciplined peasant masses. Ireland was saved for the Ascendancy landlords and the Crown. Not for nearly one hundred and twenty years was Ireland to witness such a rising again.

A failed bourgeois revolution

Some 30,000 rebels were killed in the insurrection, scores executed and many of the arrested leaders exiled. Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger resolved to end once and for all the danger of an Irish alliance with continental powers against Britain. He decided to abolish the Dublin parliament and simultaneously wipe out all economic restrictions on Ireland by forcing it into full political union with Britain in an expanded United Kingdom. The widening gap in economic level between the two countries posed no continuing threat of economic competition from a country which would serve as an agricultural region of the kingdom with a limited industrial base integrated into the British market.

The plan was forced on the Irish Ascendancy. A majority was procured for it in the Irish parliament by unprecedented bribery. From 1800 onwards 100 Irish members of parliament from British style constituencies would sit at Westminster. Meanwhile, the rapid concentration of industry in Britain and the revolution in industrial technique was beginning to undermine the diversification of industry in Ireland. All of Ireland, outside of the north east, was facing rapid economic decline, and around Belfast the further development of industry became an extension of the industrial revolution in Britain, with little organic connection to its own national hinterland.

The objective basis for national revolution by a rising all Ireland industrial bourgeoisie was being rapidly eliminated. The national unity of "Catholic, Protestant and dissenter", so brilliantly achieved for such a

short time by Tone, the United Irishmen and the Defenders, was never to be rebuilt.

The "Great Irish Rebellion" of 1798 was indeed a major bourgeois revolution albeit one which failed, tragically for Ireland and for the popular forces in Britain itself.

It united the Irish masses for the first time, though briefly, in a national movement, for a republican state free of British colonial rule. It was free of the cultural nationalism and claims to Gaelic ancestry in which the later nationalist movements were steeped. It took its powerful dynamic from the objective realities of the new capitalism in Ireland which provided a brief window of opportunity to lead Irish society out of its semi feudal rural backwardness.

Such a revolution was only possible because of a combination of factors. Although economic development provided the fundamental motor, a national movement could not have emerged or hoped to succeed without the powerful ideological impulse of the American and French revolutions and the prospects of aid from revolutionary France.

The degree of capitalist development in Ireland, and the real possibility of accelerated social development in an independent republic, made it a classically bourgeois revolution; but the young Irish bourgeoisie, as in the American war of Independence, was pitted against a capitalist and colonial Britain.

Even though Britain's economic interests in Ireland were increasingly at odds with the monopoly of the semifeudal landlord Ascendancy, its imperial strategy could not tolerate the threat to its domination by the "Great Irish Rebellion".

That would have opened the road to a French victory in Europe and to a radical democratic revolution in Britain. The brutal reaction to the Irish revolution was part of Britain's consolidation of its colonial empire and its trading power against the prospect of a Europe of republics.

By the time an Irish republican movement would once more plan and execute insurrection against British control, it would be in a profoundly altered historical epoch.

But no reconsideration of "the Year of Liberty" in Ireland can deny that it set in train one of the most enduring of all national struggles, one which remains as yet unresolved.

Marxism and Irish history

It is scarcely surprising that the development of the "peace process" in 1995 has further stimulated a debate about Irish history. Revolutionary Marxists must intervene in this debate. Neither fashionable trends in bourgeois history, so called "revisionism" nor the old Irish Nationalist myth makers can provide an orientation for those who wish today to fundamentally re-orient the struggle against British imperialism and its loyal servants in Ireland.

Historians such as Ronan Fanning (*Independent Ireland*) and Roy Foster (*Modern Ireland, 1600-1972*) are the most general synthesizers of the revisionist approach. Others have contributed to the assault on the nationalist "myths" in specific fields; Tom Dunne (on Wolfe Tone). Ruth Dudley Edwards (on Patrick Pearse). Austen Morgan (on James Connolly) and Tom Garvin. Many insist that Ireland's past is detachable from present day political agendas but their work has been used to back up a very definite agenda, that of reconciliation with Orangeism and Britain. This means that the historic oppressor has to be exonerated and the heroes of the nationalist pantheon dethroned.

Their general method is to contextualise and thereby relativise all the key events and processes which Irish

nationalist historians have interpreted as '800 years of English oppression'. Their claims include:

- * the conquest by first Norman and then by Tudor England was not unique in the conditions of pre and early capitalist Europe;
- * colonial plantation in Ulster was just one more instance of worldwide migrations of peoples in the 16th and 17th centuries:
- * the penal laws against the Catholic masses were of little consequence:
- * the landlord Ascendancy in Ireland was mostly either well meaning or self destructive;
- * the 18th century British restrictions on Irish economic development are by and large a myth created by nationalists.

In this view, the United Irishmen who rose up in 1798 due to this "misperception" were tragically mistaken. Even the Great Famine of the 1840s was a "natural" tragedy for which it is "unfair" to blame the British state. The anti landlord and anti British republicanism of the Fenians from the 1860s onwards was supposedly sectarian, terrorist, and obsessed with "blood sacrifice". Its pursuit of a mythical all Ireland republic could only mean civil war against the Protestants who were, in the North East, a distinct nationality. The results of all this farrago of misunderstanding and mythology was an unnecessary and bloody war with England, the partition of the country and the entrenchment of mass Orange sectarianism in Northern Ireland.

Of course, no single revisionist writer would subscribe to all of these views. Most hide behind the claim of being "specialists" in discrete periods or aspects, escaping into empiricism and economic statistics, and pretending to be champions of a "value free" method.

The revisionists have been answered by a number of nationalist professional historians such as Brendan Bradshaw, probably the best of them. Unfortunately, even he remains fundamentally idealist in his conception of the Irish nation and the historical basis of its right to struggle.

An overall Marxist position has yet to be argued in this debate notwithstanding the outraged abuse from Stalinised left nationalists and a few Marxist studies in political economy. "Marxist" historiography began with James Connolly's republican socialist historical propaganda and was resumed by post war Stalinist writers such as T.A.Jackson and Desmond Greaves.

The Marxist position is distinct from either the revisionist servants of the Irish bourgeoisie's latest tactical turn or Stalinist attorneys of Irish nationalism. Contrary to the nationalists' views, the present conflict is not a simple reprise of the millennial struggle of an ancient nation. It is the unfinished business of a roughly two century old struggle against the colonialism and then the imperialism of Britain by different organised expressions of an Irish national movement.

That movement was born in a revolution whose leading social force (the rising industrial bourgeoisie) was smashed almost as soon as it was created. This had tremendous consequences for the later organised manifestations, revolutionary and reformist alike; O'Connell's Repeal movement, the Fenians. Parnell's Irish Party, P.Carse's IRB, the IRA over the last seven decades.

The relation of past to present can never be adequately understood outside of a historical materialist approach. It is to this task that our present series of articles are devoted
