

THE RELEVANCE OF THE UNITED IRISHMEN

Next year we will be commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of the United Irishmen and their rebellion of 1798. For us in this part of Ireland, the United Irishmen are of particular historical and contemporary relevance. The North was one of the main centres of the United Irishmen revolt, with Antrim and down in the forefront. Belfast in the 1790s was a beacon of radicalism, a city respected for its progressive and open-minded politics, its dynamic economy and its internationalism. We were, two centuries ago, in the European mainstream. It has taken us two hundred years to even contemplate moving back into the mainstream.

Why are the United Irishmen of such significance for contemporary Ireland. I will try to answer that question by looking at the political ideals of the United Irishmen as well as the tragic fate of the movement in practice.

The United Irishmen movement differs substantially from most other movements in Irish history. Unlike the aristocratic revolts of the 17th century, or the mass movements of the 19th century, or indeed the twentieth century republican movement, the United Irishmen were committed to a completely non-sectarian ideal - the unity of 'Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter'. Wolfe Tone and his colleagues were the first to realise that our country could be neither free or at peace unless the different traditions on the island of Ireland cooperated in a common purpose. They argued that none of the principal traditions on the island - Catholics, Protestants (meaning the Anglican establishment Church of Ireland) and Dissenters (meaning essentially Presbyterians) could genuinely protect their interests by oppressing the other traditions.

It should be remembered that in 18th century Ireland, the country was dominated by the Protestant Ascendancy (ie members of the Church of Ireland) while both Catholics and Dissenters were the victims of political exclusion and discrimination. Yet it was from this same Protestant Ascendancy that the vision of an Ireland united in its diversity, with equal

rights for all traditions, emerged. Wolfe Tone and many of his fellow visionaries came from the Ascendancy class. But rejecting the prejudices of their own caste and tribe, they advanced the idea of an Ireland in which all traditions would play an equal part. Only in such a way could the country ever be truly united. Only in such a way could the country be at peace.

That is why the United Irishmen are still relevant today. While the various revolts before 1798 have little more than vague historical resonances, Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen remain contemporary figures. What was the battle of Kinsale about? Only historians know or care. Indeed, for all the old slogans, who really does remember 1640 or 1690?

We cannot say the same about the United Irishmen because so much of their message remains as valid today as it was two hundred years ago. Their principles of toleration, respect for diversity, a common purpose for our divided traditions, and internationalism are exactly the principles that should guide in the present.

Toleration was a crucial element in the United Irishmen. In the 1790s, the monopoly of political power in Ireland remained in the hands of the Protestant Ascendancy. If Dissenters were second class subjects, Catholics were in third class. Political, military and judicial office remained the preserve of members of the Church of Ireland. Yet the United Irish leaders, many of them members of the Ascendancy themselves, risked their careers, property and lives in the attempt to emancipate their fellow citizens. On the face of it, many United Irishmen had little in material terms to gain but were prepared to lose heavily in order to advance their principles of freedom and democracy. It is relatively easy for a member of an oppressed group to campaign for freedom. It requires a great deal more to abandon one's own privileges in order to create a more equal society. That perhaps explains why individuals who transcended their own caste, class and religious prejudices occupy such a privileged position in our historical imagination, eg the likes of Wolfe Tone, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Thomas Russell (the Man from God know where) and the

Emmett Brothers.

The United Irishmen insisted on toleration because they had the imagination to realise that without respect for diversity, none of our traditions could in the long run be assured of its future in Ireland. One section of the people cannot oppress another without inflicting grave moral, psychological, political and economic damage on itself. We need hardly look too deeply into contemporary history to see that oppression hurts the oppressor as well as the oppressed. I would argue that among the prime victims of the way in which twentieth century unionism has evolved in Northern Ireland has been the unionist community itself. In its inability so far to come to terms with the diversity of our island, it has inflicted upon itself and had inflicted upon it a siege mentality. Not only is such insecurity damaging to individuals, it cannot ultimately provide a safe foundation for the unionist tradition in Ireland. This is a community which for four hundred years has been a stranger in its own land. Like the United Irishmen, I hope that we can eventually create a country in which all our traditions are at home and at peace, both in physical and psychological terms.

The United Irishmen also sought to mobilise our divided traditions on the basis of a common project. In their case, the objective was to create a self-governing country capable of developing its economy in the rapidly emerging new industrial and world system of the late 18th century. It is not necessary to agree with the particular blueprints for political institutions drawn up by the United Irishmen to realise that they had hit upon a fundamental political reality of the post-Ancient Regime world. Essentially, they saw the ideal political system as one in which the quest of control by one faction or another was not the keystone of political life. Rather than upholding sectional monopolies of power, influence and wealth, considered to exist only in finite quantities, the purpose of the political system was to reflect the diversity of interests and aspirations of the people as a whole, and to enhance the overall wealth of society. In other words, the objective of politics was to make government serve the people rather than make the people serve the government. That is a simple, genuinely republican principle which has lost none of its validity or urgency, even after two hundred years. Even with our deeply entrenched

present-day divisions, it is still possible to mobilise our divided communities to work in common in pursuing an economic agenda for prosperity.

Finally, one of the most important lessons to be learnt from the United Irishmen is their commitment to internationalism. The United Irishmen were an integral part of the intellectual, philosophical, economic and political winds of change sweeping across Europe and America in the late 18th century. Belfast, a name one does not normally associate with the word enlightenment, was the Irish centre of the European Enlightenment. The United Irishmen were often involved in the development of the Irish industrial revolution and in the new industries which made our part of Ireland so distinct from the rural south and west of the country. They were open to the new political doctrines emerging from both North America and continental Europe, and to progressive political thinkers in Britain. They were ardent supporters of the American and French Revolutions. Indeed, it is hard to explain the emergence of the United Irishmen without the precedents and the thinkers of Virginia and Paris. These were people deeply engaged in a dynamic and changing world, whose horizons were expanding all the time and where the communications revolution was beginning. They were not isolationists or xenophobes. They had an all-inclusive view of the world where events in Paris were taken as seriously as the latest developments in the imperial capitals of London and Dublin.

The relevance to our times is obvious, particularly given the fact that Dublin has supplanted Belfast as the progressive face of Ireland in the eyes of European opinion. We have spent far too much time contemplating the 'narrow ground', too much time involved in insular and circular discussions. Our world is changing even more rapidly and more fundamentally than that of the United Irishmen. They won the 'battle of the Castlebar races'. We have to ensure that Northern Ireland is at the economic, technological and political races of the 21st century. Old doctrines of sovereignty are being drastically eroded by the developments in the real worlds of technology and the economy. Instead of squabbling over out-moded concepts, we should become part of the global mainstream, reflecting on the new forms of society and community emerging world-wide. How will we

fit in with the global society? What institutions will we need to do so? Ultimately, these are far more fundamental questions than our present quarrels.

We have a major advantage over the United Irishmen. While the military and political realities of the 1790s obliged Wolf Tone and his colleagues to spend a great deal of time as supplicants lobbying in the antechambers of the Ministry of Defence in Paris, and eventually to don French uniforms, we are equal partners in the European Union. We take part, in our own choice of civilian clothes, in the debates and arguments in Europe on the same basis as French, German, Finnish or Spanish colleagues. Every member of the European Parliament has only one vote. No country is in a relation of subordination to another in the new Europe. I very much hope that the new generations will be able to play a full role in the creation of a united Europe, freed from all the wars and conflicts of the past.

So far I have been talking about the ideals of the United Irishmen. I do not want to idealise the United Irishmen of 1798. I wanted to emphasise that in terms of their basic ideals, the United Irishmen have had a lasting and positive relevance in the politics of this country. But obviously the United Irishmen movement failed and did so in the most dramatic and appalling circumstances - the violent conflict which scarred our country in 1798.

The historians can argue over the exact responsibility for the violence and on the allocation of blame for the atrocities which took place. Many historians would argue that the revolt in the North and in Wexford, the two principal centres of insurgency, were in fact a despairing response to the violence of the state.

It is important to remember that the United Irishmen began their existence as a peaceful movement for reform of the old Irish Parliament, and who sought to unite all Irishmen, of whatever creed in peaceful agitation for that purpose. It was only when a despotic and

undemocratic state made it clear that it was prepared to use the most ruthless force to suppress their peaceful agitation that they began to organise for revolution.

Appalling oppression drove the United Irishmen into a rebellion conducted and suppressed at the cost of a great loss of life and idealism. Others argue that the connection between the United Irishmen and Revolutionary France made the suppression of the movement a strategic necessity for Britain. But we are not here to apportion blame or praise to men dead for two centuries. We are here to learn from their tragic experience and to examine the consequences of 1798.

The fact is that 1798, despite the high ideals of the United Irishmen, set back the cause of progress by decades, if not centuries. The inevitable atrocities involved in any violent conflict ensured that the unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter remains an aspiration to this very day. There is no such thing as a civilised war.

Atrocities are an integral part of war. Turning the aspiration for harmony between our traditions into a reality is essentially the purpose of the peace process in which we are now engaged. It is not too much of a paradox to say that if, in 1997, we can return to the politics of 1797, we will have made a substantial step forward.

Ultimately, 1798 increased and solidified the bitter conflict between Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. Various efforts have been made in the attempt to resolve these conflicts - the Act of Union, Home Rule, partition, direct rule, Sunningdale, etc, not to mention the long tradition of state coercion and rebel insurgency. But today we have to apply the positive principles of the United Irishmen to the resolution of the divisions created by the tragedy of 1798.

Above all, 1798 shows that violence kills the cause it serves. The honourable idealists of the United Irishmen often paid with their lives. But their ideals were massacred too. In the conflict between state and insurgents in 1798, forces were unleashed which neither

United Irishmen nor the state were able to control. Two centuries on, we are still waiting for the use of force to be totally removed from our politics.

The best memorial we can build to the United Irishmen is to establish peace once and for all in our country. Our diverse traditions must find an agreement on how we share the island and allow all the people, North and South, to endorse that agreement. That would be the best way for the men and women of 1998 to repay their debt to the 'men of 1798'.