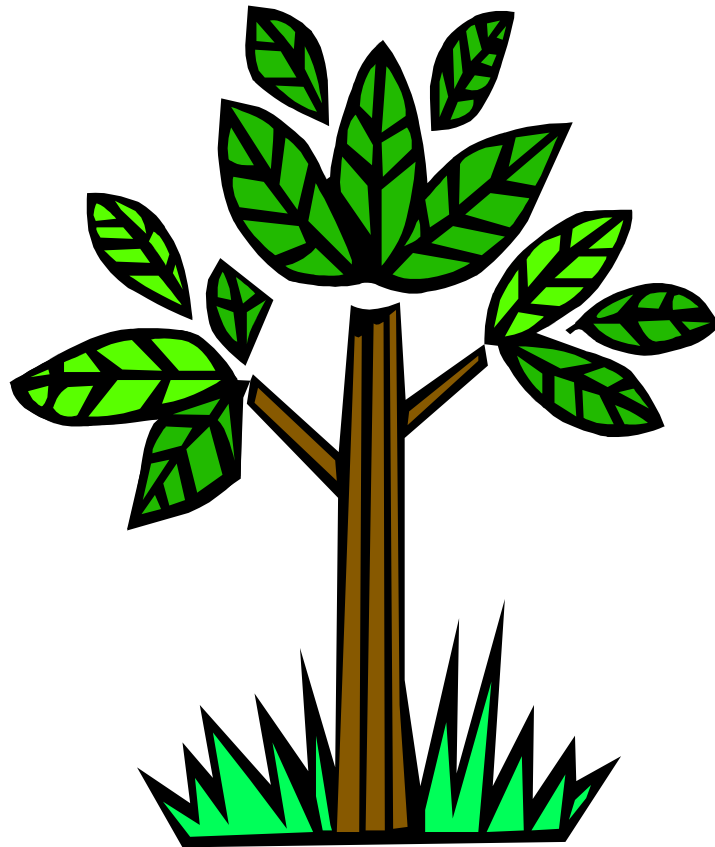


**Teachers Booklet 1**



**Climb the Liberty Tree:**

**An Exploration of the  
Ulster-Scots' Role in  
the United Irishmen's  
Rebellion of 1798**

## Liberty 1

This unit of work allows pupils opportunities to:

- Learn about the eighteenth century Penal Laws as they affected the Ulster people
- Explore the concept of democracy and take part in a voting exercise
- Write a formal, persuasive letter
- Research using the Internet
- Take part in a role play
- Take part in a group discussion on the issue of Rights and Responsibilities
- Design and create a poster using Publisher
- Reflect on their own work and how to improve it
- Develop and practise techniques to aid the memorising of complex material
- Work in a group to reflect critically on the aims of the Society of United Irishmen
- Create their own assessment tool in the form of a quiz for classroom use.

### KEY STAGE 3 CURRICULUM

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

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

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



## TEACHER NOTES

### Climb the Liberty Tree 1: Background to the 1798 Rebellion

#### The European Enlightenment

During the eighteenth century, while most European governments were still authoritarian and absolutist in orientation, theories of liberty, individual rights and equality were increasingly promulgated by philosophers and other thinkers. These ideas began to filter down to populations, even while governmental and legal systems remained unchanged. The American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 seemed to demonstrate to the watching world that the status quo could be successfully challenged.

#### Ireland in the 18th Century: The Penal Laws

These Laws were designed to privilege the members of the official, **Episcopal Church, the Church of Ireland**.

In this period Ireland, while under British rule, had a Parliament in Dublin, but the Parliament was not representative of the majority population who were mainly Catholic. In addition, any laws passed in the Irish Parliament had to be accepted by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland who was appointed by the British Government. They then had to be passed again in the British Parliament before they could become law. This greatly weakened the authority of the Irish Parliament.

Passed in 1697, following the defeat of James II at the Battle of the Boyne, the Penal Laws excluded the Roman Catholic population from Parliament, the Civil Service, local government, the Law.

They also prohibited education in Catholic schools and, significantly, greatly restricted Catholics in buying, leasing or inheriting land. For example, the only means by which a Catholic eldest son could inherit his father's whole estate was if he became Protestant. Otherwise, the estate would be divided up among all the sons, leading to a great reduction in the family's standing and wealth. By 1775, only about 5% of land was in the hands of the majority population.

Some laws seem petty, deliberately designed to humiliate. For example, Catholics were forbidden to own a horse worth more than £5.00

#### Suspicion of Catholics

This resulted from a number of factors, both historical and contemporary:

- Ireland had not embraced the Reformation as England had
  - The Spanish Armada's attempted attack in 1588 was remembered as an attempt by a Catholic monarch to subvert the government of the Protestant Elizabeth I
  - James II had the support of Irish Catholics against William of Orange who had taken the English throne in the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688
- Fear, after 1789, that the French Revolution would be "imported" into England via Ireland, with Irish Catholic support.

## **Presbyterians**

The Presbyterian Church is organised on democratic lines. It is governed by a body of Elders, of whom the Minister is one: the Teaching Elder. The Elders are elected by the communicant members of the congregation.

In eighteenth-century Ulster, Protestant Dissenters (ie non-Anglicans) were in the main Presbyterian. They were often descendants of Scots Covenanters who had migrated during the Plantation of Ulster, or later, in order to escape persecution under the Stuart monarchs. They too were excluded from parliament, from public service and from municipal corporations. Their church ministers did not even have official recognition as such. They were believed to be dangerous as they maintained close links with Scotland where the **Presbyterian Church** had managed to retain its status. In addition, their loyalty to the State tended to be conditional, determined by the State's treatment of their church, its authority within communities, and its traditions. Most Presbyterians lived in N.E. Ulster. They resented the ascendancy of the Church of Ireland and their exclusion from public office, although many managed to become prosperous merchants and manufacturers in urban centres. One such family were the **McCrackens** of Belfast who were textile manufacturers.

Many other Presbyterians emigrated to the American colonies where they fought in the War of Independence, thus increasing Government suspicion of their counterparts in Ireland.

## **The Patriot Party**

This group was led by Henry Grattan, in the Dublin Parliament. Although they belonged to the establishment, ie were members of the Anglican Church who did not suffer under the Penal Laws, they resented the lack of control the Irish Parliament had over Ireland's affairs. Grievances included:

- restrictions on Irish trade
  - taxes imposed on Ireland from England.
  - 15<sup>th</sup> century Poyning's Law which said that any legislation passed in the Irish Parliament had to be authorised by Westminster and the Crown in order to become law
- British control over senior appointments in the military, the church and the civil service.

## **The Volunteers**

By 1778 Britain was at war with France and there were fears that France might seek to invade Britain through Ireland. British troops were engaged against France and against rebelling colonists in America so a national volunteer force was formed for the defence of Ireland from within. The Volunteers were mainly Protestant, but they realised their power could be used to give armed support to the Patriot Party in the Dublin Parliament as it lobbied for greater independence from England. In fact, between 1778 and 1782 most of the restrictions on Irish trade were removed and the Irish Parliament was given the freedom to pass bills without alteration.

## **The Catholic Relief Act, 1778**

In the face of a perceived threat from the Volunteers, the British Government moved to conciliate "His Majesty's Catholic subjects" by passing a Relief Act which allowed Catholics to lease and inherit land on equal terms with Protestants.

## **Grattan's Parliament**

Neither in Britain nor in Ireland during this period was government democratic or society fair. Power was in the hands of the wealthy and the privileged. However, from 1778-1800 Ireland had a much more independent legislature. In the Constitution of 1782 restrictions on Catholic education and worship were relaxed but Catholics were still not permitted to enter Parliament.

## Tithes

By 1780 the restrictions on Presbyterians holding public office had been removed, but by then many of them were beginning to feel that it would be in the interests of Catholics and Presbyterians to present a united front against the British/Anglican ascendancy. The sense of anger at the exclusion they had suffered remained strong in both communities. In any case, Catholics and Presbyterians deeply resented the tithe: a tax of 10% of income which they were required to pay to the established Anglican Church.

## The Age of Revolutions

The Americans had asserted their independence from Britain in 1776. In 1789 the French Revolution took place. In the early 1790's **Tom Paine** published *The Rights of Man* which asserted that

- Citizens have the right to liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression
- Sovereignty resides in the nation
- A people has the moral right to decide its own destiny.

These events and ideas were the inspiration for:

### **The United Irishmen, founded 1791** (Belfast and Dublin)

The Society drew support from radical thinking Catholics and Protestants, North and South. They aimed to

- Reform parliament to make it more representative
- Restore all rights to Catholics
- Some, like Wolfe Tone, also wished to establish a democratic Irish Republic.

In Dublin the leadership was in the hands of **Wolfe Tone**, a Protestant barrister and **William Drennan**, son of a Belfast Presbyterian minister. The Society included Catholics and Anglicans. Tone wished to "unite all the people of Ireland, abolish the memory of past dissensions and substitute the name of Irishmen in place of Protestant, Catholic or Dissenter" There was support for his ideals in Leinster and Wexford, as well as in the Dublin area.

In Belfast a group of political radicals, many with links to the Volunteers, regularly met at *Peggy Barclay's Tavern*, located in an entry off High Street. They were mainly Presbyterian, well-educated and from well-off, middle-class families. One exception was **Thomas Russell**, a southern Anglican and close friend of Wolfe Tone. They formed a Society of United Irishmen. Once a Society had more than 35 members a new group formed, spreading under cover of Masonic Lodges, Presbyterian congregations and Volunteer membership.

### ***The Northern Star***

The Belfast Presbyterian radicals launched this newspaper in Jan.1792 to promote the ideals of the United Irishmen through critical journalism and political satire. The editor was **Samuel Neilson**, son of the Presbyterian minister in Rathfriland, Co.Down. Two Presbyterian ministers regularly wrote articles for the paper: **Rev. James Porter of Greyabbey** and **Rev. William Steel Dickson of Ballyhalbert**.

### **Cultural Revival –**

The revival of interest in Irish culture gave rise to events such as the Belfast Harp Festival which coincided with a visit to Belfast of Wolfe Tone. Poetry of a patriotic nature, including poetry in the Ulster-Scots vernacular was popular. The *Northern Star* and the *Newsletter* both had poetry columns.

## Division of Opinion

The United Irishmen were inspired by revolutionaries, but not all of them wished to use revolutionary methods to achieve their aims. Some, like William Drennan, believed in a more cautious, patient approach. There was also a question of how far the Society should ally itself with groups such as the **Catholic Defenders**. This secret society had been formed to protect the interests of Catholic farmers. It was frequently involved in sectarian clashes with the Protestant **Peep O' Day Boys**, which also had much support in rural areas. These clashes came to a head in a bloody conflict in September 1795. However, leading figures in the United Irishmen movement such as **Henry Joy McCracken** and **Thomas Russell**, actively worked to forge an alliance with the Defenders as they planned rebellion.

## War with France

Britain went to war with revolutionary France in 1793. By this time the **Reign of Terror** had taken place. The British government feared the influence of revolutionary thinking on the United Irishmen and that they might offer the French the opportunity of invading England through Ireland in exchange for assistance with their own radical plans.

## Government Response

From 1793 onwards the government sought to suppress the movement by dealing with some of the Catholic grievances, while at the same time suppressing the United Irishmen. Thus the following measures were taken

1. Two **Relief Acts** were passed which gave the vote to Catholic owners of small farms on the same terms as Protestants, though they still could not enter Parliament.
2. Government raised a **Militia** from local populations, eg in County Monaghan, to help keep the peace; many Catholics joined this.
3. The United Irishmen were declared illegal in 1794.
4. The presses of the *Northern Star* were broken up in 1797.
5. From 1794 - 1797 several leaders of the movement were tried and imprisoned. Imprisoned leaders included McCracken, Neilson and others who were detained in Kilmainsfort Gaol, Dublin in the autumn of 1796 until late 1797. In 1795 Fitzwilliam, the emancipation-supporting Lord Lieutenant was recalled to England.

## The Cave Hill Oath

In June 1795, Tone, Russell, McCracken, Neilson and several others climbed to McArt's Fort at the summit of the Cave Hill. There they swore never to give in until they had achieved Ireland's independence from England.

The Government, meanwhile, prepared to deal with insurrection by passing :

### 1 1796: The Indemnity Act

This allowed magistrates to take measures of exceptional severity, even to break the law in order to check any attempt at rebellion.

### 2. 1796: The Insurrection Act

Administering an "unlawful oath" ie the United Irishmen's membership oath was now punishable by death.

## French Invasion

Wolfe Tone avoided arrest by leaving Ireland with his family, supposedly emigrating to America. In fact he was soon in France, lobbying for an invasion force in support of the United Irishmen. It arrived in Bantry Bay in December 1796 with Tone on board, but bad weather prevented any landing.

## Martial Law, 1797

United Irish leaders, including Henry Joy McCracken, continued to liaise with the Defenders for support for their revolutionary plans. Fearing that uprising was imminent, **Lieutenant-General Gerard Lake**, the commander of Crown forces in the North acted with severity to disarm Ulster. Martial Law was proclaimed, informers were promised protection, arms were to be handed in. There were hangings of Militia men who had taken the United Irish Oath, and of **William Orr**, a Presbyterian who was alleged to have sworn some of them in. Orr made a moving speech just before his execution at Carrickfergus and was regarded as a martyr by many Presbyterians. Henry Joy McCracken wore a ring which bore the motto "Remember Orr". Floggings were administered to those accused of concealing arms. Pitch-capping was used to torture suspected sympathisers. Nevertheless, many arms were hidden for future use, some even in Presbyterian meeting houses, such as the Old Presbyterian Church at Templepatrick.

Lake was promoted late in 1797 and the northern command went to **Major-General Nugent**.

## The Rising

Despite the efforts of the Government and the Military, plans for a rebellion continued. In Ulster, Antrim and Down, where Scots Presbyterians were in greatest numbers, were the key areas. The rebels were unaware that their ranks had been infiltrated by at least two **informers**, one Catholic, the other a Protestant, who were reporting their plans in detail to the authorities.

The date chosen for the rebellion was 23 May. Tone was once again expected to arrive with a French force. Several days before the date, however, the Dublin-based executive leader, **Lord Edward Fitzgerald** was arrested. Soon after this Samuel Neilson from Belfast was also in custody. Fourteen members of the Leinster executive were also arrested.

**May 1798** – Rebellion broke out in Leinster and Wexford, only to be crushed at Vinegar Hill in early June. Massacre of Protestants at Scullabogue in Wexford turned many against the rebellion.

**June 1798** – Rebellions in Antrim and Down, led by Henry Joy McCracken and **Henry Munro** respectively. Both were crushed within days.

**August 1798** – A French fleet arrived in Co. Mayo. It surrendered in September.

**October 1798** – Another French fleet arrived with Tone on board. It too was successfully intercepted. Tone was arrested.

## Executions

Thomas Russell and William Steel Dickson escaped execution as they had been arrested shortly before the Rebellion broke out. McCracken and Munro were both hanged as were several others. Many were viciously flogged. Tone died in prison from a self-inflicted wound.

## Notes

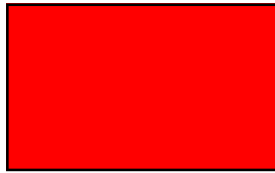
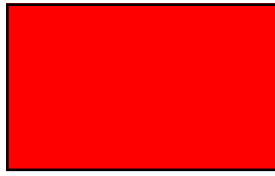
**The Covenanters** were 17th-century Scots Presbyterians who were determined that Presbyterianism should be the established religion of Scotland. In a bid to prevent the worship forms and the structures of the Anglican church being forced on them by Charles I, they signed the National Covenant in 1638 to maintain their traditions and church government in Scotland. In 1643 they joined with English Parliamentarians against Charles under the Solemn League and Covenant. Later, they changed sides and supported Charles II in his bid to recover the English throne, but he was defeated by Cromwell. After the Restoration he broke his promises to them and began persecuting Covenanters with great severity.

**Radicals** were activists who favoured political and social changes of a sweeping or extreme nature. Many were democrats, inspired by the American Revolution.

## Sources

- Beckett, J.C.      *The Making of Modern Ireland*  
Stewart, A.T.Q.,   *The Summer Soldiers*  
                          *The 1798 Rebellion in County Down*  
Wilsdon, Bill,     *The 1798 Rising in Antrim and Down*

# TUCKSHOP TASK PUPIL CARDS



## Liberty Game Answers

1

1791— United Irishmen's Society founded In Belfast

2

1793—Britain at war with French. United Irishmen seek French help in their own revolution

3

Government relaxes Discrimination against Catholics

4

Government sets up Militia to help keep the peace. Many Catholics join

5

United Irishmen declared illegal in 1794

6

1795—the Cave Hill Oath. Leaders, including Tone, Russell and McCracken swore never to give in until they had achieved Ireland's independence

7

Dec. 1796—Tone's French fleet fails to land at Bantry

8

1796-97. Many leaders of the movement imprisoned in Dublin

9

Martial law imposed in in 1797. William Orr, a Presbyterian hanged.

10

May 1798—Rebellion In Wexford.

11

June 7th, 1798— Rebellion in Antrim, led by McCracken

12

June 9th, 1798. Rebellion in Co. Down, led by Henry Munro