

United Irishmen, abolition and the slave trade, 1770-1807

Contents

Abolitionist activity, 1770-1790s

Who were the abolitionists?

Why were they abolitionists?

The Impact of abolitionism

Abolition and the United Irishmen



A historical map of Boston, Massachusetts, showing the city's layout in the late 18th century. The map is yellowed with age and features a dense network of streets. Numerous red dots are placed across the city, primarily in the central and northern areas, indicating locations of abolitionist activity. Key geographical features include the "GREAT NORTHERN RAILROAD" in the upper left, "ORMEAU PUBLIC PARK" in the lower left, and "WATER BINS" in the upper right. A coat of arms is visible in the bottom right corner. The text "Abolitionist activity, 1770s-1791/2" is overlaid in white on the left side of the map.

Abolitionist activity, 1770s-
1791/2

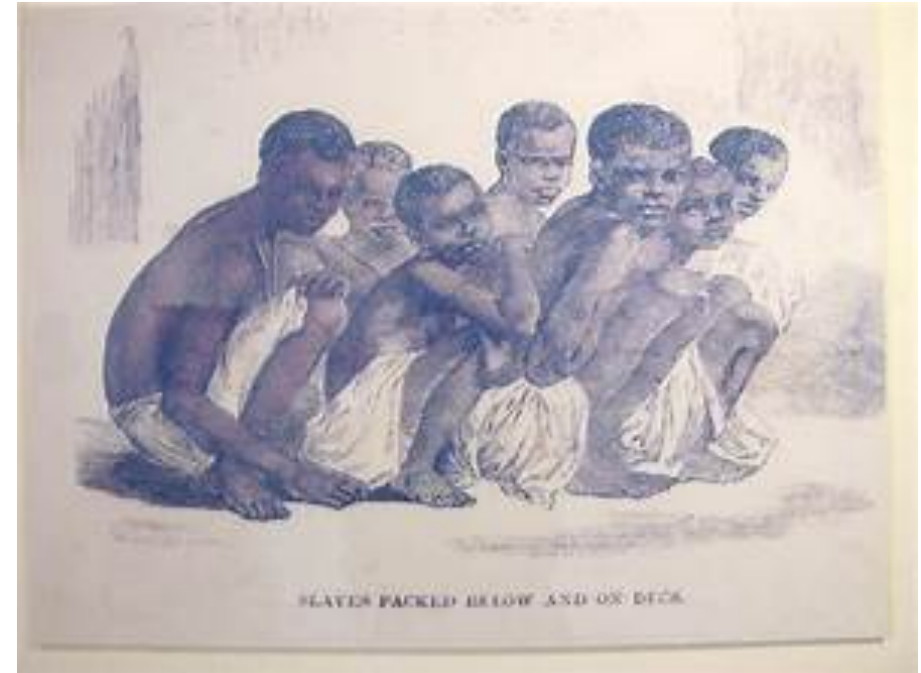
Little abolitionist activity before 1770s

- **Economic Interests:** Britain was heavily dependent on the Atlantic slave trade and the plantation system in its American colonies, particularly in the Caribbean. These industries were immensely profitable, and many British merchants, plantation owners, and investors had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. The economic benefits of slavery created powerful opposition to any movement for abolition.
- **Racial Prejudice:** Racial prejudices and stereotypes were deeply ingrained in European society during this period. Many people in Britain held racist views that dehumanized Africans and justified the institution of slavery. These attitudes made it difficult to gain widespread support for abolitionist causes.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Many British citizens had limited knowledge of the conditions faced by enslaved people in the colonies. There was a lack of information about the brutal treatment, harsh living conditions, and forced labor endured by enslaved individuals. Without awareness of these issues, there was less public pressure to end slavery.



No organised movement

- **Political and Social Stability:** Britain was undergoing significant political and social changes during this period, including the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the subsequent establishment of constitutional monarchy. Abolitionist efforts could be seen as a challenge to the stability of the state, and politicians and elites were often hesitant to support such radical ideas.
- **Lack of Organised Movement:** Before the late 18th century, there was no well-organized and cohesive abolitionist movement in Britain. The few individuals who spoke out against slavery often did so in isolation, without a unified strategy or platform to rally public support.



Sermons: Reverend Samuel Barber

In 1779, the Presbyterian preachers
the slave trade was:

“That horrible degradation of human
nature”

Later he said that:

“[a good Christian]...shall act not
only as reasonable creatures...but
disengaged likewise from the
imperious dictates of depraved
nature (the worst of slavery) he shall
enjoy a perfect un-interrupted peace
of mind and secure a blessed
mansion...”



Organisation to support 'slaves': Amicable Society of Belfast

- In 1781, ASB was outraged at a notice in the BNL offering a reward for the return of a runaway slave described as "Indian Black".
- The ASB's members were irate that a human being was being described as "property" and that his master was threatening legal action against any who would help him.



As a result

- The Society pledged its help to the escaped slave:
- “...to our unfortunate fellow-creature, the foresaid Indian black...we will not only harbour him, but enable him, by pecuniary donations, to carry on a legal prosecution against his intended enslaver, who...has committed the most daring outrage on the liberty of the subject, and has wantonly attempted the perpetration of a deed repugnant to human nature, or to civil society.”



Abstention from sugar

- William Drennan wrote to his sister Martha suggesting that that the women of Belfast should publish a recipe book of sugar free pies and desserts
- Drennan, while resident in Dublin in the early 1780s, established a subscription paper requesting people to abstain from using sugar



Northern Star supported the ban

Northern Star (published 1792 – 1795) said that:

‘... every individual, as far as he consumes sugar products, becomes accessory to the guilt (of slavery).’



Thomas Russell (in 1859, as noted from Mary Ann McCracken by Dr. Madden)

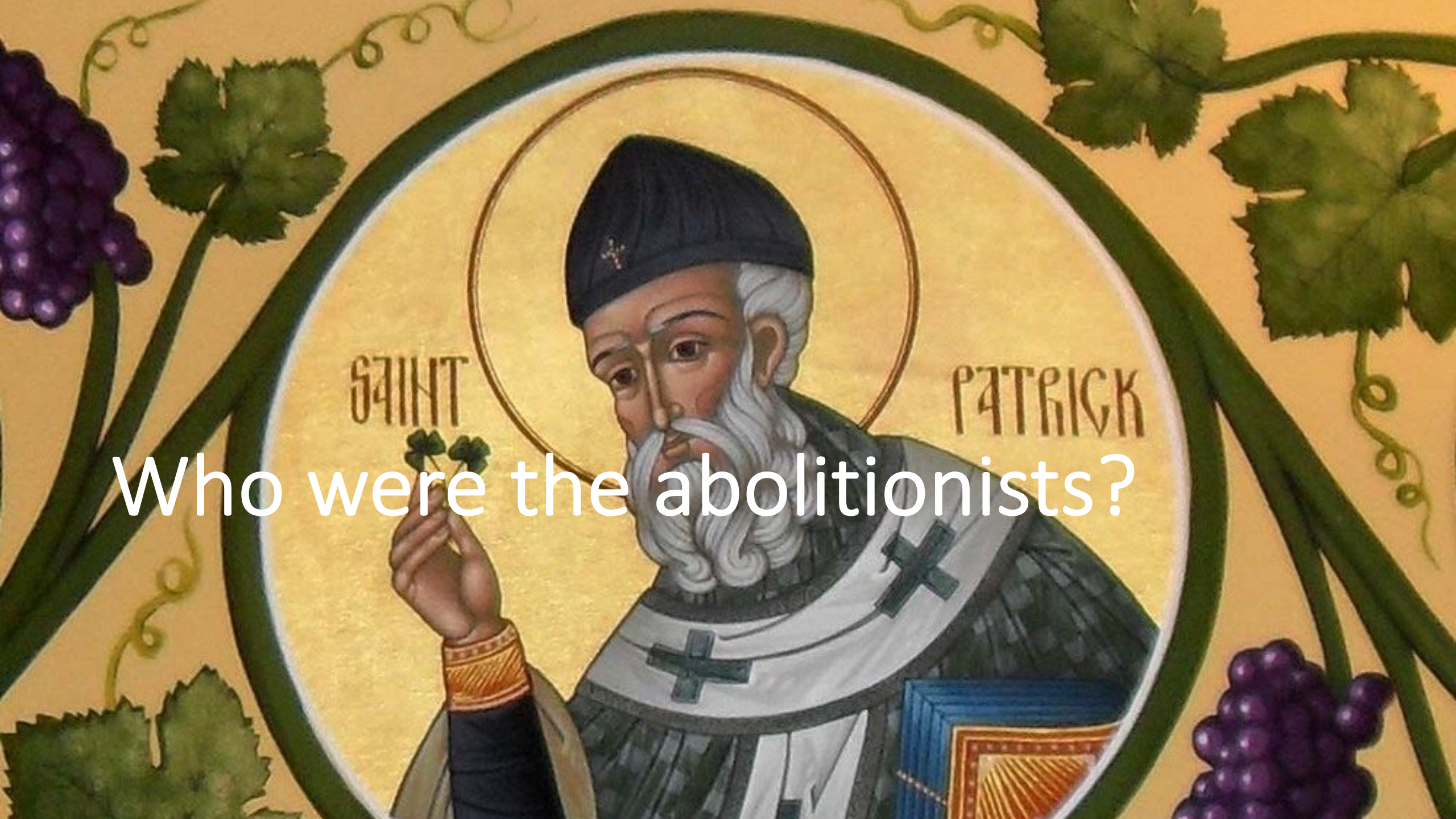
“...who in the day of Wilberforce abstained from the use of slave labour produce until slavery in the West Indies was abolished, and at dinner parties to which he was so often invited and when confectionary was so much used he would not taste anything with sugar in it...”



Public demonstrations

- On Bastille Day 1792, a banner denouncing slavery was amongst the political expressions carried through the streets of Belfast.
- Bastille Day Banner, Belfast, 14 JULY 1792: “Can the African Slave Trade, though MORALLY wrong be POLITICALLY right?”
- Toast proposed by Henry Joy (bnl & bcs), probably on the same day: ‘To Mr. Wilberforce, and a speedy repeal of the infamous traffic in the flesh and bone of man.’





Who were the abolitionists?

Presbyterian preachers

- Majority of Ireland's Presbyterian clergy educated in Scotland, facilitating the transmission of the Scottish Enlightenment ideas to Belfast.
- Many were New-Light or Unitarians as they came too be known, and played an important role in Belfast's burgeoning anti-slavery thinking by utilising and spreading enlightenment ideology.



Non-Arian, Old Light, subscribers to the Confession Presbyterians

- Westminster Confession of Faith states that the sole doctrinal authority is Scripture, and it agrees with and restates the doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ from the creeds of the early church.
- The doctrine of the eternal decree (predestination) is that “some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death,” and yet “neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of creatures.”
- Seen as conservative, dogmatic and worshipers of the old ways.



May St Presbyterian Church, 1902

Arian, New Light, non-subscribers to the Confession Presbyterians

- Seen as liberal, using their conscience, education and judgement to interpret the word of god.
- Some were Arianists. Arianism is a Christological doctrine first attributed to Arius, a Christian presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt.
- Arian theology holds that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who was begotten by God the Father with the difference that the Son of God did not always exist but was begotten within time by God.



Samuel Barber

- Born in County Antrim, served as a minister in Rathfriland, County Down, from his ordination in 1763 until his death in 1811.
- Beyond his religious duties, Barber assumed the role of colonel in the Rathfriland regiment of volunteers in 1782, concurrently advocating for parliamentary reform and other societal changes.
- Notably, Barber sat in three volunteer conventions, supporting causes such as parliamentary reform, catholic emancipation, and revisions to the tithe system and revenue laws.



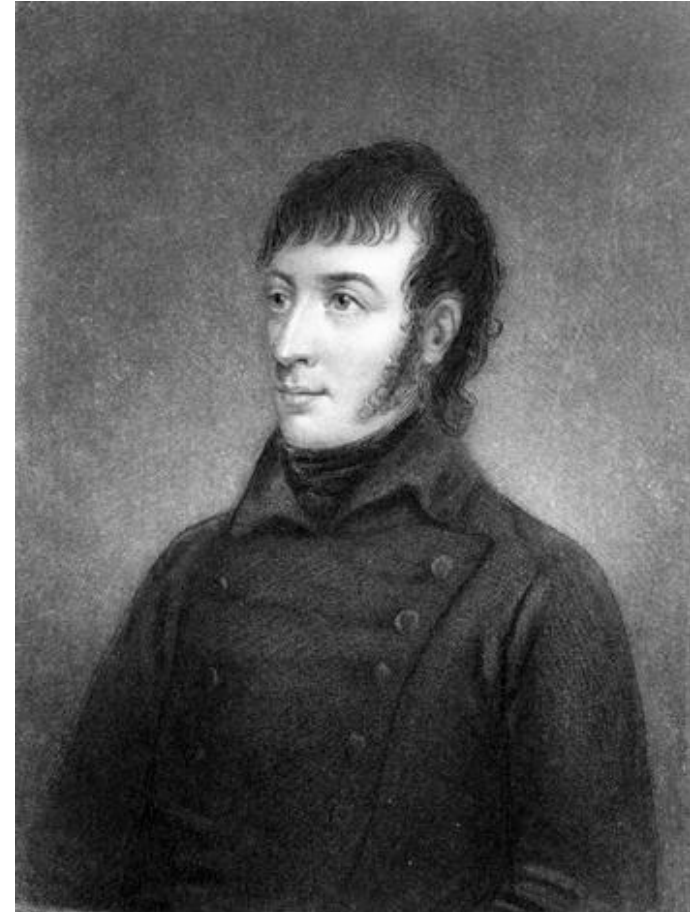
Samuel Barber, later life

- In 1786, he engaged in a satirical exchange with Bishop Woodward, showcasing his skill in critique and advocating for disestablishment of the Church of Ireland.
- Despite being falsely charged with high treason in 1798, Barber, described as a pronounced liberal in both religion and politics, left a legacy as a reformer and intellectual, passing away on September 5, 1811, at the age of seventy-three.



Thomas Russell

- Thomas Paliser Russell, born in Dublin on November 21, 1767, emerged as a fervent anti-slavery activist from a Quaker upbringing.
- Joining the Society of United Irishmen in the early 1790s, Russell dedicated efforts to unite Irish people for independence and championed anti-slavery causes.
- In 1793, Russell spearheaded a sub-committee within the Society, organizing public events and distributing pamphlets to raise awareness about the atrocities of the slave trade.



Anti slavery activity

- Renowned for his impassioned speeches, Russell's charismatic advocacy inspired many individuals to join the anti-slavery movement and take decisive action.
- Taking his cause to an international level, Russell traveled to London in 1796, forming a close alliance with William Wilberforce (right), leader of the British anti-slavery movement.



Russell and the slave trade

- Russell's collaboration with Wilberforce extended to legislative efforts against slavery, leveraging his Irish connections to amplify the anti-slavery message.
- Russell played a pivotal role in the abolition of the slave trade, contributing significantly to the global movement against the inhumane practice.



Robert Neil

- Born in 1775 to Ross Neil, a baker, Robert Neil became a successful Belfast silversmith, starting his business in High Street in September 1803.
- A partner with Henry L. Gardner, Neil contributed to the firm's success in jewelry, watchmaking, and optics, even manufacturing public clocks in the north of Ireland.
- Actively involved in philanthropy, Neil supported causes such as parliamentary reform, anti-slavery initiatives, and relief efforts for cholera, as documented in the Belfast News-Letter from 1830 to 1853.



Robert Neil, later life

- An ardent abolitionist, Neil played a pivotal role in the fight against slavery, hosting renowned figures like William Lloyd Garrison, Henry C. Wright, and Frederick Douglass during their visits to Belfast.
- Residing in Albion Place, Belfast, in 1854, Robert Neil passed away in Hollywood in 1857, leaving a legacy of social engagement and a dedication to the abolitionist cause.



William Tennant

- Born in 1759 near Ballymoney, County Antrim, Ireland, William Tennant, the son of Reverend John Tennant, became a prosperous Ulster Presbyterian banker.
- Tennant, apprenticed with merchant John Campbell, joined the Belfast Chamber of Commerce in 1783 and later became a partner in various businesses, including the New Sugar House in Waring Street.



Founding member of the United Irishmen

- A founding member of the Society of United Irishmen, Tennant played a key role in supporting revolutionary insurrection against British rule, collaborating with radicals like William Drennan.
- Arrested on the eve of the 1798 rebellion, Tennant, held on a prison ship and later in Fort George, Scotland, was released in January 1802, distinguishing himself as a prominent United Irishman.



After the rebellion

- Post-release, Tennant swiftly re-established himself in business, becoming a significant owner and director of the London and Liverpool New Traders partnership by 1807.
- Co-founder of the Commercial Bank and later working for the Belfast Banking Company, Tennant contributed to the Spring Water Commissioners and the Chamber of Commerce.



Belfast Banking Company in 1827 by a merger of Batt's and Tennant's (The Commercial Bank).



Later life

- In 1810, Tennant, along with William Drennan and his brother Dr. Robert Tennent, co-founded the Belfast Academical Institution, aiming to provide affordable education.
- Appointed treasurer of the First Belfast Presbyterian Church in 1817, Tennant, a bastion of liberal Presbyterianism, died of cholera in 1832, leaving a legacy in business, education, and personal relationships.



Samuel Neilson

- Born in Ballyroney, County Down, Ireland, on September 17, 1761, Samuel Neilson became a key figure in the Society of United Irishmen and founded the influential Northern Star newspaper.
- Despite commercial success in Belfast, Neilson's political fervor led him to support the reformist Volunteer movement and act as Robert Stewart's election agent in 1790.
- Inspired by the French Revolution, Neilson proposed a political society in 1791, launched the Northern Star in 1792, and faced legal troubles, including imprisonment for libel.



Deportation and later life

- Actively involved in military efforts against British control in Ireland, Neilson's role in the United Irishmen's rebellion plans was thwarted by arrests, leading to his imprisonment and collaboration with authorities.
- Following his release, Neilson faced exile, contributing to his deportation to Scotland and the Netherlands before arriving in the United States in 1802, where he succumbed to yellow fever and died on August 29, 1803, in Poughkeepsie, New York.



William Drennan

- Born in 1754 in Belfast, William Drennan, from a family of 11, only had three siblings survive infancy.
- Educated at the University of Glasgow, influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment and Francis Hutcheson, Drennan championed the "restless power of reason."
- Gaining national attention with his 1784-1785 publication "Letters of Orellana," he advocated for radical constitutional reform.



Activity

- In 1791, he proposed a "benevolent conspiracy" for Irish independence and republicanism, leading to his 1793 arrest on sedition charges.
- Following the 1798 Rebellion, Drennan supported women's suffrage and co-founded the Belfast Academical Institution for democratic reform.



Irish nationalism and death

- Renowned as a poet for "When Erin First Rose" (1795), he also contributed to medicine, advising handwashing and pioneering cowpox injections.
- William Drennan passed away in 1820, leaving a lasting legacy in politics, education, and medicine.



Lord Rawdon, Earl of Moira

- In 1775, Rawdon, wrote to his mother from Vienna.
- He wrote of an act committed by Sir Robert Keith, who through negotiation, had organised for a slave to be freed who belonged to the Palace of the King of Algiers.
- Rawdon's greatly respected Keith's action, commenting "I am sure you must admire his character from this".



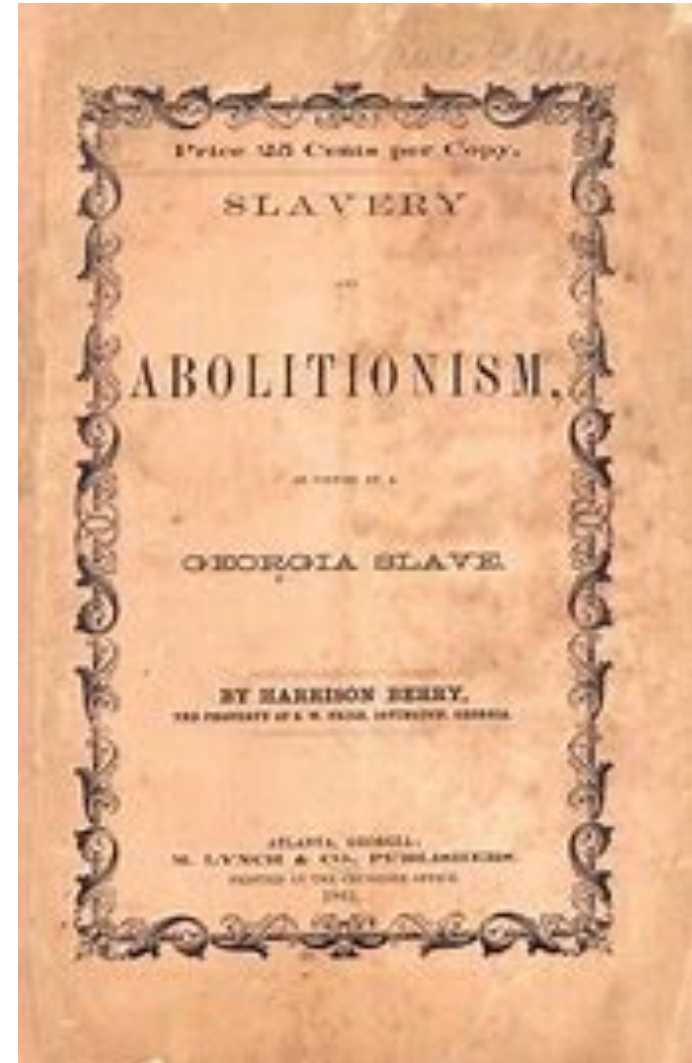
John Rawdon, 1st Earl of Moira



Why were they abolitionists?

Reasons

1. Historical association with the Irish being 'slaves' under the penal laws and the plight of African slaves.
2. The impact of the Scottish Enlightenment.
3. Social networks and milieu.
4. Impact of print media
5. Christian faith



(1) Many commentators viewed the Irish as 'slaves'

In the 1720s,, the Anglo-Irish satirist and poet **Jonathan Swift** claimed that English legislative interference had reduced the Irish to slaves.

Lord Chesterfield, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1745-6, observed that the Irish poor “are used worse than negroes by their lords and masters, and their deputies of deputies of deputies.”



Black slaves cutting sugar cane on a plantation established by the Delays of Canagol, from ten views of the island of Antigua, by William Clarke, 1823.

Lord Clonmell

- Was the future Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench in Ireland,
- Compared the English administration in the role of Dutch planters, claiming that the "common Irish divided, oppressed, pillaged and abused as they are, are the Hottentots"
- Hottentot is a term that was historically used to refer to the Khoekhoe, indigenous nomadic pastoralists of South Africa. Use of the term Hottentot is now deprecated and considered offensive, the preferred name for the non-Bantu speaking indigenous people of the Western Cape area as being Khoi or Khoekhoe.



Samual Barber

He argued that “...Evidence that we are an enslaved People as every Nation must be where the law is not the will of that community. Look forward to better days...”



1785, Belfast Newsletter

'...To preserve the independence of Parliament and our constitutional and commercial rights, we shall deem no sacrifice too dear. Doubt not the support of the nation: Irishmen know their rights, and will maintain them. We are loyal to our Sovereign. We wish to preserve inviolate to latest ages the most friendly connection with our fellow subjects of Great Britain; but we will never tamely submit to be SLAVES.'

[1776.] HENRY AND ROBERT JOY. [Numb. 1776.]

The BELFAST NEWS-LETTER.

From FRIDAY AUGUST 23, to TUESDAY AUGUST 27, 1776.

at of the last PACKETS.]

AMERICA.

CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

THE REPRESENTATIVES
TO THE STATES OF AMERICA,
CONGRESS assembled.

WHEN in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate station to which the laws of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

They are aware that the most sacred and unalienable rights of the human race are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

That whenever a form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, we have suffered the longest continuance of a British yoke, which has been rendered more oppressive by the repeated injuries and usurpations, which have been advanced only by repeated injuries.—A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Now have we been wasting in attention to our British brethren. We have warned them, from time to time, of attempts, by their legislature, to extend an unconstitutional jurisdiction over us. We have remonstrated to them of the consequences of our attachment and friendship here. We have seen with circumstances of civility and modesty, scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow citizens, taken captive on the high seas, to bear arms against their country, to become the executioners of their friends and brethren, or to fall themselves by their hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions.

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress, in the most humble terms; our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.—A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Now have we been wasting in attention to our British brethren. We have warned them, from time to time, of attempts, by their legislature, to extend an unconstitutional jurisdiction over us. We have remonstrated to them of the consequences of our attachment and friendship here. We have seen with circumstances of civility and modesty, scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

Orange county; but our old friends and countrymen Hugh and Alexander Wallace, together with their two cheerful Englishmen Wallace and Stothorn, after having got over to Long Island, have not yet been able to reach our camp. Poor Charles Evans has been long missing; he had into the woods, and has never since been heard of. The Provincials have driven much of the cattle from Long Island to the island of New York; they were employed in carrying off all that existed on Nassau Island, but luckily were prevented by the arrival of our troops.

The New York papers tell us that the dull, vulgar Donald Cromwell, who had long prevailed at the head of the New York militia, including and terrorizing the friends of government, has been tried and defeated the Provincial service, for his two last short retreats in the Province of Quebec. His Majesty's half-pay bill I find has been lately countermanded and recalled. We are just now informed that the lady and family of Sir John Johnston have been taken prisoners by the Highland, and bestowed invariable General Schuyler, by way of hostages, for Sir John is at the head of a number of the six Indian nations, and on his way to facilitate the movements of the British army.

THE Associates of the Loyal Country Towns, are reported of Dungeness, on Thursday the 21st, on particular business.

TO be sold by Auction, at Belfast, on Saturday the 23rd, ready money, under Casks of Iron Great Hay, and four Acres of good Farm, August 18, 1776.

An experienced, competent Book-keeper, who can be very useful for Subscribers and Merchants, would Merchant or Gentleman, as fact, master of the Printer but their whole and labor.

L O A T

ON Tuesday the 23rd inst. a dead fish was a line captured by of Sir John, and sent to the Home of our friends here, or Ireland, Charles of Dungeness, where the day before one General Stewart, and on the 24th Dungeness, August 1776.

ADVERTISED

TO be sold by Auction, the 23rd

Penal laws: Test Acts

- Enforced oaths and sacraments in the Church of England for public office, discriminating against non-conformists, including Catholics.
- Restricted political participation, disenfranchising those who did not adhere to the established Anglican Church.
- Targeted dissenters from the Church of England, hindering the rights of Protestant non-conformists as well.



PENAL LAWS AND TEST ACT: QUESTIONS TOUCHING THEIR REPEAL PROPOUNDED IN 1687-8 BY JAMES II., TO THE DEPUTY LIEUTENANTS AND MAGISTRATES OF THE COUNTIES OF BEDS. BERKS. BRISTOL [ETC.] ... FROM THE ORIGINAL RETURNS IN THE BODLEIAN LIBRARY

ANONYMOUS

Popery Acts

- Imposed limitations on Catholics in Ireland, excluding them from public office, military service, and land ownership.
- Aimed at curbing the influence of the Catholic Church in a predominantly Protestant political and social environment.
- Restricted educational opportunities for Catholics and curtailed their ability to establish schools.



General Discrimination

- Both Catholics and non-conformists faced penalties for non-compliance with established religious and political norms.
- Disenfranchisement, limitations on land ownership, and economic restrictions were used to marginalize these groups.
- Overarching goal was to maintain the dominance of the Anglican Church and suppress religious dissenters in Britain and Ireland.



An important distinction

Irish faced severe restrictions but retained basic freedoms. Irish situation was not that of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean.

Many commentators recognized this distinction: In 1760 the Dublin Courier, for example, made reference to the “several degrees of slavery to which the nation may be gradually subjected...”



(2) The impact of the Scottish enlightenment

- Discussion of liberty influenced by Enlightenment. Emphasis on natural rights of men stimulated discourse on freedom.
- Scottish Enlightenment in Ireland led to demands for freedom from religious persecution and its emphasis on natural rights shaped the abolitionist view point. Particularly influential Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid.
- Church's embrace of enlightened ideology fostered a climate receptive to anti-slavery sentiments.



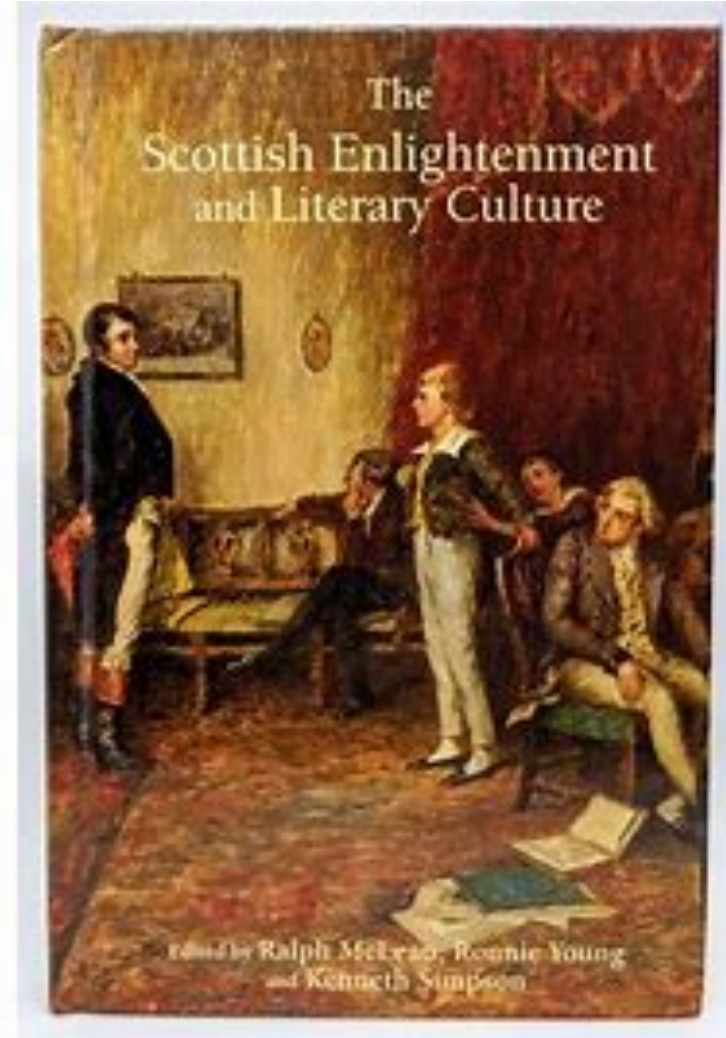
What was the Enlightenment?

The Enlightenment, spanning the 17th and 18th centuries, was an intellectual movement in Europe that championed reason, science, and individual rights.

- Emphasis on rational thinking and the scientific method.
- Advocacy for individual freedoms, including freedom of thought and expression.
- Critique of traditional authority and a call for social and political reform.

Enlightenment ideas influenced diverse fields, including philosophy, science, politics, and the arts.

Contributed to the shaping of modern democratic societies and the concept of human rights.



What was the Scottish Enlightenment?

- The Scottish Enlightenment was a distinct phase within the broader European Enlightenment, primarily flourishing in Scotland during the 18th century.
- Common Sense Philosophy: Led by figures like Thomas Reid, it emphasized the reliability of human perception and the role of common sense in understanding the world.
- Moral Philosophy: Francis Hutcheson's contributions focused on moral philosophy, emphasizing benevolence and innate moral sentiments.



Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746)

- A Scottish-Irish philosopher born in Ireland.
- A prominent figure known for his works on moral philosophy and aesthetics, he emphasized the importance of benevolence and natural moral sentiments in human behaviour.



Thomas Reid (1710–1796)

- Scottish philosopher, often regarded as the founder of the Scottish Common Sense School of philosophy.
- He critiqued the skeptical trends of the time, emphasizing the role of common sense in understanding the world.
- Reid's ideas were a response to the philosophical skepticism of thinkers like David Hume.
- He argued for the reliability of human perception and the existence of innate common sense principles, influencing later philosophers and contributing to the development of the Scottish Enlightenment.



Reid as painted by Henry Raeburn in 1796

Scientific explanation for racial difference

In 1786, the News-Letter described how scientific studies using the bodies of Africans demonstrated that black skin resulted wholly from climate.

It said that climate affected changes in skin and how:

“Negroes transplanted into Europe, will, in a few generations, become white; and Europeans, residing in Guinea, will change to a brown complexion”.



Black people were not inferior

The Newsletter said in 1786:

“That the Africans are an inferior link in the grand chain of nature is a prejudice, which has been indulged in and propagated by Europeans, especially in modern times, from considerations peculiarly sordid and contemptible; the fact is that the mental faculties of the negroes are by no means of a subordinate description to those of any other men.”



Religion and science not in conflict

As noted by John Bew,
New Light Presbyterianism
believed that “To constrain
freedom of enquiry was to
restrict the religious
liberty which was essential
to human fulfilment”



Samuel Barber rejoiced

“...at the amazing
advances of knowledge
and the progress of
science which must
ever be favourable to
truth and fatal to error.
Science enforces the
mind...”



Men had natural rights, importantly liberty

Hutcheson included the penal code as undermining individual and natural liberty.

He said that:

“These laws prohibit the greatest and wisest of mankind to inflict any misery on the meanest, or deprive them of any of their natural rights.”



John Locke:

(English) All people have “natural rights” of life, liberty and property. Government was to protect these, if it didn’t overthrow it.

The influence of these written works

- United Irishman and business man William Tennent, had a copy of Hutcheson's treatise in his library, alongside books by Scottish and French Enlightenment thinkers such as Beattie, Blair, Turnbull and Voltaire.
- Belfast Reading Society in 1788, and the later Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge in 1792, held many of these works. Thomas Russell, a vocal abolitionist, was appointed librarian.



(3) Social networks and milieu

- Many who adopted liberal ideas had known and worked closely with those who developed and wrote them.
- The Belfast intellectual middle class and commercial circles in which people moved were small, tight and familial.



William Drennan

- Familial connections were also important in the development of enlightenment thinking in Belfast. William Drennan's father Thomas (minister, First Presbyterian church), had once served as Hutcheson's assistant with Thomas sharing many of Hutcheson's enlightened views. Drennan credited his views to the influence of Hutcheson and his father.
- Furthermore, Drennan's father's ideas were also influential. Drennan said "...I said that I had early formed my principles in politics and that my father to his last hour had desired me never to forsake them..."



People shared the same social spaces

- Small elite population in Belfast
- Many attended the same churches – 1st, 2nd and 3rd Presbyterian
- Many were members of the same organisations (e.g. Ballast Board, Charitable Society, Chamber of Commerce, Volunteers)



People were also wealthy, had time and means to do other things than work

- Many in wealthy professions, did not have to worry about money
- Ran and managed their own businesses and had time to attend meetings in the day.
- Wives, daughters and sisters often had time to indulge in pastimes or accomplishments.



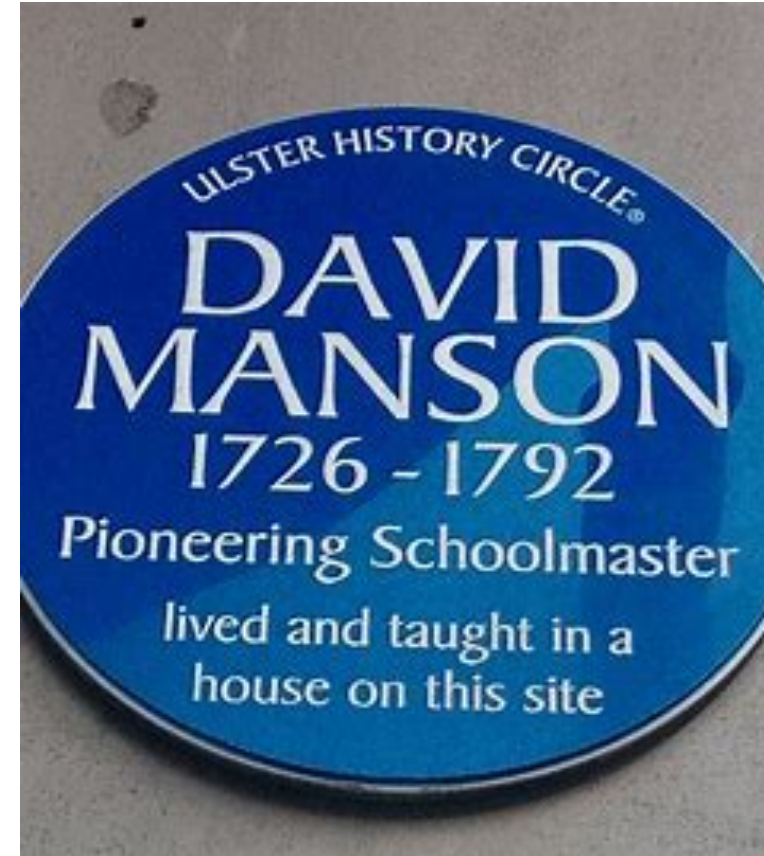
(4) Impact of print media, literacy and books

- Press reportage of slavery stories increased in the 1770s, 1780s and 1790s.
- Increase in the number of accounts and memoirs of people who had experience of the slave trade (e.g John Newton, Equiano)
- Newspapers in Belfast, BNL established in 1737



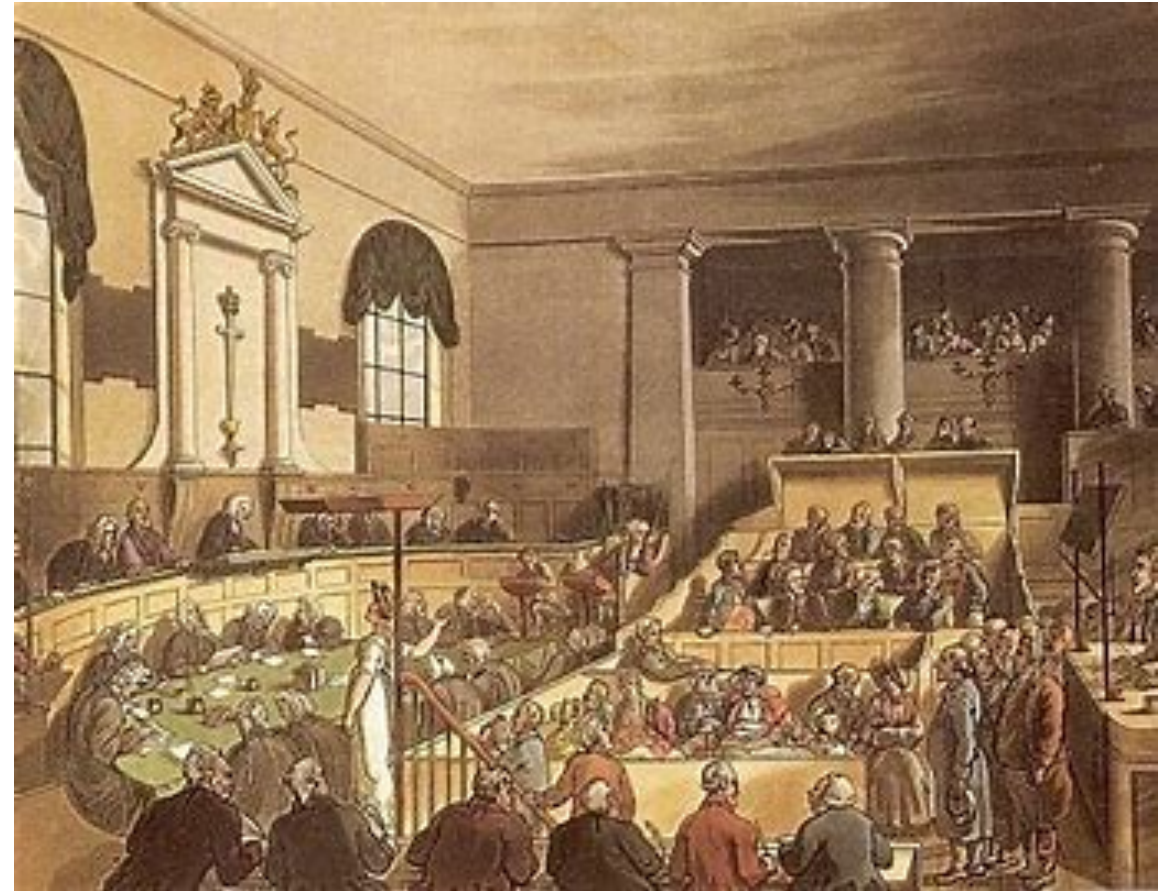
Literacy among Belfast's population

- Belfast had one charitable school by 1770, which was open to the children of Lord Donegall's labourers, weavers and bleachers who were taught reading, writing and arithmetic.
- By the turn of the century, Belfast would have many versions of the hedge school.
- Mary Ann McCracken attended David Manson's liberal school. This pioneered co-educational learning, very radical!



Reporting of the 1772 Somerset case

- James Somerset, an enslaved African, was purchased by Charles Stewart, a customs officer in Boston, a British colony in North America.
- Stewart brought Somerset to England in 1769.
- In October 1771, Somerset escaped.
- He was recaptured in November and was to be sent to Jamaica on the ship Ann and Mary.
- Somerset's godparents from his baptism in England applied for a writ of habeas corpus on December 3 to secure his release.
- Lord Mansfield's ruling that slavery in the British Isles was not supported by English common law.
- The BNL published regular updates regarding the Somerset case. It labelled it "a very interesting trial" and agreed with Lord Mansfield's finding.



James Ramsay's article

- BNL on 29 March 1785, published a piece by Royal Navy Surgeon Ramsay who witnessed first-hand the treatment of slaves on slave ships.
- Ramsey said slaves suffered ‘...beating with a stick, sometimes to the breaking of bones, the chain, an iron crook about the neck, a large iron ring about the ankle...There have been instances of splitting ears, breaking of limbs, for as to make amputation necessary, beating out of eyes, and castration...’



Further BNL reporting

- In January 1788, it published an article reporting the prohibition of the slave trade in Rhode Island.
- On the creation of the famous seal of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the editor was delighted.
- The newspaper called the seal an “ingenious device”.



Reporting of the John Kimber incident (recap)

- John Kimber was the captain of a British slave ship.
- In 1792, he faced a trial for murder.
- The trial was initiated by the abolitionist William Wilberforce.
- Kimber was accused of torturing to death an enslaved teenage girl on the deck of his ship.
- Despite the accusations, John Kimber was acquitted in the trial.
- The case garnered significant attention in the press.
- It established a precedent that slave ships' crews could be tried for the murder of enslaved individuals.



Engraving by [Isaac Cruikshank](#) showing Captain John Kimber on the deck of the *Recovery*, with the girl he was alleged to have whipped to death

Newsletter reported on 6 April 1792

- Story was highly emotive and told of a 15-year-old enslaved girl who was being transported on a slave ship.
- The girl was naked and “appeared to be exceedingly modest” so hung her head in embarrassment.
- The captain, instead of taking pity on her, ordered for her to be suspended by her wrists in front of all the crew.
- He then had her removed only to be once again chained and suspended by her legs. Following this, she was suspended for a third time by only one leg.
- Very soon she had a fit and within three days she was dead.

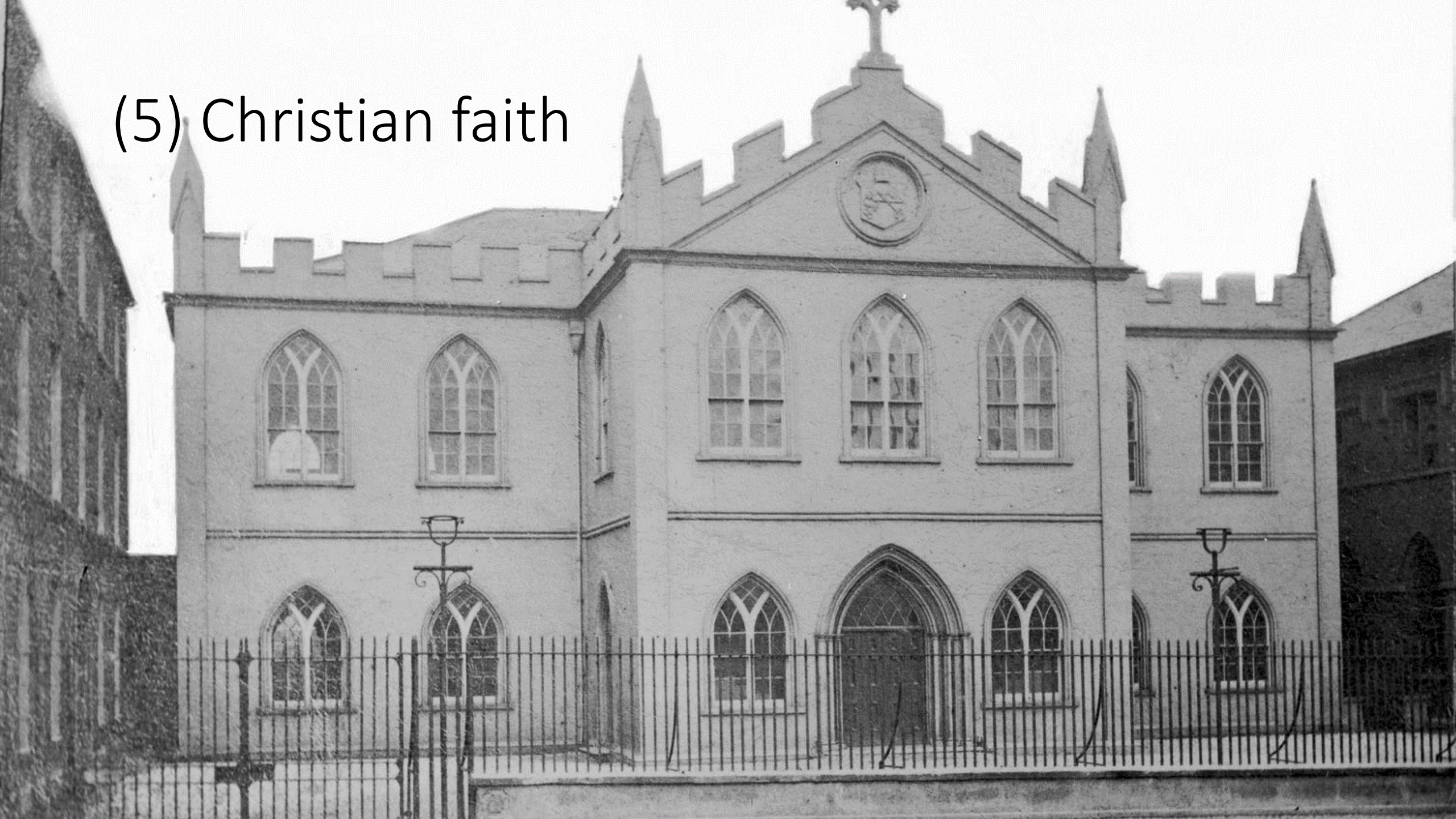


Reporting of abolitionist activity

- Wilberforce's activities to introduce legislation banning the trade were reported. (e.g. Northern Star, January 1792.)
- The BNL praised Wilberforce's stance and actions in Parliament, they said he was a “man endowed with great humanity and considerable ability”.



(5) Christian faith



William Drennan

Son of the Presbyterian minister, Thomas Drennan, who preached at the First Presbyterian Church.

Drennan declared that

“I am the son of an honest man; a minister of that gospel which breathes peace and goodwill among men a Protestant Dissenting minister, in the town of Belfast; who[se] spirit I am accustomed to look up, in every trying situation, as my mediator and intercessor with Heaven”



Thomas Russell

- Russell was an Anglican, whose Christian ethos and ethics shaped his abolitionism.
- He believed slavery went against God, and those involved used their powers and privileges to “frustrate the divine plan of liberty and justice for all”.



Elders of the General Synod of Ulster

In 1792, they wrote an address which was unanimously agreed to and sent to Wilberforce in London.

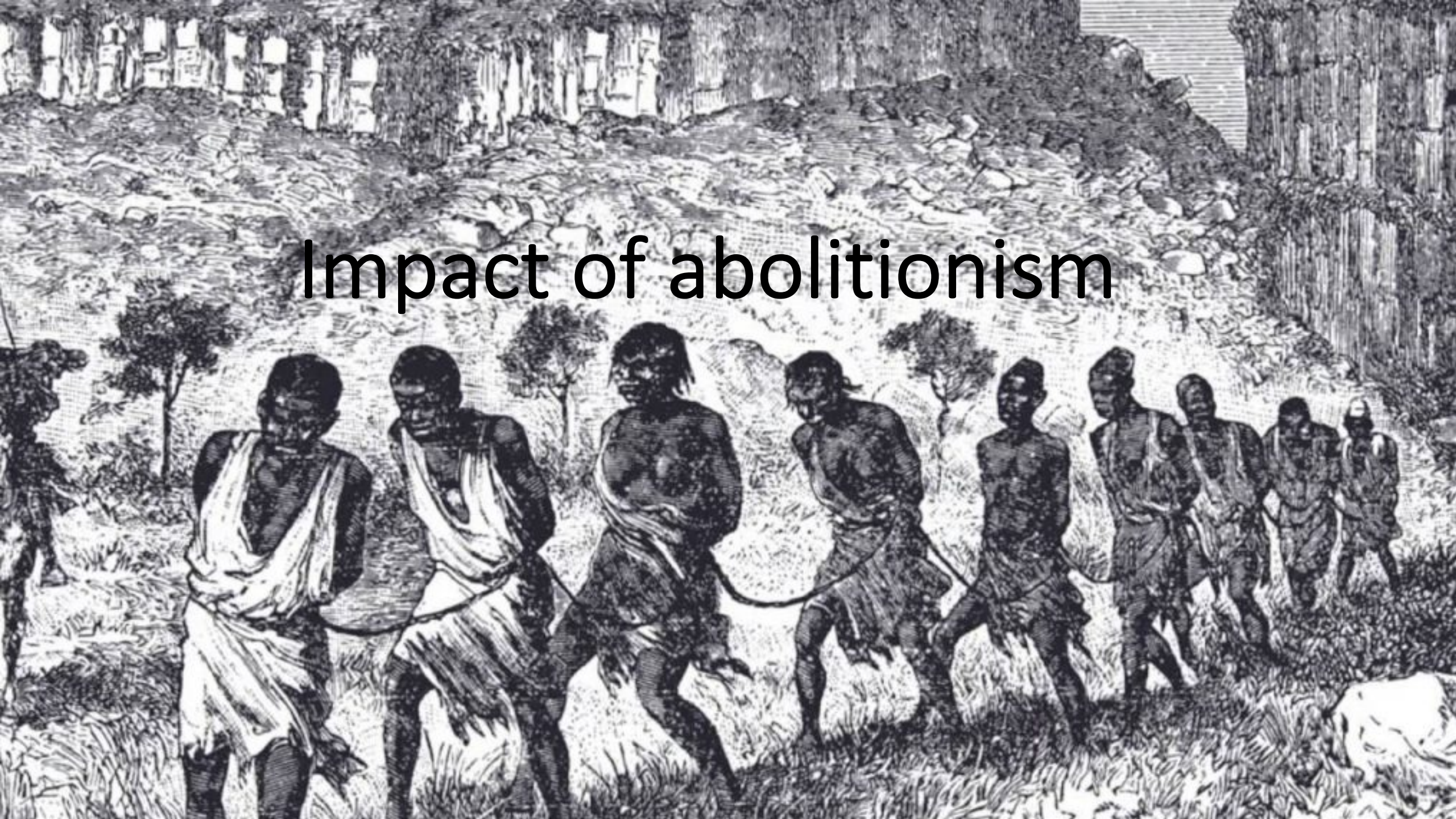
It detailed their support for Wilberforce's work:

“We should think ourselves shamefully defective in our duty to God, to the world, and our own consciences, did we not come forward to bear our publick [sic] testimony against the unnatural Traffick [sic] in Human Flesh, which has so long disgraced the nations of Europe”



Donegall Street Presbyterian Church, Belfast.

Impact of abolitionism



Sinking of the Belfast Slave Ship Company

- Waddell Cunningham presented a plan to the town in 1786 to establish a slave-trading company in the town.
- 1784 Limerick became the first Irish port to attempt to promote a slave-trade company. Never went anywhere.



Waddell Cunningham

Cunningham was:

- Irish merchant prominent in Georgian-era Belfast
- Patron of Belfast Charitable Society and its Poor House
- Commander of Volunteer patriot militia
- Supported the construction of Belfast's first Catholic chapel
- Controversial for land speculation and slaveholding – Belfast Estate





Thomas McCabe denouncing Waddell Cunningham's proposed Belfast slave-ship company in the Old Exchange, 1786. (J.W. Carey from Robert Young's Old Belfast [1895])



Drennan recounted what happened at the meeting in a letter to his sister, Martha McTier (17 May 1806):

“I had a letter lately from T[homas] McCabe to tell me of an association planned by Waddell Cunningham for carrying on the slave trade at Belfast to which he had got several subscribers, but which Tom had knocked up completely by writing in the proposal book: ‘May G— eternally damn the soul of the man who subscribes the first guinea’. I could not but smile at receiving this letter and anecdote in Mrs C’s presence.”



Assembly rooms interior

Thomas McCabe's oration

- He argued that as Christians they should “forego their unholy desire to become rich by such diabolical means”
- He cursed: “May God wither the hand and consign the name to eternal infamy of the man who will sign the document.”



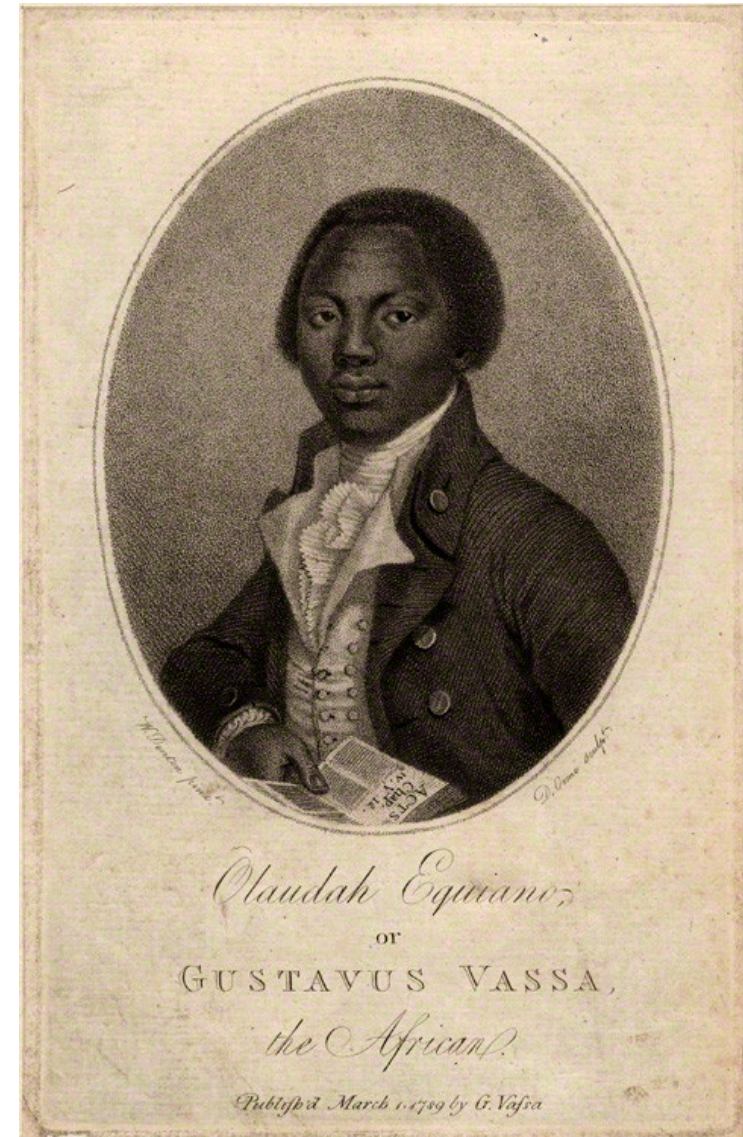
Thomas McCabe

- Born: 1740?, Lurgan, Co. Armagh
- Professions: Watchmaker, businessman, United Irishman
- Co-founded watchmaking business in Donegall Street, Belfast (1762).
- Introduced cotton industry to Belfast with Robert Joy (1779).
- Robert Joy, Captain John McCracken, and Thomas McCabe explored new manufacturing possibilities.
- McCabe was known as 'the slave' after he hung a sign saying 'An Irish Slave' outside his shop in Smithfield in protest at raids by soldiers.



Visit of Olaudah Equiano

- Olaudah Equiano was the first black abolitionists to visit Ireland
- Travelled to the country in May 1791, visited Belfast in December.
- He was regarded as a leading spokesperson on enslavement and was also a gifted writer and lecturer.
- Published his autobiography, 'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African' in 1789



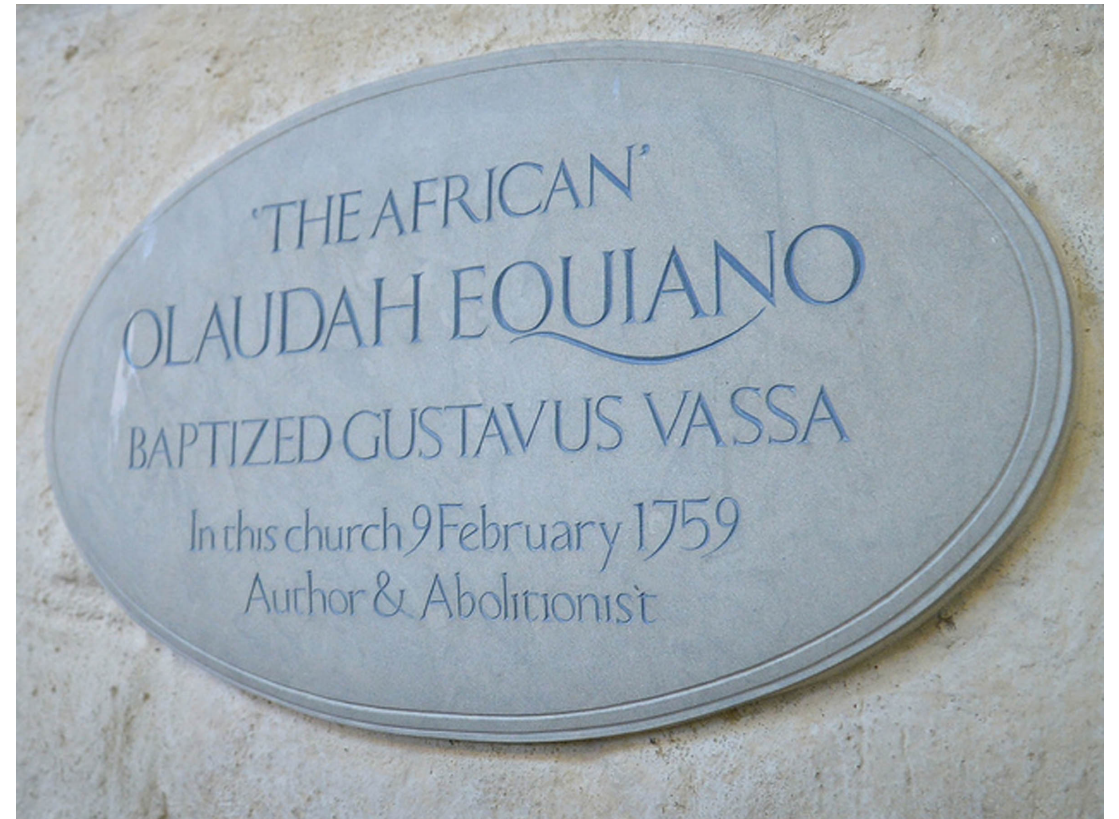
Belfast visit

- During the time of Equiano's visit, Samuel Neilson was treasurer of Belfast Charitable Society and on 17 December 1791, Equiano attended a committee in the Boardroom of the Poor House.
- Equiano said that he was *'exceedingly well treated, by persons of all ranks'* in Ireland, and found the people of Belfast to be particularly hospitable.



What impact did his visit make?

Equiano's popularity in Ireland is evident from the sale of copies his autobiography, which have been claimed to near equal those sold of Thomas Paine's Rights of Man.



A circular blue plaque with white text. The text is arranged in four lines: 'UNITED' at the top, 'IRISHMEN' in the middle, '1791 ~ 1798' below that, and 'met here' at the bottom.

UNITED
IRISHMEN
1791 ~ 1798
met here

Abolition and the United
Irishmen

United Irishmen

October 1791, Society of United Irishmen was formed.

Drennan proposed:

"a benevolent conspiracy – a plot for the people"

the "Rights of Man and the Greatest Happiness of the Greater Number its end – its general end Real Independence to Ireland, and Republicanism its particular purpose."



United Irishmen formed from abolitionists

- Members in Belfast included:
- William Drennan
- Henry Joy McCracken
- Thomas Russell
- Samuel Neilson
- Samuel Barber



What did they want to achieve?

- **Primary Aims:**

- Achieve Irish independence from British rule
- Promote religious equality between Catholics and Protestants
- Unite the Irish population regardless of religious differences

- **Additional Objectives:**

- Overthrow the Protestant Ascendancy
- Establish a Republic of United Irishmen
- End British influence in Irish affairs

Northern Star – paper of the United Irishmen

First edition of the Northern Star appeared in Belfast on 1 January 1792.

Financial backers of the Northern Star were Presbyterian and one of the United Irish leadership, Samuel Neilson, was made editor.

Masthead of the paper read: "The public will our guide, the public good our end"



Northern Star published against the slave trade

- From its founding in 1792, the Star would regularly carry articles criticising the slave trade.
- Published William Cowper's famous poem The Negro's Complaint that highlighted the cruelties of the slave trade.
- The Star went further than any other local publication in linking the situation of slaves with the standing of the Irish.



Many United Irishmen became more radical

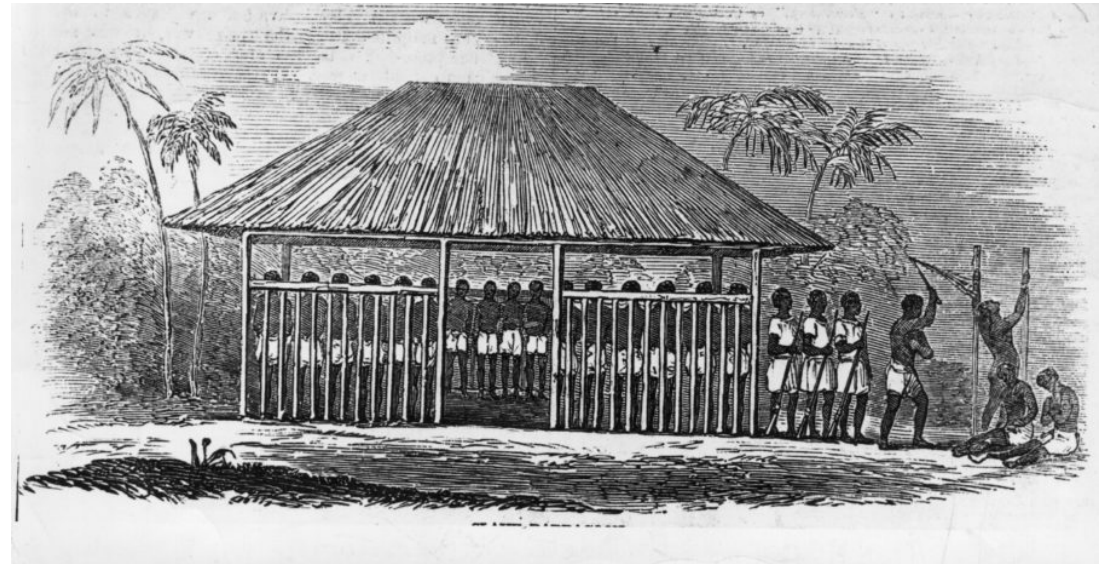
- Events in France, USA and Poland demonstrated democracy, franchise reform and political change could be brought via revolution.
- Stalled reform of Dublin Castle convinced many that a 'Jacobin' solution was required.
- Economic problems and disorder in the countryside fuelled feeling of instability and chaos.



Change of focus: Irish slaves over African slaves

Samuel Nielson, wrote that while the Star was shaped “with the principles of general liberty” and was not “insensible to the sufferings of any part of the human race”, there were over “three million slaves in our native land” and these people and their condition were the newspaper’s priority.

The Star did not to publish an essay by Thomas Russell in which he attacked the slave trade.



1793: Britain at war with revolutionary France

- Crown forces deployed to Belfast; attacks on homes of UI leaders.
- 1,000 armed country men paraded in town at Third Presbyterian Church
- May 1794, UI 'proscribed'; UI groups organise covertly on a lodge structure
- In June 1795, four members of the Ulster executive – Neilson, Russell, McCracken and Robert Simms – met with Tone atop Cave Hill swore their celebrated oath:

"never to desist in our efforts until we had subverted the authority of England over our country, and asserted our independence".



Preparing for revolution

- UI leaders form an alliance with the Catholic Defenders
- UI leaders seeking weapons, arms and support from Revolutionary France.
- 1796, attempted French landing fails due to weather
- 1798 Rebellion launched. Failed battles at Antrim, Saintfield & Ballynahinch.
- French force land in Mayo in late 1798; defeated.



Detail of the Battle of Ballynahinch 1798 by Thomas Robinson. Yeomanry prepare to hang United Irish insurgent Hugh McCulloch, a grocer.

Why did the uprising fail?

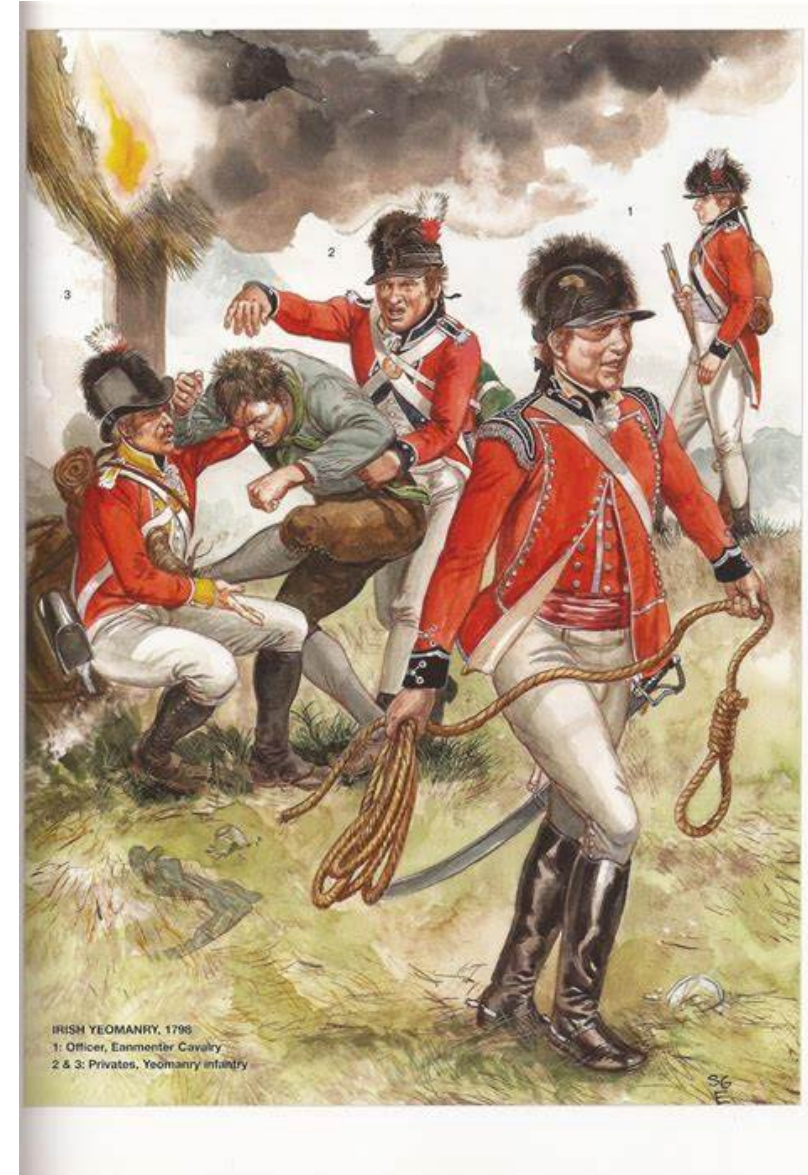
- **Suppression by British Authorities:**
 - British government's crackdown on the movement
 - Arrests of key leaders, including Wolfe Tone
 - British penetration of UI organisation
- **Lack of External Support:**
 - Hoped for French assistance was limited and ultimately unsuccessful
 - Lack of foreign backing weakened their position
- **Internal Divisions:**
 - Disagreements over tactics and strategies
 - Religious tensions among members led to sectarian fighting (e.g. The Scullabogue massacre)



Massacre at Scullabogue - illustrated by George Cruikshank (1845)

Impact of UI Rebellion on the abolitionist movement in Belfast

- Northern Star suppressed in 1797; major organ for cause silenced.
- Many of key proponents of abolition dead (e.g. McCracken, Drennan), exiled or disengaged from the movement.
- Domestic events overshadowed other factors.
- Act of Union changed political landscape



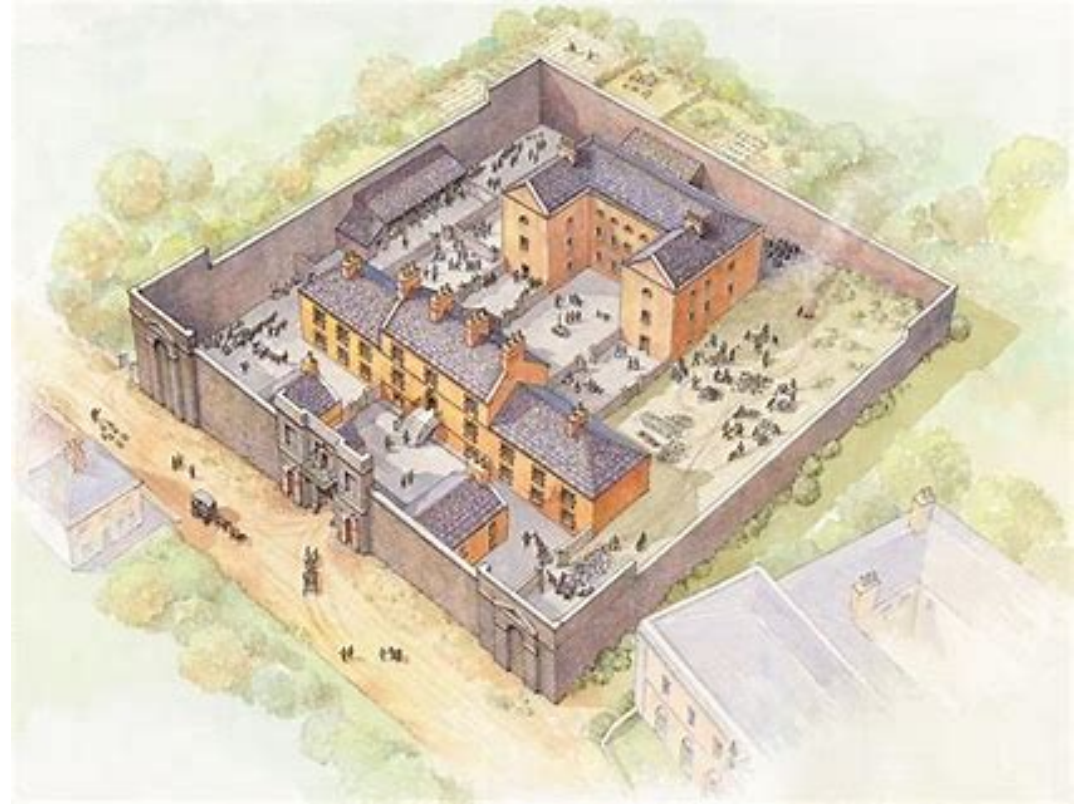
Robert Emmet uprising, 1803

- Renewed Irish republican attempt after the failed 1798 rebellion.
- Organized under a reconstituted United Irish directorate.
- Hopes of French aid, English radical support, and Presbyterian involvement, but disappointments led to the 1803 uprising.



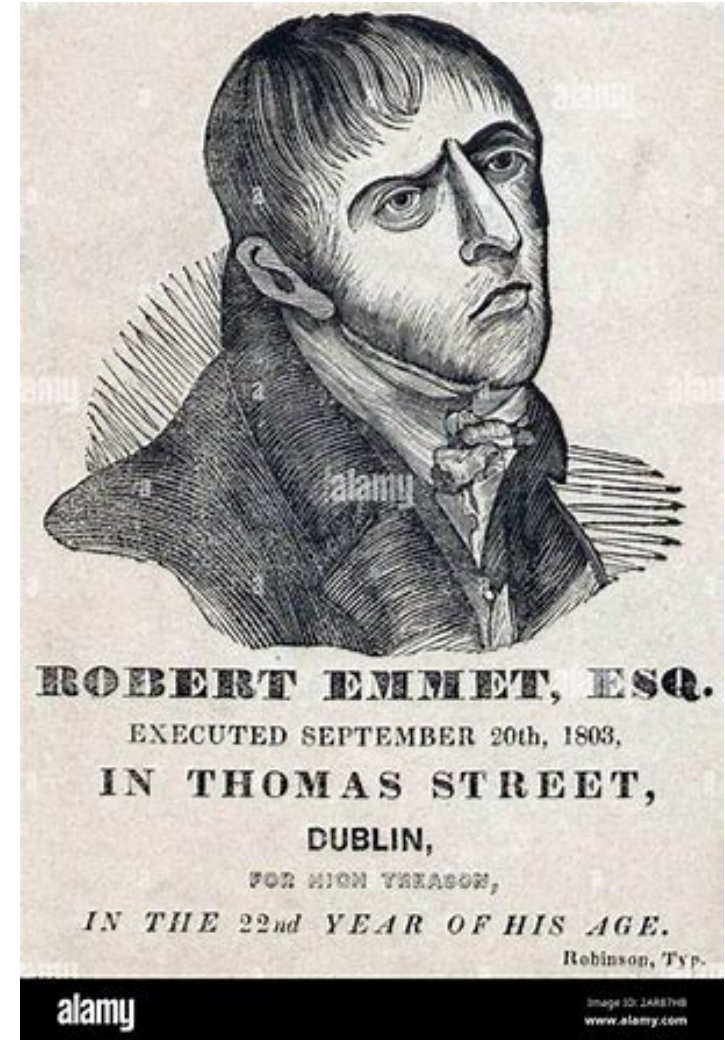
Uprising fails

- Leaders included Robert Emmet (executed), Myles Byrne, James Hope, William McCabe, and Thomas Russell (executed).
- The rising in Dublin encountered obstacles and ended in street skirmishes.
- Robert Emmet captured and executed; others went into exile.



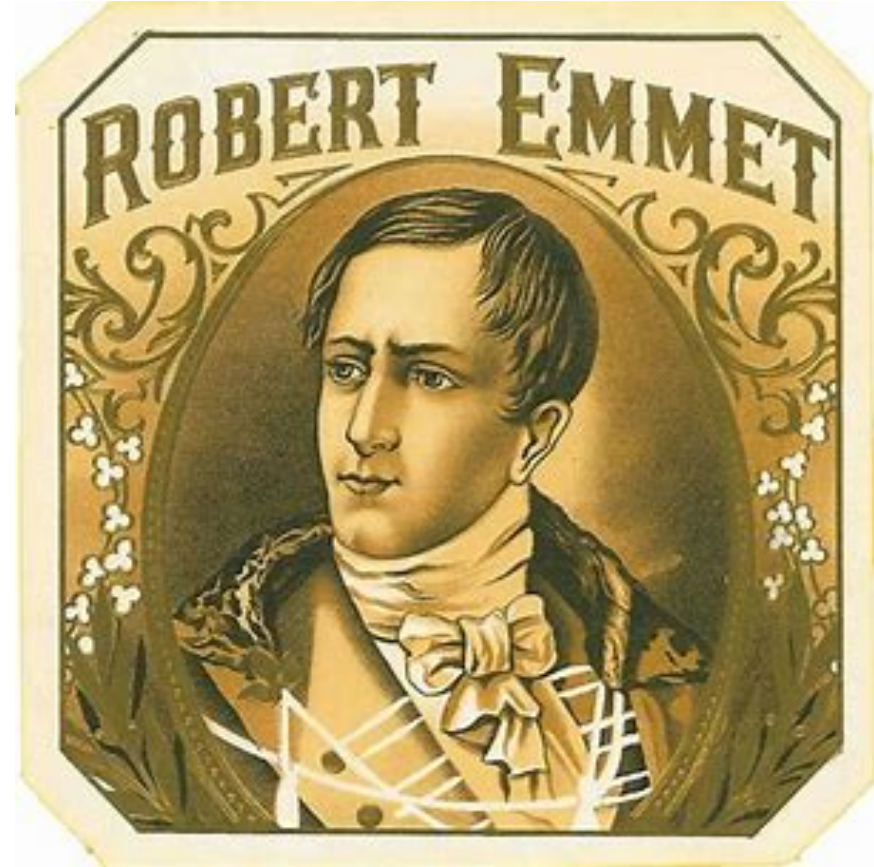
Why did it fail?

- Lack of sufficient arms and support: The rebels faced shortages in firearms and military support, hindering their ability to execute their plans effectively.
- Disrupted communication: Communication between different rebel groups was hindered, leading to a lack of coordination during the uprising.
- Premature exposure: The explosion at the Patrick Street arms depot on July 16 alarmed the authorities and forced the rebels to bring forward the uprising's date, catching them unprepared.
- Lack of widespread support: While there were hopes of French aid and English radical support, these expectations were not met, leaving the rebels without the backing they needed.



Legacy

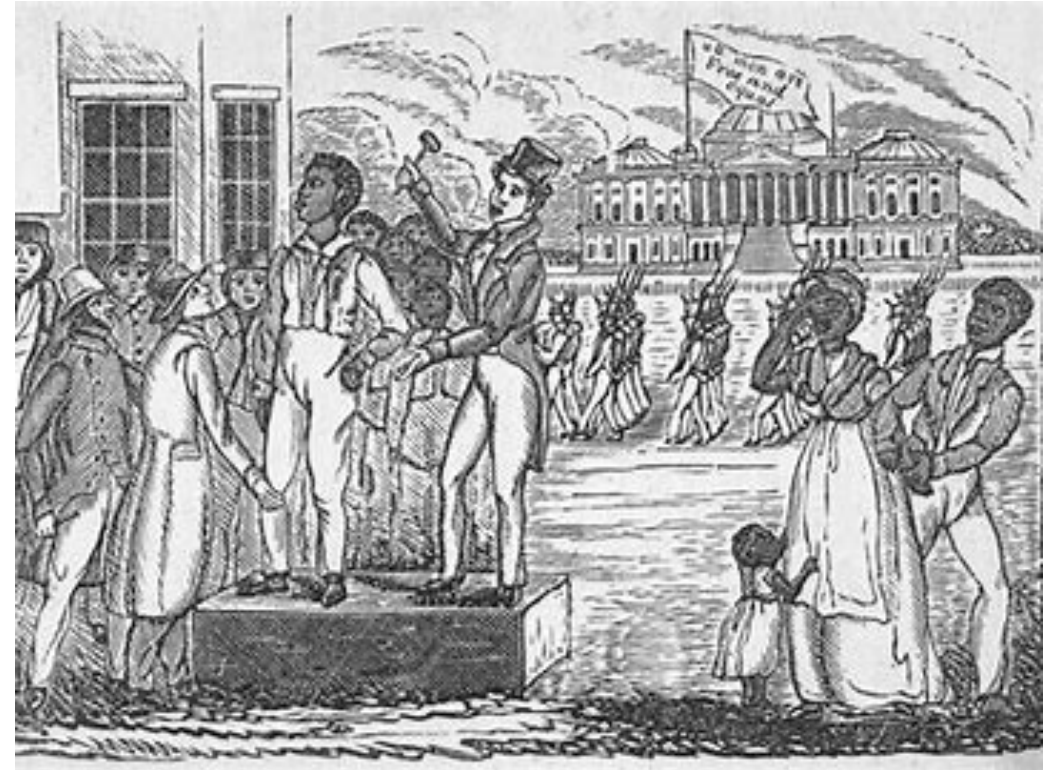
- Government portrayal of rebellion as a "popish affair" led to the abandonment of Union principles.
- Daniel O'Connell distanced himself, viewing Emmet as an instigator of bloodshed.
- Later generations of Irish republicans hailed the 1803 uprising as a triumph for Irish Nationality.



However, abolitionist spirit alive and well

BNL published:

- July 1806, an article regarding the sale of slaves in Charleston, South Carolina.
- The article read: “Let it be noted too, how ingenious avarice has given a new range to depredation. The western coast of Africa is no longer able to glut their “cursed thirst of gold.”... It is a folly to dwell upon the immortality, injustice and crying sin of this abominable traffic; but is it not surprising that avarice should be a stronger principle than self-preservation?”
- Coverage of William Wilberforce’s attempts to pass a Bill banning the British slave trade



The Abolition of the Slave Trade, BNL, 6 February 1807.

Methinks I see grim Slavery's Gorgon form,
Like one condemn'd for Foulest crimes, aghast,
Writhing with inward agony' pent storm,
To hear her sentence by stern justice past.

Methinks, too, Mercy's angel shape I see,
Wiping the tear from misery's furrow'd cheek,
While Freedom ratifies the just decree,
That fell Oppression's shackles soon shall break.

Humanity, in triumph, lifts her voice
To Heaven the prayer of Piety ascends
With holy fervour all the good rejoice,
While the poor NEGRO'S persecution ends.



Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire, 1807

- The Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade received royal assent on March 25, 1807, prohibiting the slave trade in the British Empire but not slavery itself, which persisted until 1833 in most of the empire.
- Despite the abolition act, slavery remained lucrative in the British Empire until 1807, with British ships conducting about 1,340 voyages across the Atlantic between 1791 and 1800, transporting nearly 400,000 slaves.
- The Act introduced fines of up to £100 per enslaved person for ship captains continuing the trade, leading some to resort to dumping captives overboard to evade fines when Navy ships approached.



Enforcement

- The first trial under the Act occurred in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where Chief Justice Robert Thorpe presided over the case of Samuel Samo from April 8 to April 11, 1812.
- To enforce the abolition, the Royal Navy established the West Africa Squadron in 1808, patrolling the West African coast and seizing approximately 1,600 slave ships between 1808 and 1860, liberating around 150,000 Africans.



Questions