

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



HIGH STREET, BELFAST

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Abolitionist activity, 1770-1790s

Who were the abolitionists?

Why were they abolitionists?

The Impact of abolitionism

Abolition and the United Irishmen





Abolitionist activity, 1770s-1791/2

Little abolitionist activity before 1770s

Economic Dependence. Britain's economy relied on profits from the Atlantic slave trade and Caribbean plantations, creating strong opposition to abolition among merchants and investors.

Racial Prejudice: Deeply ingrained racist attitudes dehumanised Africans, justifying slavery and limiting public support for abolition

Public Ignorance: Limited awareness of slavery's brutality and harsh conditions reduced pressure for change.



No organised movement

- **Political and Social Stability:** Concerns about destabilising Britain's evolving constitutional monarchy and political order made politicians and elites hesitant to back abolitionist ideas.
- **Absence of Organisation:** Early abolitionist efforts lacked a unified, organised movement, leaving advocates isolated without a cohesive strategy to mobilise 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 (ASB)

- 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.



A SMOKING CLUB.

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.”



Abstinence 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).’



A Sugar Plantation.

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...”



14th July 1789 – Storming of the Bastille



Public demonstrations

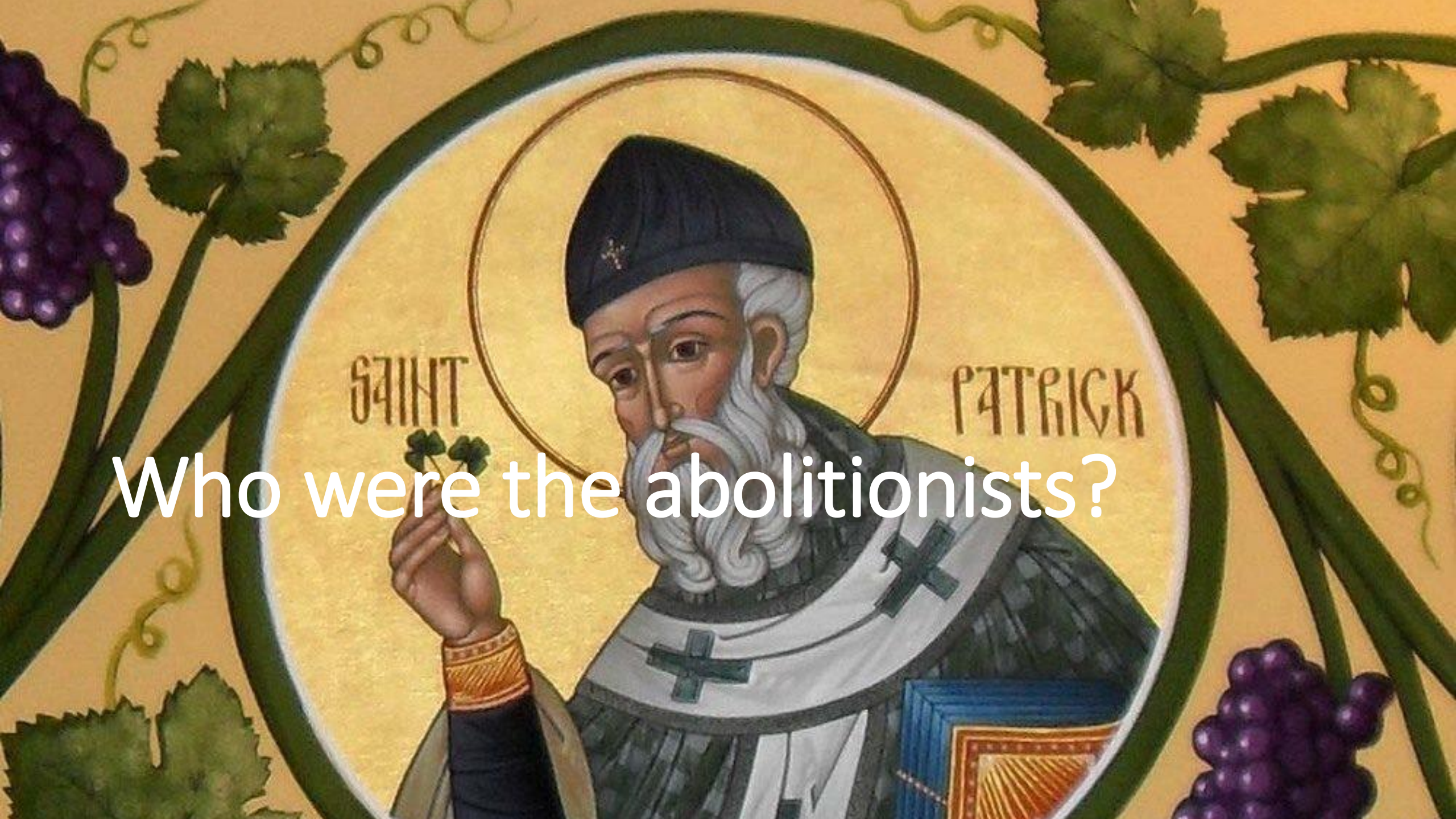
- On Bastille Day 1792, a banner denouncing slavery was amongst the political expressions carried through the streets of Belfast.
- Bastille Day Banner, Belfast, 14 JULY 1792: “Can the African Slave Trade, though MORALLY wrong be POLITICALLY right?”



Saluting Mr Wilberforce

- Toast proposed by Henry Joy (reported in BNL), probably on Bastille 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 debated Bishop Woodward, critiquing and supporting disestablishment of the Church of Ireland.
- Falsely accused of treason in 1798, Barber, a liberal reformer, died on 5 September 1811, aged seventy-three.





Thomas Russell

- Born in Dublin on 21 November 1767, Thomas Paliser Russell, raised as a Quaker, became a passionate anti-slavery activist.
- In the 1790s, he joined the Society of United Irishmen, promoting Irish unity and anti-slavery efforts.
- In 1793, he led a sub-committee, organising events and distributing pamphlets to expose the horrors of the slave trade



Russell's anti slavery activity

- Russell's passionate speeches inspired many to join the anti-slavery movement.
- In 1796, he allied with William Wilberforce in London, advancing his cause internationally.

Robert Neil

Born in 1775, Robert Neil became a prominent Belfast silversmith, starting his High Street business in 1803.

Partnering with Henry L. Gardner, he excelled in jewellery, watchmaking, optics, and producing public clocks in northern Ireland.

A philanthropist, Neil supported parliamentary reform, anti-slavery, and cholera relief efforts, as noted from 1830 to 1853.





Robert Neill, later life

- Neil hosted abolitionists like Garrison, Wright, and Douglass during their Belfast visits.
- Living in Belfast's Albion Place, he died in Hollywood in 1857, remembered for his abolitionist efforts.



William Tennant

- Born in 1759 near Ballymoney, William Tennant became a successful Ulster Presbyterian banker.
- After apprenticing with John Campbell, he joined the Belfast Chamber of Commerce in 1783 and partnered in multiple businesses, including the New Sugar House.



Tennant helped found the United Irishmen

- A founding member of the United Irishmen, Tennant supported revolution alongside radicals like William Drennan.
- Arrested before the 1798 rebellion, he was imprisoned on a ship and in Fort George, Scotland, before his release in 1802

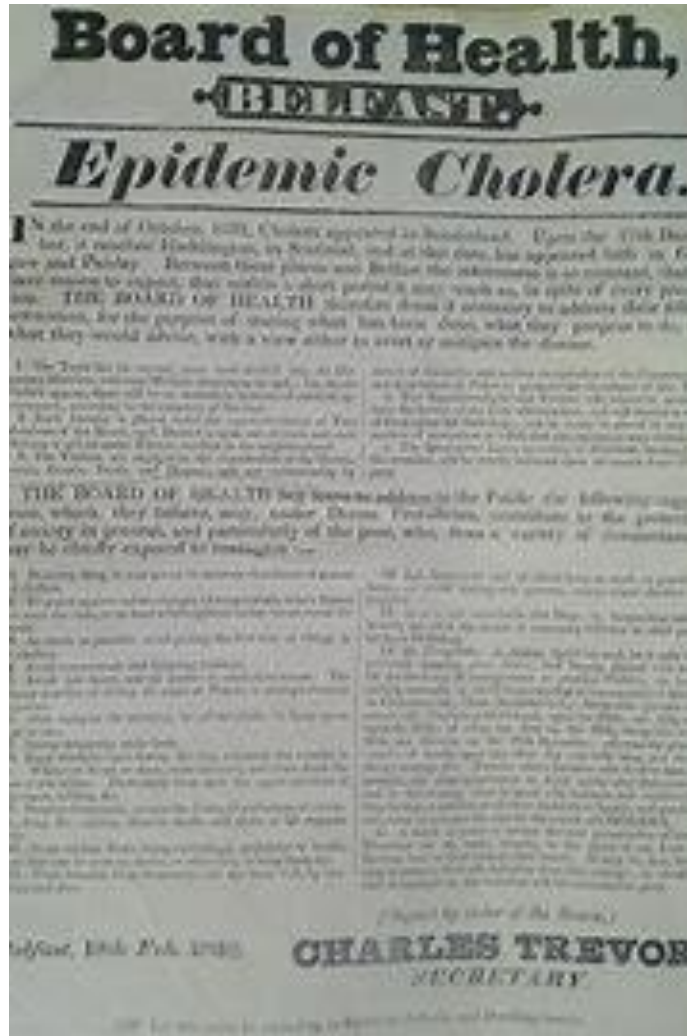
After the rebellion

- After his release, Tennant rebuilt his business, becoming a key figure in the London and Liverpool New Traders by 1807.
- He co-founded the Commercial Bank and later worked for the Belfast Banking Company, also aiding the Spring Water Commissioners and 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 co-founded the Belfast Academical Institution with William Drennan and Dr Robert Tennent, promoting affordable education.
- Treasurer of the First Belfast Presbyterian Church from 1817, he died of cholera in 1832, leaving a legacy in business, education and liberal Presbyterianism.



Samuel Neilson

- Born on 17 September 1761 in Ballyroney, County Down, Samuel Neilson was a leading United Irishman and founder of the *Northern Star* newspaper.
- A successful Belfast merchant, he supported the reformist Volunteer movement and acted as Robert Stewart's election agent in 1790.
- Inspired by the French Revolution, he proposed a political society in 1791, launched the *Northern Star* in 1792, and faced imprisonment for libel.

Deportation and later life

- Neilson's involvement in the United Irishmen's rebellion was halted by arrests, leading to imprisonment and forced collaboration with authorities.
- Exiled after his release, he was deported to Scotland and the Netherlands before reaching the United States in 1802, where he died of yellow fever on 29 August 1803 in Poughkeepsie, New York.



William Drennan

- - Born in 1754 in Belfast, William Drennan was one of four surviving siblings from a family of 11.
- Educated at the University of Glasgow, he was inspired by the Scottish Enlightenment and Francis Hutcheson.
- His 1784–1785 Letters of Orellana gained national attention, advocating radical constitutional reform.





Activity

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

Irish nationalism and death

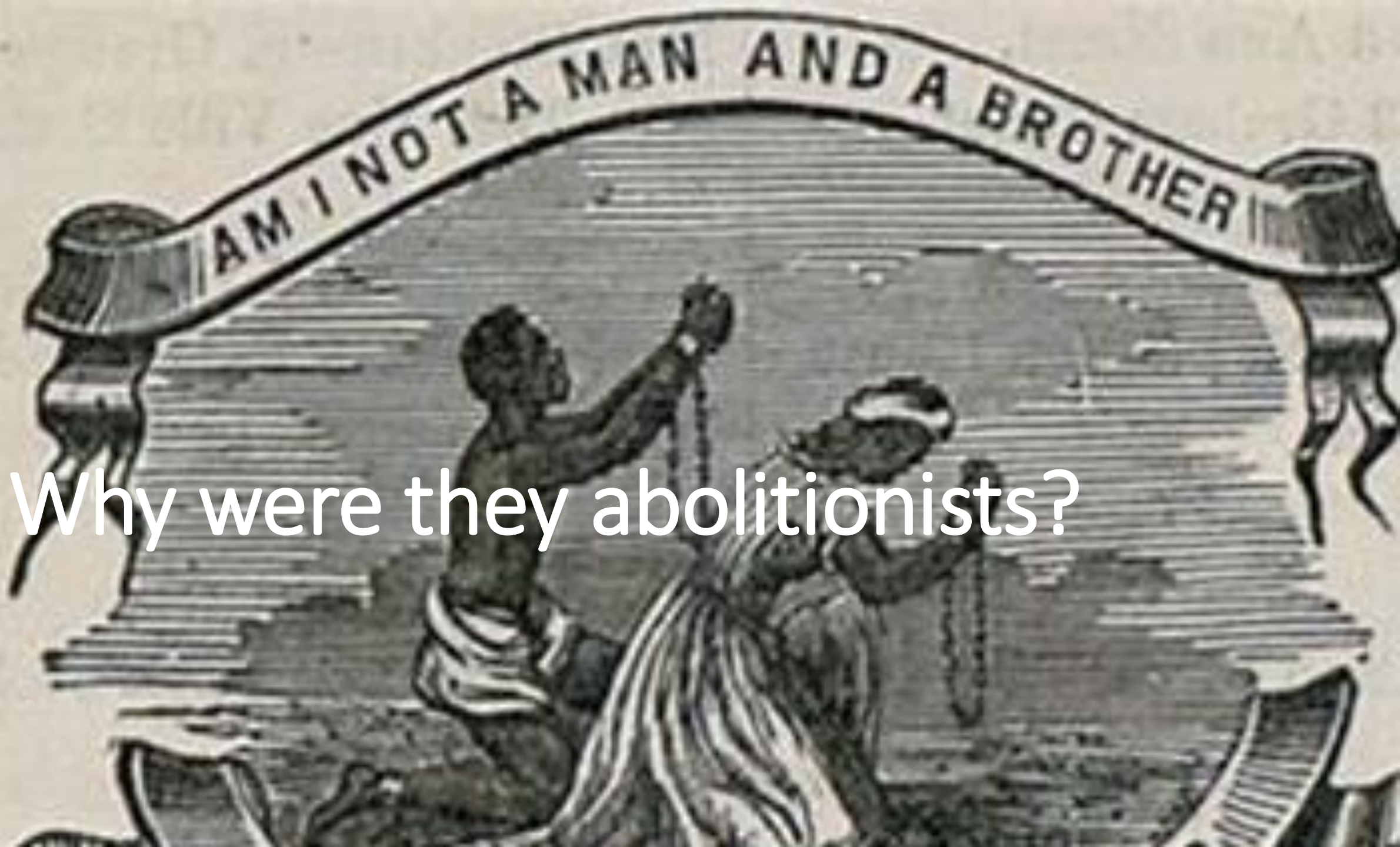
- Renowned as a poet for "When Erin First Rose" (1795), he also contributed to medicine, advising handwashing and pioneering cowpox injections.
- William Drennan passed away in 1820, leaving a lasting legacy in politics, education, and medicine.



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

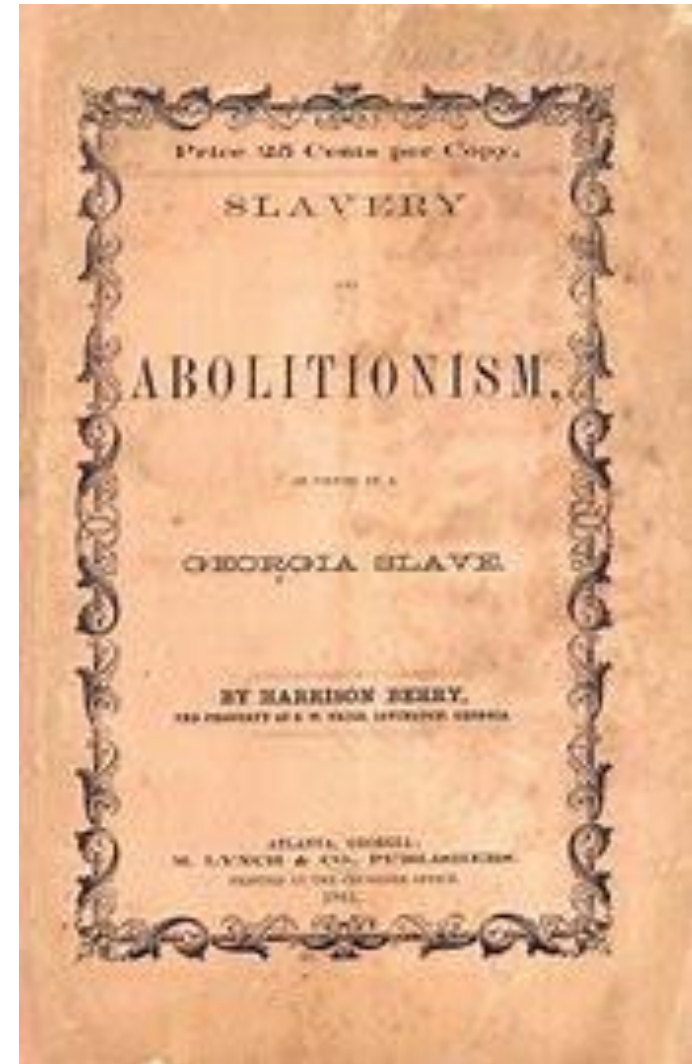
Historical association with the Irish being 'slaves' under the penal laws and the plight of African slaves.

The impact of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Social networks and milieu.

Impact of print media

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.”



Scene on a plantation established by the Duke of Devonshire, from Ten Views of the Island of Antigua, by William Clarke, 1788

Lord Clonmell

- The future Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench in Ireland compared English administration to Dutch planters, claiming the "common Irish...are the Hottentots."
- *Hottentot*, historically used for the Khoekhoe of South Africa, is now considered offensive; the preferred term is 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...”



[1776.]

HENRY AND ROBERT JOY.

[Numb.

The BELFAST NEWS-LETTER.

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

at of the last PACKET.]
M E R I C A.
GRESS, JULY 4, 1776.
by the

with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy, dar-
ly paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and to-
sely soweth the seed of a civilized nation.
He has confined our fellow citizens, taken
captive on the High Sea, to bear arms against
their country. To become the executioners of

Orange country; but our old friends and coun-
trymen Hugh and Alexander Wallace, together
with their two cheerful Englishmen Wallace and
Shobrook, after having got over to Long Island,
have not yet been able to reach our coast. Poor
Charles Evans has been long missing; he had once

THE Associates of the Liberty
Country Tyrants, are reported
of Desegnon, on Thursday the 1
pub. on particular Subjects.
TO be sold by Auction, at
Belfast, on Tuesday the 21st

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.'

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

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.



The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture



Edited by Ralph McLean, Ronnie Young
and Kenneth Simpson

What was the Enlightenment?

- The Enlightenment (17th–18th centuries) promoted reason, science, and individual rights.
- It emphasised rational thinking, the scientific method, and freedom of thought and expression.
- Critiquing traditional authority, it inspired social, political, and cultural reforms, shaping modern democracy and 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:

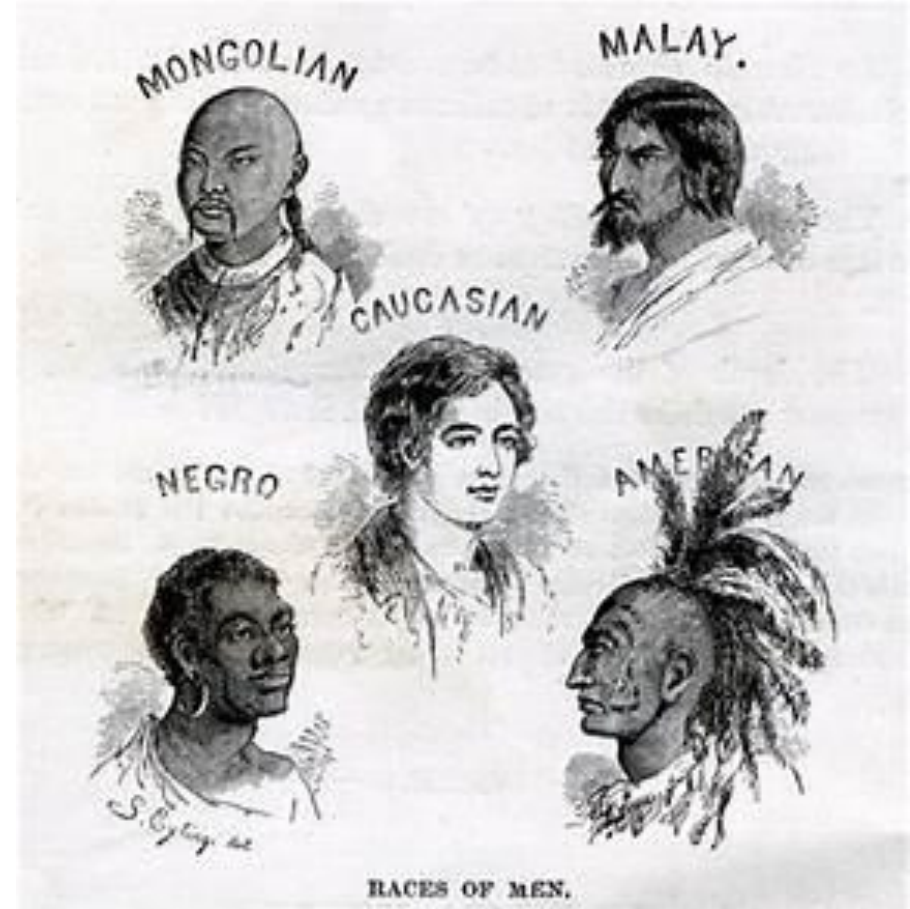
“Negroes transplanted into Europe, will, in a few generations, become white; and Europeans, residing in Guinea, will change to a brown complexion”.



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 William Tennent owned works by Hutcheson, Beattie, Blair, Turnbull, and Voltaire in his library.
- The Belfast Reading Society (1788) and Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge (1792) held similar works.
- Thomas Russell, an outspoken abolitionist, served as the 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 ties shaped Enlightenment thought in Belfast, with William Drennan's father, Thomas, a minister and former assistant to Hutcheson, sharing his enlightened views.
- Drennan credited Hutcheson and his father for shaping his political principles, recalling his father's advice to remain steadfast in 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

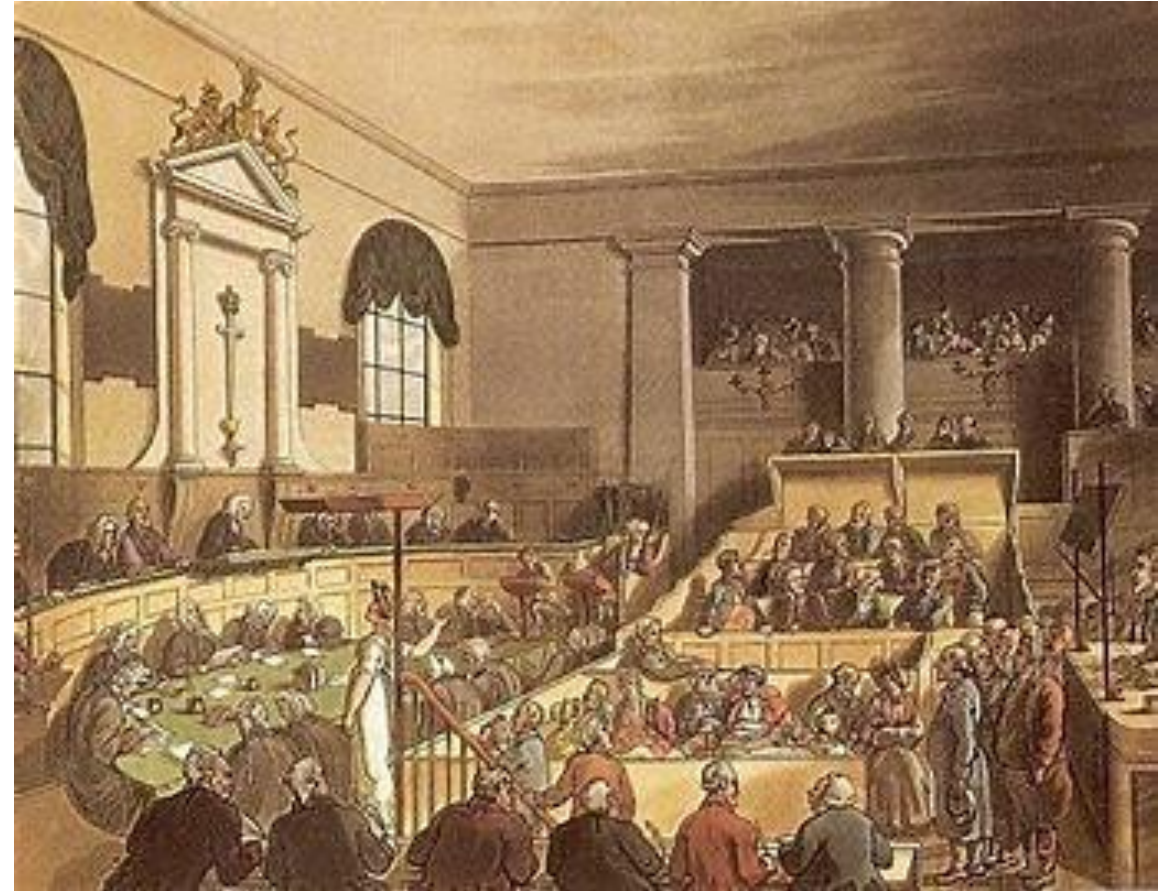


Literacy among Belfast's population

- 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 in Boston and brought to England in 1769.
- Somerset escaped in October 1771 but was recaptured in November and set to be sent to Jamaica.
- His godparents secured a writ of habeas corpus, leading to Lord Mansfield's ruling that slavery was unsupported by English common law.
- The Belfast News-Letter called it "a very interesting trial" and supported Mansfield's decision.



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, a British slave ship captain, was tried for murder in 1792.
- Abolitionist William Wilberforce initiated the case, accusing Kimber of torturing a teenage enslaved girl to death.
- Though acquitted, the trial drew major press attention and set a precedent for prosecuting slave ship crews for murdering 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 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.

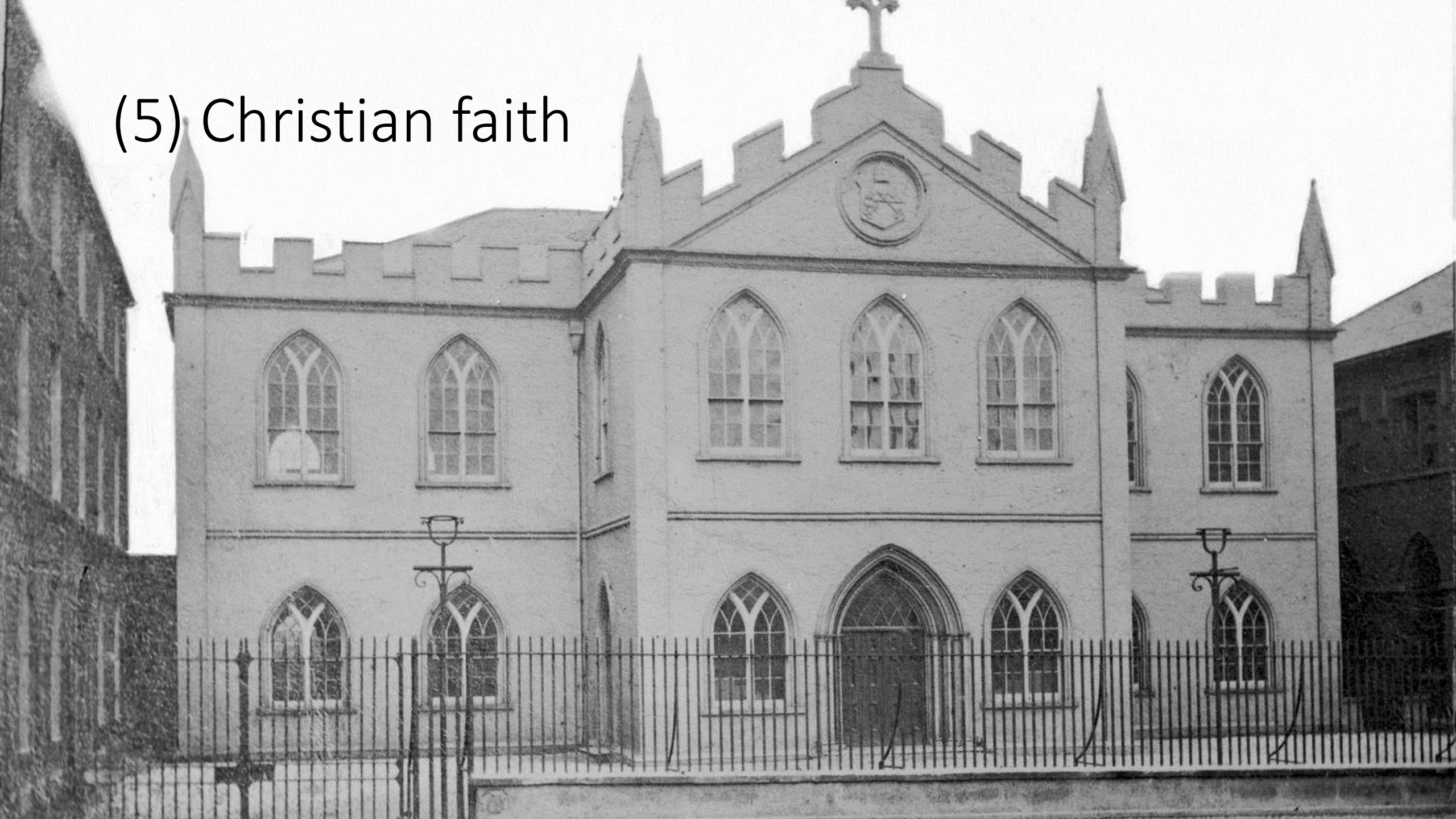


Reporting of abolitionist activity

- 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.

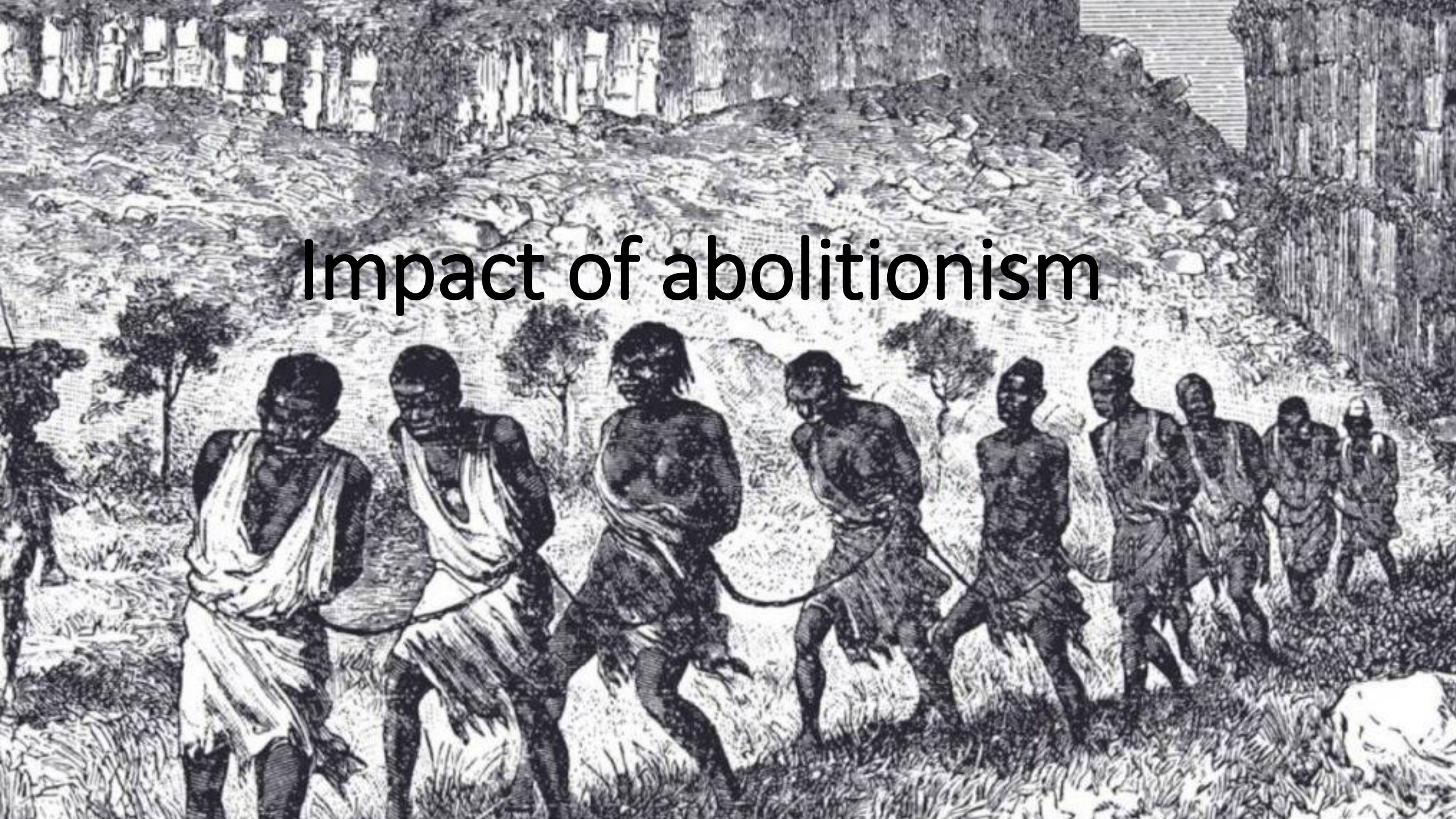
It detailed their support for Wilberforce's work:

“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

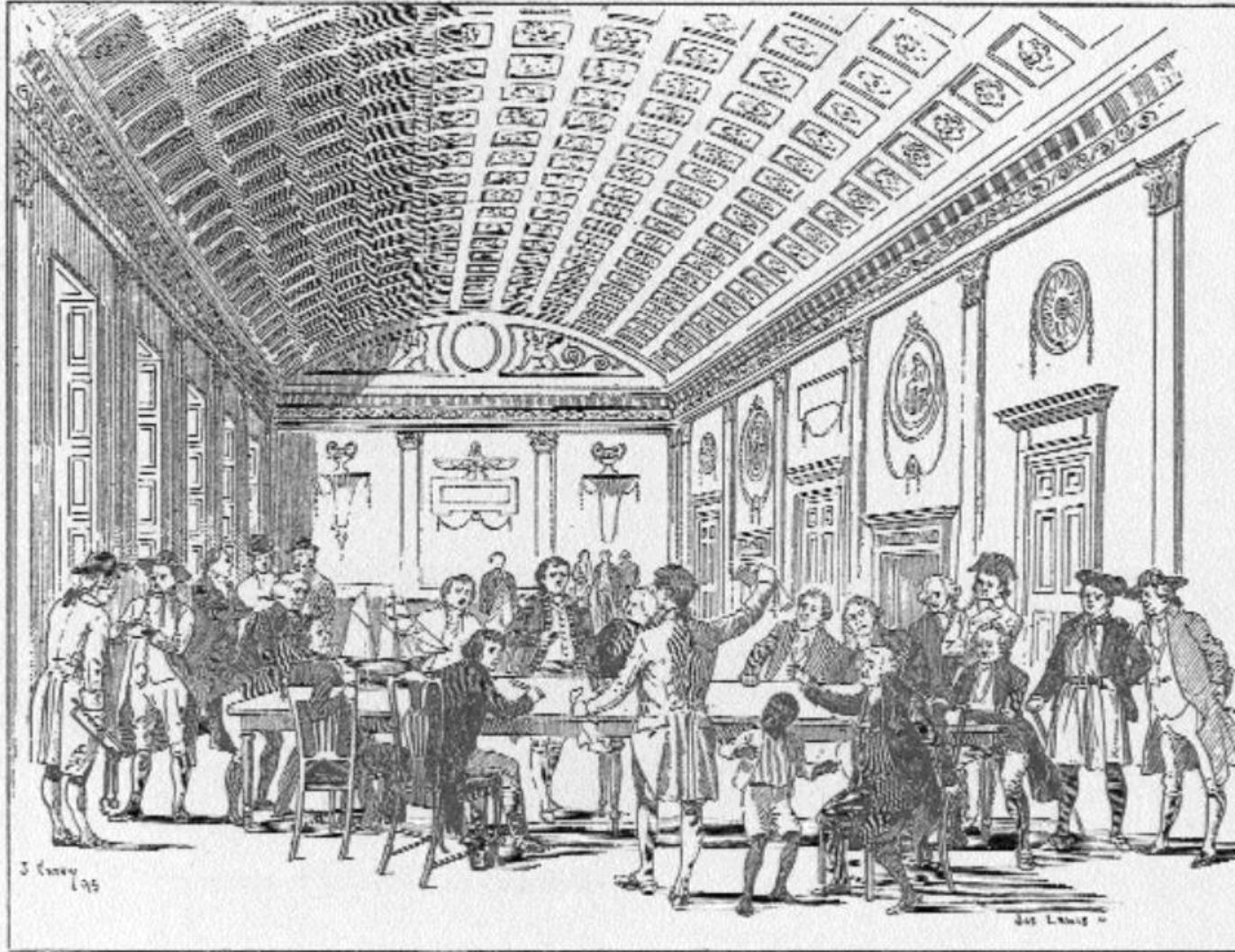
- Waddell Cunningham presented a plan to the town in 1786 to establish a slave-trading company in the town.
- 1784 Limerick became the first Irish port to attempt to promote a slave-trade company. Never went anywhere.



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])

All rights reserved.

THOMAS MCCABE DENOUNCING WADDELL CUNNINGHAM'S PROPOSED BELFAST SLAVE-SHIP COMPANY
IN THE OLD EXCHANGE, 1786.



107
95

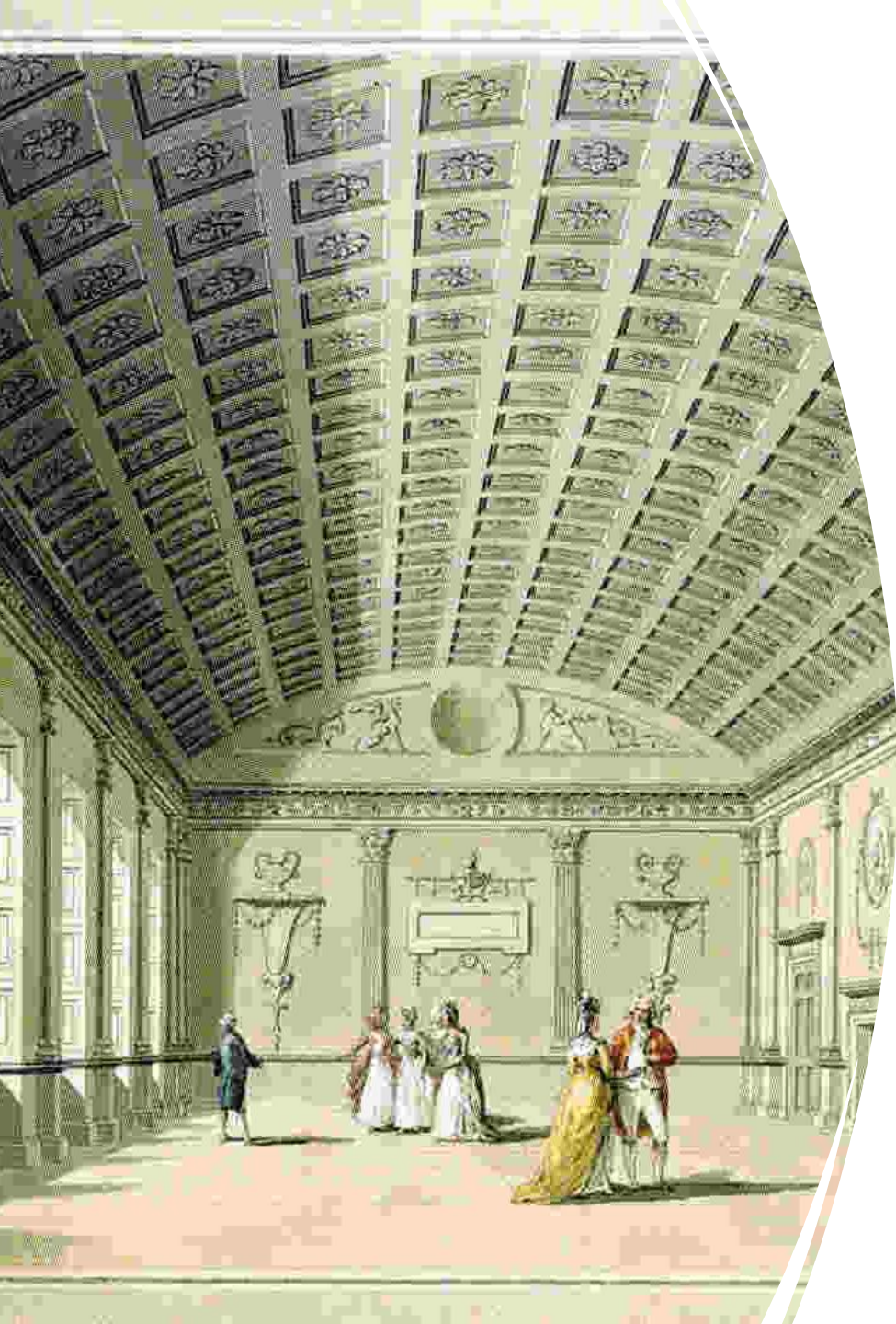
Jas Lewis

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.”

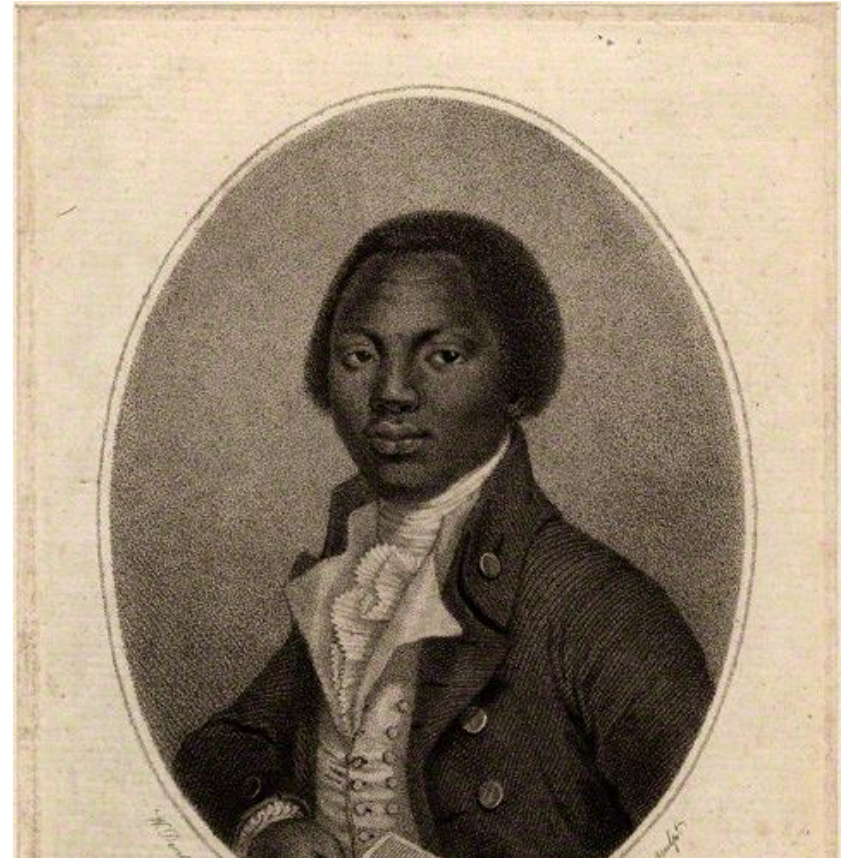
Thomas McCabe

- Born: 1740?, Lurgan, Co. Armagh
- 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
- In May 1791, Equiano arrived in Dublin to arrange the publication of the fourth edition of his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative*. He spent eight months in Ireland, travelling widely to promote his book.
- Published his autobiography, 'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African' in 1789



Why visit Belfast?

- Belfast was a fast-growing commercial hub with strong ties to Enlightenment thought.
- The city had a radical political climate, influenced by the French and American Revolutions.
- Equiano saw Belfast as an ideal place to gain support for abolition and sell his book.

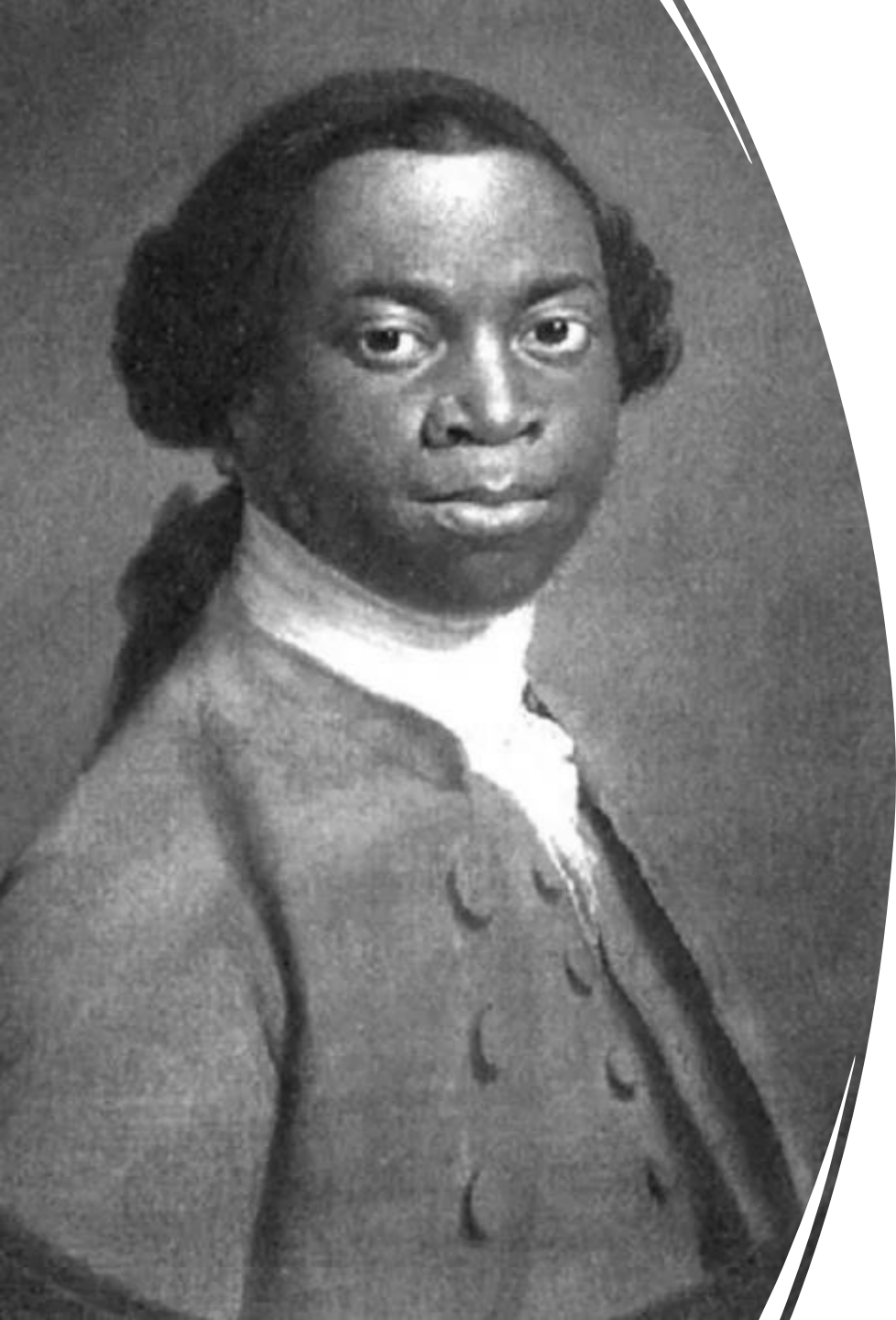




Belfast visit

- 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.





Promoting His Autobiography & Message

- Equiano sold nearly 1,900 copies of his book in Ireland, a major success.
- Nearly outsold Paine's Rights of Man.
- His book was widely read by radicals, merchants, and abolitionists.
- The Belfast News-Letter promoted his book, advertising it as an adventure story and moral lesson.

Linking Slavery & Irish Oppression

- Irish reformers used the term “slavery” to describe British rule over Ireland.
- Equiano’s visit strengthened parallels between black and Catholic oppression.
- Belfast’s 1792 Bastille Day parade included banners questioning the morality of the slave trade.



GUSTAVUS VASSA.

THE
LIFE AND ADVENTURES
OF
OLAUDAH EQUIANO
OR
GUSTAVUS VASSA
THE AFRICAN.
FROM AN ACCOUNT WRITTEN BY
HIMSELF.
ABRIDGED
BY A. MOTT.
TO WHICH ARE ADDED
SOME REMARKS ON THE SLAVE

“AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?”



“ Ah pity human mis'ry, human woe
“ 'Tis what the happy to the unhappy

NEW YORK:
PUBLISHED BY SAMUEL WOOLDRIDGE,
No. 261 Pearl-street.

R. & G. S. WOOD, PRINTER,
1829.

Political & Abolitionist Impact

- Equiano's visit aligned with Belfast's radical reform movement, which supported human rights and democracy.
- He reinforced anti-slavery sentiment among the United Irishmen, linking it to their fight for Irish freedom.
- The French Revolution had already inspired Belfast radicals, and Equiano's presence added another moral dimension to their cause.



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

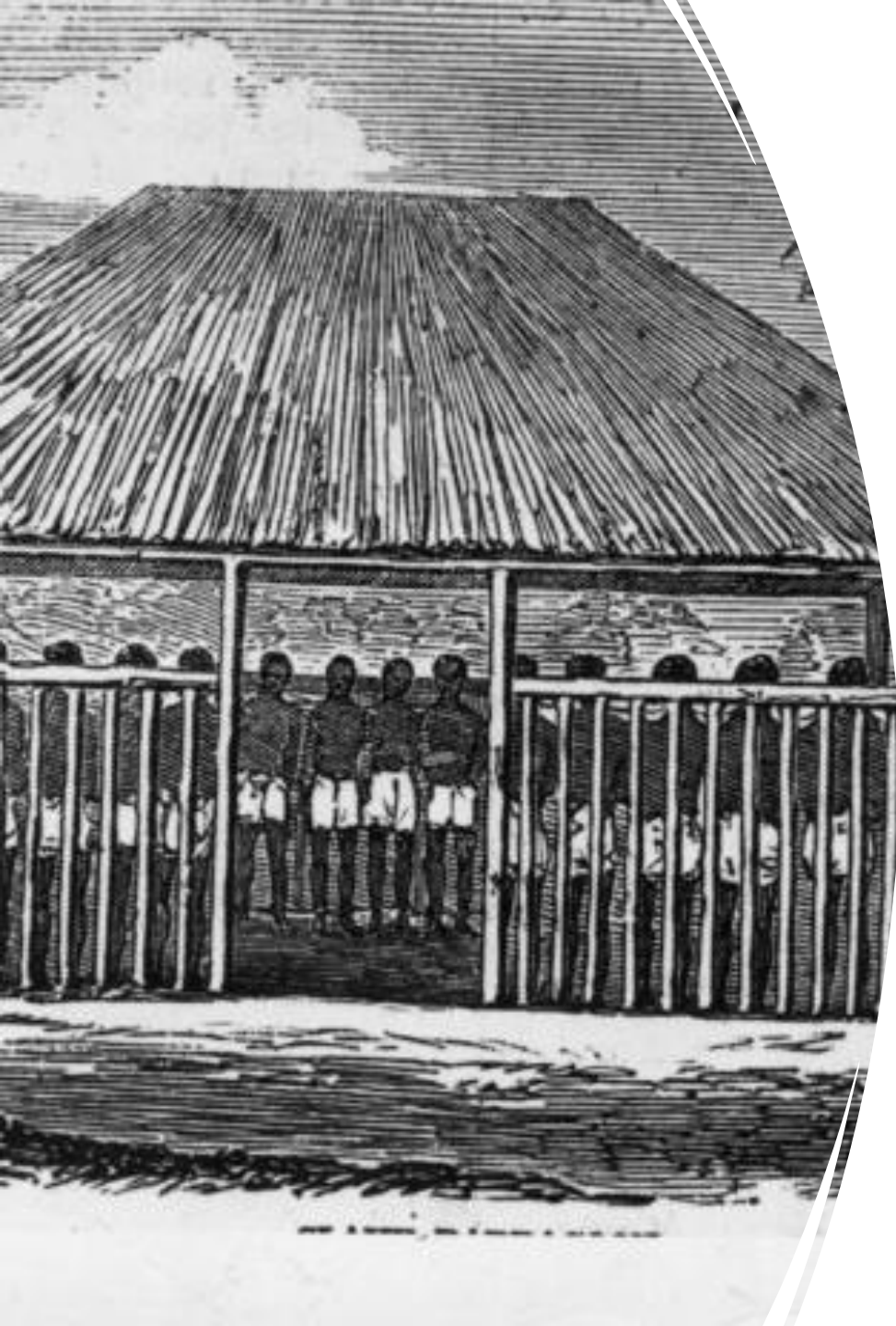
- From its founding in 1792, the Star would regularly carry articles criticising the slave trade.
- Published William Cowper's famous poem *The Negro's Complaint* that highlighted the cruelties of the slave trade.
- The Star went further than any other local publication in linking the situation of slaves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

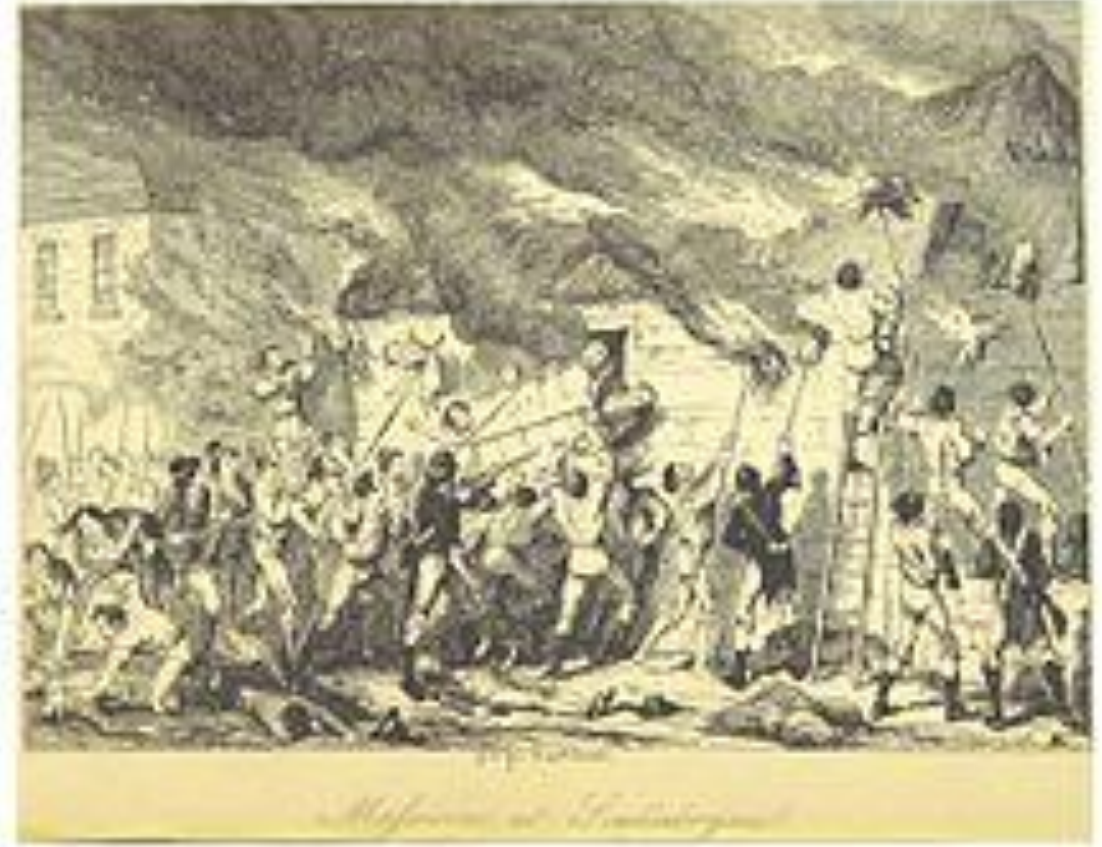
- UI leaders form an alliance with the Catholic Defenders
- UI leaders seeking weapons, arms and support from Revolutionary France.
- 1796, attempted French landing fails due to weather
- 1798 Rebellion launched. Failed battles at Antrim, Saintfield & Ballynahinch.
- French force land in Mayo in late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

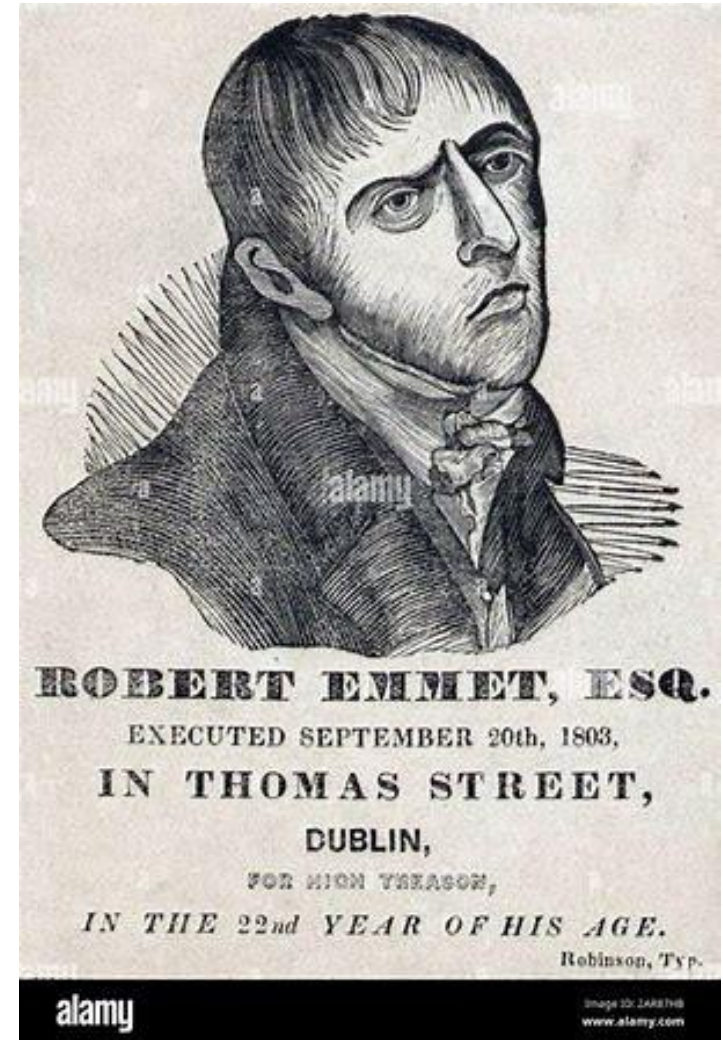
Uprising fails

- 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.



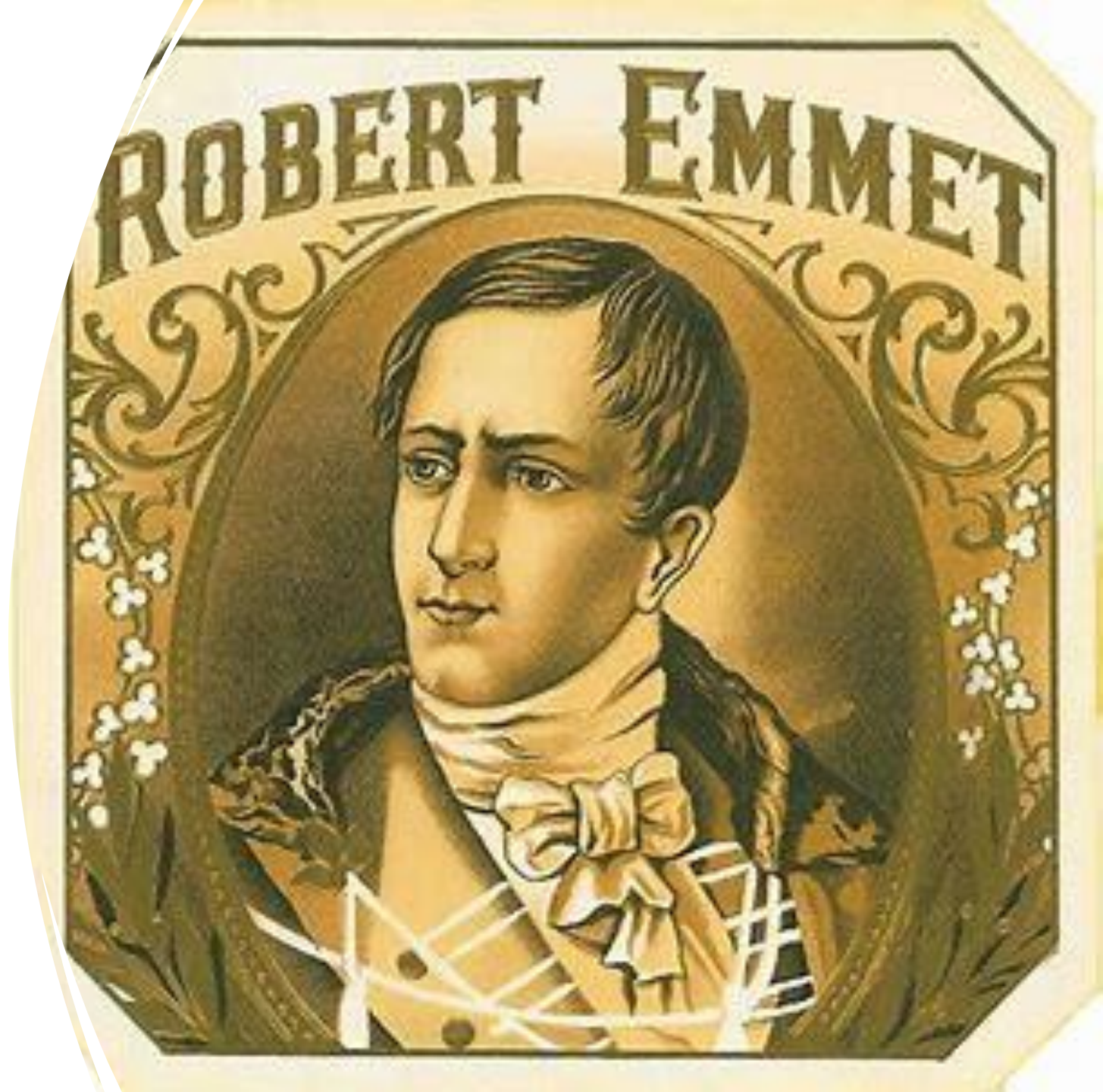
Why did it fail?

- Arms Shortage: Rebels lacked firearms and military support.
- Poor Coordination: Disrupted communication weakened the uprising.
- Premature Exposure: A depot explosion on 16 July forced an early, unprepared revolt.
- No External Aid: Hoped-for French and English support never came.



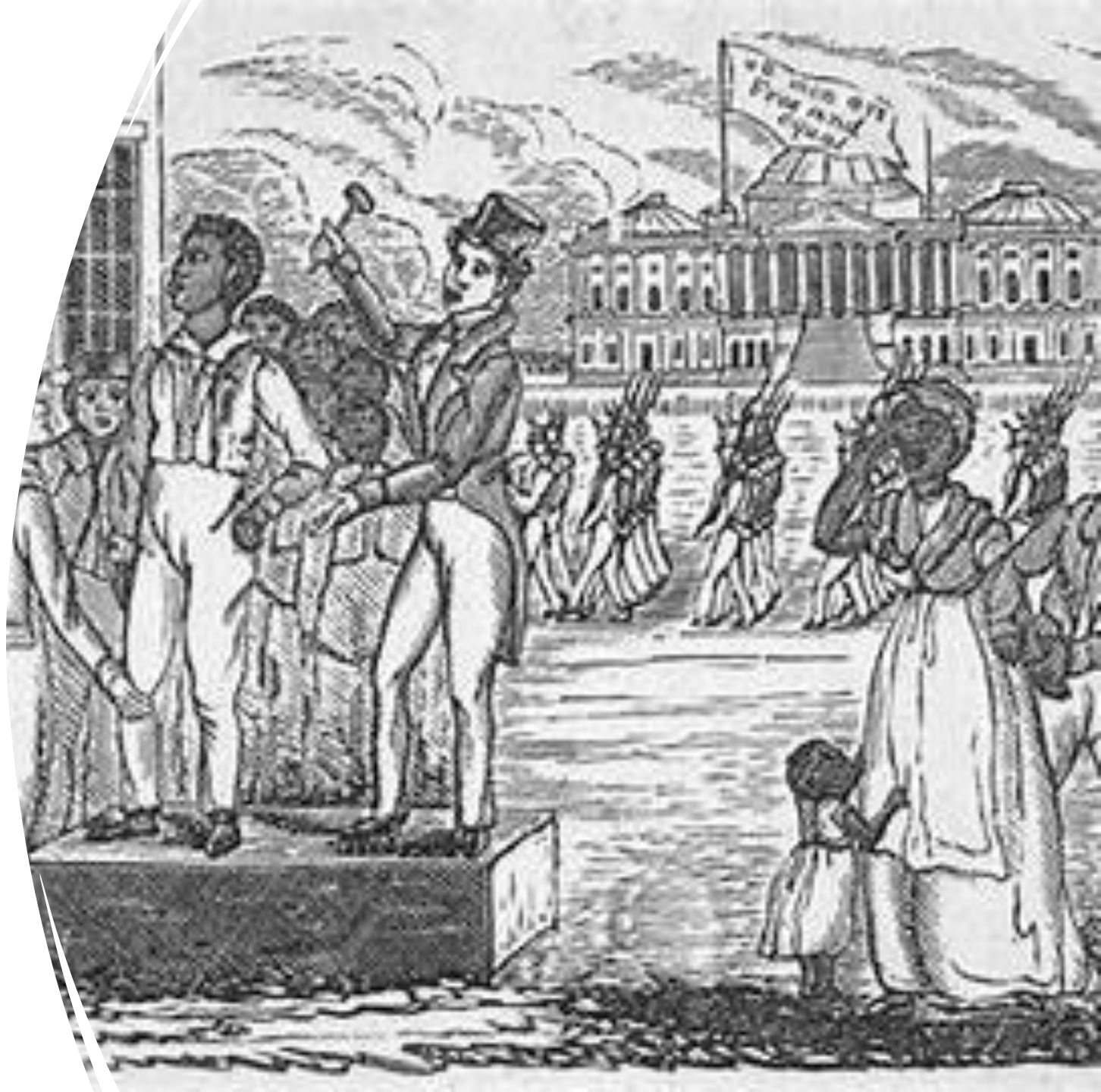
Legacy

- 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

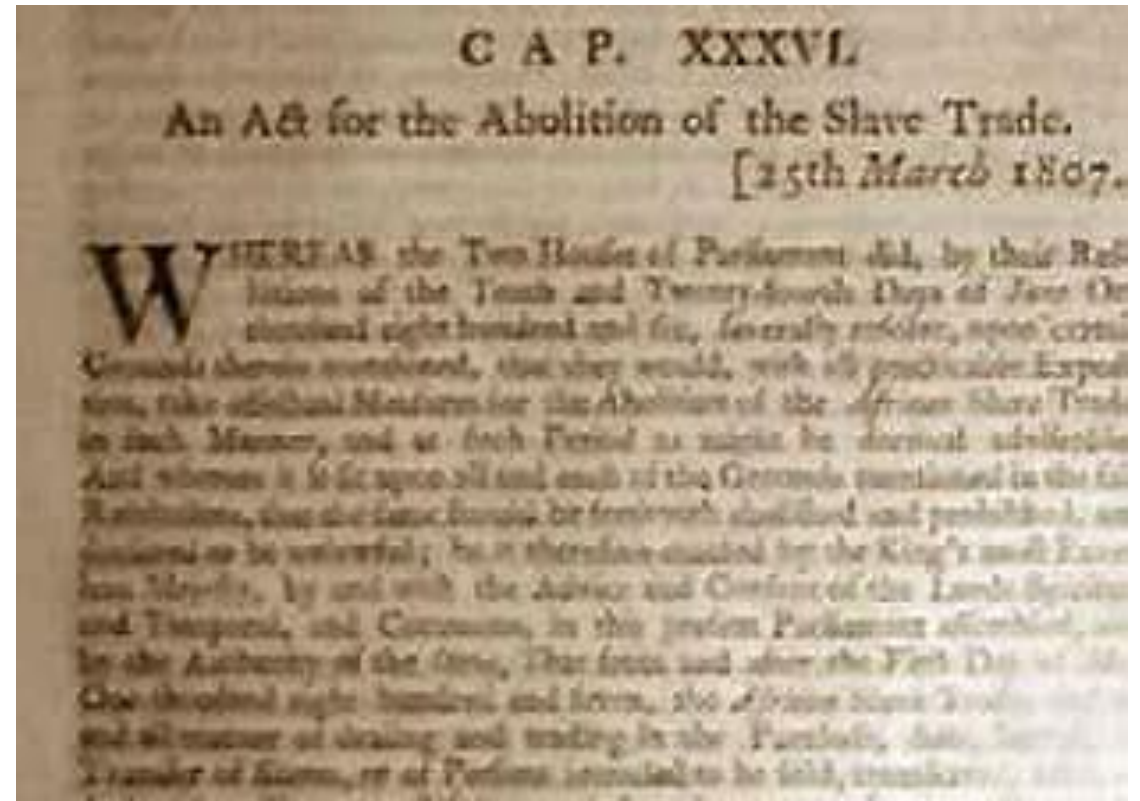


The Abolition of the Slave Trade, BNL, 6 February 1807.

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

- **Abolition Act (1807):** Banned the slave trade in the British Empire but not slavery itself, which ended in 1833.
- **Continued Trade:** British ships made 1,340 voyages (1791–1800), transporting nearly 400,000 enslaved people.
- **Harsh Penalties:** Captains faced £100 fines per enslaved person, leading some to throw captives overboard to evade punishment.



Enforcement

First Trial (1812): Held in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with Chief Justice Robert Thorpe presiding over Samuel Samo's case.

Enforcement: The Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron (1808) seized 1,600 slave ships (1808–1860), freeing around 150,000 Africans.



Questions?

