

DEMYSTIFYING FEMININE IRELAND DURING THE REBELLION OF 1798

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Although the role assigned to women by Irish historians during the era of the United Irishmen is one of background involvement and passivity, Mary Ann McCracken and Elizabeth Richards provide important case studies to the contrary. Directly opposing not just history but contemporary propaganda, Elizabeth and Mary Ann stood firmly for their beliefs and now provide important insights into the rebellions. Instead of being a passive Hibernia or a ragged Granu, the women of Ireland in the 1790s had experiences and emotions that ranged from distrust and terror to active involvement in the movement. Irish women were part and parcel to the events in the rebellion, and that including them as active participants in the story of the rebellion provides an insight that the historical context will continue to miss if their participation remains in the background rather than the forefront.

Introduction

The prescribed role of Irish women during the Irish rebellions of 1798 was as victims of exploitation, both in propaganda and in life.¹ Even though the Irish Unionist movement promoted itself as an egalitarian movement dedicated to the common good, this common good did not include women. Women were not seen as equal partners in the movement. The United Irishmen gave no significant consideration of the extension of the franchise to its female members at any time in its activism, which historians point to as modern evidence of their entrenched gender inequality.² It's doubtful that women were only the passive participants described by historians and Unionist propaganda during the Unionist movement and the rebellions as a whole, but their historical contributions have been largely neglected by the larger scholarship on Irish history.³

The aim of this paper is to analyze the differences between women in Unionist legend at the time and the recorded lived experiences of women from the 1790s, specifically women who documented life in their own words in the late 1790s. Although victimized by shifting political ideologies, exploited by the United Irishmen as a symbol for a broken, corrupt, and destroyed Ireland, and denied the franchise under Irish Republicanism, Irish women's varied experiences ranged from distrust and terror to active involvement in the movement. These varied experiences, collected in

¹ Nancy J. Curtain and Margaret MacCurtain, "Women and Eighteenth Century Irish Republicanism," in *Women in Early Modern Ireland*, ed. Mary O'Dowd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 135.

² *Ibid.*, 135

³ Dáire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong, eds., *The Women of 1798* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 7.

the form of diaries and letters, work to demystify the representation of women in Unionist literature and lend validity to their experiences and contributions in the Unionist movement and to the rebellions of 1798.

Primary sources are vital to this argument, especially primary sources authored by women. To discuss the legend of women in Unionist literature and propaganda I am relying on *Paddy's Resource*, a contemporary collection of literature published by the United Irishmen. I am also using a collection of letters from Mary Ann McCracken to her brother, Henry Joy McCracken, executed for his part in the rebellions in Belfast in July of 1798.⁴ Mary Ann McCracken played an enthusiastic and fairly involved role in the United Irishmen and pushed for feminist reform—feminism in this paper meaning extension of both intellectual and political considerations to women—so this primary source will be used to discuss what an “active” role in the United Irishmen looked like for a woman. This source will be used to get a fuller picture of life for Irish women who were not just experiencing the rebellions and pushes for reform, but living them and actively working for their success. *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards* is the other primary source I am using to show the experiences of non-combatants and women who were not directly affiliated with the United Irishmen. These also provide a focus on Protestant women who were not, like the Belfast rebels or the common people, Presbyterian or Catholic. Elizabeth Richards was an Anglican, a steadfast member of the Church of England.⁵ *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards* shows an element of fear that accompanied members of the middling Protestant class during the rebellions that is a vital piece of the discourse on women's lived experiences.

According to the preface of *The Women of 1798*, a collection of essays edited by Dáire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong, “No aspect of the 1798 rebellion has been so neglected as that of the women's role in the events of that year.”⁶ Thus, this paper contributes a new perspective to an often overlooked element of the scholarship in Irish history. The historical field is fairly narrow on the subject of Early Modern Ireland, and the primary expert on Early Modern Irish women is Mary O'Dowd. O'Dowd wrote *A History of Women in Ireland 1500-1800* and edited an essay collection entitled *Women in Early Modern Ireland*, to which she also contributed an essay herself. In *A History of Women in Ireland 1500-1800*, O'Dowd writes that women were recognized in the revolutionary space not as assets but as scapegoats and symbols. They were denied the franchise by the United Irishmen in the 1790s, and were largely ignored by historians in their role during the rebellions until the nineteenth century.⁷ However, women still benefited from this movement in that their spheres of influences expanded. Women were now able to be seen in public more often, and were held up as examples of virtue. I hope that my original contribution is the demystification of the feminine mythos of United Irish literature, and that this paper contributes to the expansion of Early Modern Irish women's history. I hope as well that this paper promotes a feminist basis for critical analysis of male dominated, Irish authored primary sources from the 1790s.

On October 14th, 1791, The United Irishmen's Belfast chapter was founded in part by Theobald Wolfe Tone, an outspoken supporter of Catholic rights in Ireland.

⁴ Mary Ann McCracken, “To Her Brother in Kilmainham Jail” and “To Eliza Templeton,” in *Irish Women's Letters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 53-66.

⁵ Elizabeth Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards: from the Wexford Rebellion in Ireland to Family Life in the Netherlands. Elizabeth Richards and the Wexford Rebellion* /Kevin Whelan, ed. Kevin Whelan and Marie de Jong-Ijsselstein (Hilversum: Verloren, 1999).

⁶ Keogh and Furlong, *The Women of 1798*, 7

⁷ Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd, *Women in Early Modern Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

Emboldened by Enlightenment ideals from the mind of John Locke as well as the beginnings of the French Revolution, Tone and his contemporaries at first sought out parliamentary reform as well as an extension of rights for Irish Catholics.⁸ The United Irishmen were not the first of their kind. Ireland was a hotbed for organizations pushing for social reform that included groups such as the White Boys, the Defenders, and, four years after the formation of the United Irishmen, the notorious Orange Lodgers or Orangemen, who supported British control and Protestant supremacy.⁹ During the 1790s, Irish high politics began to mirror the interests of the people. Governor of Ireland William Wentworth Fitzwilliam lasted just three months before he was recalled due to his positive views towards Catholic emancipation and “endeavouring to govern Ireland on behalf of her inhabitants.”¹⁰

As the 1790s drew on, the United Irishmen made headway in bringing about reform that would better benefit their Catholic friends and neighbors. Reform did not come without a price, however. In April of 1793, for example, the Catholic Relief Act was passed which allowed Catholic men to vote and to hold most public offices. In retaliation, the Ascendancy, the upper-class Protestant controlled government, passed the Convention Act, which effectively banned all future meetings of the United Irishmen by prohibiting assemblies with political goals in mind.¹¹

As the power and scope of the United Irishmen grew over the course of the 1790s, the British controlled colonial government of Ireland began to panic. Sectarian and religious violence began to break out as early as 1794, when the Dublin branch of the United Irishmen was raided and suppressed by the government. Fitzwilliam, the short-lived Governor of Ireland in 1794, attempted to dismiss Ascendancy grandees during his tenure to make room for Catholic improvement, the same year that the Battle of the Diamond, fought between Catholics and Protestants, led to the formation of the Orange Order, a radical Protestant militia. The Orange Order remains a sectarian militia to this day. In 1796 the Irish government began to pass laws aimed specifically at acts of what they considered sedition: the Insurrection Act subjected people to searches and curfews, as well as high treason convictions for having sworn any oath not sanctioned by the government, such as an oath to the United Irishmen. Habeas Corpus was suspended in the same year as the government grew increasingly wary of pro-Catholic and pro-Celtic Irish sentiments that grew under the influence of the United Irishmen. In 1797 the press fell under attack when the *Northern Star*, Belfast’s United Irish newspaper, was forced to disband, and by March of 1798 most of the leaders of the United Irishmen had been rounded up and sentenced to execution. On March 30, Britain declared that Ireland was now under martial law and in a state of rebellion, which was an embellishment of the true situation. By May 23, 1798, the real rebellion had begun.¹²

The rebellion itself was short lived and overall unsuccessful. Fighting only really lasted through the summer of 1798 and the British forces routed the rebels as a whole. 30,000 people lay dead at the end of the fighting, Catholic and Protestant alike.¹³ Theobald Tone, the progenitor of the United Irishmen, cut his own throat in prison in November, and Edward Fitzgerald, another progenitor, had been imprisoned

⁸ Oliver Knox, *Rebels and Informers: Stirrings of Irish Independence* (London: John Murray, 1997), 53

⁹ Harold Felix Baker Wheeler, Alexander Meyrick Broadley, and Mount Norris, Arthur Annesley, 1st earl of, 1744-1816, *War in Wexford: an Account of the Rebellion in the South of Ireland* (London: Lane, 1910), 9

¹⁰ Wheeler, Broadley, and Norris, *War in Wexford*, 9

¹¹ Knox, *Rebels and Informers*, xii

¹² Knox, *Rebels and Informers*, xvi

¹³ *Ibid.*, 268

since May 19 and died of sepsis during the early days of combat in June.¹⁴ Even the arrival of a French force, agreed upon by Tone and Napoleon, could not save the rebel cause. When the French did arrive, neglected by Napoleon's changing focus to the East and stranded at sea for six weeks, the rebellion was all but over. The French were met on the beach by members of the British forces, and Tone was summarily taken to Dublin and thrown into prison, where he committed suicide less than a month later.¹⁵

A large consequence of the rebellion, besides a lack of success in the separation of the Irish from their Protestant landlords and government, was the fracturing of sects previously amenable to working together. The reformist ideology of the United Irishmen had been defeated by the failure of the rebellion to produce lasting change, and it was clear to many that the real motivating factor for the Catholic and lower-class participants had never been reform but rather the expulsion of the British from the Emerald Isle, and that the rebellion, intended to be carefully organized and cultivated, had devolved into sectarian mob violence.¹⁶ Despite the bloody efforts to unite the Irish people against the British under a coherent political ideology that supported reform and emancipation for non-Anglicans, the Act of Union, binding Ireland to Great Britain, was passed in 1799.¹⁷

Feminine Legend in *Paddy's Resource* and Memoirs of the Rebellions

The United Irishmen used women as tropes in their songbooks, a collection known as *Paddy's Resource*. According to Mary Helen Thuene, "United Irish verse ... presented their major tropes of women - goddesses, mothers, maidens, and maniacs."¹⁸ While considered more elaborate than simply representing the "typical sorrowing mother or maiden," the United Irishmen still relegated women to legend rather than personhood in their narratives.¹⁹ This is not to say that *Paddy's Resource* didn't get some things correct: many women in rebel controlled towns during the rebellion were indeed raped by British soldiers after they seized control.²⁰ The stereotypes played into by the book were very much grounded in reality, but still refused to consider the varying experiences of Irish women and focused on the experience that men believed they were most affected by. In the 1798 edition of *Paddy's Resource*, Ireland as a country is personified as a woman. Hibernia, another word used for Ireland, is a feminine noun linguistically, using an 'a' at the end instead of a consonant or an 'o' that would mark a masculine noun. The catchphrase of the United Irishmen, "*Erin ma vorneen! Slan leat go brah!*"²¹ translates to "Ireland my darling! Forever adieu!" Ireland in this catchphrase, first quoted in the 1798 copy of *Paddy's Resource* in "An Exiled Irishman's Lamentation," speaks of Ireland as a lover or a close relative.²² The song, from the perspective of a man who has been exiled from his home nation, mourns his native Ireland like he mourns the loss of his wife. The narrator uses she/her pronouns to refer to Ireland, singing that "if her foes e're prevailed, I was well known to fight for it!"²³ By fighting for Ireland, the song contributes to a traditional view of the

¹⁴ Ibid., xvi

¹⁵ Ibid., 256-257

¹⁶ Ibid., 271.

¹⁷ Patrick M. Geoghegan, *The Irish Act of Union: a Study in High Politics, 1798-1801* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2001), 9.

¹⁸ Mary Helen Thuene, "Liberty, Hibernia, and Mary Le More: United Irish Images of Women," in *The Women of 1798* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 9.

¹⁹ Ibid., 10.

²⁰ Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards*, 50.

²¹ *Paddy's Resource: Being A Select Collection of Original and Modern Patriotic Songs* (New York: R. Wilson, 1798), 1.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 2.

United Irishmen held of feminine Ireland “as Hibernia, the graceful, dignified Roman matron whose honour and reputation needed to be asserted by her gallant admirers.”²⁴

Making Ireland feminine provided a specifically paternal sense of duty to a man’s own country. Traditionally, an unmarried woman’s protection was the responsibility of a male family member such as a brother, father, or uncle, and any violation of that woman was seen not only as a grotesque display of violence but also as a personal insult to her primary male protector. Ireland as well was being violated in a symbolic format as Ascendancy class landlords disenfranchised the Catholic Irish, who saw themselves as the original Irishmen and thus owed land and primacy over the island and its government.²⁵ By fighting for graceful, feminine Ireland, a United Irishman was protecting the sensibilities of a symbolic woman while also fighting for his own female relatives. His duty to his country was out of love but also out of propriety and the fulfillment of the traditional demands of masculinity. If he was caught refusing to fight to protect Ireland, he was seen as acquiescing to the British exploitation of the island, and just like if he had failed to protect his sister, he was personally emasculated by the insult that was the exploitation of his female-coded homeland.²⁶

Later on in *Paddy’s Resource*, in “Teague and Pat,” taxes imposed by the British authorities are attacked directly due to their impact on the less fortunate. Specifically mentioned is the “widow reluctant doth groan,” a maternal figure who is in peril and furthers the heroic, chivalric notion of a fight for Ireland as a fight to protect women.²⁷ In Irish ballads, Ireland could also appear as “an old woman, Granu or the Shan Van Vocht, summoning her sons to protect and defend her homestead.”²⁸ The old woman in “Teague and Pat” has no husband to protect her, and thus must rely on her sons. By vanquishing the British and doing away with their mandatory tithes, as well as other non-religious taxes, the United Irishman that chose to fight was protecting his mother, the woman who gave him life, as well as the island that he lived on.

The theme of protecting one’s female kin carries on through *Paddy’s Resource*. In “Freedom Triumphant,” the narrator entreats his male audience to do as the French did on “The fourteenth of July, in Paris Town.”²⁹ France, which was a Catholic country who overthrew their tyrannical government, was used as inspiration by the United Irishmen during the 1790s to inspire their own people to fight back against the British control of the country. The narrator plays on this inspiration as he asks his audience “Why then should we not join to Free/ our children, Wives, and Mothers?”³⁰ The threat, the narrator says, is not to men directly but to those who rely on men to stay alive. Women in *Paddy’s Resource* provided a convenient way of motivating men who otherwise would not have joined the fight against the British. By reminding the men reading or singing these songs and poems that they fight not for their own glory but to protect their female relatives and their female isle from the rape, both metaphorical and physical, of the British overseers, *Paddy’s Resource* painted the rebellion against the British forces as a just action to take in order to protect the virtue of those who could not protect it themselves.

²⁴ Nancy J Curtain, “Women and Eighteenth-Century Irish Republicanism,” in *Women in Early Modern Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 136.

²⁵ Curtain, “Women in Eighteenth Century Irish Republicanism,” 136.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Paddy’s Resource*, 3.

²⁸ Curtain, “Women in Eighteenth Century Irish Republicanism,” 136.

²⁹ *Paddy’s Resource*, 6.

³⁰ *Paddy’s Resource*, 6.

Curtain phrases this notion succinctly by saying that “The violation of their women was the price Irishmen paid for suppressing their own patriotism and their civic duty.”³¹ By presenting a united patriotic front, the men of Ireland were saving their women from horrible atrocities. *Paddy’s Resource* used the pride of Irish men to recruit them to the cause, but in doing so, relegated the women of Ireland to a background role in the movement, one that was entirely based around the notion of male paternalism and patriarchal standards of “manliness.” This singular role women were expected to play by the movement did not include the very real truth of many Irish women in the period, who both helped and hindered the progression of the movement in very active ways.

Elizabeth Richards: Protestant Fear and Loathing in 1798

If one was not involved in the United Irishmen, the rebellion itself was a shocking and often traumatizing moment in time. Elizabeth Richards had family members in the United Irishmen, but her diary reveals a lack of conviction and in fact an element of derision when faced with their ideals. As a member of Anglican Church, Elizabeth had little to gain and much to lose if the rebellion was to succeed. If she had been Presbyterian like Mary Ann McCracken, Elizabeth’s views on the 1798 rebellions may have been different, but as it stood she was an upper middle class Anglican woman who lived in relative comfort.³² The rebellion not only threatened her religion, but her home, town, and country. Elizabeth’s diary is a good record of the Wexford branch of the rebellion, combining her personal thoughts and feelings with dates and facts. Elizabeth’s diary reveals the fears that accompanied the rebellion and indeed the United Irishmen for members of the landed Protestant class, who feared that change would eliminate their privilege. Their fears of persecution by Catholic rebels for being Anglican. Protestants had a fear not only of loss of privilege but also of physical and retaliatory violence.

Elizabeth’s diary expresses a fear heavily laden with derision and disgust for the acts of the Catholics in Wexford, as well as a strong conviction in both her Anglican faith and the British forces in Ireland. The diary trades in rumors circulating among Anglicans in Wexford to express that fear. In the entry for June 1st, Elizabeth records that the rumors making their way around Wexford that “... a report that a massacre of all those who professed their [Anglican] religion was intended...” had completely shifted the atmosphere in her circles.³³ This fear had driven some of her counterparts to “abjure[d] their faith, and suffered themselves to be christened by Romish priests from whom they had obtained written Protections...” Elizabeth is clearly both shocked and disgusted at this decision. The word Romish indicates a prejudice towards Catholics that was common in Anglican believers of the time as a spillover of anti-Catholic bigotry occurring throughout Protestant Europe.³⁴

Elizabeth herself refused to receive this protection by becoming a baptized Catholic, proof of her strong convictions in her own faith. She writes that “I was a Protestant, that I could die, but not become a Roman Catholic.”³⁵ Elizabeth’s bravery in the face of what she considered certain death cannot be erased and must be commended. Her convictions were strong enough that she refused conversion even as the people around her assured her it was the only way to avoid being slaughtered by the rebel forces. Elizabeth and a family friend went to talk to the local priest, who they referred to as Mr. Corrin rather than Father Corrin. He “assured us no massacre was

³¹ Curtain, “Women and Eighteenth-Century Irish Republicanism,” 136.

³² Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards*, 10.

³³ Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards*, 35.

³⁴ Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards*, 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

intended,” an excellent example of the power of rumor espoused in Elizabeth’s diary.³⁶ A continuing trend of Catholic slurs reappears as the diary continues. Elizabeth claims that “our religion never ordered massacre” and that though the “Papists” claim that the Orangemen were murdering Catholics on their way to Wexford, “they do not in their hearts believe it.”³⁷ She also in the same entry referred to the native Irish Catholics as “savages,” thus fully expressing her disdain for not only their faith but their culture as a whole.³⁸

Elizabeth expressed a great faith and joy in the actions of British forces during the rebellion of Wexford. The British militia used rape of Catholic Irish women as a tactic when taking rebel-controlled towns. Her willful ignorance of British atrocities towards Catholic women does seem to suggest a certain knowing ignorance of the atrocities they were committing in Wexford as they captured the town from the rebels, and echoes Elizabeth’s repeated disdain for the lower classes of her town, who were primarily Catholic and thus more likely to be victim to British military rapes. In the entry for Saturday, June 2nd, Elizabeth reported that “Letters were found with them [two members of the Protestant militia captured by the rebel forces in Wexford] which say 10,000 men had marched from Dublin against the Wexford rebels. Oh, what a joy for us!”³⁹ Although Elizabeth did put up a good front by carrying rebel symbols when out and about during the rebellion, there is no questioning whose side she truly supported.⁴⁰ In the entry for June 6th, Elizabeth made her feelings quite clear in action rather than thought, writing that “I pulled the odious green cockade out of my hat, and trampled on it. It was a satisfaction to me to disrespect the rebel colors.” In the same entry she entreated a rebel supporter, William Hatton, to listen to her arguments in support of loyalty to the British-run government of colonial Ireland and grew angry when he refused to take her seriously.⁴¹

Later in the diary, in the entry for June 7th, Elizabeth expressed fear that ships appearing off the coast were French, rather than British. Given that the Irish had a deal in the works with France to support their rebellion efforts, her concerns are warranted.⁴² Elizabeth Richards forms a picture of the passive Protestant resistance to the rebellion. She expresses dislike and refuses to participate in activities that show deference to the rebels in control of her town, but she makes no active attempt to subvert rebel movements.

Mary Ann McCracken: Belfast’s Feminist Rebel

Few people could have such diametrically opposing viewpoints on the Unionist movement and the rebellion than Elizabeth Richards and Mary Ann McCracken. The sister of notorious rebel Henry Joy McCracken, Mary Ann herself was deeply invested in the Unionist cause.⁴³ Belfast born Mary Ann received a comprehensive education that was much the same as her brother’s, and indeed, Henry was her favorite brother. Mary Ann was a staunch feminist according to the definition mentioned in the introduction and was an advocate for women’s rights and the franchise. Her letters to her brother and Thomas Russell during their imprisonment and their executions reveal a firm belief in the political and social equity of a United Ireland, and a sharp mind.⁴⁴

³⁶ Ibid., 37.

³⁷ Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards*, 37.

³⁸ Ibid., 45.

³⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 38. Elizabeth, like other women during the rebellion, carried rebellion symbols to ensure they would not be attacked as Anglican dissenters and loyalists to the British crown.

⁴¹ Ibid., 40.

⁴² Knox, *Rebels and Informers*, 256.

⁴³ Flanagan, *Irish Women’s Letters*, 55.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 55.

Mary Ann, like many of the founding members of the United Irishmen, was not a Catholic but rather a Presbyterian, another dissenting sect of Christianity present in Ireland. Hesitant at first to advocate for the Irish Catholics due to a distrust in “Popery,” the Belfast Presbyterians developed an intense sympathy for the plight of their similarly-disenfranchised Catholic neighbors after the onset of the French Revolution.⁴⁵ This sympathy, combined with the privileges of education and middle class wealth available to them because of their standing as Protestants, despite being Dissenters against the Anglican Church, allowed people like the McCrackens alongside Theobald Tone to form the United Irishmen.⁴⁶

Mary Ann’s letters show a deep commitment to her brother, the cause, and feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, the year after the United Irishmen were formed, and its place in Belfast society and intellectual circles suggests good evidence that Mary Ann was not the only person advocating for the inclusion of women in the fight for an increase of rights for Roman Catholics. Mary Ann certainly left the most detailed evidence for a feminist position in her letters, given that political thoughts, ideologies, and meetings of political societies were suppressed in Belfast after 1793.⁴⁷

Just as she was what we would consider a dedicated feminist today, Mary Ann was fully committed to the Unionist cause, a commitment that was created in full after her brothers Henry and William were arrested in 1797 for their Unionist activities. Mary Ann wrote to her brother, Henry Joy McCracken, on March 26 of that same year, entreating him to stay true to the cause which she herself has become deeply committed; “If the complete Union of Ireland should demand the blood of some of her best Patriots to cement,” she wrote, “if they will not sink from their duty ... in the end the cause of Union and of truth must prevail.”⁴⁸ Mary spoke of the highest sacrifice possible for one’s own country in her letter of encouragement and faith to her brother, that of martyrdom for Ireland. Indeed, she encouraged him to resist temptation to back out and to keep the faith in the Union by using the martyr motif, thus evoking in him a sense of sacred duty to Ireland.

Mary Ann also sat in on meetings and participated in Union events, as evidenced by the intelligence she passed her brother in their letters while he was incarcerated in Kilmainham. On March 16th she told him that “a Cousin of our own told Frank last night that a friend had shewed him the United Irishmen’s test, that he approved highly of it, and would not have the least objection to take it, as he had done more violent things often before.”⁴⁹ Her participation in the Unionist movement seems to surpass simple information gathering to quasi espionage. McCracken himself had participated in criminal and illicit activities of the type that the United Irishmen trafficked in before outright rebellion. She lied to authorities, concealed contraband in her own home, and moved what we can only assume was a sensitive document out of Belfast for safe keeping. She wrote that “a certain article which was the only cause of uneasiness to you at the time you were taken up, was concealed in the house till the late strict search which has been made about town ... we gave it in charge to a man in whom we had confidence, who buried it in the country so that its being found can’t injure any person.”⁵⁰ This letter shows a wholehearted participation in not just the ideals of the United Irishmen, but the activities they were conducting mostly in secret by 1797.

⁴⁵ Gray, *Mary Anne McCracken*, 51.

⁴⁶ Gray, *Mary Anne McCracken*, 51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁹ McCracken, *To Her Brother in Kilmainham Jail*, 56.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

Mary Ann used both her feminist and rebellious fervor while her brother was incarcerated to attempt to bring more women into the fold of true involvement in the United Irishmen. She wrote to him that “I have a great curiosity to visit some female societies in this Town... I wish to know if they have any rational ideas of liberty or equality for themselves...”⁵¹ Mary Ann discussed what was likely her most radical viewpoint, even to the most radical United Irishman: the equality of women and men. Writing to her brother, Mary Ann says that “for if we suppose woman was created for a companion for man she must of course be his equal in understanding,” accepting the common Christian narrative on the purpose of women but using it to further her own agenda, that of women’s rights.⁵² Although the United Irishmen themselves did not intend to expand the franchise to women, Mary Ann’s letter provides concrete proof that some among the membership and followers were amenable to certain extensions of women’s rights. Mary Ann expresses the hope that “the female part of the Creation as well as the male should throw off the fetters with which they have been so long mentally bound...”⁵³ For Mary Ann, the rights of women were intrinsically tied to the rights of men. She believed in the cause of the United Irishmen, but her letters to her brother suggested that she believed they should do more to increase the rights of Irish women, not just their male counterparts.

Legends vs. Life

Women who lived through the rebellions of 1798 are often erased from scholarly history, but their contributions are notable. Diaries like Elizabeth Richards’ provide first-hand accounts of historical events and military action, and letters like Mary Ann’s provide evidence for the scope of female involvement in the United Irishmen that has been ignored by scholars for the past two centuries. There are two major differences in the legend of women in Ireland at this time and their actual experiences that I wish to discuss. First, women had more autonomy than the United Irishmen’s propaganda gave them credit for. Second, the women who experienced the rebellions had strong convictions in their beliefs that the propaganda of the United Irishmen tended to erase.

Both Elizabeth Richards and Mary Ann McCracken proved to be independent women and thinkers. Elizabeth Richards especially provides a good case study of autonomous female action during the time of the rebellion. She refused to take what she saw as the easy way out, deciding personally to remain loyal to Britain instead. She proved this loyalty throughout her diary entries by discarding her protective green ribbon and cockade, announcing to her diary that “It was a satisfaction to me to disrespect the rebel colors.”⁵⁴ Elizabeth’s decision to do so was even more radically autonomous when you consider that she herself had close friends and family who were members of the United Irishmen and supportive of the cause she openly disputed.⁵⁵ Elizabeth’s disputation of the cause meant that she was going directly against the male family members’ wishes for the country. In a patriarchal system where women were supposed to provide “ornaments from females whose breasts beat as high in patriotic ardour as those of their husbands, their sweethearts, and their brothers,” to prove their loyalty to the cause, Elizabeth’s autonomous decision to refuse support to the rebels diametrically opposed the “suffering maiden” that *Paddy’s Resource* made women out to be.⁵⁶ Mary Ann McCracken’s autonomy was in service of the United Irishmen,

⁵¹ Ibid., 57.

⁵² McCracken, *To Her Brother in Kilmainham Jail*, 57.

⁵³ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁴ Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards*, 38.

⁵⁵ Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards*, 38.

⁵⁶ Keogh and Furlong, *The Women of 1798*, 19-20.

but her decisions were her own. Mary Ann made strong and often dangerous choices in support of the rebellion. She was not, like in “Honest Pat,” “sore goaded by oppressors ... she loudly calls to one and all to cut her chains asunder.”⁵⁷ Mary Ann was an active member of the United Irishmen, working directly for the cause. Rather than waiting for her brother to return to her, Mary Ann continued his work by engaging in information gathering. In her letters, Mary Ann passes on information to high level United Irishmen. Perhaps her most distinct involvement with the cause, which directly contradicts the supposed need for men to break the chains of women, was her involvement in an attempt to break Thomas Russell from prison. She wrote to a friend, Eliza Templeton, of her involvement in this and said “I know of no other course I can pursue than writing by Mr. Ramsey tomorrow to know if it be possible to do any good by going, and if so to defy all proposition.”⁵⁸ In this way, Mary Ann took up the arms to break the chains of Ireland, rather than standing as a symbol of the suffering woman who must be rescued. She was acting in direct opposition to the place she had been assigned by United Irish legend.

Mary Ann and Elizabeth also had strong convictions that were not acknowledged by the United Irishmen. Elizabeth was a firm member of the Church of England, and when faced with what she believed was conversion or death, she chose death. In her diary she wrote that “I was a Protestant, that I could die, but not become a Roman Catholic.”⁵⁹ Like her decision to abjure the symbols of the United Irishmen, Elizabeth refused to give in to rumor and coercion. Although it was rumored throughout Wexford during the rebellion that “...a report that a massacre of all those who professed their [Anglican] religion was intended...”⁶⁰ Elizabeth refused to allow the fear of physical violence to sway her. She remained Protestant throughout the rebellions, despite her concern for her very life.

Mary Ann McCracken’s convictions were even more radical than those of the United Irish movement. Mary Ann believed in the franchise for women, and the complete inclusion of women in the United Irish movement. While the United Irishmen did have what Curtin calls a “female auxiliary, which attended to fund raising and providing amenities...” who “were certainly required to take the United Irish oath of secrecy, forbidding the swearer to reveal the secrets of the organization...”⁶¹ they were not considered to be full members of the organization and the United Irishmen had no intention of extending full political rights to women. Mary Ann thought this remarkably foolish. Mary Ann was very clear in her feminist viewpoints, stating that “if indeed we were to reason from analogy we would rather be inclined to suppose that women were destined for superior understandings...” and that “I therefore hope it is reserved for the Irish nation to strike out something new,” meaning women’s suffrage.⁶² Mary Ann McCracken was not satisfied with just the promises of men, but rather believed that women were vital to full republican liberty. Like Elizabeth, she never gave in to her doubts but remained steadfast to her convictions.

Although the role assigned to women by Irish historians during the era of the United Irishmen is one of background involvement and passivity, Mary Ann McCracken and Elizabeth Richards provide important case studies to the contrary. Directly opposing not just history but contemporary propaganda, Elizabeth and Mary Ann stood firmly for their beliefs and now provide important insights into the

⁵⁷ *Paddy’s Resource*, 17.

⁵⁸ McCracken, *To Eliza Templeton*, 61.

⁵⁹ Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards*, 35.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶¹ Curtin, “Women and Eighteenth-Century Irish Republicanism,” 134.

⁶² McCracken, *To Her Brother in Kilmainham Jail*, 58.

rebellions. The editors of Elizabeth’s diaries refer to it as one of the most complete accounts of the rebellion as it took place in Wexford, and her steadfast loyalty to the Anglican Church during an era of fear show a strong sense of dignity and self.⁶³ Mary Ann McCracken, who was a devout rebel, did more than just “attend to fund raising.”⁶⁴ She believed in rights that the United Irishmen never in fact took seriously, but that she championed herself. She carried information, and even attended an attempted jailbreak. While the legends and the literature of the time period refuse to see women as anything more than “mothers, maidens, and maniacs,” the actual evidence points to women who were just as involved as the men history remembers. Instead of being a passive Hibernia or a ragged Granu, the women of Ireland in the 1790s had experiences and emotions that ranged from distrust and terror to active involvement in the movement. When demystified using historical evidence and their own words, we can see that Irish women were part and parcel to the events in the rebellion, and that including them as active participants in the story of the rebellion provides an insight that the historical context will continue to miss if their participation remains in the background rather than the forefront.

⁶³ Richards, *The Diary of Elizabeth Richards*, Preface.

⁶⁴ Curtain, “Women and Eighteenth-Century Irish Republicanism,” 134.

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