

13.6 United Irishmen Rebel against England (1798)

Source: New York State Great Irish Famine Curriculum

Background: The late eighteenth century was an era of tumultuous argument over the Natural Rights of Man. It was an era when revolutions broke out in the British colonies in America, in France, in the French colony of Haiti and in Ireland. In Ireland, one of the most prominent figures in this struggle was Wolfe Tone, an Irish Protestant who supported rights for Catholics and led the effort to achieve an independent republic for Ireland. This round of opposition to English domination over Ireland began in 1778 with the formation of the Volunteers, a people's militia. Its original purpose was to defend Ireland against possible attack by France while British troops were fighting against American independence, but the group gradually became more politically involved. In 1782, a Volunteer Convention demanded that an independent Irish Parliament have authority over Ireland.

In 1798, the United Irishmen led rebellions demanding home rule with nominal support from France. They were defeated, the groups leaders were executed for treason, and many rank and file soldiers were exiled. Wolfe Tone was captured during the French attack and sentenced to death. He killed himself while in prison. The song "Unite and Be Free" calls on Catholics and Protestants to work together to create an independent Ireland. It was a direct challenge to efforts by a colonial regime to keep its subjects divided.

A. Rebellion of 1798, a Chronology

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| 1778 | The Volunteers, a people's militia, was formed. Its original purpose was to defend Ireland against possible attack by France while British troops were fighting against American independence. |
| 1782 | Volunteer Convention demands that an independent Irish Parliament have authority over Ireland. A small group of radical Volunteers forms a committee to support revolutionary action for Irish independence. The committee included both Protestants and Catholics. |
| 1791-94 | The Belfast Society of United Irishmen demands liberty for all Irishmen. They adopt the French Revolutionary slogan, "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." About the same time, informal groups of Catholic "Defenders" raid wealthy homes in the countryside looking for weapons and money. |
| 1793-94 | England and France go to war. The French are interested in supporting an Irish rebellion. The United Irishmen are banned by the government. They become an illegal secret society. |
| 1796 | The Defenders and the United Irishmen merge into one organization. Leaders of the group meet with the French government. In December, a French fleet arrives at County Cork, but bad weather drives off the fleet. The few soldiers who land are quickly captured. |
| 1797-98 | The British government arrests leaders of the United Irishmen. Many are beaten and sent to prison. At least fifty people are executed. British troops terrorize civilians in the Irish countryside. |
| 1798 | Rebellions break out in May and June. Attacks against British forces are not well coordinated. The rebels are defeated and the leaders of the United Irishmen are executed for treason. In August, France sends a small invading force. It is quickly. |

Questions

1. Which Irish organizations challenged British authority?
2. How did the British government respond to these organizations?
3. In your opinion, which international events during this time period influenced events in Ireland?

B. Unite and Be Free

The song *Unite and be Free* is from Belfast, Ireland, 1795. Hibernian is another term for the Irish.

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| Ye lovers of Union, of ev'ry degree, No matter what Trade or Religion ye be, The right-hand of friendship to you I'll extend And hope for your pardon if I should offend. | Till oppression and tyranny's banish'd the land, We'll fight for our country with heart and hand. |
| For the Rights of Man let us always be, And Unite in the cause that will make us Free, | "Divide then and conquer' - the maxim of knaves, Who have practis'd it long on a nation of slaves - But the bright Star of Reason will soon let them see That Hibernians were made to Unite and be Free. |

Questions

1. According to the song, who is invited to join in the struggle for a free Ireland? Why is this offer significant?
2. Why is the slogan "Unite and be Free" a revolutionary idea?
3. In your study of history, what similar documents have you studied? Explain.