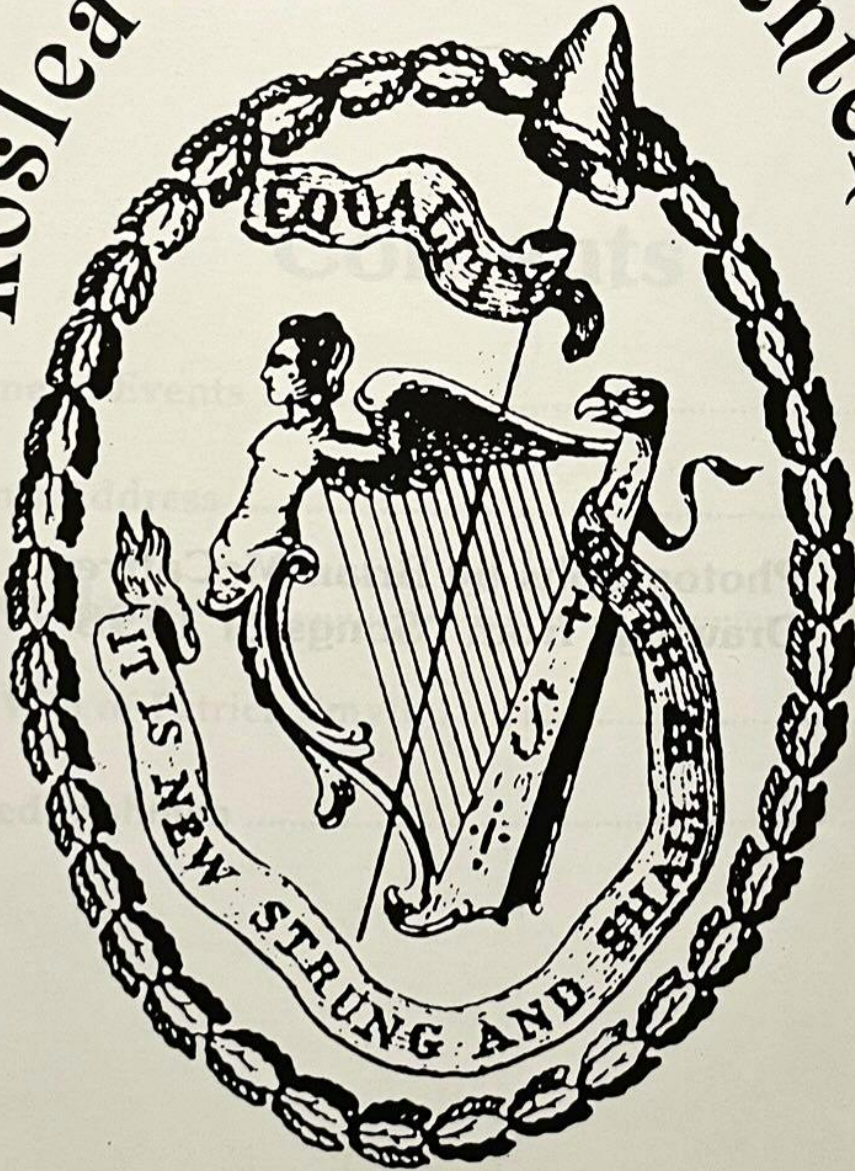


Roslea Martyrs Bicentenary

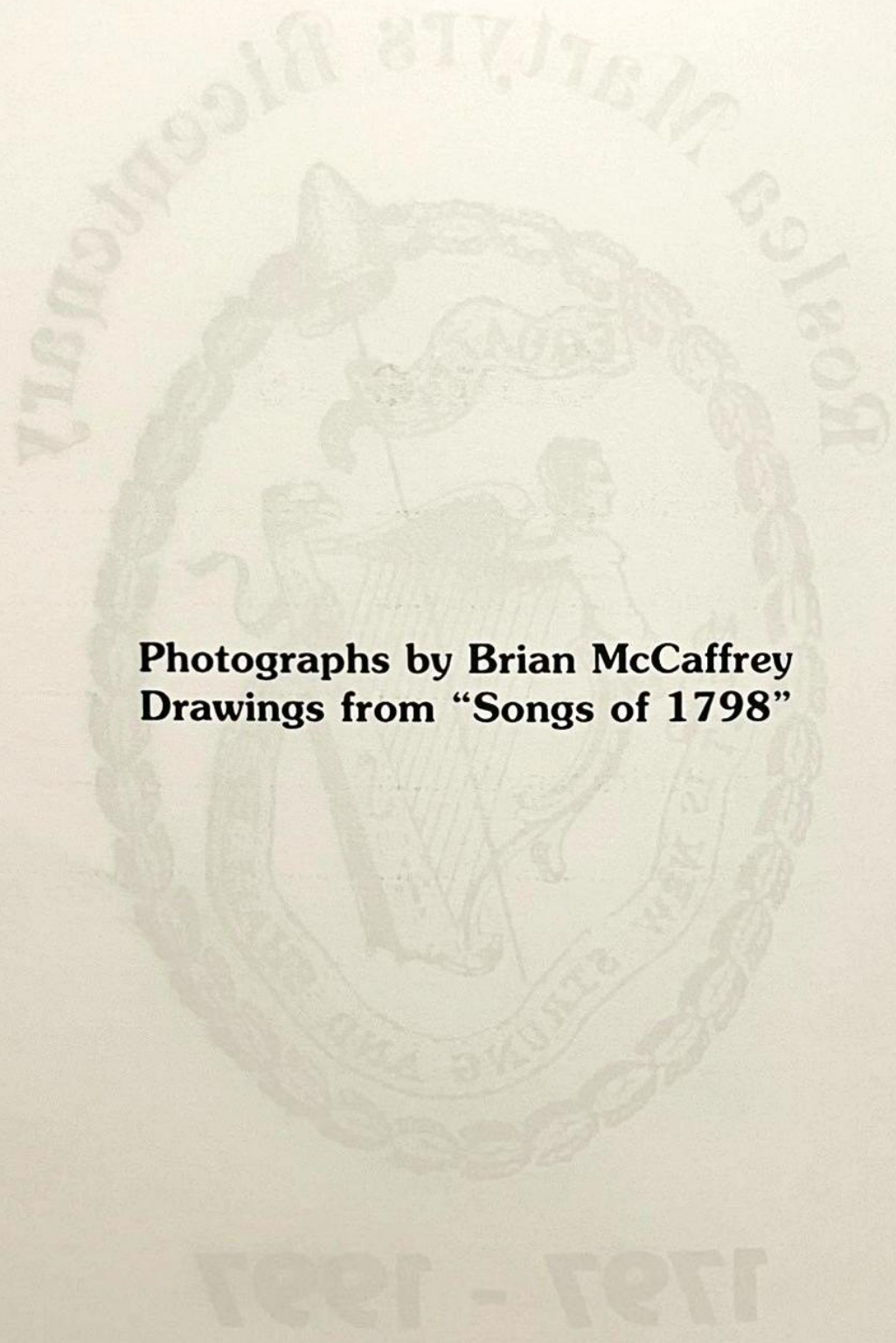


1797 - 1997

Roslea Martyrs Bicentenary



1797 - 1997



**Photographs by Brian McCaffrey
Drawings from “Songs of 1798”**

FRIDAY 17TH OCTOBER 1997

8.15 PM Derrynane Hall

Commencing at 10.00 PM

Music by The Emerald Celli Band

ADDRESSSES

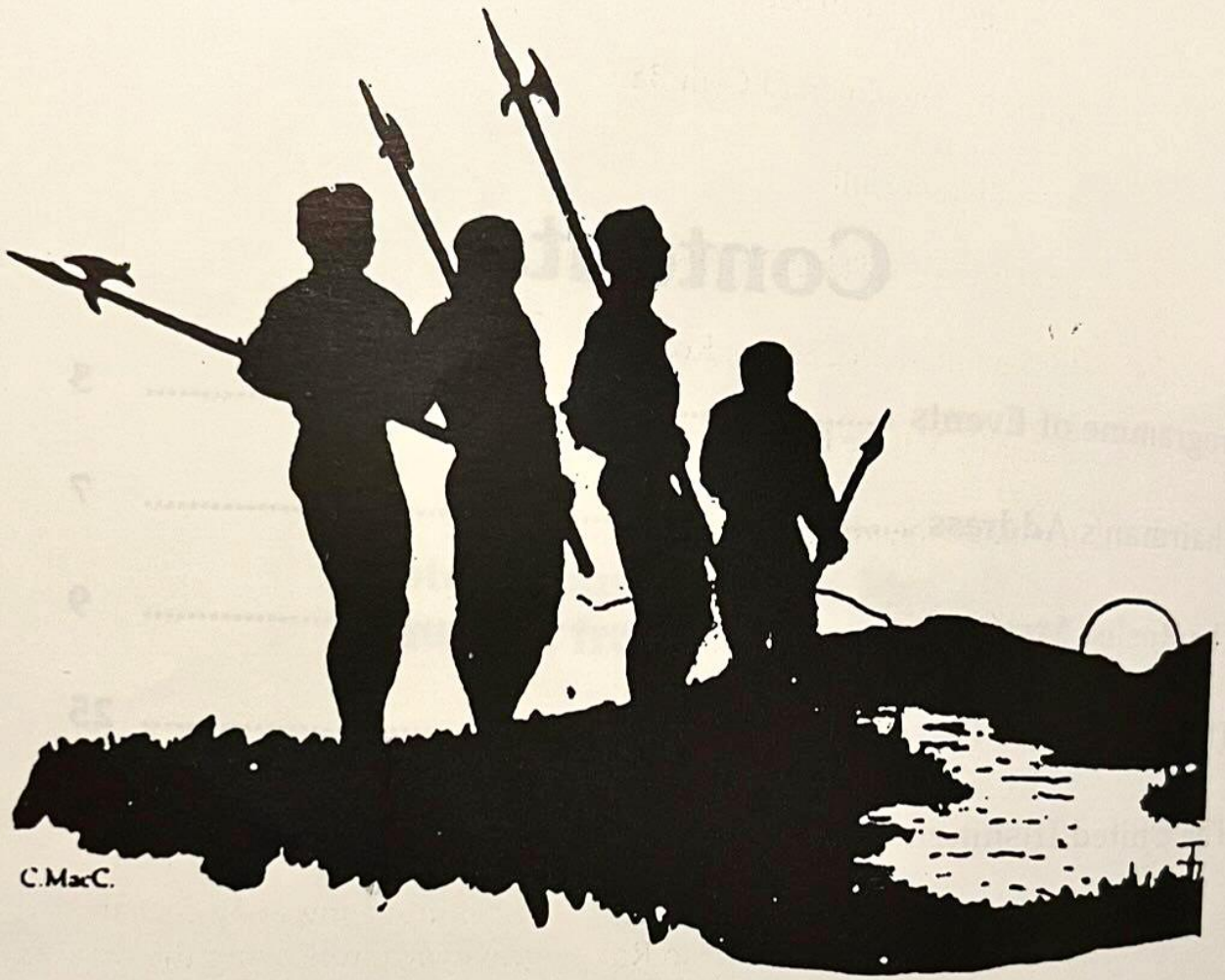
Evolution in Ball

SATURDAY

Contents

10.30 PM to 12.00 AM

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C. MacC.

ROSLEA MARTYRS BICENTENARY ASSOCIATION PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

FRIDAY 10TH OCTOBER 1997

Ceili in Derrygannon Hall.

Commencing at 10.00p.m.

Music by The Emerald Ceili Band

Admission £3

Exhibition in Hall

SATURDAY 11TH OCTOBER 1997

Irish night in McCagues, Roslea

Music by Village Folk

Commencing at 9.30p.m.

Admission £5

Speaker - Caoimhghin O'Caolain T.D.

SUNDAY 12TH OCTOBER 1997

(A) Anniversary Mass at 11.30a.m. in St. Tierneys, Roslea.

(B) Walk from Enniskillen Courthouse commencing at 1p.m. carrying three Symbolic Coffins to Roslea graveyard, following the original route by way of Enniskillen, Maguiresbridge, Nutfield Cross, Knocks, Errasallagh Cross Roads, Drumshancorrick, Roslea.

(C) Candlelit procession into Roslea.

(D) Planting of Liberty tree.

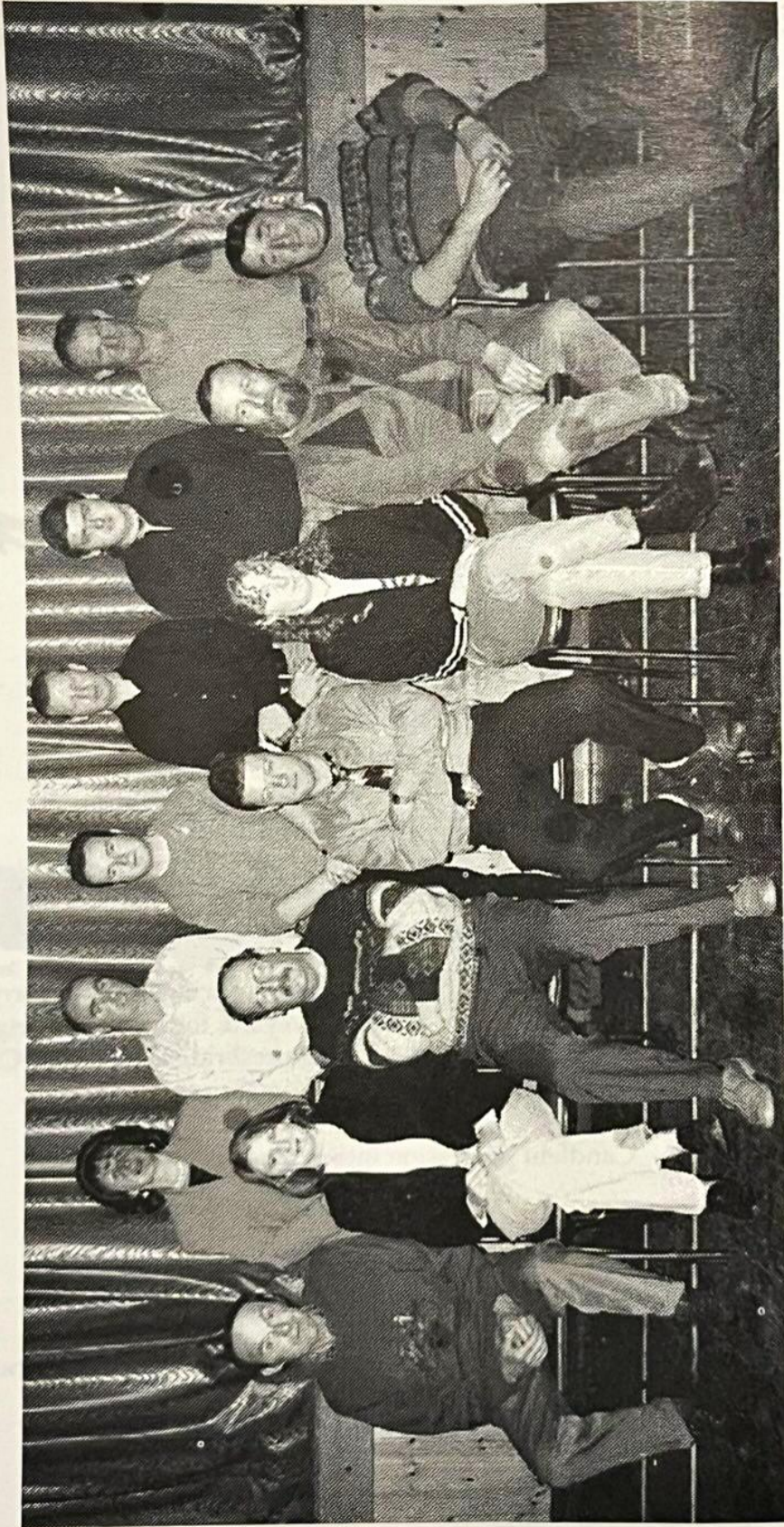
(E) Laying of wreaths on the Martyrs graves.

(F) Bonfires on Carnrock, Potteagh and Drumshancorrick

(G) 8.30p.m. Prominent Speakers at Graveyard -

Mitchel McLaughlin. National chairperson Sinn Fein
Presbyterian Speaker.

Roslea Martyrs Bicentenary Committee



*Front Row. L to R: Joe Murphy, Carmel Maguire, Oliver McCaffrey, Seamus Smyth, Caroline Cosgrove, John Cosgrove, Jim Quigley.
Back Row L to R: Margaret Hanna, Jimmy Murray, Jimmy Cosgrove, Dom Donaghy, Archie McDonagh, Eugene Cosgrove.*

Chairman's Address

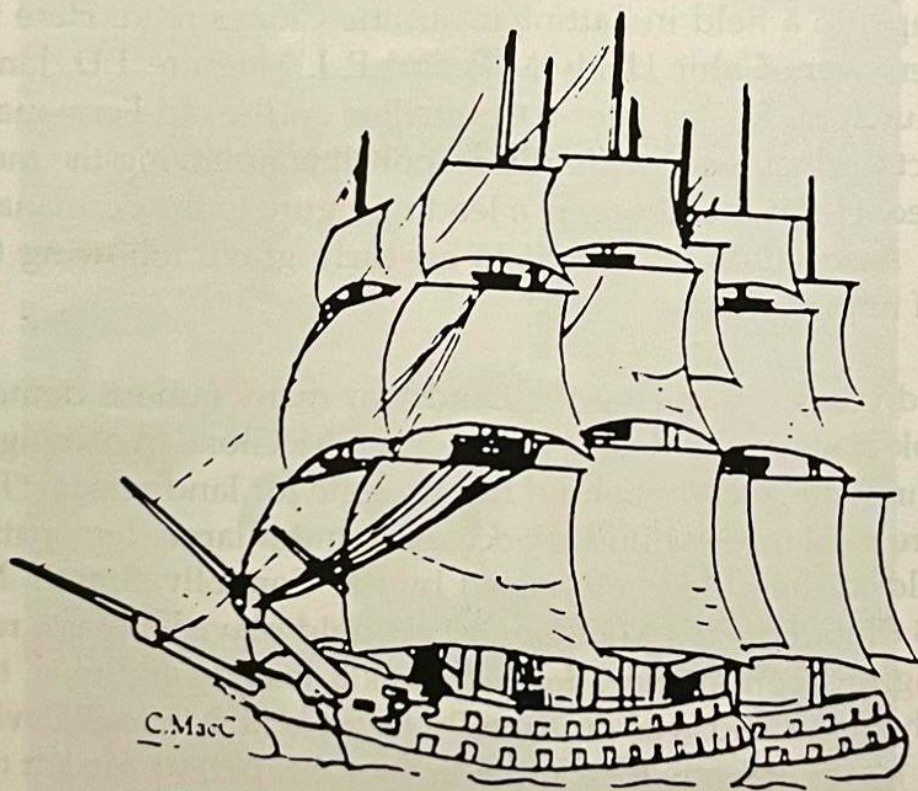
On behalf of the Roslea Martyrs Bicentenary Association I wish to commend all those members and helpers who have put together the series of events to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Roslea Martyrs. The Committee came together at short notice and the amount they have achieved to date has been remarkable.

In 1947 during the Anti-Partition campaign a committee was established to collect funds and erect the monument that now stands in St. Tierneys graveyard. On the 1st November 1949 the monument was unveiled. Following mass in St. Tierneys a large procession took place from the chapel to a field in Tattinbar out the Clones road. Here the main speakers were Cahir Healy M.P. and P.J. Maguire T.D. James Lynch of Church St. Roslea later a Councillor on the old Fermanagh Rural District Council was primarily responsible in having the monument erected. He later on became a leading figure in the Fermanagh Civil Rights Association and went to an early grave following the hardships of imprisonment.

A hundred years ago during the Land War many famous demonstrations took place in the Roslea area. Canon McGlone in coming to the parish threw his weight behind the struggle for land reform. The Martyrs were remembered on that occasion and a large demonstration was held in the village organised by the Connolly, Smyth, Mc Mahon 1798 Club. Edward Madden of Lakefield played a major role in organising this commemoration. He was a leading figure in the Fenian Brotherhood and was on friendly terms with Michael Davitt, John Dillon, James Blayney Rice and others of this period. He left the parish to reside in Belfast about 1899 and sadly his work for land reform is now forgotten. Madden was ably assisted by a near neighbour - James Lenaghan from nearby Drumacritten who also worked tirelessly in order to achieve the principles of the United Irishmen. Students researching the history of the Land League can obtain much information on this period through back issues of the "Peoples Advocate" in Clones library.

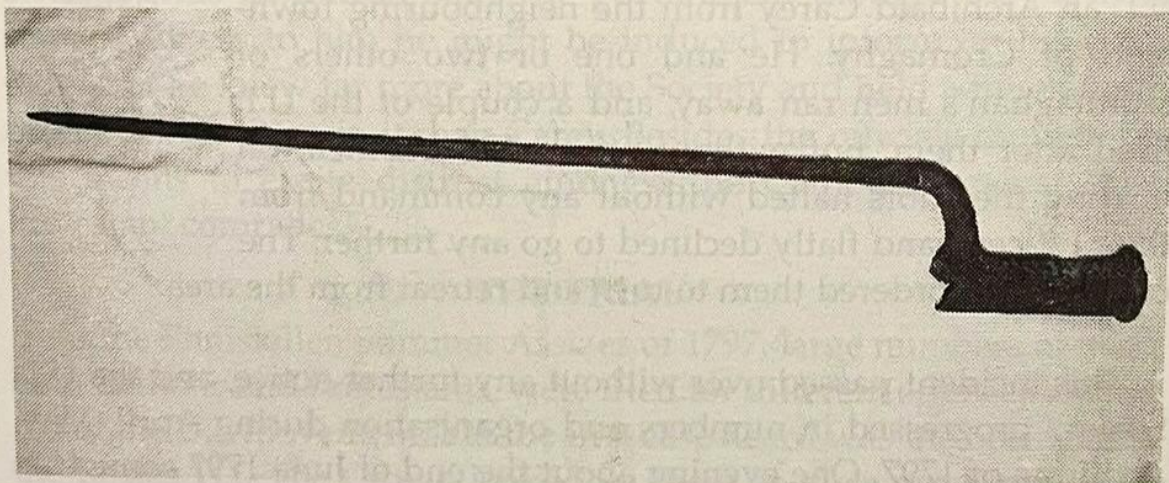
The principles of the United Irishmen of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity are as relevant today as 200 years ago. As we now head into the historic talks process let us hope that when we commemorate the next 50 years of the Roslea Martyrs that the principles that they died for will be achieved and that peace with justice will reign in our land.

Oliver McCaffrey (Chairman)



The Roslea Martyrs

The United Irishmen in the Roslea district were organised by a Protestant called Captain Thompson who was said to come from the townland of Derryvollen. Thompson had spent a period in Belfast where he joined the Society. When he returned to Roslea he organised the U.I. and his orders were obeyed from Carnmore to Tydavnet. Under his direction pikes were made and raids for arms were made on Protestant houses. In one of these raids over 80 guns and 1,200 cartridges were taken from a Mr Lendrum. Thompson had an ex-soldier, David Kelly to train his men and the training centre was at Derryard near Roslea. ⁽¹⁾



Bayonet from an Arms Raid.

On the night of the 5th of April 1797, a body of U.I. under the leadership of one Owen Hulthaghan of Aghnashammer, raided several houses for arms, and amongst others the house of a man named Samuel Mayne of Tattygormican near Roslea. Felix Mc Caffrey, of Bulleagh, who was at the head of the Column, called out to Mayne in the name of Ireland to deliver up his arms to the U.I. Mayne was at first slow in coming, and another of the body named William Whiteside, of Islands, fired a pistol through the window. This brought Mayne quickly to the door, where he handed over his gun to the nearest man to the door, James Scholes of Roslea. This was hailed with a cheer by the U.I. as they marched off. A Yeomanry patrol, who

were in the neighbourhood, heard the cheer, and proceeding in the direction descried the U.I. marching on the road up a hill some short distance ahead of them and followed them. The rear-guard of the U.I. gave word that the Yeomen were marching up the road after them. Hultaghan halted his men and served out cartridges to his musketeers, most of whom he divided into two lines, and placed a line with loaded muskets behind the hedges on each side of the road. He then proceeded a little further up the road and formed the remainder of the musketeers and all his pikemen into a solid body where they were prepared to charge the Yeomen in front, while those behind the hedges poured in volleys from the right and left.

Now, unfortunately, there happened to be among the U.I. an Archibald Carey from the neighbouring townland of Cromaghy. He and one or two others of Hultaghan's men ran away, and a couple of the U.I. fired after them, but without effect. The Yeomen, on hearing the shots halted without any command from their officers, and flatly declined to go any further. The captain then ordered them to turn and retreat from the area.



This incident passed over without any further notice, and the U.I. Society progressed in numbers and organisation during April, May and June of 1797. One evening about the end of June 1797 some U.I. were drinking in a public-house in Roslea, and they talked rather loudly of their achievements, one boasting that he had fired one of the shots after Carey. A Loyalist, said to have been the owner of the public-house, over heard them, and listening attentively learned the whole events of the 5th of April. The Loyalist informed the magistrates and the Crown officials, approached Carey. At first Carey denied all knowledge of the transaction but on being told that there were other informers, and hearing so accurate an account of the event, and even more than he knew, for he was told the name of one of the fellows who fired at him, he then said he was forced to join them, but did not know any of them. Ultimately, after the lapse of a few days, on some further pressure, he turned complete informer, and swore information's on 7th July 1797, before John Wright J. P.

which resulted in the following arrests being made - John Connolly of Pottyegagh, Bernard Mc Mahon of Drummerheave, John Lynch and James Scholes of Roslea and Patrick Smith of Mullaghbrady. Warrants were issued for Pat Greenan of Roslea, Felix Mc Caffrey of Bulleagh, and William Whiteside of Islands, as well as several others, all of whom escaped. Mayne's gun was got with Scholes servant boy, Felix Mc Donnell, who also escaped.

The prisoners were brought before the magistrates. Carey told the well-known tale of all informers, but Mayne turned out to be a very unwilling witness, and failed to identify any of the prisoners. All were returned for trial, bail being refused for Connolly, Mc Mahon, Smyth and Lynch, but Scholes, the only Protestant who had been arrested, was let out on bail. The government thought by showing some kindness to him he might be induced to inform on his comrades, for he knew far more about the Society and held a much more prominent position in it than Carey. Besides the officials thought by this means to excite distrust amongst the Catholics against their Protestant comrades.

THE TRIAL

At the Enniskillen Summer Assizes of 1797, large numbers of men, both Catholic and Protestants, were tried for different offences arising out of the U.I. movement, but the first case heard was the one against the Roslea U.I. The Crown looked on them as their most important prisoners, and it was well known that if a rising once took place in that locality the government could not count on the Yeomanry who would desert them, either through cowardice or sympathy with the U.I., and that the entire male population of the district would join the insurrection. The Government, therefore, determined to strike a blow at the U.I. Society in Roslea, which would be sure to have an effect. The particular charge on which the men were tried was for raiding for arms at Mayne's house after sunset on the 5th of April. The prisoners declined to join on challenging the jurors and were, therefore, tried separately. John Connolly was first indicted, and the following jury was empanelled to try him.



Robert Shaw
John Askin,
Daniel Thompson
Simon Armstrong
Henry Watkins
William Armstrong

Simon Armstrong
George Armstrong
James Campbell
Thomas Whittaker
William Hudson
George Forsythe

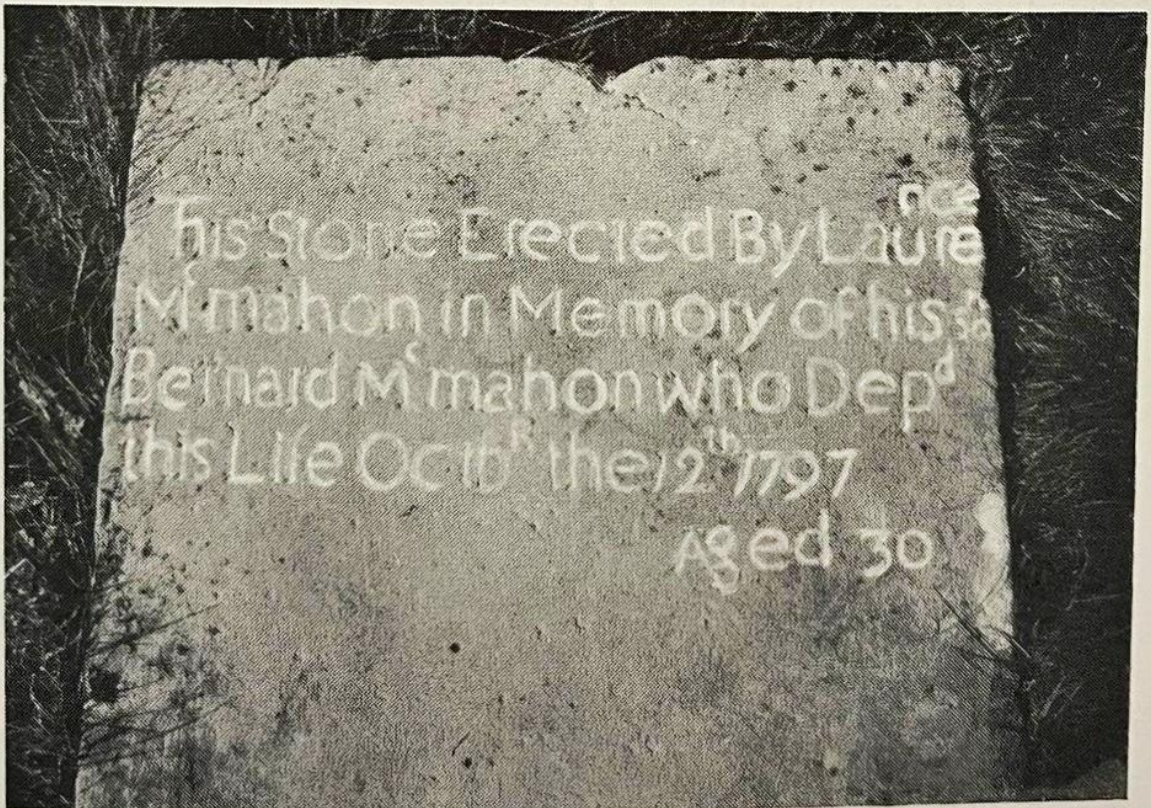
The first witness called was Archibald Carey, who told simply and accurately of the raid on Mayne's identified the prisoners as those who were nearest him in the ranks on the 5th of April, the approach of the patrol, the disposition of the U.I. for the expected fight; and his own escape from the shots fired after him. He added that the reason he gave the information was because of his hostility to the principles of the rebels. In cross - examination, he at first stuck to this statement, but could give no reason for not telling about the raid for some months; then he said he was afraid of the U.I. killing him if he informed. Towards the end he got confused, and admitted that the reason he gave the information was for fear someone else had informed who would seek to implicate him. Samuel Mayne was then called, but did not answer, and on inquiry it was discovered that he would sooner have his recognisance escheated than give evidence in company with Archy Carey. His bail bonds were accordingly escheated, and he was ordered to be fined £20. Some general evidence of magistrates and official witnesses was given. When the Crown case closed, the prisoners' counsel called on the judge to direct a verdict of acquittal, as the informer had not been corroborated. The Crown counsel argued that Carey was not an informer, but only an ordinary Crown witness, and required no corroboration. The judge said he would leave both facts to the jury. After the usual speeches of counsel and the judge's charge, the jury retired in the afternoon to consider their verdict, and a case of minor importance was proceeded with. After some hours the jury came out and announced that they could not agree. They were sent back and threatened with being locked up all night without food. There were a few men on the jury who took a view favourable to the prisoner, and for a long time could not be induced to convict him. It was believed at the time that the same tactics were adopted by the crown to obtain a conviction as had been put in force towards the jury of William Orr and other Irishmen; for ulti-

mately, late in the evening, the verdict of guilty was handed down, and the prisoner was ordered to stand back for the night. The next morning a new and carefully selected jury were empannelled, on every man of which the crown could rely for a verdict. They were the following:-

John Whitem,
John Thompson,
George Mc Donnell,
John Irwin,
Alexander Clarke,
John Graydon,

Malcolm Forsythe,
Henry Watkins,
Simon Armstrong,
Robert Lindsay,
William Whitaker,
Alexander Irwin.

The prisoner, Bernard Mc Mahon, was given in charge to them, and the same evidence given. Carey amended his evidence by explanations of the points he had failed in Connolly's trial; still other new points were raised by the prisoners' counsel, which showed him in a very bad light. The same questions of law were again argued, and the



Bernard McMahon's Headstone.

judge adopted a similar course. The new jury took a very short time to consider - so short that there was not time to swear in another jury to try Smith until they came out with a verdict of guilty; and the crown was so well satisfied with the jury that, at the request of the Crown Solicitor the same jury were re-sworn to try Patrick Smith. Why the prisoners' lawyers did not exercise their rights to challenge some of the jurors is not now known.

Smiths' trial was on exact repetition of Connolly's and Mc Mahon's and the jury found him guilty at once. John Lynch was not put forward for trial, owing to the fact that he was owner of Roslea Mill, and that the then landlady of the College-land estate the Hon. Charlotte King, who took a great interest in Lynch, used her powerful influence and succeeded in saving him from the fate of his comrades. Scholes was next tried in the same manner as Mc Mahon, Connolly and Smyth and was also found guilty, and ordered to be put back. Connolly, Mc Mahon and Smyth were then called to the bar, where the judge, assuming the black cap, sentenced each of them "To be hanged by the neck until dead at the common place of execution, the gallows, on Thursday the 12th day of October next".

Thought there was no hope for them, and though the court was crowded with their enemies, still the three Roslea United Irishmen were in no way daunted. It is said they were visited in prison both before and after their trial by Captain Hawkshaw, a local magistrate, who did his best to induce any one of them to turn informer, but that they each refused. There is no evidence of this except the statements made by the men to their friends and the accusations made by counsel at the trial. It is certain that Hawkshaw was most active in getting the prisoners arrested and getting up the crown case.

The execution of Connolly, Mc Mahon and Smith was carried out at Enniskillen in the usual way. The three men showed no sign of wavering, but met their deaths bravely. Their dead bodies were given to their friends, who carried the three coffins on their shoulders to Roslea, a distance of 20 miles. When the funeral reached Carnmore, about midnight an enormous concourse of people met it and a torch-



light procession was formed. The torches consisted of rushes soaked with tallow and resin. Several thousands of men marched in military order. The procession could be seen many miles distant, and children could be shown by their parents what was believed to be the beginning of the great U.I. rebellion in Fermanagh, but which turned out to be the end of it. The leaders of the movement, who had been on their keeping from the time of the arrests in July, nearly all turned up at the funeral that night, for they expected an attack on the procession by the government troops; but the government having no troops in the neighbourhood, or even in the county, sufficiently strong to cope with so large a body of men as attended the funeral, wisely kept out of the way and allowed the men to be buried in Roslea Catholic Graveyard without a single soldier or yeoman showing his face to the people. The village, as the funeral procession passed through, was illuminated with lighted candles. When the bodies were buried the people dispersed quietly and returned to their homes, all expecting that they would soon be called out again for the double object of freeing their country and avenging the deaths of their comrades.

The government felt it had gained a victory, and following it up rapidly by letting loose a brutal soldiery on the people, who terrorised the weak and tortured the strong, so that in a short time the braver spirits lost heart and fled the country, and the whole movement died out there as it did in almost every other district in Ireland.

Before the warrants were issued Owen Hulthaghan the central figure of the fatal night had disappeared from the neighbourhood of Roslea, and the inhabitants thought he was merely on his keeping, but he of all the leaders did not attend at the funeral of Connolly, Mc Mahon and Smith, and many people wondered what had become of him. The cause, which was not known for some time, arose in the following manner: In the early days of July, about the time Carey turned informer, Owen got drunk in a neighbouring town, and a

This Monument erected by John
Lynch of Roslea in memory of
his Mother Cathrine Lynch Alias
Béahil who departed this life
Dec. 13th 1706 Aged 58 yrs. Also his
father James Lynch who dep^d this
life July 22 1804 Aged 64 yrs.—
Also the above named John
Lynch who dep^d this life June 21st
1857 Aged 60 yrs.—
Anne Lynch died April 1st 1853
Aged 4 years
Requiescant in pace Amen

John Lynch's Monument.

recruiting sergeant enlisted him in the militia, which had then been called out. Owen, when he got on the red coat proceeded to enlist the militia in the U.I. society. Towards the end of 1797, Owen Hulthaghan was arrested by the military authorities on the charge of seducing his comrades from their allegiance, and, while in custody, his antecedents were looked up, with the result that he was handed over to the civil authorities, and lodged in Enniskillen Gaol to stand his trial at the Lent Assizes of 1798 for the raid on Mayne's.

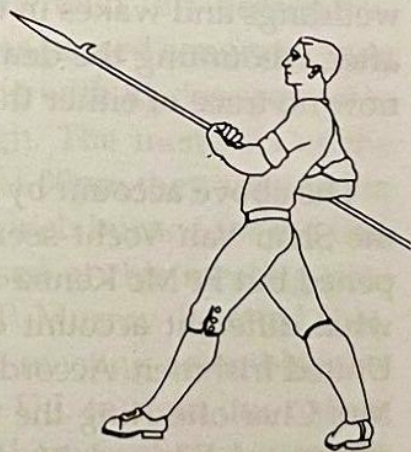
However, when the assizes came on most of the time allotted for the purpose was taken up with the trial of James Trimble, the most prominent U.I. in Enniskillen. There was also batches of U.I. tried from other parts of the county, so that Hulthaghan and several others were sent back to the gaol, but owing to the crowded state of the institution at the time, a lot of the prisoners, including Owen Hulthaghan were discharged. It is to be regretted exceedingly that no record or even tradition of Hulthaghan's subsequent career remains.

Connolly, Mc Mahon and Smith were young men, Smith had just been married before his arrest, and after his death his wife bore him a daughter, who was afterwards married to a man called Treanor, whose descendants live in Allagesh, Co. Monaghan. The other two were bachelors.

Over each grave was placed a headstone recording merely their names, ages and dates of death. Connolly's tomb was broken many years ago by accident. On the two remaining tombs are the following inscription: '

"This stone was erected by Laurence Mc Mahon in memory of his son, Bernard Mc Mahon, who departed this life October 12th 1797, aged 30 years". and

"I.H.S." This stone was erected by Owen Smith in memory of his son, Patrick Smyth, who departed this life October 12th 1797, aged 26 years".





House in Gortindarragh used as a Yeomen Barracks in 1797.

There was an old ballad, half in English and half in Irish, sung at weddings and wakes in the neighbourhood of Roslea for many years after, recounting the death and funeral of these patriots; but there is now no trace of either the words or the air.⁽²⁾

The above account by Dean Carolan Rush written in April 1898 in the Shan Van Vocht seems to be an accurate account of what happened but Fr Mc Kenna in his parishes of Clogher 1920 gives a somewhat different account of events leading up to the hanging of the United Irishmen. According to his report the U.I. raided the house of Mrs Charlotte King the then land lady of Roslea Manor Estate and widow of Edward Madden. The land agent at that time Captain Hawkshaw ordered his men to surrender their arms. When his cowardice was later criticised in the locality, he contrived in revenge to have 4 men arrested - Connolly, Smith, Mc Mahon and Lynch with the help of a publican named Greenan. Due to the intercession of Mrs King, Lynch was released. Hawkshaw visited the 3 men in Enniskillen Gaol and persuaded them to plead guilty although they had nothing to do with the raid. As a result they were wrongly executed.

Captain Thompson the Roslea U.I. leader along with some other local U.I. travelled to Antrim and fought along side Mc Cracken. Others including a man called Mc Kenna from Bunmichael and Treanor of Cornoon travelled to Ballinamuck. Some of them returned from this battle and lived to be old men including Mc Kenna who spent the best of his life as an outlaw on Slieve Beagh.⁽³⁾

On the 8th May 1897 a branch of the '98 Centenary Association was formed in Roslea. It elected Dan Murray (president) James Leonard Secretary, Edward Madden, Treasurer and Thomas Mc Clave vice-chairman. It called itself the Mc Mahon, Connolly, Smith '98' Club. On the 12th June 1897 they called a public meeting for Corraleek at which it was decided to decorate the graves on 20th June. At the September 25th meeting Edward Madden was delegated to attend the provincial Convention in Belfast. At this meeting he was elected joint treasurer of the Ulster Provincial Council. The club organised a large demonstration in Roslea on the 27th November 1897 to commemorate the anniversary of the Manchester Martyrs. Over 2000 people many from the surrounding parishes attended this demonstration. On the 31st December 1897 a motion was passed congratulating Boho in establishing a '98 club, This club along with Roslea seemed to have been the only two clubs in Fermanagh. The members of the Roslea club held a concert and dance and at 11.30pm they adjourned to an adjacent hill and ignited a huge bonfire which burned for the first 3 hours of 1898. A resolution was also passed at this meeting proposed by James Leonard and seconded by P. Murray. It stated that, "we the Roslea '98 Centenary Association in meeting assembled, on the eve of the centenary of the rising of the U.I. to right our native land, while honouring the memory of the heroes of that glorious epoch of Ireland's history, hereby declare our unalterable devotion to the cause and principles for which they fought, bled and died and our determination to strive by every means in our power to restore to our country national self-government". On Sunday the 19th June 1898 a large demonstration and public meeting was held in Roslea. Contingents from Monaghan, Clones and the surrounding parishes attended this meeting. Many bands also attended. The graves of the Roslea martyrs were decorated and speeches made by Edward



Monument to the Roslea Martyrs in St Tierney's Graveyard.



Close-up of the Monument



Madden, Roslea, James Blaney Rice, Tyholland, C. Rafferty, Monaghan and William Mc Mahon, Clones.⁽⁴⁾

In 1947 a committee consisting of Fr Austin Slowey C.C, James Lynch, Roslea, James Lynch, Lisnawestna and James Mc Mahon, Cornacrieve was established to raise funds to erect a memorial to the Roslea martyrs. This was during the period of the anti-partition campaign and on Tuesday the 1st November 1949 the memorial was unveiled to a large crowd from all over Fermanagh. Requiem mass was celebrated for the repose of the souls of the three United Irishmen in Roslea chapel and the 12ft monument was blessed by Rev Canon Gormley P.P. At the public meeting afterwards speeches were given by Cahir Healy M.P. and Dr P. J. Maguire T.D. Over eight bands from both sides of the border attended. The memorial was the work of John Kennedy, sculptor, Barrack St. Belfast. The following ballad was composed at this period by James Mc Mahon formally of Cornacrieve but residing in Belfast:-

The Martyrs of Roslea

There's a hollowed spot in Ireland,
in the shadow of Slievebeagh,
In the County of Fermanagh, in the churchyard of Roslea,
Where the graves of three United men, may their souls
shine bright in heaven.
Bear witness to the tyrants wrath in 1797
Mc Mahon, Smith and Connolly adhered to a noble cause.
To deal a stroke at the foreign yoke and smash the penal laws
But treachery, that cancered weed, gave the Yeomen full detail
And they were taken from their beds, and lodged in the County jail.
The agents of oppression sought from them in dungeons vile.
They promised them their freedom, if their comrades they'd betray,
But they gave their lives before they'd give their country men away.
Their trial was a masterpiece of cunning and deceit
And publicly they murdered them in Enniskillen street.
But the Blessed Virgin Mary succours those who bear a cross
And tendered consolation to all who mourned their loss,

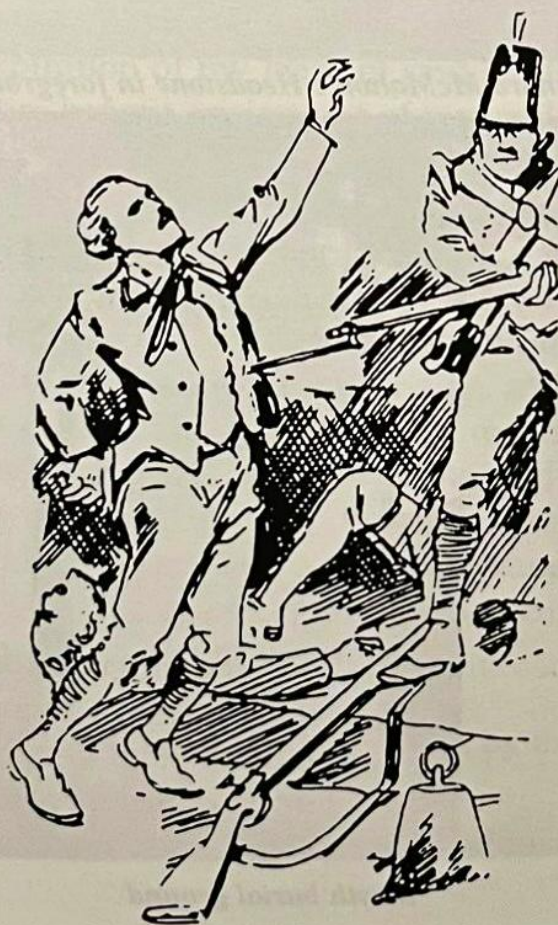
Their lifeless bodies taken down and laid upon their biers,
While faithful comrades knelt around, in prayer and silent tears.
Their remains were borne 20 miles o'er the mountains of Slievebeagh,
And laid to rest by candlelight in the churchyard of Roslea.
The weeping willow drooped its leaves, the tree bowed its head
And nature fashioned floral wreaths o're Irelands martyred dead.
All ye who pass on your way to mass, will you bow your head
in prayer

For the souls of three United men whose bones are mouldering
there.⁽⁵⁾

References

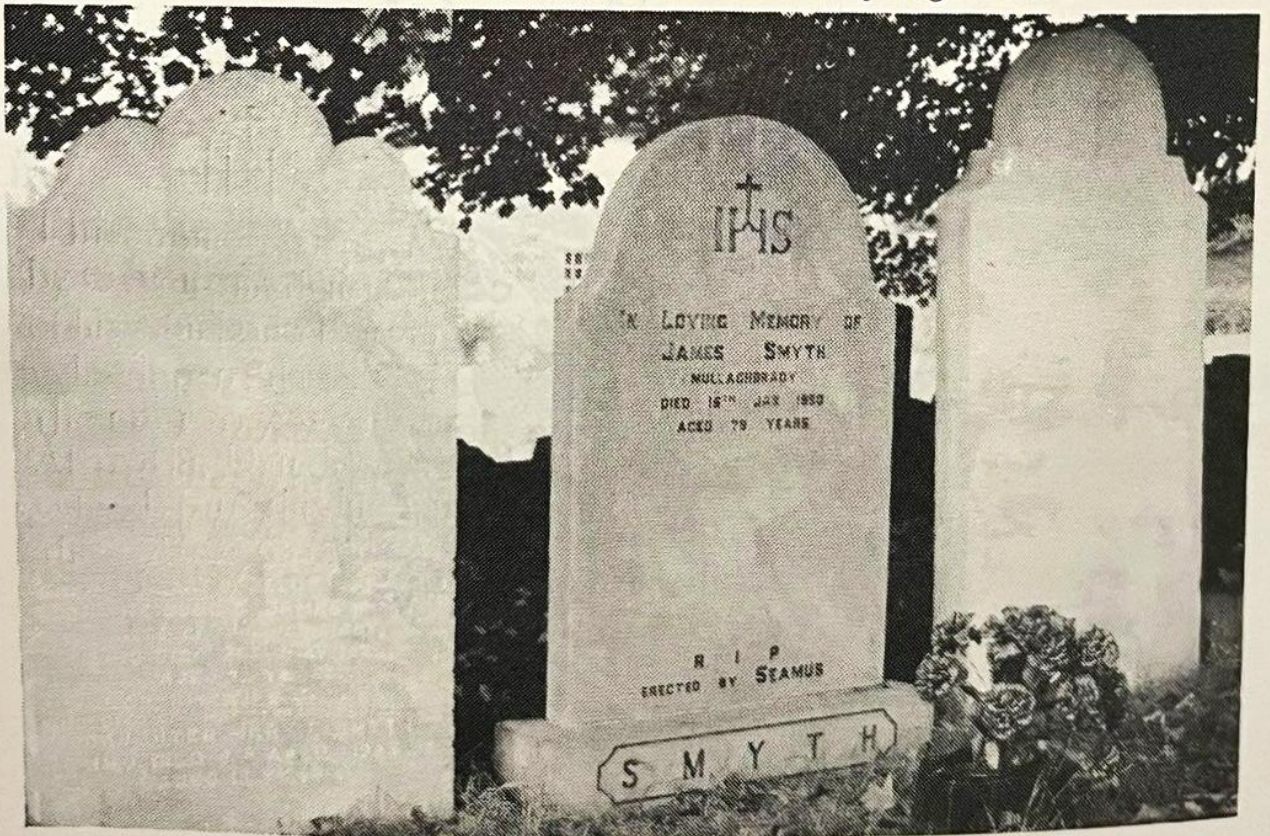
- (1) Fermanagh Story by Fr. P. Livingstone.
- (2) SHAN VAN VOCHT - 1898
- (3) Mc Kenna's - Parishes of Clogher - 1920
- (4) Peoples Advocate Newspapers - 1897/1898
- (5) Fermanagh Herald - November 1949.

Oliver McCaffrey,
October 1997.





Bernard McMahon's Headstone in foreground.



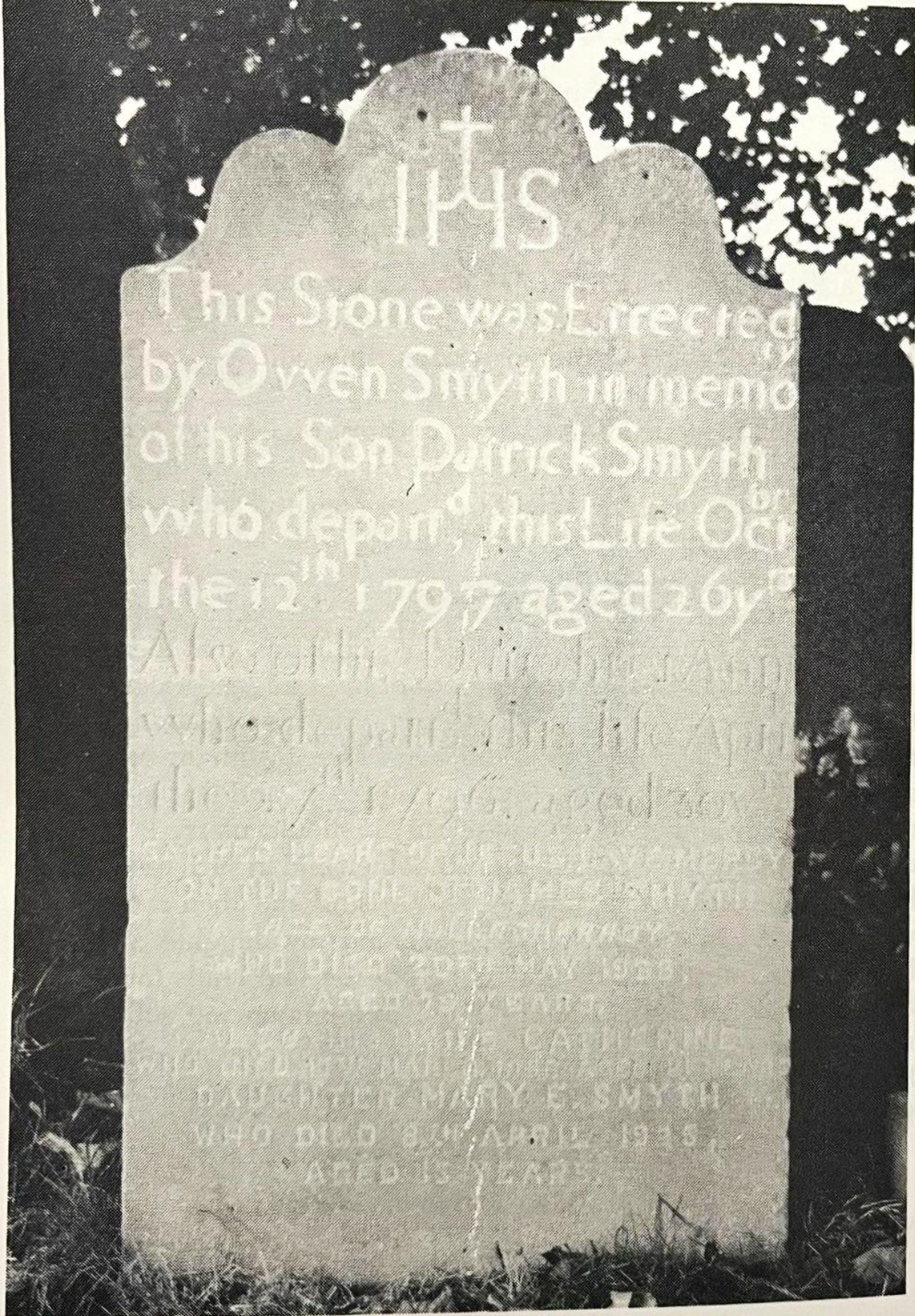
Smyth burial ground

THE LAST WILL OF PATRICK SMYTH

In the name if god. (Amen)

I Patrick Smyth late of Mullaghbrady, but now a prisoner in the Goal of Enniskillen, by trade a cooper, being of sound judgement and full presence of mind do hereby commit my will to Almighty God who gave it and my body to the earth from which it came, as to my substance bequeath in manner and from following viz: I leave and bequeath to my beloved wife and my beloved daughter Judith Smyth the full and entire benefit or hereafter shall arise out of my lands of Mullaghbrady of aforesaid with all the (Goods & Chattels I now possess with my (Law) to be share and share alike, and that in case my said wife should die or be named to another person before the expiration of my lease of said lands, that then and in such case the entire benefit arising out of my said lands to go to the full use and purpose of my said daughter Judith Smyth and in case of failure as above mentioned I order leave and bequeath the benefit so, arising to the property of my brother Philip and that in case my said wife Ann Finnegan otherwise Smyth should marry before the expiration of my lease of said lands that then and in such case I order leave and bequeath the entire benefit arising and then a daughter widowed and in case of her marriage and my daughter's death I leave and bequeath my daughters half of the said lands for the use and benefit of my brother Philip Smyth and renouncing will or wills made, I declare this to be my last will and testament as witness my hand and seal this tenth day of October in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety seven.

Signed and sealed, confirmed and delivered by the testator in presence of Patrick Smyth.



Headstone in St Tierneys Graveyard to Patrick Smyth.

THE UNITED IRISHMEN

"The outcome of the French Revolution?
It is perhaps too early to say" (Chou-En Lai 1964)



The Society of United Irishmen was founded in Belfast on 14 October 1791. The twelve founding members were Samuel Neilson, William Sinclair, Robert and William Simms, Thomas McCabe, John Campbell, Gilbert McIlveen, William Tennent, Henry Haslett, Samuel McTier, Thomas Russell and Theobald Wolfe Tone. Of these twelve all but Tone and Russell were successful Presbyterian merchants or manufacturers. Tone was a lawyer from a Church of Ireland background; Russell was a junior army officer who had served six years in India.

Three resolutions were carried at this first meeting of the United Irishmen:

First, Resolved, That the weight of English influence in the Government of this country is so great, as to require a cordial union among ALL THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND, to maintain that balance which is essential to the preservation of our liberties, and the extension of our commerce.

Second, That the sole constitutional mode by which this influence can be opposed, is by a complete and radical reform of the representation of the people in Parliament.

Third, That no reform is practicable, efficacious, or just, which shall not include Irishmen of every religious persuasion.

Tone and Russell returned from Belfast to Dublin where the Dublin Society of United Irishmen was established in November 1791. Napper Tandy was secretary and Simon Butler, a successful lawyer, became Chairman. On 5 December 1791 the Dublin Society issued its

first document:

"The object of this institution is to make an United Society of the Irish nation; to make all Irishmen Citizens - all Citizens Irishmen."

It went on to claim that in forming their Society they had not brooded over the past but looked forward to their children's future. This section of the document included the memorable sentence:

"Are we to forever walk like beasts of prey over the fields which [our] ancestors stained with blood?"

The Society looked forward to a brighter future:

"to a people united in the fellowship of freedom; to a parliament the express image of the people; to a prosperity established on civil, political, and religious liberty; to a peace - not the gloomy and precarious stillness of men brooding over their wrongs; but that stable tranquillity which rests on the rights of human nature..."

The founders of the Society of United Irishmen were able, energetic men who were wealthy enough to put their money where their mouth was. They founded a vigorous campaigning newspaper, *"The Northern Star"* in Belfast in 1792. They published cheap editions of Thomas Paine's *"The Rights of Man"* and Wolfe Tone's *"An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland"*. Above all they celebrated the achievements of the French Revolution which had begun in 1789. They set about expounding the ideas of *"Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"* in an Irish context. Ballads, pamphlets, theatrical displays and military parades spread their ideas.

The organisation spread rapidly along the east coast of Ireland attracting support from the Presbyterian, Catholic and Anglican elites. The Wexford branch of the Society was founded at Gorey by Robert Graham in 1792.

In 1791 Ireland was an English colony with two layers of government. Overall control rested in London. In Dublin there was a parliament which had some real powers but which represented only the interests of the large landowners who were at least nominal members of the Church of Ireland. Both Catholic and Presbyterians were excluded from political power, from university education, from the judiciary and from the professions.

In 1791 the vast majority of the Irish people were Catholics who had been deprived of the ownership of land in the wars of the 17th Century. Most Catholics were tenants-at-will who lacked formal legal rights and who were accurately described as "hewers of wood and drawers of water".

Catholics, were not, however, uniformly wretched. There were considerable numbers of prosperous Catholic merchants and traders. These were concentrated in the coastal towns of Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Galway. Many inland towns also contained Catholic merchants and publicans of some considerable wealth. These groups threw up a Catholic leadership who were cautious in their approach to the authorities but who were, nevertheless, anxious to remove the penal laws which prevented them from taking their place in politics and the professions. This leadership was represented by the Catholic Committee which employed the young lawyer, Theobald Wolfe Tone, as Secretary. Many younger members of this Catholic group were attracted by the ideas of the United Irishmen.

The British administration in Dublin Castle and the great majority of members of the Irish parliament viewed the coming together of Catholic and Presbyterian elites with fear and loathing. They were joined in these sentiments by a London government which was preparing for war with revolutionary France and which had good reason to fear the influence of French ideas in Ireland. After all, the leaders of the United Irishmen came from back-



grounds comparable to those of the French revolutionary leaders who were now loudly proclaiming the principles of "*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*" as the solution to the problems of the peoples of the whole world!

The first response of the British administration to the threat posed by the United Irishmen was repression, which intensified after the outbreak of war with France in 1793. Repression led the leadership of the United Irishmen to the conclusion that their aims could not be achieved by peaceful means. Their approach to the formidable problem of seizing power in Ireland by force was two-pronged. They dispatched emissaries to Paris seeking the assistance of a French army which they saw as providing a trained and disciplined backbone for their efforts at insurrection. At the same time they set up secret military committees and some time in 1794 they came to an understanding with the leadership of the Defenders, a secret, oath-bound, Catholic society.

The Defenders started life in Armagh in the 1780's. Many of their leaders were self-employed weavers, tailors, cobblers, hedge-schoolmasters, coopers, etc. These men travelled through the country in pursuit of a living. On their travels, they spread the ideas of the Defenders first into the Midlands, and later, as far afield as Cork and Kerry. Like the United Irishmen, the Defenders were profoundly affected by their knowledge of the French Revolution. The slogan "*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*" had an immediate appeal to men in whose lives all three principles were conspicuously absent.



The Defenders armed themselves by raiding loyalist homes for weapons and also by buying weapons in England and Europe. Between 1790 and 1795 many Defenders came before the courts. A considerable number were hanged and many more were press-ganged into the British navy or deported to Botany Bay. From 1795 onwards the Defenders were sworn en masse into the United Irishmen, greatly increasing the

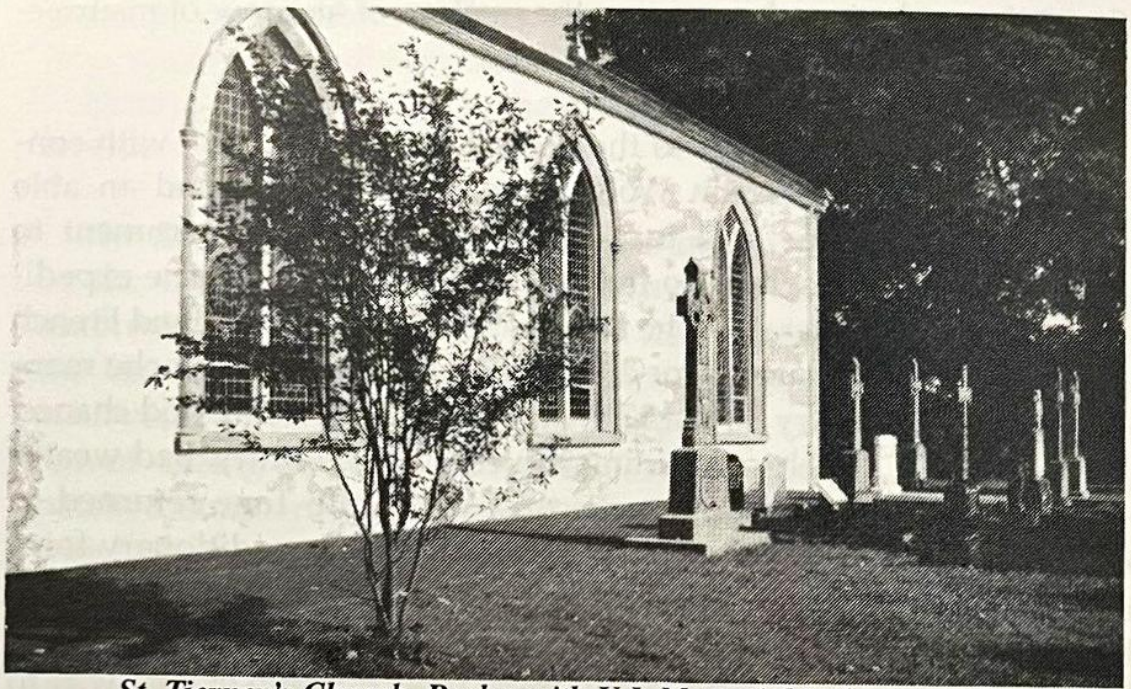
Society's numbers and providing the nucleus of an army of insurrection

United Irish approaches to the French government met with considerable early success. In Wolfe Tone, the Society found an able ambassador. He was able to persuade the French government to mount a major expedition to Ireland in December 1796. The expedition was led by General Hoche and consisted of 15,000 trained French soldiers and enough arms for 20,000 Irish recruits. Had Hoche managed to land at Bantry Bay in 1796 he would have had a good chance, with United Irish help, of gaining control of the country. Bad weather prevented a landing and a disconsolate Wolfe Tone returned to France. There, he continued to lobby for another expeditionary force but, after the sudden death of Hoche, with decreasing success.

The response of the British administration to these events was to intensify repression of the population while courting the Orange Order and the Catholic Bishops. (Both the Orange Order and Maynooth were established in 1795).

In late 1796 many prominent leaders of the Society were arrested. These leaders, who included Thomas Addis Emmett and Thomas Russell, were effectively interned, first in Ireland, and later in Scotland. They were not released until 1802. In 1797 martial law was proclaimed in the province of Ulster and troops led by General Lake were turned loose on the population.

In spite of repression, the Society continued to prepare for insurrection. At local level strenuous efforts were made to obtain weapons and at the same time to infiltrate and subvert the various county militias. In 1797 the authorities were alarmed to discover that 70 members of the Monaghan militia stationed outside Belfast were sworn United men. Similar United Irish cells were found among the other militias stationed in and around Belfast. On 14 May 1797 four men of the Monaghan militia were marched from Belfast to their camp and executed in front of their fellow militia.



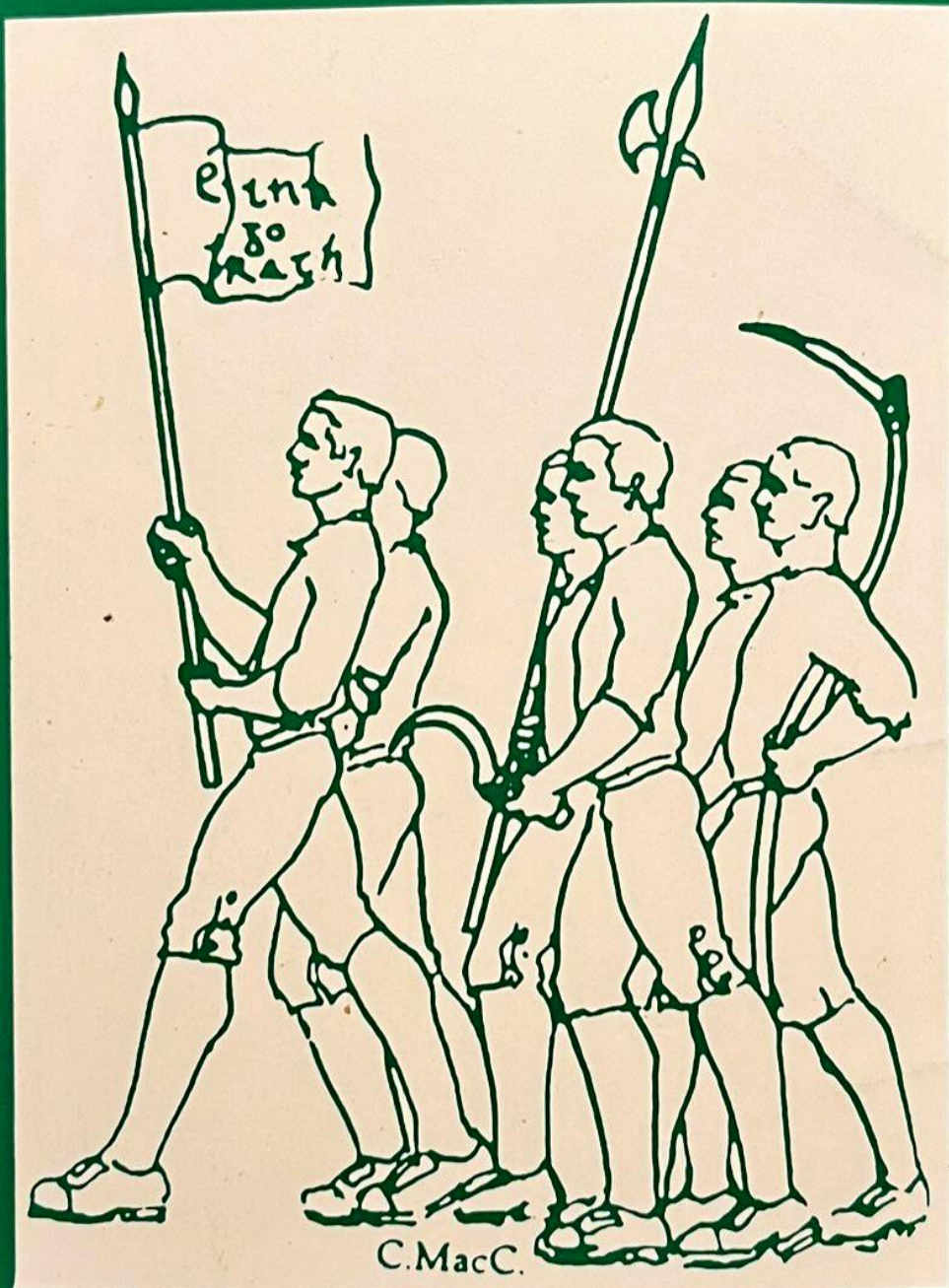
St. Tierney's Church, Roslea with U.I. Memorial in foreground.

At national level there were divisions among the leadership. The basic issue was whether to attempt an insurrection on their own or to await another French expedition. Finally, it was decided to attempt insurrection unaided in 1798. The attempt was disrupted by government arrests of the top leadership and when rebellion broke out, in Antrim, Down, Kildare, Wicklow, Carlow and Wexford, it was defeated quite quickly but with considerable loss of life, chiefly on the side of the rebels.

The United Irishmen were unsuccessful and the subsequent development of Irish politics was very different from what they imagined or desired. Nevertheless, theirs was a noble, inclusive vision of "a prosperity established on civil, political and religious liberty".

The above account gives the merest brief outline of the maelstrom of Irish politics in the 1790's. The full story of the Society of United Irishmen has not yet been uncovered. In the meantime we do well to remember our Roslea Martyrs and the many thousands of their comrades who fought and died at Antrim and Enniscorthy, at Randalstown and New Ross, at Ballynahinch and Vinegar Hill.

Peter Cosgrove
September 1997



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