

## **'Thomas Russell'**

### **14<sup>TH</sup> February 2018**

Linda McKenna from Down Museum gave a most interesting talk entitled 'Thomas Russell, the Man from God Knows Where'. Russell, who was born in County Cork in November 1767, was a co-founder and leader of the United Irishmen. He was executed at Downpatrick on 21st October 1803 for his part in the Robert Emmet rebellion of that year.

Russell joined the British Army in 1783 and served in India. He returned to Ireland in 1786 and began studying science and politics. In July 1790 he met a young radical politician, Theobald Wolfe Tone, in the visitor's gallery in the Irish House of Commons and they became close friends. Russell was attracted to the radical ideas of Tone. When he restarted his military career he was posted to Belfast and it is while he was there that he met other radical thinkers such as Henry Joy McCracken, James Hope and others and with them he founded the Society of United Irishmen on 18th October 1791. The initial aims of the society were constitutional reform and union among all Irish people irrespective of their religion or political beliefs

The government in Dublin were concerned at the growing popularity of the United Irishmen and when Russell and other leaders of the society declared for the independence of Ireland from Britain and planned to get French help to achieve this aim, the government banned the society forcing it to become a clandestine organisation as the would be revolutionaries sought to continue their progress towards independence.

By 1796 the Society of United Irishmen were openly training men to fight. The government reacted by declaring martial law in many parts of Ireland. This included County Down where Russell was one of the leaders, in fact he was referred to as Adjutant General of the Republic in that County. He was arrested and held without trial in jail in Dublin. As a result he missed out in taking part in the rising which broke out in the summer of 1798.

In March 1799 he and other state prisoners were transferred to Fort George in Scotland near Inverness. He was released in June 1802 on condition that he would go into exile in Hamburg. This he did but he did not stay there long, soon making his way to Paris where he met another United Irishmen, Robert Emmet who was planning another insurrection in Ireland. Russell agreed to support Emmet and they returned to Ireland in March 1803. He agreed to organise a rising in the north.

He was to be disappointed. Much of the north was subdued following the suppression of the 1798 rebellion and few were interested in taking part in

another insurrection. Eventually he found some support in Loughinisland near Downpatrick and prepared to take to the field on 23rd July 1806, the date set by Emmet. However the plan was badly thought out and the rising quickly collapsed. Russell fled to Dublin before a shot was fired in anger. Russell managed to hide for a few weeks but Dublin was a bad place to hide in the days following the failure of Emmet's rebellion. The shocked authorities had launched a massive campaign of raids and arrests in an effort to eradicate the United Irishmen. Russell was soon arrested and sent to Downpatrick jail where he was tried for treason and found guilty. He was executed by hanging outside the jail and then beheaded on the 21st October 1803. His body was claimed by Mary Ann McCracken, sister of the late United Irishmen's leader Henry Joy McCracken. She paid for the grave at the Church of Ireland Parish Church in Downpatrick, a grave which can still be seen today.

In 1898 a number of people commemorated the centenary of the United Irishmen rebellion. One of these people, Florence Mary Wilson from Bangor wrote a poem about Russell and his role in Emmet's 1803 rising. She referred to him as 'The man from God knows where', a title which has become linked to Thomas Russell ever since.