

The Unknown Rebellion

You have heard of William Wallace, the Bruce and of course Bonnie Prince Charlie. Have you heard of Thomas Muir, Thomas Palmer or William Skirving?

The basic freedom of speech was restricted by the crown and Muir, Palmer and Skirving were considered radicals, for preaching freedom and equality. These terms are reminiscent of Wallace since the joining of the two crowns. Freedom was for the landed gentry and those in the lower social rungs were sorely lacking any form of freedom. Only the landed gentry had the right to be represented.

In the early 1790's Muir, Palmer and Skirving were tried by Lord Braxfield, one of Scotland and the crowns most notorious judges. The outcome of the trial was not in doubt. Muir who was a lawyer by trade, mounted a gallant defense, but it was for naught. The three gallant radicals were sentenced to 14 years in the penal colony of Australia. Only one escaped "Muir" in 1796 and fled to France. In 1797 he tried to get the French to "liberate" Scotland.

From 1793 to 1817 Britain was at war with France, more to the point the "little corporal" Napoleon. During this period government repression drove those seeking equality underground. During this time a group called the United Scotsman was formed to promote vote by secret ballot, universal male suffrage "the right to vote" and annual elections.

With the end of the war came a vast recession, unemployment was rampant. If you had a job your wages were cut. From 1800 to 1808, the wages of weavers was cut in half. This trend in down sizing wages became the norm. In 1816, the weavers in Kilsyth were making £1 (one pound) per week. By 1820 they were making 11 shillings per week. A pack of meal was 3 shillings. Bread was no longer a staple, it had become a major luxury for the working class. To complain was to lose any chance of working.

A meeting of "radicals" was held on 16th August 1819 at St. Peter's Fields, Manchester England and was put to rout by the Kings military with many deaths and casualties. In Scotland the "Peterloo" deaths provoked much widespread protest, 16,000 protested in Paisley. The band with the protesters was arrested for playing "Scots Wha Hae". The Royal Calvary was called out to restore order. There were mass meetings also in Stirling.

On Sunday April 1, 1820, a bill was posted on the streets of Glasgow, Dumbarton, Paisley, Stirling and Kilsyth calling for a general strike to sweep away the present form of government. Words such as “friends and countrymen”, roused from the state in which we have sunk for so many years, we are at length compelled to assert our rights at the hazard of our lives. Sounds a bit like “Give me liberty or give me death”. The British Crown had a rebellion on its hands and only called out the military.

On Monday, April 2nd, the government called for all shops to be closed and everyone was to stay in their homes. Most of central Scotland went on strike. Most of the weaving communities went out on strike. Many in the west of Scotland went on strike.

On April 8th a royal decree was posted at Glasgow Cross. It offered 500 pounds reward for the authors of the treasonable document of April 1st. The first arrest was that of James Wilson of Strathaven. James was a weaver, a jack of all trades and had been of a radical mind for years. James Wilson had carried a banner during the strike stating “Scotland Free or a Desert”.

Wilson was known to have many meetings at his home prior to the rebellion. He was taken from his home to Hamilton Barracks on a charge of high treason. On July 20th, 1820 he was formally charged with high treason in the high court of Glasgow.

On April 3rd about 70 men led by Andrew Hardie met at what is now the Necropolis in Glasgow. All were armed with muskets, pistols, swords and pikes. Hardie by trade was a weaver. The armed men marched to Condorrat and met up with another weaver, John Baird. Baird had a party of men with him. The combined parties would march on Carron Iron Works near Falkirk and secure munitions for the coming fight. At Bonnymuir they were spotted by the 7th and 10th Hussars. The overwhelming British force soon subdued the parties led by Hardie and Baird. All of the survivors were taken to the military prison at Stirling Castle.

The rebellion was quelled by overwhelming force, not for the lack of desire to be free. On Saturday 8th of April prisoners from Paisley were taken under guard to prison in Greenock. The escort ran into a crowd of protesters and opened fire killing 8 people including 8 year old James McGilp. They also wounded 10 others. That night the angry crowd stormed the jail at Greenock and set the prisoners free.

The trial of James Wilson was a mockery of justice. James Wilson pled not guilty, but on the second day of trial the verdict was guilty. When asked if he had anything to say, Wilson stood proudly and said, "You have condemned me with a mock trial. You want a victim. I will not shrink from the sacrifice. I am ready to lay down my life in support of these principles which ultimately will triumph."

The sentence was to be hung, have his head cut off and his body cut into quarters. Hearing the sentence, Wilson again stood and said, "I commit my sacred cause, which is that of freedom, to the vindication of posterity."

On the 30th of August 1820, dressed in prison uniform, the proud Wilson was led to his fate. James Wilson was buried in Strathaven not as a traitor, but as a revered patriot.

A special court of English law "not Scots" met on 23 June and the remaining prisoners from Bonnymuir were charged with high treason. Among this group were John Baird, weaver from Condorrat and Andrew Hardie of Glasgow.

The trial was held under English law on July 6th in Edinburgh. Both were found guilty in due course and hung by the neck at Stirling. Before being hung Hardie declared, "I die a martyr to the cause of truth and liberty".

The story of this rebellion survived by being passed down by word of mouth within the families. It is only in the last 10 years that it became part of the history course taught in Scottish secondary schools through public pressure.

For more information on this subject contact the 1820 Society in Scotland. They are on the internet.