

DID YOU KNOW...

History, they say, is written by the victors. They might as well have added “by the men,” since so many women’s stories have gotten lost. (Is that why it’s called HIStory?)

Students of Irish history recognize the name of Henry Joy McCracken, commander in chief of the rebel force that marched on Antrim in the 1798 Rebellion. Although his sister had arranged for his escape to America, he was caught and executed.

Few, however, have heard of that sister. Mary Ann McCracken, born into that progressive philanthropic family in Belfast in 1770. Francis McCracken was a prominent shipowner; their mother Anne Joy came from another wealthy family which made its money in the linen trade and founded the Belfast News Letter. Concerned about the negative affect of British policies upon Irish industry, they were active in the reform movement of the 1790s.

Mary Ann was enrolled in a co-educational school, where young women received the same education as young men, and where she excelled in mathematics..

Like her brother Henry Joy, she was interested in reviving the ancient poetry and music of Ireland - they were both enthusiastic supporters of the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. She was a founding member of the Belfast Harp Society, founded after the turn of the century, and gave considerable financial assistance to individual harpists.

Like him, also, Mary Ann held radical beliefs, not just about politics, but social issues as well. Her letters to him in jail are full of political commentary, news of raids, arrests and arms seizures - showing that she was very much involved in the events around her. The letters demonstrate an advanced and well developed feminist consciousness, as well. ("Is it not almost time for the clouds of error and prejudice to disperse and that the female part of Creation as well as the male should throw off the fetters with which they have been so long mentally bound and conscious of the dignity and importance of their nature, rise to the situation for which they were designed...") Poverty and slavery also concerned her. Mary Ann led the Women's Abolitionary committee, continuing to promote the cause long after others had lost interest. At the age of 88, she could be seen on the Belfast docks, handing out anti-slavery leaflets to those boarding ships bound for the United States, where slavery was still practised.

After Henry's death she defied family opposition and brought up his illegitimate daughter Maria in the family home.

Subsequently, she and her sister Margaret opened a muslin business, employing a number of handloom weavers working at home. A progressive employer, she wrote about factory hygiene and the condition of workers, even suggesting they should be provided with warm coats! She was also opposed to the Act of Union, concerned for its effects on the poor. The sisters struggled to keep their business open during the economic depression that followed. Mary Ann worried about what would happen to the women if they were made redundant, but by 1815, the McCrackens were forced to close shop.

Mary Ann continued to be concerned about education and poverty, helping to establish an Industrial School in 1847, and later a nursery for orphans. She supported the Poorhouse and was active in the Belfast Ladies

Association for the Relief of Irish Destitution, the Belfast Ladies Clothing Society and the Society for the Relief of the Destitute Sick

Mary Ann McCracken never married, having lost the man she loved in the rebellion of 1803. She died in 1866, just weeks after her 96th birthday and is buried with her brother in the shadow of the Poorhouse to which she was so dedicated.