Opposing Emancipation, 1801–12

If early experience of the Union allowed the propagandist battle-lines of the 1790s to remain fixed a decade after the Act, the receding prospect of Catholic Emancipation ensured that the Protestant version of 1798 would become entrenched. From a modern perspective, it seems surprising that the 1798 Rebellion had not itself driven Emancipation from the political agenda. Yet in 1799 and 1800 the British Critic and the Antijacobin Review were both more concerned to combat English Protestant Dissenters – notably Unitarians – than the threat of Catholicism.¹ In February 1801 the Antijacobin, reviewing a pamphlet by Thomas McKenna in favour of Emancipation, commended it as ‘a production containing much good sense and sound argument’. The short review does express surprise that ‘Mr McKenna has not noticed the objections so strongly urged by Dr Duigenan’, which have ‘led us to entertain very strong doubts, not merely as to the expediency, but as to the constitutional practicability of rendering Catholics eligible to seats in Parliament’. The editors nevertheless express themselves ‘open to conviction’, and prepared to ‘weigh the arguments that come before us on both sides with equal impartiality and attention’.²

Meanwhile the Antijacobin reviewed an anonymous challenge to McKenna. The spirit of the hostile pamphlet may be gauged from its reference to the year 1797, when the system of United Irishmen had attained a great degree of maturity, and was every day threatening open rebellion; and when the Catholics, little grateful for past favours, demanded new concessions, amounting to a surrender of the constitution under the fanatical name of Catholic Emancipation.³
McKenna had argued that, contrary to the published evidence of those United Irishmen questioned by the parliamentary committee, the Catholic campaign for Emancipation was no mere smoke-screen. As for the pretended obstacle of Catholics' dual allegiance, McKenna asserts: 'The supremacy of the Pope is practically little more than rever­
ential.' In 1799, the year when the 81-year-old Pius VI died at the end of a 24-year pontificate, it was easy to believe that the days of the Papacy were over. Yet within two years Napoleon would conclude a concordat with Pope Pius VII.

The year of the Act of Union saw not only the papal concordat and the first two editions of Musgrave's *Rebellions*, but the resignation of William Pitt – ostensibly because of royal opposition to Catholic Emancipation. The same year brought publication of John Reeves's *Considerations on the Coronation oath*. Reeves, a former Fellow of Queen's College, Oxford and a government placeman, had been a leading antijacobin figure in the 1790s, and was more hostile to Dissenters than to Catholics. His loyalist Crown and Anchor Association, formed with covert ministerial encouragement, was designed to keep French invaders (and French principles) at bay. Reviewing Reeves's 1801 publication, the *British Critic* could not find anything 'approaching to asperity' in the text, nor 'any very strong declaration about the inexpediency of admitting the claims of Catholics, any further than the obligation to preserve the law and constitution established in the time of King William'. Reeves argued, with some ingenuity, that the relevant phrase in the coronation oath had been intended as a remedy against the sovereignty of Parliament:

The politicians of that day saw that they had no way of binding their posterity, but by binding the King, whose political character gave a sort of individuality to the nation; and who, in all succession of time, might set himself against every attempt that should be made, even by the ministers and parliament, to repeal the Protestant constitution which they intended to fix for ever.

More than half of the six-page review of Reeves is devoted to a verba­
tim extract. The *British Critic* notes the writer's (somewhat paradoxical) insistence 'that Catholics should not be admitted into our government; but if Ireland had continued a separate kingdom, they might have been admitted there'. The *British Critic* evidently assumes that the Act of Union had settled the matter.