

Patten, John

by Sylvie Kleinman

Patten, John (1774–1864), associate of Robert Emmet (qv) and librarian of the RDS, was born 16 August 1774, youngest among three children of the Rev. J. Patten (d. 1787) of Annerville, presbyterian minister of Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, and his wife Margaret (née Colville) (b. 1725). His sister Jane married (1791) the United Irishman Thomas Addis Emmet (qv), and his elder brother, William (b. 1772), became a governor of the Bank of Ireland. John entered into a partnership with his uncle, William Colvill (qv), a prosperous merchant with a business on Merchant's Quay, Dublin. After his sister's marriage he became a frequent guest at the Emmet family home on St Stephen's Green, assisting young Robert with experiments in his laboratory and sharing his political opinions. It is not clear if he was a United Irishman, but long after the events of 1803 he recalled to the historian R. R. Madden (qv) one of their frequent meetings hosted by Thomas Addis Emmet there. He had seen Robert sketching the design for the society's seal, and so identified a ring, engraved with this design, worn by Emmet at his execution.

In early summer 1800 he travelled to visit his brother-in-law, then a state prisoner at Fort George, Scotland, possibly with Robert. When the prisoners were released (1802), his sister Jane was unsuccessful in persuading him to emigrate to America with them. He provided the finance to set up a tannery business in Dolphin's Barn, with Robert Emmet, who was debarred from a professional career because of his expulsion from TCD. They were to learn the trade from a William Norris, a United Irishman who would become active in Emmet's conspiracy. Patten attended strategic meetings at the home of Thomas Wright (qv), a military strategist, but otherwise little is known of his role during the insurrection save that Philip Long (qv), the main financier of the action, sent him his will for safekeeping. After the failure of the coup Patten was one of a trusted inner circle who visited Emmet in hiding, and with Long urged him to escape to France. Patten was arrested in July, freed, then rearrested and brought to Kilmainham gaol. His papers were seized by Maj. Sirr (qv) on 27 August, and at Emmet's trial he was listed in the 'Devil's Brief' as a witness, needed to testify as to whether seized papers were indeed in the hand of the accused. Patten was held without trial and, on 12 August 1804, with fourteen other state prisoners, including Emmet's cousin St John Mason (qv) and Long, signed a petition to the viceroy complaining of the hardships they suffered at the hands of Dr Edward Trevor (qv), whose cruel treatment had driven some to madness.

He was released on 26 November 1805, but details for the following years are scarce. He continued his scientific interests and was a member of the RDS's chemistry committee. On 21 February 1833 he was elected the society's librarian, defeating the eminent academic John Anster (qv). Though it was said he lacked the academic qualities of his predecessors, he was a painstaking custodian of

the library, which at the time housed some 11,000 volumes, manuscripts, and pamphlets. In 1836 he implemented the recommendations for the collection of the select committee of the house of commons, and retired in 1855, after two decades of devoted service. He lived for a time in Sandymount, just outside Dublin, having suffered reverses of fortune due to loss of property. An American niece spoke warmly of her visit there, describing her ageing but playful uncle as possessing 'a mind stored with information' (Emmet, i, 157). His longevity made it possible for him to assist Madden in reconstructing Robert's life, sharing intimate memories and personal letters, as over the years he had remained a loyal and trusted friend of the Emmet family. He died 11 January 1864 at 93 Lower Mount St.

He married (c.1822) a Miss Orr from Scotland; they had three children who all died young, including a son, John (1823–c.1844).

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Plowden, *Hist. Ire, 1801–10*, 719; R. R. Madden, *United Irishmen* (1860), iii, 34, 40–41, 103; id., *Memoirs* (1891), 304–5; T. A. Emmet *Memoir of Thomas Addis Emmet* (2 vols, 1915); James Meenan and Desmond Clarke (ed.), *The Royal Dublin Society* (1981); Patrick Geoghegan, *Robert Emmet: a life* (2003); Ruán O'Donnell, *Robert Emmet and the rebellion of 1798* (2003)