

4 CENTURIES : 30 LOCATIONS

# PREBYTERIANS IN ULSTER

POCKET HISTORY AND HERITAGE TRAIL

FOR FOUR CENTURIES, PRESBYTERIANS HAVE REPRESENTED ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENTS IN THE POPULATION OF IRELAND. THEIR INFLUENCE HAS BEEN STRONGEST IN THE HISTORY OF THE NORTHERN PROVINCE OF ULSTER WHERE FOR OVER 300 YEARS THEY HAVE CONSTITUTED A MAJORITY OF THE PRESENT POPULATION. THE ORIGINS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES IN IRELAND CAN BE TRACED TO SCOTLAND AND TO THE SUCCESSIVE WAVES OF IMMIGRATION OF SCOTTISH FAMILIES TO THIS ISLAND IN THE 1600S.

This publication looks at the story of Ulster's Presbyterians, highlighting the emergence of the historic Presbyterian denominations, the role of Presbyterians in the 1798 Rebellion and the formation of Northern Ireland, and the contribution of Presbyterians to education and the mission field. It also includes information on 30 sites where you can discover at first hand the richly textured history of Presbyterianism in Ulster.



Text by William Rouliston. Design by Mark Thompson. Thanks are due to Valerie Adams, Librarian, Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, Leslie McKeague, Roger Bradley, Grace Moloney, the Ulster-Scots Agency.



It has been based on DVD by the Ulster Historical Foundation. Acquired from the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland and the BBC Northern Ireland television.

Established in 1966, the Ulster Historical Foundation has been a leading force in the preservation of the Presbyterian history of Ireland. The Society aims to be the pre-eminent authority on the history of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and to promote the history of the churches of the province.

Each year the Foundation organises a variety of events, including lectures, conferences, exhibitions and publications. Each year the Foundation organises a variety of events, including lectures, conferences, exhibitions and publications.

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## 1 THE FIRST MINISTERS

Early 17th-century Ireland was in a state of transition and in no part of the island was this more apparent than in Ulster. As a result of official and unofficial plantations there was an influx of settlers from England and, in particular, Scotland which transformed the character of much of the province.

Accompanying these settlements was the introduction of Presbyterianism. The Church of Ireland was the established or state church and was organised along episcopalian lines. However, a number of ministers came to Ulster in this period who dissented from this view of church government, preferring the Presbyterian system. In part, their move to Ulster was due to the increasing hostility of the authorities in Scotland to Presbyterianism.

The first of these men was **Rev. Edward Brice** who moved from Dymen in Stringshire to Ballycary in County Antrim in 1613. He was followed by, among others, **Rev. Robert Blair** in Bangor, and **Rev. John Livingstone** in Killybegs, both County Down. **Rev. Andrew Stewart** in Donegore, and **Rev. Josias Welsh** in Nempelpatrick, both County Antrim. To begin with such men were tolerated within the Church of Ireland and there was no separate Presbyterian denomination at this time.

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Memorial to Rev. Andrew Stewart at Donegore Church of Ireland church



Plaque to Rev. Josias Welsh in the old graveyard in Nempelpatrick

## 6 THE COVENANTERS

By the 1680s a majority of Presbyterians had come to a position on the Covenants of 1638 and 1643 which could be described as 'respectful remembrance'. That is, they believed that the Covenants had been important documents, but were no longer perpetually binding on them and their descendants.

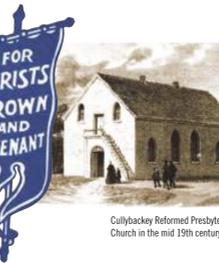
On the other hand, a minority of Presbyterians continued to believe in the continuing obligation of the Covenants and from them today's Covenanters or **Reformed Presbyterians** descend.

Of the early history of the Covenanters in Ireland very little is known, save that their numbers were small and that they were widely scattered. They maintained close links with fellow Covenanters in Scotland where a Reformed Presbyterian Church was formed in 1743. The first Reformed Presbyterian minister, **Rev. William Martin**, was ordained at the Vow on the River Bann, near Ballymoney, in 1757. Six years later an **Irish Reformed Presbytery** was established. Due to a depleted ministry this was dissolved in 1773, but was re-established in 1792. In 1811, at Cullybackey, County Antrim, a Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church met for the first time.

The 1830s was a decade of dissension within the Reformed Presbyterian Church over issues relating to the denomination's historic position on political dissent and in particular on the powers of the civil magistrate. Eventually, led by **Rev. John Paul** of Loughmourne, County Antrim, those who challenged the accepted view withdrew from the main body of the Church in 1840 and formed the **Eastern Reformed Presbyterian Church**. This denomination folded in the early 20th century with most congregations either joining the Presbyterian Church or returning to the Reformed Presbyterian Church.



Rev. John Paul



Cullybackey Reformed Presbyterian Church in the mid 19th century

## 11 PRESBYTERIANISM SINCE 1900

Presbyterians entered the twentieth century with confidence, a clear sense of purpose, and with a pride in their contribution to the modernising of Ulster as well as a strong awareness of their Scottish roots. This was symbolised in the opening of a new headquarters for the Presbyterian Church – the magnificent **Assembly Buildings** – in Belfast in 1905.

During the third Home Rule crisis of 1910–14, unionists drew on the 17th-century Scottish covenants in formulating a document – the **Ulster Covenant** – that would express their deep opposition to proposed changes to their position within the United Kingdom.

The partition of Ireland in 1921 was viewed by Presbyterians as a regrettable necessity. While most Presbyterians now found their fulfilment within the new state of Northern Ireland, a significant minority in the border counties of Ulster and in other parts of the island – some 50,000 – were in the Irish Free State, the forerunner of the Republic of Ireland.



Left: Memorial to Thomas Sinclair, author of the Ulster Covenant, Assembly Buildings, Belfast. Below: St. Enock's Presbyterian Church, Carlisle Circus, Belfast (now demolished)

The recent 'Troubles' was a period of intense trial for many Presbyterians. Many Presbyterians died as a result of terrorist atrocities during the conflict and many more were injured.

In the 21st century the Presbyterian Church faces the major challenge of secularism and the increasing disinterest in matters of religion. A number of congregations, especially in inner city Belfast and on the west bank of the Foyle in Londonderry, have folded, while others are at risk of closure. Nonetheless, in other areas new congregations have been established and existing causes revitalised.

Today the Presbyterian Church continues to maintain a witness and carry on a tradition that began in Ireland four centuries ago. At present there are some 560 congregations and around 230,000 members of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. While its presence is mainly to be found in Northern Ireland, there are significant numbers of congregations in other parts of the island, especially counties Donegal and Monaghan as well as the city of Dublin.

## 2 THE FIRST PRESBYTERY

In Scotland attempts by Charles I to impose his authority upon the Church provoked a hostile response which eventually led to the **National Covenant** of 1638. This Covenant declared Presbyterianism the only true form of church government and bound the nation to the principles of the Reformation.

Many people in the north of Ireland also signed this Covenant. In response, the government insisted that all Scots in Ulster over the age of sixteen take an oath – the **'Black Oath'** as it became known – abjuring the Covenant. This had a deep destabilising effect on the province with many settlers withdrawing to Scotland to avoid taking the oath.

In October 1641 an uprising began in Ulster which was organised by the leading figures in the Gaelic Irish community. This insurrection quickly escalated and resulted in significant loss of life and destruction of property. Many of the Scottish settlers fled for safety to their homeland, while in 1642 an army under the command of Major General Robert Munro was sent to Ireland to protect those who remained.

The regiments in this army were accompanied by ministers who acted as chaplains. They included:

- Rev. Hugh Cunningham, Rev. James Simpson, Rev. John Baird, Rev. John Scott, Rev. Thomas Peebles, Rev. John Aird



The signing of the National Covenant in Greyfriars, Edinburgh, in 1638

On 10 June 1642, in Carrickfergus, County Antrim, five of these ministers and four ruling elders, chosen from the four regiments that had formed Kirk sessions, came together in what is regarded as the inaugural Irish Presbytery meeting, from which, in a formal sense, today's Presbyterian Church in Ireland descends. This event is commemorated by a sculpture positioned beside **Joymount Presbyterian Church**, Carrickfergus, and by the 'Carrickfergus Window' in **Assembly Buildings**, Belfast.



Carrickfergus Window, Assembly Buildings, Belfast



The Solemn League and Covenant

Signatories to the Covenant signed in Holywood in 1644

## 7 THE NON-SUBSCRIBERS

In the early 18th century there occurred the first major dispute within Irish Presbyterianism. This was over the issue of subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith which had been made compulsory on all ministers by the Synod of Ulster. Led by **Rev. John Abernethy** of Antrim, those who denied the necessity of subscribing to this work were known as 'New Lights' or 'Non-Subscribers'.

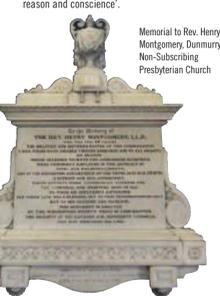
Failing to reach a consensus on the issue, in 1725 the Synod of Ulster placed those who took this stance in the **Presbytery of Antrim** (this did not mean that all of the congregations were in County Antrim). In the following year the Synod voted to exclude the Presbytery of Antrim from the courts of the church.

A century later the issue of subscription again arose and was exacerbated by the division on the issue by conservative and liberal elements within the Synod, the former favouring compulsory subscription. Eventually this led to the withdrawal from the Synod of Ulster of seventeen ministers, led by **Rev. Henry Montgomery** of Dumnyry, and the formation of the Reformed Synod of Ulster in 1830, which held its first annual meeting in Belfast in May of that year.



Rev. John Abernethy

In 1835 the Reformed Synod, the Presbytery of Antrim and the Synod of Munster came together to form the **Association of Irish Non-Subscribing Presbyterians**. In 1910 the **General Synod of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church** was formed by the Presbytery of Antrim and General Synod. In the 1930s the Synod of Munster also joined this body. Today the 34 congregations of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church are found exclusively in counties Antrim and Down, with the exception of the congregations in Cork and Dublin. The denomination has as its motto, 'Faith guided by reason and conscience'.



Memorial to Rev. Henry Montgomery, Dumnyry Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church

## 12 PRESBYTERIAN PLACES OF WORSHIP

It was not until the second half of the 17th century that Presbyterians in Ireland began to build their own places of worship. (Prior to this they met in the parish churches of the Established Church.) To begin with Presbyterian meeting houses were built in less conspicuous rural areas or on the edge of towns.

Lacking wealthy patrons, most Presbyterian congregations did not build architecturally distinguished meeting houses. Rather in their design and configuration these places of worship reflected the Presbyterian emphasis on preaching and the need for everyone to hear the message.

The typical 18th-century Presbyterian meeting house was built on the T-plan with the pulpit in the centre of the long wall. If extra room was needed galleries would be added with access to them usually via external staircases. More innovative designs can be seen in the **First Presbyterian Church, Belfast**, and the **Old Congregation, Randalstown**, County Antrim, which are elliptical in plan.



Portlary Presbyterian Church (1841)



Wellington Presbyterian Church, Ballymena (2009)



Old Congregation, Randalstown (1750)

## 3 THE COVENANT AND ULSTER

Presbyterians across Ulster looked to the new Presbytery for leadership and spiritual guidance. As Kirk sessions were formed and as ministers were appointed to preach in various districts, the Presbyterian Church began to put down deep roots in Ulster.

In response to wider political developments across the three Kingdoms, the **Solemn League and Covenant** was prepared in 1643 by Scottish Covenanters and English Parliamentarians. In return for a promise to reform the Church in England and Ireland along Presbyterian lines the Scots agreed to provide military support to the Parliamentarians in their conflict with Charles I.

In April 1644 orders were issued from Scotland that the Solemn League and Covenant should be administered to the Scottish army where it was garrisoned throughout Ulster and to anyone else who wished to subscribe to it. Over the next three months, the Covenant was administered to thousands of people at 26 locations across the province, from Ballyvaughan in County Down to Ballyshannon in County Donegal. The copy of the Covenant signed at Holywood is in the collection of the Ulster Museum in Belfast.

The Parliamentarians, now led by Oliver Cromwell, failed to deliver on their promise to reform the Church of England as a Presbyterian denomination and when they executed the king in 1649 they were roundly condemned by Ulster's



The Solemn League and Covenant

Signatories to the Covenant signed in Holywood in 1644

## 8 THE SECEDERS

Following a dispute in the Church of Scotland over the issue of patronage and concerns about doctrinal laxity, a number of ministers seceded (hence their appellation Seceders) in 1733 and formed the Associate Presbytery. The conservative evangelicalism of the Seceders appealed to many Presbyterians in Ulster and from the 1740s onwards Seceder congregations were established here.

As a general rule, it would appear that it was in those areas most strongly affected by the influx of families from Scotland in the years either side of 1700 that the Seceders made the greatest impact.

The first Seceder congregation in Ireland was at **Lylehill**, County Antrim. In 1741 Presbyterians in this district appealed to the Associate Presbytery in Scotland, to send them preachers. Occasional preaching supplies were provided for several years before **Isaac Patton**, a native of Myroe, near Limavady, County Londonderry, was ordained their minister in 1745.

The Seceders in Scotland divided over the issue of the Burgess Oath, giving rise to the Burghers and Antiburghers. Though this division had little



Lylehill Presbyterian Church

relevance to Ireland, nonetheless, the Seceders here separated into the two camps. The Burghers established a Synod in 1779 in Monaghan and the Antiburghers did so in 1788 in Belfast.

A growing realisation that what they held in common was far greater than what divided them led to the Burghers and Antiburghers coming together to form the **Secession Synod** at Cookstown in 1818. In 1840 the great majority of Seceder congregations joined with the Synod of Ulster in forming the **General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church**. A few Seceder congregations remained outside of this body, but in time most joined the General Assembly, though a few joined the Reformed Presbyterian Church.



Tombstone at Hillsborough to Rev. James Hume, one of the earliest Seceder ministers in Ireland

## 13 EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

The Presbyterian Churches have always placed a high premium on education, not only in terms of an educated ministry, but also in having a literate membership. Many Presbyterian ministers organised their own schools. One of the earliest of these was the school established by **Rev. James McAlpine** at Killybegs, County Down, in 1697 where **Rev. Francis Hutchinson**, later Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University, received some of his early education.

In the second half of the 18th century notable academies were founded at **Rademore**, County Down, by **Rev. Moses Neilson** and at **Strabane**, County Tyrone, by **Rev. William Crawford**. The driving force behind the opening of **Belfast Academy** in 1786 was a Scotsman, **Rev. Dr James Crombie**, minister of the First Presbyterian Congregation, who wanted to establish a school along the lines of a Scottish collegiate institution.

Prior to the 19th century the overwhelming majority of Presbyterian ministers received their university education in Scotland, for the most part in Glasgow. However, the opening in 1815 of **Belfast Academical Institution** with its collegiate department meant that it was now possible for the Presbyterians to receive a higher education without having to travel to Scotland. Later in the



Anne Jane Carlie



Hutcheson blue plaque, Saintfield



Royal Belfast Academical Institution

## 4 THE LATE 17TH CENTURY

Following the Restoration of 1660, ministers who refused to conform to the teachings and episcopal authority of the newly reinstated Church of Ireland were dismissed. One virulent opponent of the Presbyterian ministers was Bishop Jeremy Taylor of Down and Connor who in one day declared vacant 36 parishes in counties Antrim and Down.

In the years that followed there was considerable state hostility towards Presbyterians and at different times ministers were arrested and imprisoned. One particularly notorious incident followed the discovery in 1663 of a conspiracy by **Captain Thomas Blood** to seize Dublin Castle. Around 20 Presbyterian ministers were arrested on suspicion of complicity in this plot, but all were eventually released with the exception of Blood's brother-in-law, **Rev. William Lecky**, who was executed.

In 1684, during another difficult period for Presbyterians, some ministers in County Donegal considered emigrating to America to escape persecution, but in the end did not go ahead with this. Despite these difficulties, Presbyterians continued to form congregations and, having been excluded from parish churches, began to build their own meeting houses.



St Columba's Cathedral, Derry, was used by Anglicans and Presbyterians during the Siege of 1689

Plaque at Hillsborough Fort commemorating King William's restoration of the regnum domini in 1690

## 9 PRESBYTERIANS AND THE 1798 REBELLION

The distinguished historian A. O. Stewart famously observed, 'The Presbyterian is happiest when he is being a radical.' Political radicalism was never more obvious than in the 1790s when Presbyterians were instrumental in the creation of the United Irishmen and were heavily involved in the revolutionary activities that led to the 1798 Rebellion.

Influenced by the American and French Revolutions the **Society of United Irishmen** was founded in Belfast in 1791 by a group of Presbyterians led by **Dr William Drennan**, son of a former minister of the First Presbyterian Congregation in the town. Soon afterwards clubs were founded in Dublin and in a number of other places. The aims of the Society were parliamentary reform and the elimination of English interference in Irish matters. After efforts to suppress it, the Society reorganised itself as a secret organisation and began to prepare for rebellion.

Following a failed French expedition in December 1796, the repressive measures taken by the government in 1797 severely weakened the United Irishmen in Ulster. Rebellion began in Leinster in late May 1798. On the night of 6-7 June it spread to Ulster when a party of United Irishmen



Plaque to Henry Joy McCracken, Masonic Hall, Rosemary St, Belfast

advanced into Lame and forced a contingent of government troops back to their barracks. Soon afterwards Ballymena and Randalstown were taken, but at Antrim Town the rebels were defeated.

In County Down following an initial victory at Saintfield, the rebels were roundly defeated at nearby Ballynahinch on 11 June and the rebellion in Ulster was all but finished. There followed a series of executions including that of **Rev. James Porter** of Grayabbey, the only ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church to be put to death in what was widely regarded as a miscarriage of justice. One of the last to be hanged was the most famous Ulster rebel of them all, **Henry Joy McCracken**, a member of the Third Presbyterian Congregation, Belfast.



Plaque at Hillsborough Fort commemorating King William's restoration of the regnum domini in 1690

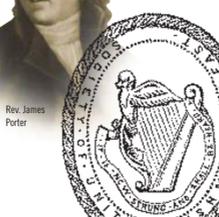
Plaque to Henry Joy McCracken, Masonic Hall, Rosemary St, Belfast

## 14 ULSTER PRESBYTERIANS WORLDWIDE

For more than three centuries Presbyterians from Ulster have been carrying their faith across the globe – to North America, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere – and have founded many congregations and built numerous places of worship.

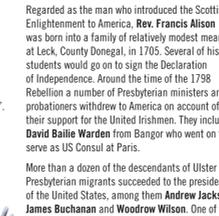
Emigration to North America by Ulster Presbyterians began in the late 17th century. Immigrants from Ulster made a huge contribution towards the development of Presbyterianism in America, none more so than the Donegal-born **Rev. Francis Makemie** who sailed across the Atlantic in 1683. His pioneering ministry earned him the title, 'Father of American Presbyterianism'.

Presbyterian ministers have been key drivers of emigration from Ulster. In 1718 **James McGregor** of Aghadowey in the Bann Valley led part of his congregation to New England, as did **Rev. James Woodside** of Dunboe. In 1764 **Rev. Thomas Clark** of Cahans, County Monaghan, led 300 Presbyterians to America, while in 1772 **Rev. William Martin** led a major exodus of Covenanter families, mainly from County Antrim, to South Carolina.

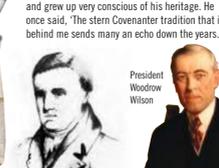


Statue of Rev. Francis Makemie, Philadelphia

More than a dozen of the descendants of Ulster Presbyterian migrants succeeded to the presidency of the United States, among them **Andrew Jackson**, **James Buchanan** and **Woodrow Wilson**. One of the most highly regarded presidents, Wilson was born in the Presbyterian manse in Staunton, Virginia, and grew up very conscious of his heritage. He once said, 'The stern Covenanter tradition that is behind me sends many an echo down the years.'



Rev. Francis Alison



President Woodrow Wilson

## 5 THE 18TH CENTURY

The prospects for Presbyterians in Ulster at the beginning of the 1690s seemed good. However, very quickly it was apparent that Presbyterians would continue to be denied full access to civil power and the enjoyment of religious freedom. The state church continued to be the Church of Ireland which remained hostile to Presbyterianism.

For many members of the establishment, Presbyterians were regarded as more of a threat than Catholics, especially because of their numerical superiority over Anglicans in Ulster.

Between 1695 and 1728 legislation known as the **Penal Laws** was passed in the Irish Parliament. While Catholics were the principal targets of these laws, they also affected Presbyterians. For example, marriages conducted by a Presbyterian minister were not recognised by the state and children born of such a marriage were regarded as illegitimate.

In 1704 the **Test Act** was introduced in Ireland which required those holding public office to produce a certificate stating that they had received communion in an Anglican church. This effectively disbarred Presbyterians from participation in local government. In 1719, with the passing of the **Toleration Act**, Presbyterians were granted official recognition. Nonetheless, with the levers of power still firmly in the hands of an Anglican elite, and with other restrictions still in force, they continued to feel estranged from the state.

The relationship with the state was only one of the issues confronting the Presbyterian Church in this period. For the first time a serious internal dispute threatened the unity of the Church. The subscription controversy is looked at in more detail in panel 7.

The Church also faced the challenge of two alternative versions of Presbyterianism in the form of the **Covenanters** and the **Seceders** (see panels 6 and 8). Nonetheless, the Church maintained its position as the dominant Presbyterian denomination on this island.

Rev. John Thomson, minister of Canonmy Presbyterian Church from 1767 to 1828

## 10 PRESBYTERIANISM IN THE 1800S

The 19th century was a period of expansion for the Presbyterianism in Ireland with hundreds of new congregations formed, partly in response to the rise in the population in the early 1800s, and also to the expansion of urban centres. This can be seen clearly in the rapidly-expanding industrial city of Belfast where between 1850 and 1900 the Presbyterian population quadrupled, while the number of congregations rose from 15 to 47.

The withdrawal of the liberals in the late 1820s helped to clear the way for the union of the Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod.