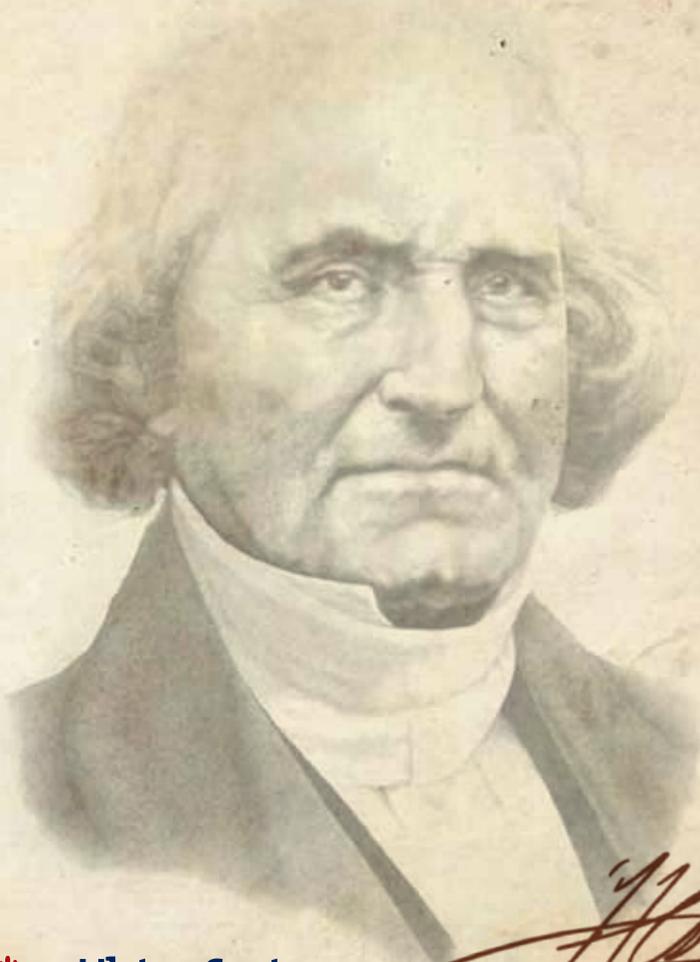


Great Ulster Scots

Henry Cooke

an introduction



A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'H. Cooke', written in a cursive style.



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Introduction

Henry Cooke was one of the most influential Presbyterian ministers of the nineteenth century and one of the great public figures of Belfast. Hugh McCalmont, the 1st Earl Cairns (1819 – 1885), the Belfast-born Conservative politician and Lord Chancellor in Disraeli's two administrations, observed that Cooke's life constituted 'a large portion of the religious and public history of Ireland'.

Even in his own life-time Henry Cooke was referred to by his opponents as the 'Presbyterian Pope'. They were suggesting that his behaviour was unPresbyterian and that he seemed to exercise, or wished to exercise, greater powers over his Church than even the office of Moderator would allow. Certainly annually-elected Presbyterian Moderators act as chairmen and figureheads and do not exercise the same level of authority and control over their denomination as bishops or pontiffs.

In the 1820s Cooke was also hailed as 'the Presbyterian Athanasius' on account of his role in the Second Subscription Crisis. St Athanasius of Alexandria (circa 296 – 373) was the champion of Trinitarianism in the conflict with Arius (who denied the divinity of Christ) and Arianism, the heresy which bears his name, at the First Council of Nicea in 325.

It was said of the young Athanasius – he was in his late 20s – that he stood 'contra mundum' (against the world) in defence of the biblical doctrine of Christ when it seemed all the world would follow Arius's heresy. Many Presbyterians viewed Cooke as fulfilling the same role in the doctrinal disputes which convulsed Presbyterian Ulster in the early nineteenth century.

Politically, Henry Cooke has been held responsible for the fusion of conservative evangelicalism and Conservative Unionism and accused of – or credited with – leading the Presbyterian community away from a liberal past

to a conservative future. This has prompted him to be called 'the Father of Ulster Unionism'.

Finally, Cooke is widely referred to, if inaccurately, as 'The Black Man' because of the statue in front of Royal Belfast Academical Institution. However 'The Black Man' refers not to the statue of Cooke but the earlier bronze statue of the young Earl of Donegall which used to occupy the site. The statue had been painted black to protect it against the elements, hence the name. It was removed from the site in 1868 and for many years was on display inside the Public Library (now Belfast Central Library) in Royal Avenue. Since 1906 it has been in City Hall and may be seen at the top of the stairs in the Rotunda. As the statue of Cooke, erected in 1875, is made of copper, it has a pronounced green hue as a result of oxidation. On this basis Cooke might be more accurately described as 'The Green Man'.

Royal Belfast Academical Institution



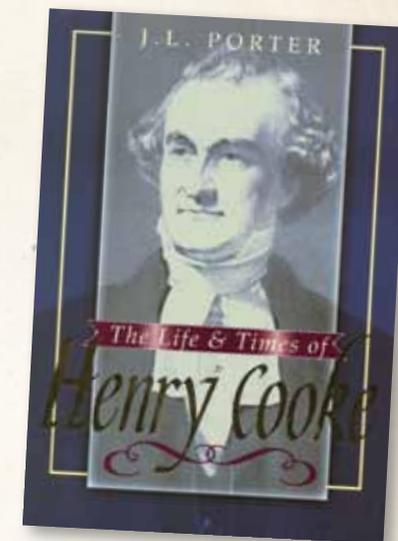
Birth and family background

Henry Cooke was born at Grillagh, near Maghera, County Londonderry. Professor J. L. Porter, Cooke's son-in-law and first biographer, states that Cooke was born on 11 May 1788, the date which Cooke himself chose to regard as his date of birth. In his *History of the Irish Presbyterians* (Belfast, 1902) W. T. Latimer, the distinguished Presbyterian historian, challenged this date, contending (but without any supporting evidence) that Cooke was born five years earlier. The only evidence which Finlay Holmes, Cooke's twentieth-century biographer, found to support the 1783 date is a remark by Henry Montgomery, Cooke's great rival and opponent, asserting that he was five years younger than Cooke. Montgomery was born in 1788. So it is possible that Latimer's contention is correct.

Perhaps of much greater interest is the fact that Cooke was actually born Maccook. By the time of his ordination in 1808 the 'Mac' was dropped from his surname. The 'e' was added later.

Henry Cooke (or Maccook) was the fourth and youngest child of John Maccook, a tenant farmer who tried to eke out a modest living from nine acres, and Jane Howie (or Howe) his second wife. Whereas John Maccook was of English Puritan stock, his wife (according to Porter) came from 'an old and respectable Scotch family ... who settled near Bellaghy'.

R. L. Marshall, the Presbyterian minister of Maghera (and a future professor at Magee) alleged that local tradition



had it that Henry Cooke was the son of the local landlord and Marshall suggested that this might explain Cooke's 'aristocratic bearing and autocratic temperament'. As Mrs Maccook's marital infidelity is a matter of pure speculation and hearsay rather than hard fact, we are all on much firmer ground, if we credit Mrs Maccook's personality as being the dominant influence on her son. From his mother he derived his force of character, his remarkable memory, and his powers of sarcasm.

According to Porter, Mrs Maccook was

Proud of the struggles of her [Covenanting] forefathers in defence of faith and freedom, she never forgot fact or legend connected with their history in Scotland and Ulster. To her Henry was indebted for most of those anecdotes and incidents of Irish history, which, in after years, he recited with such pathos and power.

In the late 1790s the Maccooks faced intimidation because of their hostility to the United Irishmen. This experience helped shape their underlying political conservatism.

Education

The young Maccook was educated at a succession of 'hedge schools'. As he explained to the Education Commissioners in January 1824, it was impossible to give a name to any of the six schools he attended except by townlands in which they were kept ... I learnt classics [Latin and Greek] with three individuals ; the first was a Roman Catholic young priest; the second a Presbyterian probationer and the third had been educated for a Roman Catholic priest who chose to marry a wife and become a school master.

The quality of the education he received was not to be sneered at. On the contrary, by the time he entered Glasgow University at age of 14 he had an acquaintance with the works of Virgil, Cicero, Homer and Xenophon.

He looked back on those days when he and a Roman Catholic friend 'tended the peaceful flocks with Vergil [sic] or fought again the battles of Homer' with nostalgia.

Glasgow University

In the autumn of 1802 the young Maccook was one of those young Ulstermen who set off to attend Glasgow University. These young lads normally walked in groups to Donaghadee and took ship to Portpatrick. From Portpatrick they walked to Glasgow. Along the route they were invariably treated hospitably by the locals. In Glasgow he would have joined other 'natives of the North of Ireland, of the very lowest order of people, who came, generally in a state of miserable destitution to qualify themselves in the speediest and cheapest manner for the function of the ministry'.

Maccook failed to shine academically at Glasgow. At a time when 'every student who had followed the course for four years left the university with an MA', Maccook managed to leave without taking a degree. While his son-in-law blamed this on his father-in-law's illness (fairly) and on the 'singularly dull' lectures of Maccook's professors (probably unfairly), in 1825 Cooke candidly acknowledged that the fault lay with him rather than with the university.

Despite his lacklustre performance at Glasgow, he was accepted as a student for the ministry by the Route Presbytery in 1806 and the following year he appeared before the Presbytery of Ballymena in 'the somewhat unclerical attire of blue coat, drab vest, white cord breeches and tops' and was licensed to preach the Gospel.



Duneane Presbyterian Church

Duneane

Although still only 20, he was called to Duneane in County Antrim and ordained and installed there on 10 November 1808 as assistant and successor to the Revd Robert Scott. His time in Duneane proved to be an unhappy episode in his life because he was very poor – he had only a stipend of £25 per annum – and he was also extremely lonely. Furthermore, Cooke's 'Old Light' worldview was wholly at variance with Scott's 'New Light' theology and that of the congregation. Cooke may have even been stigmatized as 'a Methodist'. Whereas 'Old Light' theology was conservative and traditional in outlook and adhered to Calvinism as set out in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 'New Light' theology was liberal in outlook and its advocates objected to obligatory subscription to the Westminster Confession by candidates for ordination as a test of orthodoxy. This was by no means a new controversy within Ulster Presbyterianism. It had been present in the

Presbyterian Church since the early part of the eighteenth century when many of the ablest Presbyterian ministers were sympathetic to 'New Light' doctrines and went to some lengths to avoid subscription. In 1725 the specifically non-subscribing Presbytery of Antrim was formed and parted company with the Synod of Ulster in 1726. However this did not resolve the problem because 'New Light' doctrines (or Latitudinarianism) continued to flourish within Synod and its regulations on subscription were frequently disregarded.

On a visit to Belfast in 1752 Richard Pococke, the Church of Ireland Bishop of Ossory, observed that the 'New Light' adherents were 'regarded' as Arians and that 'these two lights have a greater aversion to each other than they have to the Church [of Ireland]'. Pococke's brief observation has value in two obvious respects. First, being 'regarded' as an Arian is not quite the same thing as being an Arian. Some 'New Light' people may or may not have been Arians, a point which merits serious consideration. Secondly, the Bishop provides striking testimony to the depth of the enmity which existed between 'Old Light' and 'New Light' Presbyterians in the early 1750s.

Donegore

We have already noted Cooke's unhappiness in Duneane. He resigned in November 1810 - two years after his ordination and installation there – to become tutor to the family of Alexander Brown, a farmer from Kells, County Antrim. Cooke worshipped with the family at Connor, one of the largest congregations in the Synod of Ulster. One Sunday he was given the opportunity to shine because the memorably named Revd Henry Henry was suddenly taken ill and was unable to complete the communion service. Cooke completed the service and news of his extempore eloquence



Connor Presbyterian Church

travelled far and wide, not least to the nearby vacant congregation at Donegore. Cooke received a call to become their minister. In choosing Cooke, the people passed over another academically more brilliant candidate, the Revd Henry Montgomery, Cooke's great opponent in the 1820s. Like many rural congregations, the people of Donegore preferred Cooke's 'Old Light' theology to Montgomery's 'New Light' version. On 22 January 1811 Cooke was installed at Donegore by the Presbytery of Templepatrick.

Cooke's ministry at Donegore proved to be a very happy period of his life. In 1813 he was able to marry Ellen Mann from Toome, whom he had courted for seven years. She was supportive of his ministry and provided his life with a stability which he had not known previously. It was at Donegore too that his gift for preaching became evident. In December 1814 he was invited to preach a charity sermon at Belfast's recently opened House of Industry. This was a signal honour for a young minister. Furthermore his sermon raised £200 for the charity and was published and praised in the *News Letter* of 20 December 1814. It was the first of many charity sermons he would preach and which in turn would raise his profile. Interestingly, James Seaton Reid,



First Donegore Presbyterian Church

the Presbyterian historian, thought that the sermon was 'remarkable for the absence of evangelical sentiment'. Reid was not very sympathetic to J. L. Porter's contention that Cooke was always an evangelical.

Between 1815 and 1818 the congregation at Donegore generously allowed him the opportunity to remedy the deficiencies of which he was conscious in his education. He spent two successive winters studying in Glasgow and a third in Dublin. In Dublin he concentrated on studying medicine. During this era 'most Presbyterian ministers were physicians and surgeons likewise'. Before the advent of the National Health Service in 1948, people of all denominations, fearful of the expense involved in engaging professional medical services, greatly appreciated clergy with a modicum of medical expertise.

While he was studying in Dublin, he helped establish a Presbyterian congregation at Carlow.

First Killyleagh
Presbyterian Church



Killyleagh Castle

Killyleagh

Cooke's Donegore congregation must have been profoundly disappointed by the decision of their gifted young minister to resign to accept a call to Killyleagh, County Down. There he was to emerge as the champion of orthodoxy and a formidable critic of theological liberalism, especially Arianism.

Cooke was installed at Killyleagh, by the Presbytery of Dromore on 8 September 1818. Archibald Hamilton Rowan, a leading United Irishman in his younger days, was the foremost Presbyterian layman in the town and the occupant of Killyleagh Castle. Still a radical in politics, Archibald Hamilton Rowan was favourably disposed to 'New Light' theology. Rowan's younger son, Captain Rowan, an elder of Killyleagh and a former officer in the North Down Militia, on the other hand, did not subscribe to the same theological views as his father. Captain Rowan was attached to the older theology, and secured the election of Cooke by arguing that Cooke was 'by no means bigoted in his opinions'. There was some truth in this because at Donegore Cooke had been 'led to join in Arian ordinations', a laxity which at a later period he lamented.

Captain Rowan's significance should not be underestimated in the story which is about to unfold. Alexander McCreery in his *Presbyterian Ministers of Killileagh* [sic] states that Captain Rowan was 'primarily and mainly' responsible for promoting Cooke as 'the exponent and defender of Evangelical doctrine.'

Rowan was also responsible for introducing Cooke to evangelical aristocrats, notably the Earl of Roden and Lord Mountcashel, and other prominent people, not least his brother-in-law the Revd John Johnston, the Presbyterian minister of Tullylish.

In 1821 the English Unitarians dispatched John Smethurst of Moreton Hampstead, Devon, on a preaching mission in Ulster. Rowan (the father) may well have been responsible for bringing Smethurst to Killyleagh. The younger Rowan, accompanied by Cooke confronted him at his lecture in a schoolroom. Captain Rowan rose to his feet and said: 'These are not the doctrines our minister teaches, and here he is!' Cooke at this stage said nothing but challenged Smethurst's doctrine the following Sunday in his meeting house. Cooke then followed Smethurst to Downpatrick, Saintfield and elsewhere and allegedly inflicted a series of devastating defeats upon the Unitarian mission from which it never recovered.

During the course of 1821 Cooke also unsuccessfully opposed the appointment of Dr William Bruce, who if not an Arian at this stage certainly embraced Arianism shortly thereafter, to the chair of Hebrew and classics at the Belfast Academical Institution.

Evangelicalism

Henry Cooke is widely regarded as ‘the figurehead of the evangelical movement’ within the Presbyterian Church and it may be helpful to consider what we might mean by the term before proceeding further. The term Evangelical has its etymological roots in the Greek word for ‘gospel’ or ‘good news’: ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ (evangelion), derived from eu meaning ‘good’ and angelion meaning ‘message’. Thus the most basic definition of an Evangelical might be a believer of the Gospel, that is to say, the message of Jesus Christ.

In the sixteenth century - at the time of the Reformation - many Protestant theologians (as those familiar with the work of Diarmaid McCulloch will readily appreciate) used the word evangelical as a synonym for Protestant. For example, Martin Luther referred to the evangelische Kirche or evangelical Church. Lutherans in both northern Europe and North America continue to employ the word in this sense. This is evidenced by names of various Lutheran denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Evangelical Church in Germany.

In the English-speaking world the modern Evangelical movement dates from the 1730s and has its roots largely in Methodism. It was Methodism that prompted a religious revival within the Church of England. Although John Wesley visited Ireland on numerous occasions (21 times according to J. R. Wesley Weir), the Evangelical movement within Presbyterianism was shaped by the influence of the Church of Ireland rather than Methodism. Those Irish Presbyterians steeped in Calvinism and the doctrine of Predestination viewed Wesley’s Arminianism (belief in Free Will) with distaste. In 1828 Cooke conceded that reform within the Church of Ireland ‘may serve as a beacon’ to those seeking reform in the Synod of Ulster.

Cooke’s friendship with evangelical Church of Ireland clergy and landlords were important in the shaping of his subsequent political career.

- Normally Evangelicalism emphasizes the following:
- Personal conversion
- The Bible as the chief source of religious authority
- The cross of Christ
- Religious and social activism

These are matters which may further be examined in much greater detail in D. W. Bebbington’s *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1995).

The Doctrine of the Trinity

The second chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith states:

- I. There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory, most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin; and who will by no means clear the guilty.
- II. God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but

only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them; he is the alone foundation of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth. In his sight all things are open and manifest; his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature; so as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them.

III. In the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity defines God as three divine persons: the Father, the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit; 'one God in three persons'. The three persons are distinct, yet are one 'substance, essence or nature'.

Scripture does not contain expressly a formulated doctrine of the Trinity but, as Alister McGrath explains in his *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2001), Scripture 'bears witness to' the activity of a God who can only be understood in Trinitarian terms. McGrath's exposition of the Trinity may be explored more fully in his internationally acclaimed textbook.

Suffice to say, Cooke regarded Trinitarianism as orthodoxy and any denial of the Trinity as heresy. Those who denied the Trinity were described as Arians.



Stone relief of Cooke on
Omagh Orange Hall, County Tyrone

Very little of Arius's 'own writings have survived. We depend largely on quotations made by opponents which reflect what they thought he was saying.

It would seem that Arius argued that it was unreasonable (and unscriptural) to suppose that Jesus could be God in the same sense as God is God. How could the Son be co-eternal with the Father? He contended that it was far more sensible to regard Jesus as God's unique agent in creation and redemption than to believe that he shared the same divine nature as God. Athanasius in the fourth century argued that Arianism destroyed the basis of the Christian experience of salvation, which depended on the conviction that it was God Himself who had acted in Christ to make Himself known and to save man, who in his sin, was incapable of saving himself. The corollary of this conviction was the doctrine of the trinity, that Father, Son and Holy Spirit shared the same divine being.

The Crusade against Arianism

In 1821 very few Irish Presbyterians were Arians, a point which Cooke was willing to concede. Only 34 or 35 out of 200 Presbyterian ministers were suspected Arians. This being so, why did Cooke feel so exercised by Arianism?

John Jamieson, the historian of Royal Belfast Academical Institution and the author of a Master's thesis entitled 'The influence of the Rev. Henry Cooke on the political life of Ulster', argued that Cooke's championship of orthodoxy was 'chiefly a cloak beneath which he sought to conceal his real objective, which was the destruction of the political liberalism in his church, because it stood for the negation of his own political convictions'. In truth, it

is impossible to state with any certainty what Cooke's motives were. We may suppose Cooke's motives were religious but this cannot be proved.

In 1822 at the meeting of Synod at Newry few members of the Synod felt a crusade against Arianism had any merit. Most Presbyterians had no desire to tear their Church apart. They were perfectly happy to acquiesce in 'the easy-going, consensual arrangements' which had developed over the previous 50 years. Peter Brooke less charitably describes 'the period before 1825' as 'characterized by doctrinal indifference and apathy that inhibited the development of both theological radicalism and evangelicalism'. Cooke was no longer prepared to tolerate either 'the easy-going consensus' or 'doctrinal indifference and apathy'. He focused on the issue of the Trinity although there was a raft of other issues which concerned the Synod ranging from pulpit delivery and clerical dress. Cooke 'succeeded in reducing a complex spectrum of opinions to one black-and-white issue'.

Over the next decade Cooke was to contend that the Trinity could not be simply viewed as a speculative point of divinity. It was Cooke's view that 'a Saviour no better or only a little better than ourselves can never be a fit object for faith, the life and dependence of sinners'.

Perhaps a century later C. S. Lewis speaks to us even more forcefully than Cooke of the centrality of the divinity of Christ in *Mere Christianity* (London, 1952):

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.

Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Although Cooke was Moderator of Synod in 1824, his position did not greatly assist his crusade against Arianism. A Presbyterian Moderator is *primus inter pares* (first among equals). The same is erroneously said of British Prime Ministers because British Prime Ministers can hire and fire their Cabinet and ministerial colleagues. Moderators are only 'first among equals' and possess no authority comparable to a British Prime Minister. A Moderator is merely the servant of Synod and most emphatically not its master.

When Synod met at Ballymena in 1826 the majority was still against him. However in 1827 when Synod met at Strabane Cooke succeeded in convincing the Church to reaffirm its Trinitarianism. Building on that victory in 1828 at Cookstown, Cooke persuaded the Synod to establish a committee to examine the orthodoxy of students for the ministry. This would mean, and was emphatically intended to mean, that in the future no Arian would be accepted to train for the ministry.

The Revd Henry Montgomery published a remonstrance against the proceedings of Synod and threatened to secede if his objections and those of his friends were not met. In the words of I. R. McBride: 'In the end, the Arians jumped before they were pushed: seventeen ministers withdrew to form their own Remonstrant Synod in 1829'. As Andrew Holmes has noted, 'For the rest of the nineteenth century, evangelicalism was the dominant voice within Ulster Presbyterianism'. Jefferson College in the United States

conferred a Doctorate of Divinity on Cooke 'on account of high attainments in literature and science, and zealous earnestness in the promotion of evangelical truth', although one imagines principally the latter. The *Northern Whig* of 14 December 1829 acidly observed: 'in consequence of distance the College had discovered literary and scientific attainments which, in consequence of our too near approximation to the luminary, we were unable to discover.'

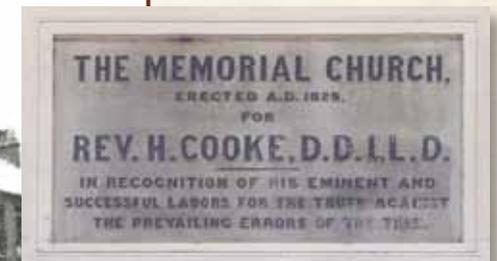
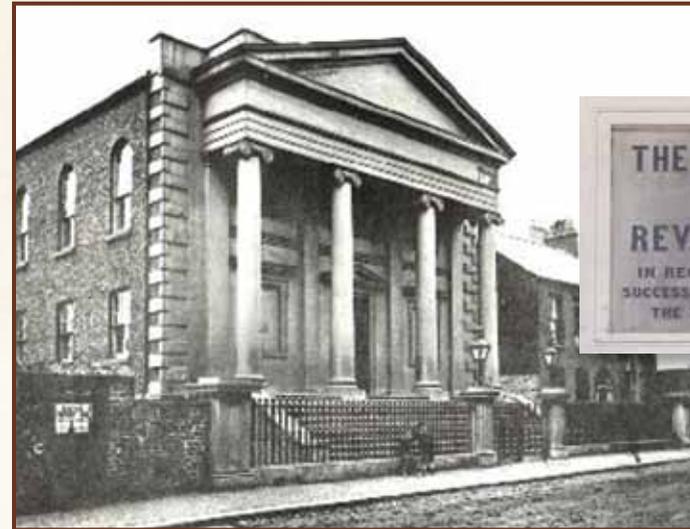
Why did Evangelicalism triumph within the Presbyterian Church?

The most obvious explanation for the triumph of Evangelicalism in the Presbyterian Church would attribute most the credit to the leadership, energy and perseverance of the indomitable Henry Cooke but there were other factors at work too.

Dr Henry Montgomery, Cooke's great opponent, attributed Cooke's 'extraordinary popularity and influence' to his skill in 'uniting Evangelicism [sic] and Orangeism, the countenance of aristocracy with the applause of the multitude'.

In addition to Cooke's acumen and skill, David Hempton and Myrtle Hill in *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740-1890* (London, 1992) contend that Evangelicalism triumphed because it met various needs and served a multiplicity of different purposes in nineteenth-century Ulster:

Against a background of rising Catholic nationalism, radical politics, secularization and industrialization, aristocrats, employers, clergy, churchmen and women imbued with evangelical seriousness, attempted to propagate a scripture-based culture which upheld social and political stability.



May Street
Presbyterian Church

May Street

At the end of the 1820s Cooke was at the height of his powers and prestige. Cooke's many admirers built him a fine new Church in May Street in Belfast to provide him with a pulpit in Ulster's rapidly expanding industrial capital. The Church, in dark red brick with stucco mouldings, was built between 1828 and 1829 at a cost of £6,500. The architect was William Smith and the *Belfast News Letter* described Smith's fine building as 'one of the most splendid and even magnificent structures for Presbyterian worship in Ireland'.

Cooke was installed there on 24 November 1829 and he was to minister there for nearly 40 years, delivering three sermons every Sunday, each rarely under an hour in length. Some observations on the style of preaching of that era may be appropriate.

According to Andrew Holmes:

The style of nineteenth-century preaching was designed to achieve the conversion of sinners and to awaken religiously indifferent congregations. Consequently, sermon delivery in general tended to display a much greater intensity and earnestness than was the case in the eighteenth century, as sinners were urged to come to Christ.

Some hostile critics regarded this intense style as ‘a form of psychological manipulation.’

Holmes has suggested that ‘the popularity of Cooke and other evangelical preachers had as much to do with their style and presence as with what they preached.’ Rightly or wrongly, Holmes is of the view that ‘they were not only evangelists but also entertainers.’ He offers the further explanation:

In that regard, evangelical Presbyterian preaching was as much a performance fitted to meet the mood of the age as it was a proclamation of the Good News.

On 2 September 1836 Robert Graham of Redgorton, a lawyer by training, a significant Perthshire landowner and a Whig, witnessed the opening of Malone Presbyterian Church by the Revd Dr Henry Cooke. Although Graham did not share Dr Cooke’s politics nor his theology, he found his discourse genuinely ‘impressive.’

Outside the pulpit, Cooke’s working habits bring to mind those of Jean Calvin: requiring little sleep, Cooke rose at 4:00 am; he travelled, spoke, and wrote with incessant energy.

National Schools

In the early 1830s Cooke denounced the National Schools established by the Whig government for ‘mutilating Scripture’ and allowing Roman Catholic clergy to supervise the religious education of their children in schools. After many negotiations the Synod in 1834 broke off relations with the Education Board. Cooke explained the views of the synod to the parliamentary committees of inquiry in 1837. In 1839 the Synod, under Cooke’s guidance,



Hillsborough Fort

organised an education scheme of its own, and applied to the government for pecuniary aid. The result was that the Synod’s schools were recognised by the Board in 1840 on Cooke’s own terms.

The Hillsborough demonstration, 30 October 1834

Although John Jamieson has suggested that Cooke was motivated by politics in his campaign against Arianism, Cooke actually seems to have been remarkably apolitical in the 1820s. Although he favoured a measure of ‘Catholic Emancipation’ in 1825, he did not actually approve of the 1829 legislation, possibly because he considered the Tory government had effectively yielded to the threat of violence, if not civil war. Yet Cooke did not do anything to oppose ‘Emancipation’ nor indeed did he ever choose to explain why he had changed his mind.

By the early 1830s Cooke was much more exercised by political developments. He was concerned by Daniel O’Connell’s success in marshalling the political strength of the Roman Catholic community and his leadership of a phalanx of Irish MPs in alliance with the Whigs. More specifically, he was worried by the Church Temporalities Act of 1833 and the Tithe War of 1830-33. The former suppressed ten of the 22 Church of

Daniel O'Connell

Ireland bishoprics and reduced the income of the surviving twelve sees. The latter was a violent campaign in huge swathes of Leinster and Munster against the payment of tithes to the Church of Ireland as the established church. The campaign was openly supported by Bishop McHale of Killala (who became Archbishop of Tuam in 1834), Bishop Doyle of Kildare and Leighlin, and many Roman Catholic priests. The campaign also enjoyed the support of local O'Connellite activists but O'Connell studiously remained aloof.

Although as a Presbyterian, we might expect Cooke to be indifferent to the fate of the Church of Ireland, Cooke regarded these attacks on the Church of Ireland as part of a broader assault on Irish Protestantism as a whole. This was not a perspective shared by other, perhaps even most, Presbyterians.

Cooke sought to counter these onslaughts with a pan-Protestant alliance and thus Cooke shared a platform with the 3rd Earl of Roden, an Orange Tory, and the 3rd Marquess of Downshire, County Down's largest landowner and a disillusioned Whig and 'Emancipationist', at the Hillsborough demonstration of 30 October 1834. Somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000 people attended the event and stood in the cold for four-and-a-half hours.

Cooke called for greater cooperation between the two main Protestant denominations: 'a sacred marriage of Christian forbearance where they may differ, of Christian love where they agree, and of Christian cooperation in all matters where their common safety is concerned.'

Cooke offered a definition of Conservatism which predated and anticipated

3rd Earl of Roden

Peel's Tamworth Manifesto of 18 December 1834, the document which is widely held by historians to have laid down the principles upon which the modern British Conservative Party was founded.

Cooke undertook to

protect no abuse that can be proved, to resist reckless innovation, not rational reform; to sacrifice no honest interest to hungry clamour, to yield no principle to time-serving expediency; to stand by religion in opposition to every form of infidelity.

Most Presbyterians at this stage were not favourably disposed to the Tory or Conservative Party and would not be so for another fifty years. Nevertheless, significantly there was no official Presbyterian repudiation of either Cooke's presence at Hillsborough or his speech, beyond the Moderator's statement that he had not been representing the Church. The impact of the Hillsborough demonstration at the time may have been rather more limited than Cooke would have wished but it was a portent of the future.

'The cook who dished Dan', January 1841

In the autumn of 1840 it was announced that Daniel O'Connell, who had launched a new movement to secure repeal of the Act of Union, had been invited by the *Vindicator*, a Roman Catholic and nationalist newspaper launched in April 1839, to Belfast.

While many Ulster Protestants, especially Presbyterians, had supported

*Daniel O'Connell
commemorative stamp*



O'Connell's campaign for 'Catholic Emancipation', there was no support for the Repeal movement among Ulster Protestants. Appreciating this, O'Connell was in no hurry to accept the invitation.

On 2 January 1841 the *Vindicator* published O'Connell's firm acceptance of the invitation. Four days later the *Commercial Chronicle* published a challenge from Cooke to O'Connell to debate the merits or otherwise of Repeal in public. The *Northern Whig*, normally no friend or admirer of Cooke, applauded Cooke's challenge and opined that O'Connell would be disgraced if he did not accept.

The *Vindicator* on 9 January retorted that O'Connell could not be expected to condescend to debating with Cooke. Instead the *Vindicator* insultingly suggested that 'a Hercules Street artisan' would suffice to debate with Cooke. On the same day O'Connell in Dublin dismissed the challenge of 'bully Cooke, the cock of the north', insisting that it could not be taken seriously. Cooke was able to accuse O'Connell of evasiveness.

O'Connell slipped into Belfast under the guise of C. E Charles, a Dublin ventriloquist, on 16 January, a Saturday. A special mass was celebrated for him in his hotel on the Sunday.

A 'reform' dinner rather than a 'Repeal' dinner was organised for the Monday and it was hoped that it would be attended by Protestant liberals. Most, including Sharman Crawford, Ulster's leading Radical, stayed away. At the dinner O'Connell cynically observed: 'I will only be a reformer tonight but I may awake a Repealer tomorrow'. He made various illusions to 'cooks' and 'cookery' and dismissed his opponent as 'the boxing buffoon of a divine'.

On the Tuesday O'Connell attempted to deliver a speech from the balcony

James Emerson Tennant MP



of his hotel but he attracted a mixed audience and could not make himself heard.

In the evening he spoke at the New Music Hall in May Street. He addressed Protestant fears of religious persecution, conceding that the reign of Mary Tudor – 'Bloody Mary' – gave some ground for Protestant concern

but he insisted that Irish Roman Catholics were fundamentally tolerant. He assured Belfast Protestants that 'there was not a Protestant more opposed to Catholic ascendancy' than he was.

Even if O'Connell failed to convince, he did at least attempt to address the issue. With respect to the Union, his speech was profoundly unsatisfactory to pro-Union sentiment in Belfast. He claimed that the Union had been achieved by force and fraud and contended that the Union was economically exploitive of Ireland. This was not an argument which would cut much ice in Belfast.

Almost seven years earlier in April 1834, when O'Connell made the case for Repeal in the House of Commons, his arguments were eloquently rebutted and repudiated by Emerson Tennant, one of the two MPs for Belfast. Tennant stressed the economic success Belfast had enjoyed under the Union. In the first three decades of the nineteenth century Belfast's population had grown from 20,000 to 53,000. And even more tellingly, Tennant was able to observe: 'The North of Ireland had, every five years, found its trade doubled under the Union'.

Belfast unionists could be forgiven for supposing that O'Connell had learned absolutely nothing from his encounter with Tennant in the House of Commons.

O'Connell left Belfast in a hurry, being escorted by the police to

Donaghadee, whence he sailed to Scotland.

On Thursday 21 January Belfast Conservatives organised a great meeting, at which Cooke was the principal speaker, to celebrate the 'repulse' of the Repealer. The audience was described as consisting of 'the principal nobility, gentry and clergy of Ulster' and 'a striking contrast both in numbers and respectability to the ragged pauperism which, two days before, had gathered at the Royal Hotel'.

Cooke refuted O'Connell's claims that Roman Catholics in power had never persecuted Protestants by highlighting the suffering of Irish Protestants at the hands of Roman Catholics in 1641, 1688-9 and 1798.

Cooke also repudiated O'Connell's case for repeal of the Union by recourse to economics and Belfast's experience under the Union:

Look at the town of Belfast. When I myself was a youth I remember it almost a village. But what a glorious sight does it now present - the masted grove within our harbour - our mighty warehouses teeming with the wealth of every climate - our giant manufactories lifting themselves on every side - our streets marching on, as it were, with such rapidity that an absence of a few weeks makes us strangers in the outskirts of our town. And all this we owe to the Union... In one word more, I have done. Look at Belfast and be a Repealer, if you can.

The Conservative *Ulster Times* was ecstatic about 'the glorious proceedings of the week' and expressed great delight in the fact that 'at least a hundred' of the Presbyterian clergy had attended the meeting. The meeting's pan-Protestantism was underscored by a vote of thanks to Cooke by the Dean of Ross who made a gracious reference to the 'banns of matrimony' proclaimed at Hillsborough in 1834.

George Dawson of Castledawson wrote enthusiastically to his brother-in-law,

Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister, about 'the utter failure' of O'Connell's ignominious visit to Belfast and Cooke's oratorical prowess which he compared with that of Lord Brougham, the former Whig Lord Chancellor.

In correspondence with his father, an Orangeman and policeman, John Tyndall, the prominent nineteenth-century scientist, thanked him for forwarding him a copy of Cooke's speech which he thought 'most excellent'. He continued: 'Well may it be said that O'Connell is the bane of Ireland but Cooke will prove the antidote, the hardy Northerners have reason to be proud of their hero'. Tyndall was born in County Carlow, hence his reference to 'hardy Northerners'.

The limits of Cooke's influence

Cooke's speech in January 1841 was almost certainly his most popular political utterance with his coreligionists.

The Revd A. P. Goudy of Strabane, the grandson of the Revd James Porter of Greyabbey on his mother's side, shared Cooke's theology but not his Conservative politics.

In May 1844 Goudy wrote in *The Banner of Ulster*:

The Presbyterian Church is laid under a deep debt of gratitude to Dr Cooke. He was made the instrument of accomplishing a great reformation in this church by extirpating the Unitarianism which tinged and weakened the body. We shall never forget the gratitude that is due to him ... But we do not hold his political opinions on many subjects.

In May 1850 Cooke professed to sympathise with the cause of Tenant Right, a cause in which many Presbyterian ministers – such as A. P. Goudy and John

Rodgers of Comber –were extremely active, but he expressed concern that some of his colleagues were advancing ‘perfect communist interpretations’ of the issue. As a Conservative his concern was understandable but very unpopular, a clear indication of the limits of his political influence. For a number of years Cooke stayed away from the General Assembly because his political views and those of the Assembly diverged so radically. For political reasons Cooke also felt compelled to decline an invitation to lecture in Strabane, Goudy’s bailiwick, in December 1854. And there were other parts of Ulster where he believed was ‘persona non grata’ (an unwelcome person).

The second Hillsborough demonstration, October 1867

In October 1867 he joined the 4th Marquess of Downshire (the eldest son of the 3rd Marquess who had attended the first Hillsborough demonstration) and the Earl of Roden on a platform in Hillsborough, as he had done in 1834. Thirty-three years on a frail Roden had to be carried on to the platform and Cooke’s speech opposing the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland could not be heard. Nor could his final speech to the Presbyterian General Assembly in which he protested against Gladstone’s proposal to combine disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Ireland with the withdrawal of the Regium Donum from the Presbyterian Church.

Cooke defended the Established Church as evidence of the State’s commitment to Protestantism and in the General Election 1868 an ailing Cooke urged his co-religionists to vote Tory – against their natural inclination – to avert the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. On the whole, his fellow Presbyterians would seem to have disregarded

his advice because Ulster Liberals had their best election for years. Yet, disestablishment of the Church of Ireland removed a major bone of contention between Anglicans and Presbyterians and helped prepare the ground for the formation of the Unionist alliance in 1885-86.

Funeral

Cooke died on 13 December 1868. The following day the Conservative-leaning *News Letter* announced that ‘A Prince of the church had fallen’ and carried an obituary which extended over four and half columns.

Cooke’s admirers disregarded his wish for a private funeral. At a public meeting held in the Town Hall a resolution was passed to accord the great man a civic funeral. William Johnston of Ballykilbeg, one of the two recently elected MPs for Belfast, proposed the motion, which was seconded by the Bishop of Down.

The funeral on 18 December was attended by civic and ecclesiastical dignitaries; the mourners included the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, the Church of Ireland Primate of All Ireland and the Roman Catholic Bishop of Down & Connor.

The presence of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Down & Connor may occasion some surprise but stern Protestant although Cooke was, Cooke regarded the Roman Catholic Church as a Christian church, albeit in error, and no one was more eager to render assistance to a Roman Catholic neighbour in time of need. Cooke had a capacity for friendship which transcended political and religious boundaries. Barney Hughes, the celebrated Belfast baker and Roman Catholic member of Belfast Corporation, was a close personal friend.



Grave of Henry Cooke, Balmoral Cemetery, Belfast

The funeral procession to Balmoral stretched for two miles, 154 carriages following the hearse. Thousands lined the route, businesses closed and shops along the way to Balmoral cemetery were draped in black. The *News Letter* reported that it was ‘in all respects like a royal or imperial demonstration.’

‘The Black Man’

In March 1876 a statue of Henry Cooke (by F. S. Lynn) was placed in front of Royal Belfast Academical Institution. Perhaps appropriately Cooke’s back was turned towards the school which during his lifetime he had regarded, rightly or wrongly, as a hotbed of Arianism. Significantly too, the statue was erected not by his fellow Presbyterians but by members of the Orange institution. Although Cooke had never been a member of the institution, he had long been something of a hero to Orangemen. As early as 1833 he was toasted at a dinner to mark the ‘shutting of the gates’ in Londonderry. Presbyterians celebrated the centenary of what they believed to be Cooke’s

birth by building Cooke Centenary Church on the Ormeau Road in Belfast in 1888.

Appraisal

Cooke was a major figure in nineteenth century Ulster. He gave shape to the theology of Ulster’s largest Protestant denomination. F. S. L. Lyons in *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939* (Oxford, 1979) observed that ‘the victory of the so-called “Old Light” over the “New Light” meant in broad terms, the deliberate adoption by a majority of Presbyterians of an equivocally evangelical stance’ and quoted J. E. Davey’s volume commemorating the centenary of the General Assembly to the effect that it was ‘the choice of grace and faith and revelation in place of the seeming alternative of law and logic; it was a conscious suffrage cast for God and religion rather than for man and his speculations.’

Cooke was never the spokesman for all Presbyterians. For example in 1867 the Revd Isaac Nelson wrote:

Henry Cooke is now an old man who has been publicly talking about the Bible for nearly sixty years without throwing any light on its contents. Nay, in his hands Scripture has been the formentor of party bitterness and mutual execration, a seed of dragon’s teeth from which spring armed men. The minister of religion whose appearance is the signal for party cries has misunderstood the nature of the Gospel.





Cooke Centenary Presbyterian Church

As a Protestant nationalist and the future Parnellite MP for Mayo between 1880 and 1885 Nelson was an exotic creature who was as hostile to Cooke's politics as he was to Cooke's theology.

Cooke's opponents outside the Presbyterian Church did not disappear without trace. On the contrary, the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster, founded in 1830, continued to exist and in 1910 joined forces with the Synod of Antrim, formed in the early eighteenth century, to create the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

Politically, at Hillsborough in October 1834 Cooke anticipated the formation of the Unionist Party in the mid-1880s by publishing the banns of a marriage between the Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church. As we have seen Cooke's vision was not realised in his own lifetime. A robust Liberal strand survived in Presbyterianism right up until the first Home Rule crisis of 1885-6. However with Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule

Cooke's pan-Protestant alliance became reality - less than twenty years after his death. Arguably, it was Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule rather than Cooke which destroyed political liberalism among Ulster Presbyterians.

In brief, Cooke brought together a powerful combination of conversionist theology and social conservatism which would eventually dominate popular politics in Ulster.

Suggested further reading

J. L. Porter, *Life and Times of Henry Cooke* (London, 1871) and (Belfast 1875)

Porter was Cooke's son-in-law and was Professor of Biblical Criticism in the Presbyterian College. The book's real value lies in the fact that Porter had access to papers which have since disappeared.

R. Finlay Holmes, *Henry Cooke* (Belfast, Dublin & Ottawa, 1981)

Simply the best biography of Cooke.

Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism: the historical perspective 1610-1970* (Belfast, 1994)

Brooke explores Ulster Presbyterianism as a distinct political and intellectual community.

Andrew R. Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief & Practice 1770-1840* (Oxford, 2007)

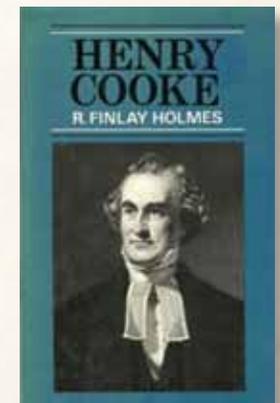
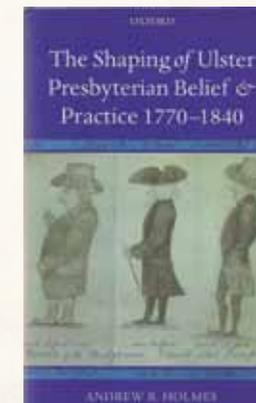
Holmes considers the three principal influences that shaped Presbyterian belief and practice in this crucial period, namely tradition, revival and reform.

I. R. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterianism and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998)

McBride offers an analysis of the complex interactions between different types of Presbyterian theology and political discourse and the emergence of political radicalism from denominational principles and Enlightenment thought.

William McComb, *The Repealer Repulsed* (Belfast, 1841)

The Repealer Repulsed was an instant book providing an account of Daniel O'Connell's visit to Belfast. It has been regarded as a foundation text of Ulster unionism and it certainly contains one of the earliest polemics to cite the industrial prowess of Belfast as an argument in favour of the Union. McComb, was born in Coleraine, became a Belfast bookseller and publisher and was an ardent admirer of Cooke (whom he regarded as the modern John Knox). A new edition was published in 2003 by University College Dublin Press with an invaluable introduction and notes by Dr Patrick Maume.





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