

Did Ulster Presbyterians have a devotional revolution?

DAVID W. MILLER

The question which I posed for myself in the title of this essay may seem to have an obvious answer. In 1859, squarely within the quarter-century, 1850–75, which Emmet Larkin identified in his 1972 article as the period in which Irish Catholicism underwent a ‘devotional revolution’, Ulster Presbyterianism experienced a religious revival of cataclysmic proportions. At least in the short run the 1859 revival had an impact on religious behaviour comparable to, say, dozens of Marian apparitions, hundreds of parish missions, thousands of novenas. Whether all that short run change adds up to a ‘revolution’ in the long run is another matter.

Revivals are relatively brief, intense, episodes generally associated with a long-run change known as the rise of something called *evangelicalism*. To make sense of the 1859 revival we must consider how Ulster Presbyterianism fits within the rise of evangelicalism in the Atlantic world. In my view much of the substantial historical literature on evangelicalism written in the past three decades is flawed by its preoccupation with theology, the ideas of the religious professionals.¹ Certain sociologists of religion in this same period have come up with a model which at least marginally improves on this approach.² Religious systems are seen as operating in a marketplace: the high levels of religious practice in contemporary America, when compared to Europe, result from a ‘free market’ rather than a ‘monopoly’ in religious ‘products’. I myself find this market *model* to be shallow and mechanical, but I think that a market *metaphor* can be quite useful. Yes, of course, religion is a commodity, but as a commodity it closely resembles whiskey:

¹ See Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (eds), *Evangelicalism: comparative studies of popular Protestantism in north America, the British Isles, and beyond, 1700–1900* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994); George Rawlyk and Mark A. Noll (eds), *Amazing grace: evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1994); D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster society, 1740–1890* (London: Routledge, 1992); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American culture: the shaping of twentieth-century evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (Oxford UP, 1980); Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of grace: colonial New England’s revival tradition in its British context* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991). ² Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The churching of America, 1776–1990: winners and losers in our religious economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1992).

it is a commodity which can readily be manufactured by the consumer. The professionals of different religious systems compete not only with each other's products but also with the home-brewed output of their own customers. A good example of such marketing initiatives is the Church of Ireland's movement in the two decades following the 1798 rebellion toward the vital religion promoted by Wesley and his followers. Before 1816 there was no Methodist denomination to compete with, but there were numerous Methodist lay fellowships among ordinary Anglicans. The 'evangelical' turn in the Church of Ireland was an adaptation of official religion to popular demand among its own devout. This marketing ploy, I might add, was accompanied by the development by elite laymen and some clergy of a new product line, the Orange Order, which provided rituals by which less devout Anglicans might act out their Protestantism without the inconvenience of regular church attendance.

So I see religious change primarily as an outcome of complex interactions between religious professionals and ordinary folk – between official religion and popular religion. In the Ulster Presbyterian case we have terms to describe the principal doctrinal products on offer by the clergy: they are called 'old light' and 'new light'. However, we lack a comparable set of terms for what was invented and/or demanded by lay folk. I propose two terms to fill that vacuum: 'old leaven' and 'new leaven'. By 'new leaven' I mean the conversionist enthusiasm associated with pietism in Germany and with Methodism in the English-speaking world in the eighteenth century. When most historians use the term 'evangelicalism' they have in mind the intellectual and organizational structures crafted by religious professionals since about 1740 as they came to terms with these powerful – sometimes frightening – popular movements. By 'old leaven' I mean the much more politicized sources of popular enthusiasm which Protestantism enjoyed *prior to* about 1740. In England the old leaven was most spectacularly on display in the 1640s and 1650s when a welter of movements – Diggers, Levellers, Baptists, Fifth Monarchy Men, Muggletonians, Quakers, etc. – threatened to overturn the social and political order. The erastian confessional state of the eighteenth century had considerable success in stamping out whatever remained of the old leaven of the 'rude mechanic preachers' and their enthusiastic audiences. Wesley himself had to contend with elite suspicions that since his preaching drew large and excited crowds it must be a reappearance of the old leaven.³ However Methodism eventually convinced the authorities that it was a new leaven purged of the political agenda of the old and became a respectable, if not quite a fashionable, religion in nineteenth-century England.

Although the English old leaven was largely eliminated in the eighteenth century, the same was not true for Scotland where politico-religious enthusiasm had taken the name of Covenanting. The Williamite settlement incorporated most of the old leaven into the Church of Scotland; initially only a tiny

3 Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp 13–17.

minority of the Presbyterian enthusiasts – those revolutionaries who were unwilling to settle for ‘Presbyterianism in one country’ – remained outside the establishment. For the first two decades after the revolution the main components of the popular Presbyterian vision of an established church which was not a state church – a situation in which *the* Church was controlled by the godly, not by the wealthy and well-born – seemed to be secure. After the union of 1707 English politicians, with the collaboration of the Scottish ecclesiastical party known as the ‘moderates’, chipped away at the elements of the Scottish establishment central to the old leaven vision – most notably through the reintroduction of lay patronage, the right of the laird – or sometimes the crown – to appoint the minister without the approval of the congregation. As a result, at about the same time Wesley was beginning his career of preaching the new leaven, a number of clergy seceded from the Church of Scotland because of its deviations from the old leaven. Although the moderates continued to dominate the General Assembly until the 1830s, a strong minority sympathetic to the seceders’ position remained. This ‘popular party’ – one is tempted to call them the ‘immoderates’ – came to be known as the ‘evangelicals’ even though, in the words of a recent student of their theology,

their perceptions of the nature of saving faith and such central doctrines as the Atonement were orientated towards an intellectual rather than an experiential conception of conversion and faith, and their preaching was not directed to the emotions of their hearers in the way that later nineteenth-century evangelical preaching often was.⁴

Although the meanings of ‘evangelical’ in English and Scottish Christianity did eventually converge, we will misunderstand developments well into the mid-nineteenth century if we fail to distinguish between their origins in the peculiar enthusiasms of new and old leaven respectively.

The power of the new leaven to evoke religious commitment is relatively easy to understand. By appealing to the emotions and fostering an experience in which the individual might attain a sense of assurance of his or her own salvation, the new leaven might seem to enjoy a clear advantage over more intellectual preaching in reaching ordinary folk of limited education. However, to understand the appeal, and even the nature, of the old leaven we need consider some specifics of the history of Presbyterianism in Scotland and its diaspora, and the north of Ireland is actually quite a good place to start. It was in Ulster that the terms ‘old light’ and ‘new light’ were coined during a protracted crisis in the Synod of Ulster in the 1720s. The new lights were a Belfast-centred group of ministers who were seeking alternatives to rigid Calvinism. From what we can

⁴ John R. McIntosh, *Church and theology in Enlightenment Scotland: the popular party, 1740–1800* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1998), p. 237.

tell the alternative which most attracted them was Arminianism – the century-old reformed heresy which allowed the individual more agency in bettering his moral status than Calvin would admit.⁵ And indeed, when the old light/new light controversy replicated itself a few years later on the Pennsylvania frontier the term new light was applied to revivalists who, almost by definition, were subject to suspicion of Arminianism. Over the next century the Irish and American usages of ‘new light’ diverged as the Irish new lights drifted toward Unitarianism. The term ‘old light’, however, was virtually unchanging in its connotation: it signified insistence that every minister must subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

What is interesting for our purposes is that the pressure to require subscription, from at least the 1720s, came principally from laymen. Why should it be so important to country folk whether their ministers espoused such Calvinist abstractions as limited atonement and unconditional election? To answer this question we need to understand that Scottish Presbyterianism was, to use a term coined by Margo Todd, ‘logocentric’. Between 1560 and 1640 a largely illiterate Scottish laity was systematically indoctrinated with Calvinist teachings, an effort which was supported by the power to withhold communion and the vigilance of a Taliban-like religious police.⁶ One can scarcely wonder that simple folk still accustomed to view access to the host as necessary to avoid physical disease as well as eternal punishment might now come away with the notion that the way to salvation was primarily a matter of having the right answers. Although this wholesale catechizing certainly subordinated ordinary laity to the religious elite in the short run, the persecutions of the later seventeenth century meant that clergy found themselves no longer imposing their theological system upon the indifferent, but rather celebrating the faithfulness of the godly. We should not be surprised if godly lay folk took from the experience a heightened sense of their own agency in maintaining doctrinal purity. A conviction among laymen that their order bore special responsibility to protect the old light from clerical derogation became central to the old leaven.

When the American historian George Marsden describes the Scotch-Irish as ‘notorious hagglers over doctrinal detail,’⁷ he identifies, perhaps unintentionally, a ritual manifestation of the old leaven: contesting by various means the orthodoxy of the minister, or ministerial candidate. Since Presbyterianism was not the established church in Ireland, we do not find in Ulster the most dra-

5 I.R. McBride, *Scripture politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish radicalism in the late eighteenth century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 45; A.W. Godfrey Brown, ‘A theological interpretation of the first subscription controversy (1719–1728)’, in J.L.M. Haire et al., *Challenge and conflict: essays in Irish Presbyterian history and doctrine* (Antrim: W. & G. Baird, 1981), pp 28–45. 6 Margo Todd, *The culture of Protestantism in early modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), pp 1–126. 7 George M. Marsden, *The evangelical mind and the New School Presbyterian experience: a case study of thought and theology in nineteenth-century America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970), p. 39.

matic Scottish ritual of this sort: the riot to prevent the new minister and his military escort from entering the church – or to force him to enter through a window or some door other than the main entrance, which, in the popular mind invalidated his installation.⁸ Nevertheless, Ulster does present various less drastic rituals of social inversion in which the literate but unreflective could challenge the well-read, perhaps even well-born, minister and thereby act out the role in the kingdom of God which the old leaven, as they understood it, conferred upon them. Such rituals might include grilling the ministerial candidate, registering complaints about a minister at periodic presbytery visitations of the congregation, attending the outdoor sermon of an itinerant Covenanting minister, or withdrawing altogether from the pastoral care of one's minister to join a nearby Seceding congregation. We should think of these challenges of the well-read leader of the community as a peculiarly Scottish ritual comparable to carnival in southern Europe; it was a means of sustaining the social order by turning the world upside down, if only for a day.⁹ The satisfactions of haggling were as central to the appeal of the old leaven as were the ecstasies of palpable conversion experience to the new leaven.

Just as official Presbyterianism conceived its mission, in Calvin's terms, to be a ministry of sacrament as well as of the word,¹⁰ so also popular Presbyterianism of the old leaven supplemented its logocentric haggling rituals with a sacramental ritual reminiscent of the days of persecution. This ritual was the festal communion or 'holy fair'. The outdoor clandestine communion services of covenanting days evolved into a post-1690 procedure by which in many parts of Scotland and the north of Ireland communion was typically observed once or twice a year at an outdoor location where members of two or more congregations gathered for several days of preaching and prayer, culminating in the actual partaking of bread and wine around rustic tables. Since the participants came from different parishes, the communion token – that peculiarly Presbyterian contribution to sacramental apparatus – was invented to insure that only those certified as worthy by lay elders of their kirk sessions were admitted to the sacrament at that dramatic moment known as the fencing of the tables. In Ulster we should see the festal communion as complementary to the haggling. Where the latter was a ritual of social inversion, the former was a ritual of social integration. The fencing of the tables did certainly draw a boundary around the godly, but a penumbra of the less devout who attended the event mainly in the interest of sociability, refreshment and dalliance ensured that, in Ulster at least, these occasions functioned

⁸ Kenneth J. Logue, *Popular disturbances in Scotland, 1780–1815* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979), pp 168–76. ⁹ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The peasants of Languedoc* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), pp 192–7; Peter Burke, *Popular culture in early modern Europe* (New York: New York UP, 1978), pp 185–91; see H.G. Graham, *The social life of Scotland in the eighteenth century* (London: A. & C. Black, 1937), pp 366–71. ¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), IV, i, 9.

to affirm an ethnoreligious community which transcended godliness. In that respect they resembled patron saints' days, known as 'patterns' among Catholics in rural Ireland.

Here I must pause to address an historiographical problem. It is a commonplace that the Scottish Presbyterian festal communion evolved into the revivalist camp meeting in America. In recent years this development has been explored by several scholars – most brilliantly by Leigh Eric Schmidt. It is important to understand, however, that this historical process involved discontinuities as well as continuities. In Scotland the old leaven and the new intermingled as early as the Cambuslang 'Wark', a 1742 festal communion which took on the appearance of what came to be labelled after 1800 a 'revival',¹¹ and further examples occurred over the succeeding century. Schmidt points out that in such sacramental occasions in Scotland the ecstasy reported by communicants was understood not as a once-for-all conversion, but as a recurring annual experience. Its function was 'to rejuvenate those who were already God's people as much as to convert the unregenerate'.¹² In the terms which I am using, the old leaven was not completely driven out by the new until the early nineteenth century when the sacrament itself was dropped from such occasions in America. A shortcoming of Schmidt's work is that he pays practically no attention to Ulster which was so often a one- or two-generation staging area for a family's passage from Scotland to America. In the case of Ulster, no evidence of Presbyterian festal communions turning into revival-like occasions has come to light for the period from the crucial 1730s until 1859.¹³ What did happen was the *invention* of a tradition of Ulster revivalism. A manuscript account of religious commotions in the 1620s which resembled a modern revival was discovered by James Seaton Reid and reported in 1834 in the first volume of his history of Irish Presbyterianism. Advocates of a revival seized upon this event as a living tradition in the spiritual repertoire of their community, but in fact whatever happened in the 1620s had been generally forgotten in the intervening two centuries.¹⁴

11 In all the *Oxford English dictionary's* eighteenth-century quotations illustrating usage of 'revival' to mean a religious reawakening, the word is followed by a modifier such as 'of religion.' Only from 1818 does the *OED* document the elliptical usage which we now take for granted: 'The Methodists of Cincinnati are very zealous and have what they call "a revival" in the country.' However, a search of a large on-line database of published books (WorldCat) reveals a spate of titles containing this elliptical usage beginning in 1801. **12** Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy fairs: Scottish communions and American revivals in the early modern period* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989), pp 153–58. **13** Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *Triumph of the laity: Scots-Irish piety and the great awakening, 1625–1760* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), p. 134. Westerkamp probably means that such Irish Presbyterian revivals did not happen in the 1740s, but no evidence of any such events between then and 1859 seems to have come to light. **14** James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian church in Ireland* (Belfast: William Mullan, 1867) [vol. i originally published 1834], i, 106–12. We know that these events had been forgotten because S.M. Stephenson in a carefully-written local history, *A historical essay on the parish and congregation of Templepatrick: compiled in the year 1824* (Belfast: Joseph Smyth,

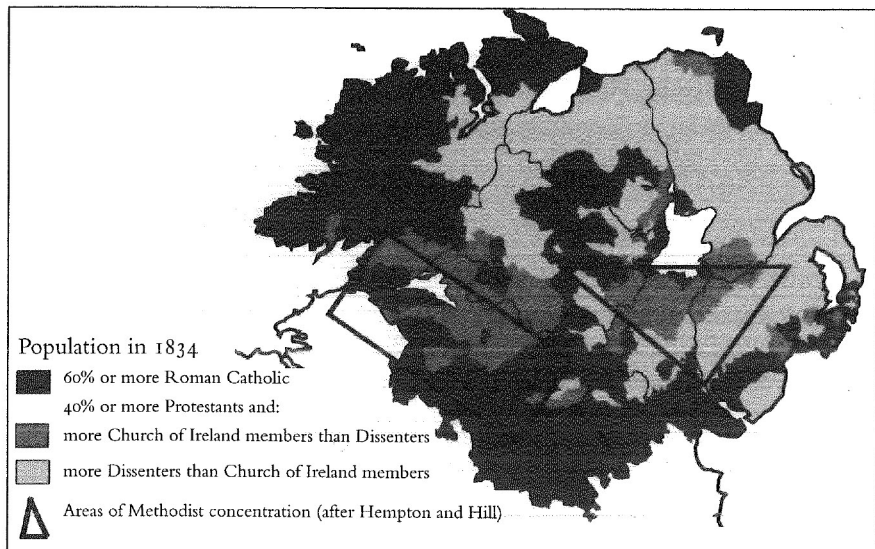


Figure 1 Sectarian zones in 1834

Festal communions did certainly continue to be celebrated in Ulster as late as the first decade of the nineteenth century, but it was the Seceders – the champions of the old leaven – who kept them alive. No doubt these sacramental occasions quietly nurtured the spiritual development of the godly, but without the outward manifestations of emotional convulsion in which the new leaven came to Scotland. The likeliest way for Ulster Presbyterians to come into contact with the new leaven was through John Wesley and other Methodist itinerants, but in fact Methodist impact in Ulster was largely confined to Church of Ireland folk, as can be seen in figure one. Indeed, why bother to listen to a Methodist preacher denounce your minister as unconverted when you and your peers enjoyed so much latitude, through the Presbyterian haggling rituals, to take such matters into your own hands? Between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, the old leaven actually worked better in the Scottish settlements of Ulster than in Scotland itself as the demotic component of a stable religious system. Because Ulster Presbyterianism was not an established church and because within the rural Presbyterian community there were only modest differences in wealth, as the landlords were nearly all Anglicans, the Presbyterian rituals of inversion and integration functioned well enough to sustain that system.

This happy consummation was not to last. By the early nineteenth century, Presbyterianism was increasingly defined by social and intellectual respectabil-

1825), pp 30–5, recounts Presbyterian origins in the valley in the 1620s without once mentioning the incidents which would be labelled a ‘revival’ by Reid nine years later.

ity and by a regimen of decorous weekly worship, better-suited to the schedules, wardrobes and residential patterns of the middle class at the cost of active participation by humbler members of their traditional ethnic community. The festal communions failed the respectability test and, as in Scotland and America,¹⁵ Presbyterian eucharistic practice in Ulster moved decisively indoors. There it would increasingly serve well-dressed, well-scrubbed communicants. By around 1840 it appears that about three-quarters of the nominal Presbyterians in Ulster were in some sense affiliated with a particular congregation, but that probably fewer than one-quarter attended worship services on a typical Sunday.¹⁶ While it is impossible to say whether these figures represent a decline in Sunday churchgoing over the preceding century or so, by the 1830s outdoor festal communions were largely extinct and the Sunday worship service was increasingly the central Presbyterian ritual. It took place in a meeting-house which might be quite distant from the residences of the poorest (probably horseless) Presbyterians, and its regular participants dressed respectably, and expected the same of their co-worshippers. In the absence of the festal communions, plain folk found it hard to act out their identification with the Presbyterian community on a seasonal timetable which reflected the rhythms of agrarian life. Perhaps more important, it came at a time when Ulster Presbyterians were realizing that, like the churches in industrialized regions of Britain, they had a serious problem of lapse from religious practice especially in Belfast and among the deskilled domestic linen workers of its hinterland.

Meanwhile, in a number of the Presbyteries of the Synod of Ulster – though not, of course, the Seceding Synods – the requirement that ministers subscribe to the Westminster Confession had been quietly relaxed. Old light and new light clergy co-existed amicably in the Synod, but among the less-educated lay folk there continued to be deep suspicion of new light clergy which manifested itself in the old leaven ritual of haggling. A crude measure of the presence of the old leaven is the incidence of disputes within congregations depicted in figure two.¹⁷ Henry Cooke, a minister who, from about 1825 to 1843, was the ‘acknowledged leader’ of Ulster Presbyterianism, set out to rid the Synod of Ulster of the new light. He attained this goal in 1829 when seventeen ministers

15 Schmidt, *Holy fairs*, pp 198–205. 16 The data on which these calculations are based are found in *First Report of the Commissioners of Public Instruction, Ireland*, H.C. 1835, xxxiii, and in the National Archives of Ireland, Presbyterian Certificates, 1841, Room VI, 3/372;VIC/15/5.

17 The data in figure two were drawn from the congregational histories in *A history of the congregations in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1610–1982* (Belfast: Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, 1982). Only disputes which seem to have involved popular participation (as opposed, for example, to disputes solely between a minister and a higher judicatory) are included. Disputes which involved two or more congregations (e.g. those which resulted in formation of a second congregation) are counted only once. The analysis is limited to disputes originating in congregations in Ulster which, at the time of the dispute, were affiliated with the General Synod, the Burgher Synod, the Antiburgher Synod, the Secession Synod or the General Assembly.

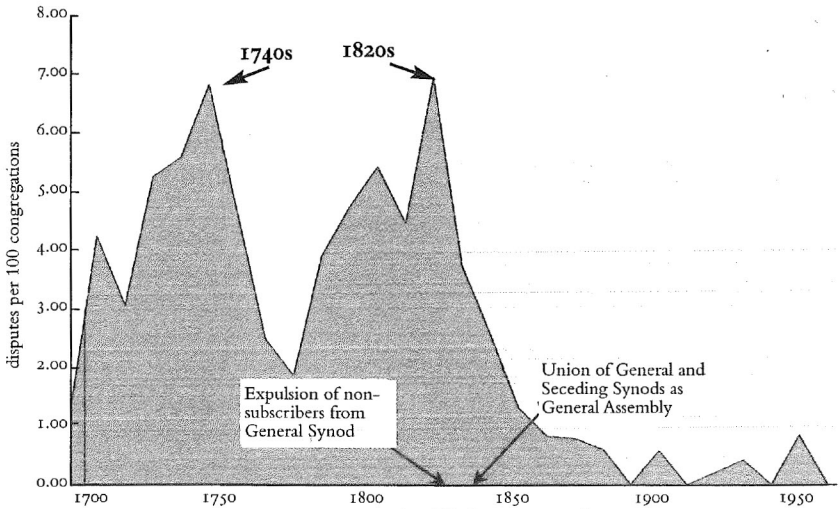


Figure 2 Dissension in Ulster Presbyterian congregations (within judicatories which became the General Assembly in 1840), by decade.

withdrew from the Synod, with their congregations, rather than accept stricter rules for enforcing subscription to the Westminster Confession by new ministerial candidates. After 1829 candidates for Ulster pulpits were clearly certified as subscribers to the Westminster Confession – after 1836 subscribers who were not even allowed to state and explain disagreements with particular phraseology in the Confession. As is evident in figure two, congregational disputes dropped sharply after the 1820s, for there was now little or no room for haggling; one might say that Cooke took all the fun out of being a Presbyterian.

The imposition of unqualified subscription in the General Synod paved the way for its reunion with the Seceders as a General Assembly in 1840, and Ulster Presbyterianism gave the appearance of a renewed institution able to address its problems with unity and dispatch. However, having attained his objective of expelling the new lights, Cooke had overreached by adopting a second major goal which would ultimately cost him his domination of the Assembly and leave it without united leadership. Starting in 1834 Cooke had sought to take advantage of the crisis in church-state relations in the United Kingdom reflected in Catholic emancipation in 1829 and the Irish Church Temporalities Act of 1833 to forge an alliance between the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Ireland in which the Presbyterians would be understood to be not mere Dissenters but a branch of the established Church of Scotland.¹⁸ There

¹⁸ Cooke himself rejected the term 'dissenter' to describe himself. J.L. Porter, *The life and times of Henry Cooke* (London: John Murray, 1871), p. 267.

was a serious disconnect between Cooke's two goals. While unqualified subscription to the Westminster Confession owed its popularity among godly lay folk to its reaffirmation of Presbyterian distinctiveness and rightness, for Cooke it was a step toward reconciliation with Anglicanism. In his mind there was no essential doctrinal difference between The Confession and the Thirty-nine Articles; such differences as there were between the two communions related to mere 'outward forms'.¹⁹ He had himself undergone an emotional conversion experience, and the 'Protestant peace' which he envisaged would rely on the new leaven for its popular base.

So Cooke's two major goals, taken together, amounted to a project for safeguarding the old light while ditching the old leaven, for central to the old leaven was the sacred memory of persecution by 'prelacy' in the covenanting days. His failure to attain his second goal was no doubt overdetermined, but the occasion for his abandonment of it arose out of the Great Disruption in Scotland. Cooke tried doggedly in the early 1840s to use his Tory connections, especially his friendship with Sir Robert Peel, to broker a compromise over the Scottish evangelical party's demand for an end to lay patronage. When he failed and the evangelicals left the Church of Scotland, the logic of his proposed détente with Anglicanism fell apart, and the Irish General Assembly, in implicit repudiation of his policies, passed a resolution intended to promote the election of Presbyterians, rather than Cooke's Tory landlord friends, to parliament. Cooke announced his withdrawal from the General Assembly's jurisdiction until such time as the resolution was rescinded.²⁰ Although this condition was met four years later and Cooke resumed his seat in the Assembly, he played more the role of elder churchman than ecclesiastical politician for the remainder of his career.

Cooke had succeeded in transforming his communion into a solidly old light body. His other project, however, was a shambles; the Assembly had no consistent strategy for how to recover its popular appeal in light of its increasingly obvious failure to maintain its full traditional constituency. Urbanization, industrialization, and the decline of the domestic linen industry were transforming Ulster Presbyterianism from a communal religious system serving an entire ethnic community to a middle-class religion. One solution advocated by some of the younger ministers was the undiluted new leaven – in other words, promotion of revivals. Advocates of this solution were at pains to distance themselves from the excesses of revivalism in America. Moreover, the lines of communication with American Presbyterianism were tangled because after 1837 their potential theological allies, the Old School, were suspicious of revivals, and were under suspicion themselves for harbouring most of the pro-slavery presbyteries.

Several strategies which owed more to the old leaven than to the new were also being floated. The most revolutionary of these was, in effect, to transform

Presbyterianism from an ethnic religion to a multi-ethnic one by seeking to convert Catholics – a ‘home mission’ project strongly supported by John Edgar, the leading figure among the former Seceders. Although in Irish historiography this effort is usually treated as a mere offshoot of the Church of Ireland’s ‘second reformation’, it actually emulated a more venerable and promising precedent: the conversion over the preceding century of many of the Scottish highlanders to Presbyterianism. The principal technique was not new leaven emotionalism but old leaven logocentrism: literacy in Irish would be taught to illiterate monoglot Irish speakers through the medium of the Irish-language bible. It was a classic logocentric project; it assumed that mere access to the very words of scripture could cause the scales to fall from Catholic eyes. Because virtually the only available teachers of literacy in Irish were Catholics, it was fraught with accountability problems in the early 1840s.²¹ The famine, however, breathed new life into the project because it offered an answer to the troubling question: what did providence intend in visiting this calamity upon Ireland? Among Presbyterian clergy that answer – that God was opening a door for Presbyterians to convert the Catholics – gained broader support than any of the various other theories of divine intent in circulation. Lay liberality did not match clerical conviction on this point, however, and expectations of an abundant harvest of elect but benighted Catholics were disappointed.²²

A second strategy was also occasioned by the famine, but it arose among clergy who more candidly recognized that not just Catholics, but poor Presbyterians also, were victims of the calamity. Ministers who pursued this policy associated themselves with the tenant right movement of the early 1850s. The most gifted member of this group was Alexander Goudy, minister of First Strabane congregation, grandson of the celebrated Revd James Porter who was hanged for complicity with the 1798 Rebellion. When reminded of his ancestry he would wryly remark, ‘My grandfather was suspended.’ Goudy articulated a rationale for his social vision in explicitly old leaven terms: Ulster was ‘our own Zion’ in which the Presbyterian Church had a mission to preach the Word which ‘would forbid the rich to grind the faces of the poor’. In opposition to the ecumenical tendencies promoted by the new leaven, he argued that Presbyterian polity was the true teaching of the New Testament, ‘diametrically opposed’ to ‘black Prelacy’. Presbyterians held the true principles of William of Orange: ‘toleration – progress – reform – constitutional Government – civil and religious liberty,’ and the very reverse of principles ‘that have so long usurped,

²¹ In the early 1840s one of the teachers, the poet Aodh MacDomhnaill, admitted publicly that he had falsified reports of Irish language instruction in the Glens of Antrim. Breandán Ó Buachalla, *I mBéal Feirste Cois Cuain* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1968), pp 103–15; Luke Walsh, *The home mission unmasked* (Belfast: James M’Convery, 1844). ²² David W. Miller, ‘Irish Presbyterians and the great famine’, in Jacqueline Hill and Colm Lennon (eds), *Luxury and Austerity*, Historical Studies 21 (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1999), pp 165–81.

and caricatured, and prostituted' King Billy's name. Naturally, Goudy also conceived the realization of 'Zion's good' in terms of 'the overthrow of the Roman Antichrist' – especially in a sermon preached in that revolutionary year, 1848 – stressing that this was a task for Presbyterianism since the 'corrupt' established church had 'shewn herself to be utterly unfitted for it.' There is a relentless logic in Goudy's writings, and although he seems to have genuinely wished for social justice for Catholics as well as Presbyterians, that logic stood in the way of his offering effective leadership to the tenant right cause. He could not bring himself to share a platform with Catholic priests. Of course the failure of the so-called 'League of North and South' in the 1850s is more complicated than the mentality of this one minister, but his career illustrates the difficulty in basing a popular renewal of Presbyterianism at this moment upon the old leaven.²³

A third approach to the problem was open-air preaching to reach the poor and 'careless' who did not 'come directly under the influence of the means of grace, even where they are most abundantly provided in the ordinary way'.²⁴ Such a proposal had been made at the 1845 General Assembly for an organized campaign of open-air preaching but had been dropped for fear that it would mobilize Catholic resistance to the home mission.²⁵ Once the famine had come and gone without producing any abundant providential harvest of Catholic converts, however, the way was clear in the early 1850s for such a campaign to be launched. Although open-air preaching was championed by proponents of the new leaven, it took advantage of old-leaven memories of outdoor spirituality, though without a sacramental component. In 1857 major sectarian riots were triggered in Belfast by open-air preaching,²⁶ but as Janice Holmes has recently argued, territorial aggrandizement *vis-à-vis* the Catholic community was not the primary cause for the preaching campaign. Figure three, which depicts the routes to be followed by the preachers in the summer of 1858, demonstrates that the system was clearly designed primarily to reach lapsed Presbyterians. The few incursions into Catholic territory were typically incidental to travel from one Protestant, usually Presbyterian, district to another. The object of the exercise was evident in the Revd William Patton's description of the audience to whom he preached in Glenarm: 'All were poor people – of that class for whom open-air preaching is designed.'²⁷ The Revd Richard Smyth of

²³ Alexander P. Goudy, *Zion's good, or, The position and duty of the Irish Presbyterian Church at the present time* (Derry: 'Standard' office, 1848); and 'Buy the truth and sell it not': a sermon preached before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (Belfast: C. Aitchison, 1858); Thomas Croskery and Thomas Witherow, *Life of the Rev. A.P. Goudy, D.D.* (Dublin: Humphrey and Armour, 1887). ²⁴ *Irish Presbyterian*, 1:7 (1853), p. 196. ²⁵ *Banner of Ulster* (Belfast), 4 July 1845, p. 4, cols. 3–6. ²⁶ Janice Holmes, 'The role of open-air preaching in the Belfast riots of 1857', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (2002) Section C, 102, pp. 47–66; John M. Barkley, *St Enoch's Congregation, 1872–1972* (Belfast: St Enoch's Church, 1972), pp. 45–9. ²⁷ *Eighth annual report of open-air preaching by ministers of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. 1858* (Belfast: 'Banner of Ulster' office, 1859), observations of

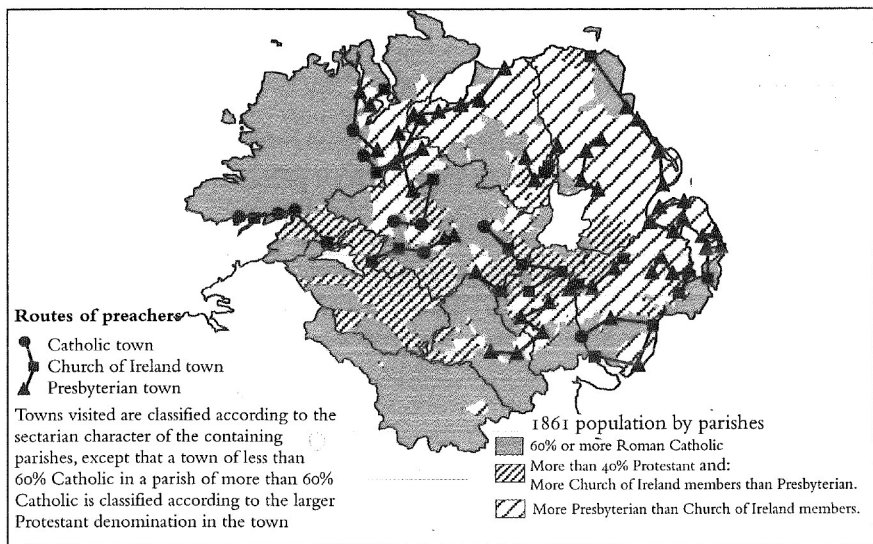


Figure 3 Presbyterian open-air preaching, 1858, and sectarian geography

Derry bluntly captured the social reality when he wrote that at one of his sermons '[m]any of the non-church-going class were present.'²⁸

Open-air preaching may well have helped to make the fourth solution, revival, more acceptable merely by not triggering the kind of excitements which so troubled many clergy. The lyrical tone of a lead article entitled 'Times of Refreshing' in the June 1853 number of a newly-established denominational magazine²⁹ contrasted sharply with the more defensive appeals for revival which had appeared prior to the famine. It conveyed the impression that 'glorious effusions of the Spirit' might be expected without any of the excesses associated with American revivals earlier in the nineteenth century. This impression seemed to be confirmed in 1858 when the news of a very extensive revival began to arrive from across the Atlantic. This event was indeed remarkably free of embarrassing popular commotions, no doubt partly because of its social origins. Triggered by a financial crisis, it came to be known as the 'businessmen's revival'.

Businessmen were especially thin on the ground, however, in the parishes of Ahoghill and Connor, Co. Antrim. In the latter the Revd J.H. Moore had for sev-

William Patton concerning preaching at Glenarm, 25 August 1858. ²⁸ *Ibid.* Typically a minister would sign up for five sermons at five locations during a given week. Each preacher was asked to record his observations in a diary, and many of those observations focus on the social class division which increasingly marked the boundary between 'church-goers' or 'the respectable classes' on the one hand and the 'working classes' or 'poorer classes' on the other. The Revd Robert Rule was pleased that a sermon he preached at Ship Quay in Derry was heard by '[a] large number of people who are too poor to attend the public worship of God on the Sabbath.' ²⁹ *Irish Presbyterian*, 1:6 (1853), pp 145-50.

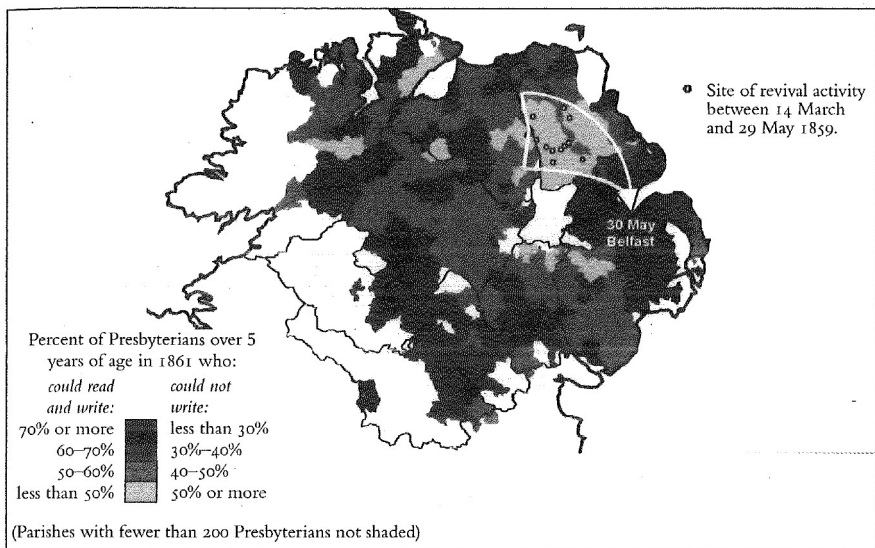


Figure 4 Literacy (as an indicator of social class) among Presbyterians in Ulster, and the early phase of the 1859 Revival

eral years been preaching up and praying down a revival in special services 'designed for the outlying population, who had no regular church connexion, and who could not find accommodation in the crowded pews in the previous part of the day'.³⁰ On 14 March 1859, in First Ahoghill Presbyterian Church, at the traditional Monday thanksgiving service to close a communion season was interrupted by an outburst which led to a scene outside the church marked by the prostration of 'scores' of people 'under intense conviction of sin'.³¹ With the appearance of such 'bodily manifestations', religious enthusiasm spread quickly during the next two months to nearby localities in mid-Antrim, as shown in figure four.

As can be seen in figure four, which utilizes literacy as a proxy for social class, the mid-Antrim 'revival district' was distinguished by a substantial population of poor Presbyterians. At the end of May several revival converts were invited to speak to Belfast congregations. The fervour induced by these events soon spilled out of the churches into working-class streets and workplaces. Newspapers in the provincial capital were filled with revival intelligence; the revival became a media event and was quickly diffused to Protestant areas throughout the province.

³⁰ William Gibson, *The year of grace: a history of the Ulster revival of 1859* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1860), p. 19. ³¹ Eull Dunlop (ed.), *Alfred Russell Scott. The Ulster revival of 1859: enthusiasm emanating from mid-Antrim* (Ballymena: Mid-Antrim Historical Group, 1994), p. 61, quoting J.E. Orr, *The second evangelical awakening in Britain* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1949) p. 40.

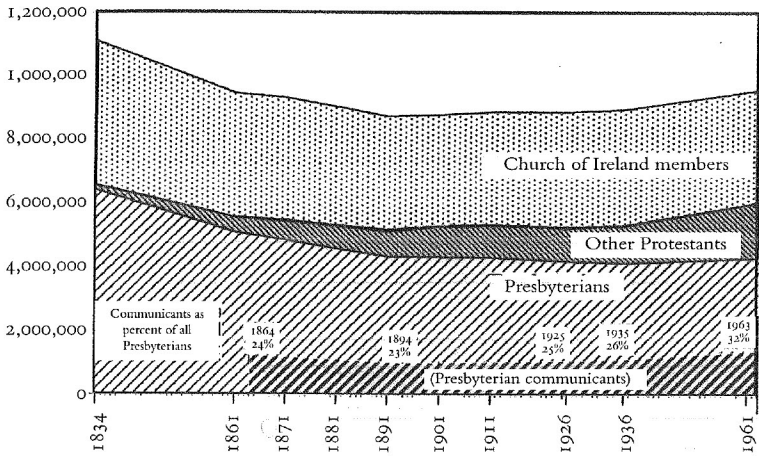


Figure 5 Protestants in Ulster by major denominational grouping, 1834–1961, with number of Presbyterian communicants, 1864–1963

Once the revival reached Belfast the city's ministers assumed leadership in a concerted effort to gain control of it, and they had ample reason for doing so. As early as the Ahoghill incident, converts had declared that a farmer whom the minister tried to restrain from excitedly praying aloud, 'spoke by the command of a power superior to any ministerial authority'.³² In the popular mind, public testimonies by those who had experienced the prostrations, dreams, visions, and yes, stigmata, became more central to the revival experience than clerical ministrations. Like Lawrence Taylor's 'drunken priest' whose lack of self-control has alienated him from his bishop,³³ the converts were believed to enjoy access to the supernatural which the clergy had forfeited in their pursuit of careers in the institutional church. Most clergy genuinely hoped that the revival might improve religious observance among the lower classes, but many were also aware, especially in Belfast, of their increasing dependence on the middle-class sector of their flocks. To meet the respectability test, the 'bodily manifestations' and altered states of consciousness had to be relegated to an ancillary and dispensable place in the salvation process, and the ministers undertook that task both in their pastoral activity and their editorial role in the publication of revival narratives.

To return the question posed in my title, 'did Ulster Presbyterians have a devotional revolution?' Both Ulster Presbyterianism and Irish Catholicism, like nearly every other church in western Christianity, did experience significant

³² Scott, *Ulster revival*, pp 61–3, quoting *Ballymena Observer*, 26 March 1859. ³³ Lawrence J. Taylor, *Occasions of faith: an anthropology of Irish Catholics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp 145–66.

devotional change in the nineteenth century in a qualitative sense. What made the change in Irish Catholicism worthy of the label 'revolution' is the fact that it initiated a period of about a century during which canonical religious practice became virtually universal. Nothing like this seems to have occurred in Ulster Presbyterianism. Of the Ulster population returned as Presbyterians by the census, 24 per cent were reported by the denomination in 1864 to be 'communicants'. As figure five shows, there was no sustained rise in this figure until the mid-twentieth century.

To understand these strikingly different quantitative outcomes of devotional change we should think of Catholic seasonal practices such as the landscape-based devotions at holy wells and the neighbourhood-based station masses as roughly analogous to the Presbyterian old leaven, and the more universalistic Catholic devotions which appealed to the senses and the emotions and were introduced from the continent in the mid- and late-nineteenth century as analogous to the new leaven. In both communities the older popular practices fostered religious systems in which annual or semi-annual official observance might be more common among the poor than weekly attendance at chapel or meetinghouse. Patterns of religious practice in both denominations were crucially affected by the development in the nineteenth century of a strong middle class fixated on the respectability, which could most easily be demonstrated by attendance at weekly worship. The elimination during the famine and in the continuing emigration thereafter of so much of the agrarian underclass of cottiers and labourers probably facilitated the extension of the respectability culture to nearly all remaining Catholics.

The respectability culture affected Presbyterianism differently. Middle-class Presbyterians were offended by the excesses of the revival which, for mill girls and farm labourers were its very essence. The uncomfortable division along class lines was evident in a pseudonymous letter to a Presbyterian magazine in 1867. The writer complained of 'the absence of personal intercourse between our ministers and elders and their people on the subject of their individual religious experience', making plain that he (or she) had in mind especially those members lacking in 'refinement and education'. This 'remissness', the writer claimed, had already caused the Presbyterian church to lose 'some of her most sincere and pious members', to 'some denominations closely approaching to our own in doctrine and discipline, but far exceeding her in this – shall I call it fellowship or communion of saints?'³⁴

Such defection to other denominations does seem to have occurred on a large scale. A generation after the revival, the Presbyterian historian W.T. Latimer wrote of the tendency of its converts to desert 'the faith of their forefathers' for 'various sects of religious enthusiasts'.³⁵ Indeed, the proportion of the Ulster

³⁴ Letter from 'A Church Member', *Evangelical Witness and Presbyterian Review*, 5:10 (1867), p. 252. ³⁵ William Thomas Latimer, *A history of the Irish Presbyterians* (Belfast: James Cleeland,

Protestant population who identified with Methodism and other smaller denominations doubled, from 5.5 per cent to 11 per cent between the 1861 and 1901 censuses,³⁶ and since non-churchgoing Protestants no doubt continued to report their religion as Church of Ireland or Presbyterian, members of the smaller groups would have bulked larger among the observant (see figure five). The clergy having constructed and endorsed a 'proper' revival – that is one without 'excesses' – could hardly deliver on the implied promise of more emotion-charged devotion in a denomination which continued for another four decades after the revival to debate bitterly the admissibility of instrumental music in worship and of hymns to supplement the Scottish metrical Psalter.³⁷ Insistence on the continued importance of these relics of the old Presbyterian leaven made little sense in a clergy which had worked so furiously to associate themselves with a new leaven which was inherently indifferent to differences within Protestantism. They should not have been surprised at the defection of their most devout working-class adherents, leaving them with a working class whose Presbyterianism was little more than a response to the census-taker once a decade. The Catholic Church made no such foolish error – at least not until our own day.

1902), pp 492–7. ³⁶ W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Irish historical statistics: population, 1821–1971* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), pp 53, 65; Presbyterian Church in Ireland, General Assembly, *Minutes*, 1864, 1894, 1925, 1935, 1963. ³⁷ Latimer, *History*, pp 509–12, 522, 533.