

Ulster Liberalism, 1778-1876: the Middle Path

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Author:

Gerald Hall

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Daniel Ritchie

In this eagerly anticipated book Gerald Hall seeks to rescue the history of a political tradition in the north of Ireland which was not primarily driven by either unionism or nationalism. He claims that, for the people who are the focus of this study, the political world was not immutably divided between nationalist and unionist: instead it is argued that the primary objective for Ulster liberals was the promotion of reformist socio-political policies. However, the author recognises that it would be naïve not to acknowledge that Ulster society was becoming increasingly polarised along sectarian lines during the time period which this study covers. Perhaps controversially, Dr Hall complains that most historical writing on Irish history continues to be written within a nationalist historiography, which presupposes the inexorable rise of the Irish nation. As a result of this, he suggests that this theoretical framework is too teleological in nature and leads to an anachronistic search for the precursors of modern parties, states and conflicts. It is claimed that the history of Ulster liberalism helps to reveal the limitations of this understanding of Irish history; this is because liberalism in the north of Ireland helps to explain various social and cultural changes that are often overlooked in the narratives of unionism and nationalism.

While all this is very well, the question of how to define liberalism was one that needed to be answered at the outset if we were to have any hope of understanding this political phenomenon. Accordingly, Dr Hall prudently recognises that any definition of liberalism is fraught with difficulty. The task is not made any easier by the fact that the author admits that, in order to fit with the time-frame of the book, the term has to be applied to people and movements who, prior to the 1820s, would have described themselves by other epithets, such as, Whigs, reformers or patriots. However, the author believes such anachronistic usage of the term for the period 1778-1828 is valid, due to the significant challenges to hierarchical understandings of society throughout this time period that warrant being designated as liberal. Of course, this raises another

question as to why the book begins in 1778. The answer is that the author is of the opinion that by examining the Volunteer movement and its concern with constitutional ideals the early development of Ulster liberalism can be better understood. From this the author moves on to consider various subjects, including the United Irish movement, liberalism in the immediate aftermath of the Union between Britain and Ireland, constitutional reform, the Arian controversy in the Synod of Ulster, changes in local government, the diminished political status of Henry Cooke subsequent to the union of synods, the Tenant Right movement, open-air preaching, sectarian riots, the effects of ultramontanism on Roman Catholic liberal opinion in Belfast, the extension of the parliamentary franchise and the 1868 election, and the muted impact of home rule upon the 1874 general election in Ulster when Tenant Right provided a basis for co-operation between Roman Catholics and Presbyterians, yet masked the growing weakness of Ulster liberalism.

On the whole, Gerald Hall's work is an excellent overview of the liberal tradition in Ulster. His assessment of the Volunteer movement he provides an interesting taxonomy of opinion among its supporters, and argues that it was divided into four discernible categories of opinion – Whigs, civic republicans, covenanters [sic] and nascent liberals. Both Whigs and civic republicans believed in upholding the ancient Irish constitution, though they diverged over the role of the aristocracy in preserving it. By contrast, those in the covenanting tradition (Covenanters/Reformed Presbyterians and Seceders) believed that the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 was the rock upon which the nation should be built, and sought to see the state enforce divine law. Though small in numbers, Dr Hall observes that the Covenanters had an influence which transcended their minority status as some of their views were often popular among the common people. Hence it is essential that views of this tradition are properly understood. Also important is the author's discussion of the intellectual influence of the Scottish Enlightenment upon the nascent liberalism of Ulster, as many Presbyterian students imbibed the ideals of figures such as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Ferguson and John Millar. In terms of the United Irish movement, he claims that, apart from agreement over the need for parliamentary reform and Catholic Emancipation, there was initially a wide range of opinion among its supporters. Consequently, it is important not to confuse the beginnings of the movement with the oath-bound Society of United Irishmen that emerged in 1795. However, in the aftermath of the failed rebellion of 1798, Dr Hall concludes that former civic republicans, Whigs and people influenced by the covenanting tradition found new common ground in the principles of the nascent liberals – which he asserts were gaining wider acceptance in society and which became the basis of 19th-century Ulster liberalism. In this respect, we are reminded that it is important to remember that the disapproval of reformers towards revolutionary violence did not always amount to reactionary conservatism. On the contrary, Dr Hall observes that the shock of revolutionary disorder sometimes led reformers to construct what he calls a middle path between revolution and reaction, namely, that of liberalism. Thus it is not surprising that at least some of those who embraced nascent liberal ideas were led to consider Union with Britain as a means by which socio-political reform could best be achieved. Support for the Union was not necessarily a sign of political conservatism. To substantiate this one need only refer to the example of the Presbyterians in the General Synod of Ulster, who, in their treatment of the Reverend William Steel Dickson in 1813 were still willing to endorse calls for significant political reforms, but who were not prepared to countenance a rehabilitation of the revolutionary violence associated with the United Irishmen. Nor did the decline of political meetings or conventions in the early decades of the 19th century necessarily indicate an abandonment of political involvement: instead the author suggests that Ulster reformers had simply begun to question the prudence of violent constitutional change.

In light of these conclusions, Dr Hall, wisely following Finlay Holmes's excellent work, argues that Roy Foster was incorrect to conclude that Presbyterians had abandoned the liberalism of their forefathers as early as the 1820s due to the influence of Henry Cooke.⁽¹⁾ The battle for theological orthodoxy which took place within the Synod of Ulster did not lead to the abandonment of political liberalism, even though Cooke's leading opponent in the Arian controversy, Henry Montgomery, was a political liberal. Although Dr Hall does not deploy the strongest arguments against the crudely reductionist assumption that the withdrawal of the Arians in 1829 was a victory for political conservatism, as he relies too heavily upon comments written after Cooke's death by Richard Smyth in 1872 and W. T. Latimer in 1902 rather than on the views of figures such as Alexander Porter Goudy when Cooke was still alive ⁽²⁾, his analysis is essentially correct. Indeed, he

makes a rather interesting argument that the heterodox provided Cooke with a stick with which to threaten the rest of the synod if they disagreed with him, but once the heterodox had departed that stick was gone, as Cooke could no longer link his rivals with the aberrant theological views of Montgomery et al. Far from wilting before Cooke, political liberals often successfully opposed him and, as Ian McBride has argued, he was never quite the dictator that later observers have supposed.⁽³⁾ Moreover, Dr Hall makes an interesting argument that the union between the Synod of Ulster and the Seceders in 1840 served to further undermine Cooke's political influence, noting that the latter group had appealed more to those in humbler circumstances than the Synod of Ulster had done. And after the union of synods, resentment towards Cooke grew due to controversies over Presbyterian marriages, the non-intrusion controversy in the Church of Scotland and tenant right. Furthermore, the establishment of politically liberal Presbyterian newspapers, such as the *Banner of Ulster* and the *Londonderry Standard*, was something of a thorn in the flesh for Cooke. So although Ulster Presbyterians had become evangelicals and supporters of the Union with Great Britain they did not automatically follow Cooke into political conservatism or consent to his proposed marriage with the Church of Ireland.

The opposition to political liberals to crude displays of sectarianism is illustrated by several points made by the author. Contrary to popular mythology, Dr Hall points out that the Reverend Hugh Hanna was not representative of evangelical Presbyterian open-air preachers, and that such an assumption overlooks the involvement of political liberals – who were certainly not Orange auxiliaries, such as the Reverend Richard Smyth in such activity. Moreover, the author claims that prominent liberals including the Revd John Brown of Aghadowey opposed sectarian violence and the Toryisation of the Glorious Revolution, believing instead that just as William of Orange had joined with the Pope against Louis XIV, Presbyterians and Roman Catholics should have maintained an alliance against Toryism. However, the reviewer would have preferred to see greater substantiation of this controversial thesis than that which is currently provided in the text. Despite increased polarisation between Roman Catholics and Presbyterians towards the end of this period, the weakness of the Home Rule movement in Ulster at the 1874 election is exposed by the fact that, unlike their co-religionist voters elsewhere in Ireland, Roman Catholics in the northern province generally supported the Liberal party. However, by 1890 such co-operation was long since forgotten – thus signifying the failure of Ulster liberals to persuade nationalists and unionists that the events of the past should not control the beliefs and actions of the present.

The lengthy discussions relating to local government throughout the chapters are no doubt of value to understanding Ulster liberalism, however, the present reviewer must confess to finding them rather tedious in comparison to the rest of the book. Nevertheless, scholars interested in municipal and local politics will find the discussion of these themes most useful, especially as there is a focus on local politics in towns other than Belfast. More worryingly, the book contains some questionable judgments. For instance, the assertion that the Reformed Presbyterian (Covenanter) theologian Dr John Paul of Loughmourne, the leading writer against non-subscription to creeds and on the Arian controversy in Ulster Presbyterianism, was a Voluntaryist does not appear to be correct, because there is primary evidence to support the view that he continued to believe in religious establishments despite his critical attitude towards existing established churches.⁽⁴⁾ Nevertheless, it is correct to argue that Paul was on a Voluntaryist trajectory as his 'New Light' Covenanter views represented a significant revision of covenanting political theology due to his undermining of the traditional Reformed understanding of the civil application of the Mosaic law and his essential rejection of the Westminster Confession's doctrine of the magistrate's power *circa sacra*.⁽⁵⁾ Dr Hall also claims that W. D. Killen was 'an admirer of Cooke in political as well as theological matters' (p. 79). However, Andrew Holmes quotes Killen as saying: 'a Tory Presbyterian is a kind of ecclesiastical and political contradiction'.⁽⁶⁾ On the other hand, the author may simply mean that Killen was in favour of Cooke's opposition to repeal and concessions to Roman Catholicism. The comment that Cooke's appointment as moderator of the General Assembly in 1841 in recognition of his role in bringing about the union of synods is fair enough, but it perhaps overlooks the significance of Dr Samuel Hanna being elected the Assembly's first moderator in 1840 – evidence, if ever it were needed, that Cooke was not the Presbyterian Pope.⁽⁷⁾ However, a few minor slips of this nature are probably unavoidable when undertaking such an ambitious project.

Andrew Holmes's recent work on 'Covenanter politics', which argues that 19th-century Presbyterians rejected 'the model of a theocratic presbyterian [sic] state and the perpetual obligation of the Covenants' ⁽⁸⁾, needs to be interacted with in relation to some of the themes discussed in this book.⁽⁹⁾ Especially since the author claims that the *Banner of Ulster* and *Londonderry Standard* were 'representatives of a renewed emphasis upon a reformulated vision of the godly commonwealth' (p. 129) whose titles alluded to the blue banners of the early Covenanters. On the subject of the covenants, it is worth remembering the often forgotten fact that the sixth question put to candidates for ordination in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland was, 'Do you acknowledge the moral obligation of public religious covenanting, and do you hold it your duty to maintain and prosecute the reformation work of our covenanted fathers of the Church of Scotland?' ⁽¹⁰⁾ Yet judging by the fact that James McKnight, a man who was strongly critical of the early Covenanters' views on religious liberty ⁽¹¹⁾, had stints as editor of both the *Banner* and the *Standard* it is hard to believe that either newspaper was inspired by visions of the godly commonwealth when they were edited by one who 'engaged in iconoclasm of this magnitude' (p. 159). Hence it is probable that if Presbyterians in this era did believe in a godly commonwealth it was something significantly different from that envisaged by their forebears. What Dr Hall argues may not be entirely wrong, and what Dr Holmes claims may not be entirely correct, but the issue of what precisely what was meant by this supposed reformulation of the godly commonwealth needs to be probed further. Was it a wholesale revision of the idea or an adaptation of the principle to the circumstances they found themselves in during the 19th century? Perhaps it was a mixture of both? Aside from these minor concerns, it is the judgment of the present reviewer that this book will long remain the standard work on Ulster liberalism and should be required reading for all serious historians of 19th-century Ireland. Furthermore, the author has managed to combine his obvious extensive research into the subjects discussed with an ability to judiciously summarise the issues under review, and to make appropriate use of a wide range of primary and secondary sources; this should serve as a model to other historians attempting to undertake similar studies.

Notes

1. R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (London, 1988), p. 303. Cf. Finlay Holmes, *Henry Cooke* (Belfast, 1981), p. 207. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. For more on this see Andrew Holmes, 'Covenanter politics: evangelicalism, political liberalism and Ulster Presbyterians, 1798-1914' in *English Historical Review*, 125, 513 (April 2010), 1–30.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. I. R. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), p. 216.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Belfast News-Letter*, 29 July 1836.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. John Paul, *A Review of the Rev. Thomas Houston's 'Christian Magistrate', and a Defence of the Principles of Civil and Religious Liberty. Part II* (Belfast, 1832), p. 95. Idem, *Review of a Speech by the Rev. Dr Montgomery of Belfast, and the Doctrines of the Unitarians Proved to be Unfavourable to the Right of Private Judgment, to Liberality and Charity, to the Investigation of Truth and the Practice of Virtue* (1828), reprinted in *Works of the late Rev. John Paul, D.D. of Carrickfergus. With a Memoir and Introduction by the Editor*, ed. Stewart Bates (Belfast, 1855), p. 417. A concise summary of Paul's views may be found in Peter Brooke, 'Controversies in Ulster Presbyterianism, 1790-1836' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1980), pp 224–5, 236.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Banner of Ulster*, 19 November 1868. Quoted in Holmes, 'Covenanter politics', 25.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Cf. Finlay Holmes, *Henry Cooke* (Belfast, 1981), p. 139.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Holmes, 'Covenanter politics', 6.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. This highlights a more general tendency on the part of the author to overlook sources written after 2000.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland: Consisting of the General Synod of Ulster, and the Presbyterian Synod of Ireland, Distinguished by the Name of Seceders: Held in Belfast, July, 1840* (Belfast, 1840), p. 30.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. [James McKnight], *Persecution Sanctioned by the Westminster Confession: a Letter, Addressed to the Clergy, Eldership, and Laity, of the Synod of Ulster; Shewing, from the History and Proceedings of the Westminster Divines, and the Public Records of the Church of Scotland, the Doctrines of Intolerance to which the Late Vote of Unqualified Subscription has Committed the General Synod of Ulster. With an Humble Dedication to the Rev. Dr. Cooke* (Belfast, 1836).[Back to \(11\)](#)

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