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## The 'Natural Leaders' and their World: Politics, Culture and Society in Belfast, c. 1801-1832

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**Reviewer:**

Richard Torpin

Jonathan Jeffrey Wright's *The 'Natural Leaders' and their World* is an important contribution to the history of Belfast as well as to the broader subjects of Ulster liberalism and Presbyterianism. By stepping out of the usual historiographical constraints placed upon the period, Wright has produced a confident and enlightening first monograph, one that hopefully will help to steer future research into what is perhaps the most neglected period of modern Ulster's history. A great deal of impressive research has been published on the momentous events which brought the 18th century to a close and resulted in a new political reality for the Irish.

However, scholarship focusing on the first decades of the 19th century has been surprisingly thin, bookended between the Act of Union and the era of Daniel O'Connell, the campaigns for Catholic emancipation, repeal and finally the Great Famine. In the case of Ulster, a great amount of historical writing has focused on developments within Ulster Presbyterian thought and the shift from the radicalism of the late 18th-century to the eventual rise of Henry Cooke and the perceived shift towards political and theological conservatism.

Wright however attempts to move beyond these previous scholarly guideposts. In short, Wright seeks to build upon the body of scholarship concerning Ulster during this period and to marshal it forward. He does

this with what he calls a 'quasi-biographical' approach. Wright is to be commended for how well he applies this potentially difficult methodology. He bases his research in the extensive correspondence of the Tennents, an important middle-class Ulster family in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Through them he is able to trace the activities of the 'natural leaders', a small group of Belfast's leading reformers. This term, which was recorded by their contemporary A. H. Thornton, was chosen by the members of this clique to describe their relation to the people of Belfast (p. 49). As Wright demonstrates and newspapers of all political stripes observed, members of the Tennent family were a part of a small group that championed liberal causes in Belfast during this period. This faction was made up of the most advanced reformers in Belfast and included William Drennan, John Templeton and others. This group is set against the Reverend Dr. William Bruce and Henry Joy, who were the pillars of a more moderate group of liberals.

It is important to note that the 'natural leaders' were by no means representative and Wright is quite clear that his book is an exploration of their particular cultural milieu. Wisely, Wright also sets strict chronological and geographical parameters for the book, providing it a focus of vision that other recent works on the subject have lacked. One of the book's significant strengths is Wright's use of the most recent scholarship in the field, including recently completed dissertations. Much of this scholarship concerns developments within the wider British historiography. Central to Wright's purpose is to incorporate the cultural and political environment of Belfast's radicals in the decades after the Act of Union into a decidedly 'British' context. In doing so Wright casts new light upon the political culture of the period, rescuing it from previous negative assessments.

Wright begins with a chapter that provides a brief biographical sketch of the Tennent family. The Reverend John Tennent, the family patriarch, was a Scottish Presbyterian minister who settled in Ulster in the mid 18th century and was associated with the seceding faction of Ulster Presbyterians. Two of his sons, William and Robert, are the central figures of the book. William Tennent would eventually become a wealthy Belfast merchant, but prior to his later economic successes he was a member of the Ulster circle of the United Irishmen. There has been some debate over the extent to which Tennent was involved with the society. Wright provides a comprehensive survey of the evidence and concludes that Tennent must be considered one of the highest-ranking members of the secret organization in Ulster. He would eventually be imprisoned for his activities in the spring of 1798 and his life would eventually be spared after several years of incarceration. The fact that he would eventually play an important role in Belfast social and political life serves to make one of Wright's key points: that the vibrant urban culture of Belfast in the first decades after the Act of Union allowed William Tennant to reintegrate into society with little moderation of his reformist views.

William's younger brother Robert held similar ideological views to his older brother. He was abroad for much of the turbulent decade of the 1790s, seeking employment as a surgeon. He followed this ambition to Jamaica, where he would work as an estate manager for several years before spending an additional period as a naval surgeon. Robert returned to Ireland when word reached him that his brother had been imprisoned (p. 33). Though he would not be as financially successful as his older brother, Robert Tennent would be active in an impressive number of charities and public organizations as well as a committed evangelical. The final member of the Tennent family to appear in the text is Robert's son, Robert James Tennent. His youthful correspondence is put to excellent use to provide depth to the final chapters of the book, where Wright turns his attention to the educational and charitable institutions of Belfast. Taken together, the biographical material of the Tennent family serves as both the base, but also as the 'through line' for Wright's wider thematic arguments. Wright is able to strike a fine balance and this structure proves to be very effective.

With this biographical base established, the author then turns to the political context of the period, which he covers over the next two chapters, which make up the core of the book. The first of the two chapters focuses on the political environment in Belfast between 1801 and 1820. In surveying the political atmosphere of the post-union period, Wright concedes what many contemporaries observed: Belfast during this period had a strangely 'muted' quality (p. 57). However, building upon the theories of Habermas, Wright argues that Belfast also boasted an expanding public sphere, which included town meetings, public dinners and a

significant growth of newspapers in the town. This environment served as a counter to the unreformed electoral politics of the day and the considerable influence of the Marquess of Donegall and his allies. Wright demonstrates how these venues served as sites of conflict between both radical and more moderate reformers but also with the establishment as well.

Wright highlights moments of tension between these parties: the establishment, the 'natural leaders', and the moderates, to draw out the divisions within Belfast political life. These moments included the failed subscription in support of the radical journalist Peter Finnerty, Robert Tennent's trial for assault (which stemmed from an altercation which occurred at a public meeting), the infamous St. Patrick's Day dinner at the Belfast Academical Institution and the Queen Caroline affair. For much of this chapter the author relies on the *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, which served as the mouth piece for the interests of the Tennents and their allies (p. 67). This chapter shows a Belfast with a lively and sometimes contentious civic culture. Importantly, it was one that was very much a part of a wider British popular political context, as the carefully orchestrated outpouring of sentiment in support of Caroline in Belfast demonstrated.

The second political chapter extends Wright's frame of reference up to the general election of 1832 and incorporates the wider European political currents as they presented themselves within Belfast's civic culture. Again using the *Belfast Monthly Magazine* as a guide Wright points to the numerous continental events which served to encourage and inspire the 'natural leaders'. This included the ambiguous figure of Napoleon, but also the news of the southern European revolutions as well (p. 111). It is here where the younger generation of the 'natural leaders' make their first appearance, in the form of Robert James Tennent with his interest in romanticism and eventual participation in the conflicts on the continent. This interest serves to further one of Wright's main arguments: that the cadre of the 'natural leaders' represented the 'cosmopolitan' side of Belfast cultural life, one that was at once British and European (p. 119). While Belfast reformers took an interest in European issues during the early 1820s, they showed a resurgence of activity during the heady period which ushered in the Great Reform Bill. This included increasingly unpopular support for Catholic Emancipation and opposition to the activities of the proselytizing Reformation Society. Wright argues that the leading reformers of Belfast were very much in line with the wider trends within British politics during this period, though the election which followed in 1832 proved to be a disaster for the 'natural leaders.' While support for reform seemed to swell in Belfast after the passing of Catholic emancipation, the popularity of the 'natural leaders' faltered. Wright argues that they had perhaps overplayed their hand with the more moderate reformers, and that the term 'natural leaders' was even used against them sarcastically during the lead up to the 1832 general election (p. 133). Both candidates put forth by the advanced reformers failed to win seats against the two candidates supported by the town corporation, including one, James Emerson Tennent, who had previously been a member of the advanced reformers. He had been enticed to run by the corporation after being passed over by his former compatriots in favor of the outsider William Sharman Crawford.

While the advanced reformers of Belfast fumbled the political opportunity at the end of 1832, the language which they employed raises some important questions about developments within Ulster Presbyterianism. As Wright demonstrates, a number of prominent Belfast reformers during this period had direct connections to the United Irishmen, and had continued to employ similar political rhetoric (p. 136). It is to this language that Wright turns in the final chapters. Here he reassesses the validity of Belfast's reputation as 'the Athens of the North'. He does so skeptically, casting a critical eye on the cultural and intellectual institutions that were popular within middle-class society during this period. Wright focuses on three: The Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge, the Belfast Literary Society and the Belfast Historic Society. The author rightly places them into the context of similar organizations which were rapidly spreading through the British world. Though all of the organizations examined here claimed to be apolitical, the same political divisions identified by Wright in earlier chapters manifest themselves here and thus limited these organizations' effectiveness in maintaining membership and funds.

To this portrait of Belfast intellectual life Wright adds the Belfast Academical Institution, which opened in 1814 and, as Wright argues, injected new life into the intellectual climate of Belfast. This included the teaching of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy as well as the classics, both of which played an important

part in the political vocabulary used across the Atlantic world. Here the reflections of Robert James Tennent are particularly useful. Educated at the Academical Institution and active in the Belfast Historic Society, Wright is able to draw out these varied influences in Tennent's sometimes colorful correspondence. There he is also able to isolate the influence of romanticism as well, which places Tennent and his compatriots squarely (though at times a bit behind) in a cosmopolitan British literary sphere (p. 190).

The final chapter turns to the influence of evangelicalism in Ulster. This focus is appropriate as it fits with the biographical aspect of the book in Robert Tennent's numerous philanthropic activities. It is also fitting chronologically as well, for Belfast's rapid economic and demographic expansion created a wealth of social problems during the period. An in-depth examination of the institutional structures of charity in Belfast is not Wright's intent and he instead focuses on the ways in which evangelicalism came to influence Ulster Presbyterianism and the various voices that spoke out for and against it, especially as manifested in the city's charitable institutions. In doing so Wright is able to draw out a number of important influences on charity in Belfast, including that of Thomas Chalmers. Importantly, while Chalmers famously championed charitable works in a providentialist context, Wright argues that he was particularly well-received in Belfast in part because of the providentialism that had already existed amongst Belfast's Presbyterians prior to Chalmers' growth in popularity in the early 19th century. This links Belfast's charitable impulses, at least in part, to the period before the arrival of widespread evangelical influence.

Jonathan Wright's *The 'Natural Leaders' and Their World* is an important contribution to the history of Ulster. He has heeded the numerous calls to view the history of Belfast during the post-Union period within a 'British context'. It is helpful to read Wright's book alongside John Bew's well-received *The Glory of Being Britons: Civic Unionism in Nineteenth-Century Belfast*.<sup>(1)</sup> Bew sought to identify the origins of Ulster unionism within the urban culture of late 18th- and 19th-century Belfast. Wright, in dialogue with Bew's work, contributes greatly to a fuller understanding of that urban culture. While not a comprehensive history of this period, the work does much to fill in important gaps and to suggest interesting new connections. Informed by the most recent historiographical trends and research, Wright's book demonstrates the numerous new avenues available to historians of Ulster. Smartly organized and engagingly written, it is an important work.

## Notes

1. John Bew, *The Glory of Being Britons: Civic Unionism in Nineteenth-Century Belfast* (Sallins, 2008).  
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The author is happy to accept this review and, beyond thanking the reviewer for his generous and thoughtful appraisal, does not wish to respond.

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