

Heritage

Presbyterian Church in Ireland
Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland
Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland



Autumn 2019

Hello and welcome!

As my daughter watched the film *Braveheart* on television which deals with William Wallace, the 13th-century Scottish warrior who led the Scots against King Edward I of England, I pointed out various inaccuracies in the story. Eventually she turned to me and said rather crossly, “Dad you watch the History Channel and let me enjoy the film.”

Sadly I have found that fewer and fewer people are interested in history, and what they do ‘know’ is not always accurate. I was watching a drama in a theatre recently when a ‘teacher’ on stage instructed her pupils that King William won the Battle of the Boyne on 12 July 1690. I am sure there are many who believe that to be true, but it is not. Before you panic, yes King Billy won the battle, but it was on 1 July 1690. The calendar was advanced by 11 days in 1752 to fall into line with the one introduced by Pope Gregory XII. As the late comic James Young pointed out, Orangemen march on 12 July because of the Pope!

The Rev S.S. McFarland said in a sermon preached in First Carrickfergus, “The curse of Ireland is bad history, history which is based on fact but which is not factual.”

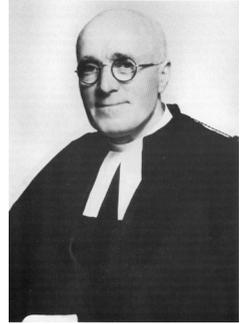
The story of the church in Ireland is fascinating. There are wonderful tales to be told of the Celtic church, the coming of Patrick, the arrival of the Scottish settlers and their Presbyterian religion. These are not just pages from the past for they have moulded the country in which we live today, and they have moulded us too.

Hopefully these pages in *Heritage* will whet your appetite to find out something more about who we are as Presbyterians and who you are. It is a wonderful story and as is usually the case, truth is sometimes stranger than fiction.

Enjoy the read. And if we can help you with your newfound passion for Presbyterian history please make contact via the website, by email or why not come along to one of our talks.

The day the minister called

Dunluce congregation in Bushmills has a long history. From 1928 to 1980 it was served by a faithful and beloved minister, Rev Samuel Alexander, BA. The present clerk of session is Mr Robert McIlroy, and he recently agreed to share his memory of ‘The day the minister called’.



Rev Samuel Alexander believed that a minister should get to know his people in their homes. A yearly visit was planned, and commenced in September. So Mrs McIlroy would say to her family, “Listen carefully to where the Rev Alexander is planning to visit this week.”

On a particular Sunday morning he announced, “I will visit homes in the townland of Dunluce, Bonneyclashy, Gortnee, Gortnacapple, Stanalane Upper and Stanlane Lower on Tuesday and Thursday of this week.” When he said ‘Stanalane Upper’ – that was us! At the end of morning worship he would look up at the family pew on the gallery and signal a wave to come down. He would say to my eldest sister “Tell your mother I will be with you on Thursday evening at 7pm.”

When Thursday came, the griddle went on. My mother’s baking was in full swing – soda bread, wheaten, pancakes, potato bread etc. She was well known for her baking skills! One thing was made perfectly clear. Our whole family of eight children had to be in for the minister’s visit.

Mr Alexander’s visit conveyed the sincerity of his interest in the family, and his concern for its wellbeing and progress. Before he conducted worship, he would take the catechisms from his Bible. He knew exactly what stages we were at in Sunday school, and he asked each of us by name to answer an appropriate catechism question. Then he would choose a psalm we had learnt, such as Psalm 23, and he would go round us asking us to say a verse each. The two eldest in the family would be asked to say the full Psalm.

Family worship followed. With a reading from God’s Word, and then mother would have a cushion placed in the middle of the kitchen floor where Mr Alexander knelt for prayer, and the family knelt with him at the chairs they were sitting on. After family worship, it was time for supper! The table was set with room for most of the family, but not for mother who would be so busy seeing to everybody’s needs, nor for the youngest child, Robert. Mr Alexander looked over at me and said, “We will make room at the table for everyone before we start.” So mother and I joined the company, leaving very little room to move.

Grace was said by Mr Alexander, who then said, “There will always be room at God’s table for everyone.” What a memory, and what a lasting impression which has stayed with me ever since!

Creevelea Presbyterian Church

“Where’s that?” you say. I’ve never heard of a congregation with that name. Well that’s not surprising considering that the congregation that once bore that name has ceased to exist in the official records of our Presbyterian Church since 1910.

Back in the 1700s Creevelea (near Drumkeeran in Co Leitrim) was famous for its ironworks which attracted a number of Scottish Presbyterians to come over to this lovely part of our island to work in its local industry. The ironworks closed in 1768, but the Presbyterian people remained in the area, working on farms, or in the local coal mines at nearby Arigna, which continued to operate until well into the second half of the 20th century. It is still possible to visit the mines and a fine local museum. The area was served by a local narrow gauge railway



Creevelea Presbyterian Church (photo www.buildingsofireland.ie)

which carried both coal and passengers, and connected with the broad gauge railway network which in those days was provided by the Sligo, Leitrim and Northern Counties Railway.

The first Presbyterian services at Creevelea were conducted on weekdays by Rev James Heron, Mminister of Sligo. The first minister of the congregation was Rev John Ashmore, who was ordained there on 15 December 1852. In addition to his work at Creevelea, Mr Ashmore conducted services at Manorhamilton, Dromahaire and Collooney. He exercised a busy ministry until he retired in 1903.

The Presbytery of Connaught initially agreed to allow the congregation to appoint an assistant and successor’, but this permission was withdrawn by the General Assembly of 1902, and the Board of Missions undertook to make temporary arrangements for the supply of ordinances.

The name of Creevelea continued to appear in the Assembly records, but with dwindling numbers. When Rev John Ashmore died on 8 October 1909, the congregation ceased to exist, even in name.

But what became of the church and manse that the little congregation had managed to build? It was bought by the local Catholic curate, and became a place of worship for its services in this community. A plaque on the church records its Presbyterian origins. It reads as follows:

“Creevelea was famous for its ironworks which closed in 1768. Many of the ironworkers were Scottish Presbyterians, and they built a small church and a residence for their clergyman at Creevelea. Father Patrick Connolly was curate in Creevelea from 1923–1934. In 1933 he purchased the oratory and house from the Presbyterian community. Repairs costing £100 were carried out at the church. It was dedicated to St Theresa and used as an oratory for weekday masses.”

William Martin

On 2 July 1757 William Martin was ordained at The Vow.

Here was a ferry over the River Bann, making it a convenient meeting place for Covenanters in counties Antrim and Londonderry. Martin was the first minister of the Reformed Presbyterian Church to be ordained in Ireland.

Martin later settled at Kellswater, near Ballymena, where a former mill building was renovated as a meeting house. In 1772 he led a major exodus of families, mainly from County Antrim, to South Carolina at a time when unrest was threatening the stability of the north of Ireland. Something of a maverick, Martin won fame for his courage during the American War of Independence. In 2007 an inscribed memorial stone was erected close to the old graveyard in this townland, commemorating Martin's ordination and his subsequent emigration to America.



Francis Makemie – the father of American Presbyterianism

Francis Makemie was born around 1657 in Co Donegal. As a student for the Presbyterian ministry, his training took place at the University of Glasgow.

This entailed him walking 110 miles to Donaghadee where he found a ship to Portpatrick. Then the walk of 90 miles to Glasgow. He carried a sack of grain to pay for his lodgings as well as what clothes and books were needed for his stay. At the end of term he made the return trip. It was tough going in those days.

The young student was licensed and following an appeal for ministers to go to Maryland, he was ordained for such service, arriving in 1683 where he found the work of Presbyterianism had been ongoing for some 25 years.

The difficulties which Presbyterians had faced in Donegal had equipped Makemie for the trials he was to face in America. Professor Finlay Holmes writes that “his trials in the biblical languages, in preaching, in theology and controversy – all of which was to stand him in good stead as a leader of an infant Presbyterian Church in colonised America.



“Significantly his main contribution to American Presbyterianism – the origination of a presbytery in 1706 and his personal fight for liberty to preach in New York – owed much to his Ulster Presbyterian experience which had taught him the value of a presbyterially structured church to safeguard and propagate the faith, shepherd Christ’s flock, providing Christian nurture and discipline for them as they had been provided for him in the Laggan Presbytery and also the inestimable privilege of religious liberty.”

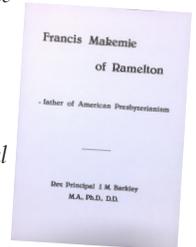
Such endeavours earned him the sobriquet ‘the father of American Presbyterianism.’

Would you believe it?

In his booklet *Francis Makemie of Ramelton – father of American Presbyterianism*, Principal John Barkley deals with the problems that the Quakers presented both in Ireland and America in those far-off days.

“The only other element requiring mention is the attitude of the Quakers. While the Society of Friends are today highly respected and rightly so, it has to be remembered that the early Quakers in America interrupted public worship and even indulged in what today would be called ‘streaking’, running stark naked into church services crying out ‘All shall be thus revealed openly in the last days.’”

Francis Makemie of Ramelton – father of American Presbyterianism by Rev Principal John Barkley is available from the Society priced £2 + p&p.



The historic synods revisited

“Gone but not forgotten” is a common tribute, but of the two “historic” synods we might say “forgotten but not quite gone”.

When the General Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod united in 1840 to form the General Assembly they did not disappear. The Act of Union 1840 guaranteed both bodies “the right of meeting hereafter in Synod”. That reassured members of the more conservative Secession Synod that they would not simply lose their identity in the larger Assembly.

At a meeting of the Synod of Ulster in 1872, “A letter was read from Professor Thomas Witherow, in which he suggested that the official records from 1691 to 1803 should be printed lest an accident might lead to their destruction.” The Secession Synod had difficulty in retrieving some of its old records; in 1896 it was reported that: “The minutes of the Presbytery of Monaghan have been found”, but in 1902 “There was no report from the Committee on Missing Records. The Committee was discharged.” I believe that Rev Dr Alfred R. Scott, minister of Ahorey and clerk of the [regular] Synod of Armagh and Down, searched everywhere for a missing minute book but to no avail. After his death a tea chest of sundry items was emptied out, and there in the bottom was the missing Minute Book; it had been in the Ahorey manse all the time!

1870 brought changes which left little business for the historic synods. Should they meet in perpetuity for a few minutes every year for a formal ritual? They no longer hold meetings; the last minutes of meetings of the historic synods were published in the Minutes of the General Assembly, 2002, pp.77 and 78. Those minutes list such forgotten presbyteries as Ahoghill, Markethill, Clogher, Connaught, etc.

The regular synods ceased in 2004 but the historic Synods continue to exist, at least on paper. Code Par 93 requires “that every congregation shall be assigned to one of other of the historic Synods whose Union constituted the General Assembly”, each being marked (U) or (S) as appropriate. Limerick is an exception, being marked (M) for Munster; it was only in 1854 that some conservative remnants of the Non-Subscribing Synod of Munster, now separately constituted as the Presbytery of Munster, were admitted to the Assembly. Lucan, being of mixed descent, is designated (MS). The Non-Subscribing Synod of Munster later became part of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church.

One legacy of the historic synods was the name of our supreme court. The General Synod of Ulster and The Presbyterian Synod “of Ireland” Distinguished by the Name of Seceders each contributed some wording to the title “The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.”

The historic Synods may be largely forgotten but they are not quite gone. They are simply in a deep sleep from which they may never awake.

*Samuel Hutchinson
(Clerk of the General Synod of Ulster and Clerk of the Secession Synod 1990-2004)*

William Dool Killen



While browsing through an old minute book of the Ballymena Presbytery, I came across a handwritten letter pinned to one of the pages. It is dated 10 October 1877 and signed ‘W.D. Killen’.

William Dool Killen was Professor of Church History and Pastoral Theology in the Presbyterian College (Assembly’s), Belfast, 1841–1889, and is best known as the man who completed the third volume of the *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* by Rev James Seaton Reid.

The letter is addressed to Rev John Gibson, minister of Second Broughshane and clerk of the presbytery. He thanks him for responding to his request to forward a copy of ‘... the Confession of Faith’ which he presented at the time of his licensing in October 1827. Killen had not signed the Westminster Confession of Faith, but had submitted a personal expression of faith instead. In the previous century there had been a major dispute about subscription within the Synod of Ulster, 1719–1726, despite it being made compulsory in 1705. The practice had lapsed in many of the presbyteries, and personal confessions were accepted.

He was licensed notwithstanding the objections of two young ministers who were strong supporters of Rev Henry Cooke to have subscription made compulsory in the Synod of Ulster, which it was in 1835. The argument lost him the possibility of becoming minister of Kilraughts where some suspected him of being ‘Arian’. He later became minister of First Raphoe even though the rumours dogged him there.

The letter shows Killen’s sensitivity on the issue 50 years later as he explains this was a widespread practice at the time, and avers his confession showed him to be ‘a very decided Calvinist’.

Rumour and accusation can be hard to shake off!

W.D. Patton

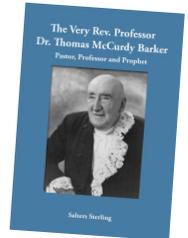
New Publication

A new booklet has been produced by the PHSI on Dr Tom Barker, our last missionary in China.

Barker was a Derry man who lived a full life very far away from the Maiden City. The year 1913 was a very important one in his life as he was both ordained and married, and later sailed for China where he was to spend nearly 40 years in missionary service. His passion and expertise were in theological education and he served in a number of colleges during his time in China, as well as with the Student Christian Movement at home. He was never happier than in the company of students.

With a number of other missionaries he was a prisoner of the Japanese during the Second World War, and was in Nagasaki when the second atom bomb was dropped.

*Written by
Salters Sterling,
this interesting
and informative
booklet is the
latest in the mini
biography series
and is available from
the Society priced £3 + p&p.*



Coming soon:

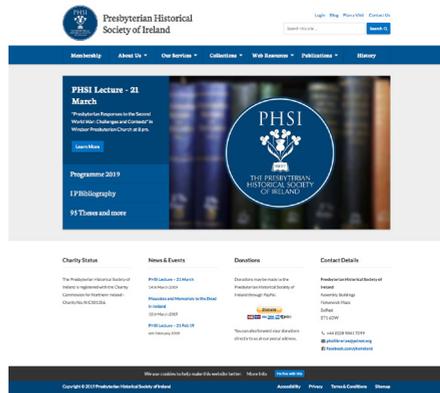
Thursday 21 November 2019 in McQuiston Presbyterian Church, Castlereagh Road, Belfast at 8pm – ‘Clerical Families in 19th century Ulster’ by Dr Janice Holmes. Exploring the domestic world of Ulster’s Presbyterian clergy, it will consider marriage, children and living arrangements, especially in a manse. It will also consider how ministers and their families interacted with their congregations.

Thursday 20 February 2020 in Cullybackey Reformed Presbyterian Church at 8pm – ‘Forgotten Covenanters. The Rise and Fall of the Eastern Reformed Presbyterian Church’ by Dr William Roulston. This will explore the history of the short-lived Eastern Reformed Presbyterian Church from its formation in the early 1840s.

PHSI website

The Society’s extensive and growing website has a great deal of information concerning Presbyterianism in Ireland:

- The *History of Congregations* which includes details of records and congregational histories which have been written;
- A list of the Society’s publications which can be ordered through the online bookstore;
- Secondhand books;
- Digitised copies of some of the early Presbyterian magazines.



While some of the material is restricted to members only, there is much that can be accessed by all visitors.

Why not give it a try and see what is there – www.presbyterianhistoryireland.com

The Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland

Assembly Buildings, Fisherwick Place, Belfast BT1 6DW

Hours of opening:

Tuesday and Wednesday 9.30am-1.00pm; 1.30pm-4.30pm;
Thursday 9.30am-1.00pm

Email: phsilibrarian@pcinet.org

Tel: +44 (0)28 9041 7299

Web: www.presbyterianhistoryireland.com

Blog: www.phsireland.org

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