

**‘Steadfast supporters of the British connection’?  
Belfast Presbyterians and the Act of Union,  
c. 1798–1840**

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‘Ever since the passing of the Act of Union, they have been the steadfast supporters of the British connection’: so wrote the Presbyterian minister and ecclesiastical historian William Dool Killen, of his co-religionists, in the early 1850s.<sup>1</sup> Though it reflected an innate political and theological conservatism, Killen’s claim is one that most modern historians would concur with. As the late R. Finlay Holmes, one of Ulster Presbyterianism’s more astute scholars, observed:

That many Presbyterians in Ulster were deeply involved in the United Irish movement in the 1790s. . . and that many of their children and grandchildren became ardent unionists, utterly opposed to any weakening of Ireland’s links with Britain, are incontrovertible facts of Irish history.<sup>2</sup>

Incontrovertible they may be, but they also rank among Irish history’s more inscrutable facts, for the process by which Ulster Presbyterians became unionists is by no means fully understood. While the sectarian atrocities that occurred in Wicklow and Wexford in 1798 and the emergence of an increasingly aggressive Catholic political voice under the leadership of Daniel O’Connell have long been recognised as factors that influenced the political realignment of Ulster’s Presbyterians in the early nineteenth century, it remains the case, as Ian McBride has recently noted, that ‘[l]ittle is known

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<sup>1</sup> Killen’s comments can be found in the third volume of James Seaton Reid’s epic *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*. Reid died before finishing the final volume of his work and Killen was appointed to complete it. In doing so, he interpreted the events of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in a markedly conservative manner. See James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (3 vols., Belfast, 1853), III, viii and 444.

<sup>2</sup> R. Finlay Holmes, ‘From Rebels to Unionists: The Political Transformation of Ulster’s Presbyterians’ in Ronnie Hanna (ed.), *The Union: Essays on the Irish and British Connection* (Newtownards, 2001), 34.

about Presbyterian attitudes during the years after 1798.<sup>3</sup>

Arguably, the most significant study of this question remains the earliest one, A. T. Q. Stewart's unpublished M.A. thesis, 'The Transformation of Presbyterian Radicalism in the North of Ireland, 1792–1825'.<sup>4</sup> In a revealing interview that appeared in the *History Ireland* magazine in 1993, the year of his retirement from full-time academic life, Stewart reflected on how he had come to undertake the research that led to his groundbreaking and influential thesis.<sup>5</sup> J. C. Beckett, my tutor in Irish history, he recalled:

suggested that I . . . look at the problem of why the Presbyterians were nationalists and radicals at the end of the eighteenth century and conservatives and unionists at the end of the nineteenth . . . I limited it to 1792–1825, so a large part of my M.A. thesis was about the channels into which radicalism was dispersed.<sup>6</sup>

These comments raise some interesting points.<sup>7</sup> First, they suggest that

<sup>3</sup> Ian McBride, 'Ulster Presbyterians and the Passing of the Act of Union' in Michael Brown, Patrick M. Geoghegan and James Kelly (eds.), *The Irish Act of Union, 1800: Bicentennial Essays* (Dublin, 2003), 69. See also, Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), 223 and idem., 'Memory and Forgetting: Ulster Presbyterians and 1798' in Thomas Bartlett, David Dickson, Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds.), *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective* (Dublin, 2003), 478–95.

<sup>4</sup> A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Transformation of Presbyterian Radicalism in the North of Ireland, 1792–1825*, M.A. dissertation (Queen's University, Belfast, 1956).

<sup>5</sup> The influence of Stewart's work can be seen in the subsequent scholarship of David W. Miller and Ian McBride. In his 1978 article, 'Presbyterianism and "modernization" in Ulster', Miller developed Stewart's argument that Presbyterians of all theological dispositions, and not just theologically liberal 'New Light' Presbyterians, had been involved in the 1798 rebellion, and argued that the interpretation of the 1790s propagated by nineteenth-century Presbyterian historians had consciously over-emphasised the involvement of theologically liberal Presbyterians in the rebellion. More recently, Ian McBride has developed this thesis further and shown that eighteenth-century Presbyterian radicalism was a complex *mentalité* which could accommodate both advanced political ideas and theological conservatism. See David W. Miller, 'Presbyterianism and "modernization" in Ulster', *Past and Present*, 80 (1978), 66–90 and McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 207–24. For a fuller examination of the literature on this subject see Gary Peatling, 'Whatever Happened to Presbyterian Radicalism? The Ulster Presbyterian Liberal Press in the late Nineteenth Century' in Roger Swift and Christine Kinealy (eds.), *Politics and Power in Victorian Ireland* (Dublin, 2006), 155–7 and Andrew R. Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice, 1770–1840* (Oxford, 2006), 7–23.

<sup>6</sup> Hiram Morgan, 'A Scholar and a Gentleman', *History Ireland*, 1 (1993), 56.

<sup>7</sup> It would, however, be somewhat disingenuous to subject these casual reminiscences of

Stewart approached the study accepting as a given that Presbyterians had transformed from liberals and nationalists to conservatives and unionists; rather than seeking to show that this *was* the case, he attempted to explain *why* it had happened. More pertinently, they suggest that he conflated radicalism with nationalism, and unionism with conservatism. On the whole, it is hard to disagree with the claim that, by the late nineteenth century, the Ulster Presbyterians had become marked by conservatism and unionism, but, when dealing with the period immediately following the 1798 rebellion, this conflation becomes rather more problematic; it was, in fact, quite possible for Presbyterians to support the Union and hold advanced reforming views.<sup>8</sup> Still more problematic is the conflation of radicalism with nationalism. Though the United Irish movement did advocate separatism, the Presbyterian radicals of the late eighteenth century should not be considered as nationalists in the nineteenth-century sense. Indeed, to consider them as such is to tie the development of pro-union sentiment to the decline of radicalism: these should, instead, be viewed as separate processes. While they were, in some instances, closely linked, the one did not necessarily imply the other, and just as it was possible for radicals to support the Union, it was possible for conservatives to oppose it.<sup>9</sup> This paper will attempt to illustrate these points by examining the response of the Belfast Presbyterians to the Act of Union. In doing so, it will reject the radical/nationalist and unionist/conservative paradigm and highlight the role that Belfast itself played in the formation of a coherent unionist ideology. It is hoped that this will contribute to the development of a more nuanced understanding of the political and intellectual diversity of Ulster Presbyterianism.

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a conversation that had taken place some fifty years previously to too much scrutiny, but Stewart has made similar comments elsewhere. In his most well-known work, *The Narrow Ground*, he posed the question he felt was ‘one of the most puzzling. . . in Irish history’, namely, ‘[w]hy did the northern Presbyterians, who had been nationalists and radicals in 1798, so quickly become unionists and conservatives thereafter?’ See A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: The Roots of Conflict in Ulster* (London, 1989), 106.

<sup>8</sup> As Ian McBride has observed, ‘[t]he rejection of nationalism . . . implied no repudiation of liberal values’. See McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 228.

<sup>9</sup> Conservatives were, indeed, particularly prominent among opponents of the Union. Members of the landed gentry composed one of the ‘three powerful vested interests’ identified by Hereward Senior as composing a ‘hard core of resistance to the idea’, the other two being the legal profession and the leading citizens of Dublin. In addition, ‘most Orangemen were among the violent anti-unionists’, though they were, in the long term, to become ‘first among unionists’. See Hereward Senior, *Orangeism in Ireland and Britain, 1795–1836* (London, 1966), 121, 123 and 137.

## I

When examining the reaction of the Belfast Presbyterians to the Act of Union, it quickly becomes apparent that, when the question was first mooted in the autumn of 1798, it aroused little interest. Indeed, reports from government sympathisers suggest that the north of Ireland looked upon the Union with a mixture of quiescence and indifference. On 10 December 1798, the earl of Londonderry, Lord Castlereagh's father, in response to his son's request that he furnish him with information on the north's sentiments towards the Union, wrote: '[f]ew in this county know that this question is to be positively agitated. . . it is not talked of seriously, nor with much earnestness. . . I infer the popular current will not be very strong in this corner of the north against the measure'. Though Londonderry was here referring to the north-west of Ulster, he went on to predict that the people of Belfast would view the Union in a similar light.<sup>10</sup> The letters of the irascible Belfast woman, Martha McTier, suggest that his judgment reflected rather more than wishful thinking and imaginative speculation. Writing to her brother, the Dublin-based doctor and founding member of the United Irishmen, William Drennan, on 13 December 1798, McTier noted of the town, 'union or no union seems equally disregarded'.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, five days later, on 18 December, she pointedly observed that '[t]he Union is never heard of in this place'. 'The silence of the whole north on any great political subject', she continued, 'is a new feature, whether dignified or stupefied, ministry perhaps can guess'.<sup>12</sup>

This contrasted sharply with the response of Dublin. With its lawyers fearing that the dissolution of the Irish parliament would have a catastrophic impact

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<sup>10</sup> See, the earl of Londonderry to Lord Castlereagh, 10 December 1798, and Alexander Knox to Lord Castlereagh, no date (probably December 1798) in Charles Vane, marquess of Londonderry (ed.), *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh, second marquess of Londonderry* (4 vols., London, 1848), II, 39–40 and 45. In a similar vein, Alexander Knox reported that Edward Cooke's pro-union pamphlet, *Arguments for and against an Union between Great Britain and Ireland Considered*, had been well received in Armagh and Derry.

<sup>11</sup> Martha McTier to William Drennan, 13 December 1798 in Jean Agnew (ed.) *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2, 1794–1801* (Dublin, 1999), 436. Drennan's role in the establishment of the United Irishmen is explained in A. T. Q. Stewart, "'A stable unseen power": Dr William Drennan and the Origins of the United Irishmen' in John Bossy and Peter Jupp (eds.), *Essays presented to Michael Roberts* (Belfast, 1976), 80–92.

<sup>12</sup> Martha McTier to William Drennan, 18 December 1798 in Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2*, 439.

on their career prospects, and its merchants fearing the impact of English competition, the capital had quickly emerged as the ‘focal point of anti-unionism’.<sup>13</sup> As early as 10 September 1798, Castlereagh’s confidant, Edward Cooke, was writing to inform him that the debates on the measure conducted by the young barristers of the city had been ‘vociferous and violent, in clamour and language’.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the year, the situation had deteriorated significantly and, in a letter dated 19 December 1798, J. C. Beresford supplied Castlereagh with the altogether more alarming information that the controversy ignited by the Union had revived the United Irish movement in the capital. ‘The conversations on this subject’, he ruefully observed, ‘have given the almost annihilated body of United Irishmen new spirits, and the Society is again rising like a phoenix from its ashes’.<sup>15</sup> In light of this, it is small wonder that the government looked on Belfast with equanimity. Reporting on the state of Ireland in a letter to the duke of Portland in January 1799, the lord lieutenant, the marquess of Cornwallis, confidently declared that, in so far as the Union was concerned, ‘appearances in the north are by no means discouraging’ and that Belfast had ‘shown no disinclination’ to the measure.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, it was equally true that Belfast had shown no significant signs of inclination. Certainly, in the aftermath of the rebellion, some of the town’s more prominent citizens attempted to cultivate a reputation for loyalty. A yeomanry corps had been established in the town in 1797 and, in a declaration printed in the *Belfast News-Letter* on 18 June 1798, its members avowed their:

utter abhorrence and detestation of all foreign interference in the affairs of the kingdom, of the atrocious insurrection now existing in it, and of all secret cabals and privy conspiracies to subvert or new model the constitution, without the joint consent of kings, Lords and Commons in parliament. . . .<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> G. C. Bolton, *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union: A Study in Parliamentary Politics* (Oxford, 1966), 77–81 and 130 and Jacqueline Hill, *From Patriots to Unionists: Dublin Civic Politics and Irish Protestant Patriotism, 1660–1840* (Oxford, 1997), 260.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Cooke to Lord Castlereagh, 10 September 1798 in Londonderry (ed.), *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*, I, 344.

<sup>15</sup> Likewise, on 15 December 1798, Cooke had warily observed that ‘Dublin violence increases’. Edward Cooke to Lord Castlereagh, 15 December 1798 and J. C. Beresford to Lord Castlereagh, 19 December 1798 in *ibid.*, II, 8, 46 and 51.

<sup>16</sup> Lord Cornwallis to the duke of Portland, 2 January 1799 in *ibid.*, II, 80.

<sup>17</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 18 June 1798. For the establishment of the Belfast yeomanry see Allan Blackstock, *An Ascendancy Army: The Irish Yeomanry, 1796–1834* (Dublin, 1998),

One of the yeomanry's members, the Reverend Dr William Bruce, minister of First Belfast Presbyterian Church and Principal of the Belfast Academy, went further and publicly castigated the rebels. In November 1798 McTier wrote to Drennan to inform him of a sermon that Bruce had recently delivered. 'It was', she related,

a thrice told tale on parental authority, pieced out by scraps suited to the times—the evils of which he deduced from want of this patriarchal tie. He talked of rebels with contempt and horror. . . and one of his expressions was, “do not let any father hope to receive respect or obedience from a rebel or an atheist”.<sup>18</sup>

None of this, however, equated to a groundswell of support in favour of the Union. Indeed, while the weeks and months following the rebellion saw the columns of the town's sole newspaper, the pro-government *Belfast News-Letter*, frequently given over to pro-union petitions, it is striking that no such petition was submitted by the citizens of Belfast itself.<sup>19</sup>

It was not, in fact, until October 1799, when the town was visited by the lord lieutenant the marquis of Cornwallis, that any significant display of pro-union sentiment was made. Upon arrival in Belfast on 7 October, Cornwallis was immediately waited on by the town's sovereign and burgesses who declared him a freeman of the city and presented an address expressing their approbation of the Union. Following this, he was entertained at a public dinner 'attended by all the principle merchants and gentlemen in the town and neighbourhood'.<sup>20</sup> So, at any rate, reported the *News-Letter*. In reality, the

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<sup>18</sup> There seem to have been some in Bruce's congregation who disapproved of such ostentatious displays of loyalism: thus McTier went on to observe that '[t]he discourse was delivered with great animation, approved of by some and stabbing others, who hardly prevailed on themselves to sit'. In typically acidic fashion, McTier herself 'expressed disappointment' that the sermon was not followed by a rendition of 'Croppies lie down'. See, Martha McTier to William Drennan, 30 November 1798 in Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2*, 428. For further discussion of Bruce and of expressions of loyalism during this period see John Bew, 'Introduction' in William Bruce and Henry Joy, *Belfast Politics*, John Bew (ed.) (Dublin, 2005), 1–23 and Allan Blackstock, *Loyalism in Ireland, 1789–1829* (Woodbridge, 2007), 97 and 99–103.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, *Belfast News-Letter*, 11 October 1799.

<sup>20</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 9 October 1799. In his autobiographical reflections, published in 1848, William Grimshaw gave an interesting account of Cornwallis' reception. He recollected that '[a] dinner having been given, on his account, at the Exchange, he

event was stage-managed to ensure that those who opposed the Union did not attend. William Dickson, the bishop of Down and Connor, for example, was informed that ‘as an avowed enemy to the Union’ his presence ‘would have interfered with the object of the meetings’ and was asked not to attend. So, too, was the Belfast reformer, bastion of middle-class Presbyterian society and emphatic opponent of the Union, Dr Alexander Haliday.<sup>21</sup> Such men would undoubtedly have appeared conspicuous by their absence, and it is presumably for this reason that the *News-Letter’s* editor declined to attach a list of those who had attended the dinner to his report of the proceedings. G. C. Bolton has presented Cornwallis’ visit as the occasion of Belfast’s ‘most convincing display of unionist sympathies’, but it is clear from Castlereagh’s correspondence that it was a manufactured event, contrived, in large part, by Edward May, father-in-law to the marquis of Donegall, the landlord of Belfast.<sup>22</sup> If, then, Cornwallis’ visit did provide the occasion for Belfast’s ‘most convincing display of unionist sympathies’, it said little for the strength of pro-union sentiment in the town.

At the same time, opposition to the Union was scarcely more impressive. While Haliday opposed it on principle, believing it to be ‘the most deadly blow ever aimed’ at Ireland, he seems to have kept his views private.<sup>23</sup> What

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[Cornwallis] expressed himself so much pleased with the gentlemen, that he became desirous also of meeting the ladies; and a ball was, in consequence, arranged; to which the marquis was specially invited’. See William Grimshaw, *Incidents Recalled or Sketched from Memory* (Philadelphia, 1848), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Bolton, *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union*, 138. Haliday expounded his anti-union viewpoints in a lengthy letter written to the second earl of Charlemont shortly after the death of his father, James Caulfield, the first earl. Caulfield and Haliday had been close friends, and it is clear that in writing to the second earl Haliday was attempting to persuade him to follow his father’s example and oppose the Union. See Dr Haliday to second earl Charlemont, 24 November 1799 in *Historical Manuscripts Commission: Thirteenth Report, Appendix, part VIII: The Manuscripts and Correspondence of James, first earl of Charlemont: Volume II: 1784–1799* (London, 1894), 356–8.

<sup>22</sup> May’s efforts did not go unnoticed: Cornwallis was so impressed with his endeavours in contriving the event that he requested a parliamentary seat be found for him. See Bolton, *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union*, 176. See also Mr Marsden to Lord Castlereagh, 28 September 1799 and Colonel Littlehales to Lord Castlereagh, 9 October 1799, both in Londonderry (ed.), *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*, II, 406–7 and 414–15. For information on May himself see Edith Mary Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish Parliament 1692–1800: Commons, Constituencies and Statutes* (6 vols., Belfast, 2002), V, 229–30 and W. A. Maguire, *Living Like a Lord: The Second marquis of Donegall, 1769–1844* (Belfast, 2002), 6 and 20–1.

<sup>23</sup> Dr Haliday to the second earl of Charlemont, 24 November 1799 in *The Manuscripts and Correspondence of James, first earl of Charlemont*, 356.

little opposition that did emerge took the form of carefully worded petitions that raised questions regarding the Union's economic implications. Some of the Dublin pamphleteers had predicted, gloomily from their perspective, that the Union, while devastating the capital, would bring prosperity to provincial towns such as Belfast and Cork.<sup>24</sup> The businessmen of Belfast were, however, equally alarmed about the potential impact of the measure and, between 5 February and 13 March 1800, three petitions were forwarded to Dublin. These petitions, one a general one from the town's 'Merchants, Traders and Inhabitants', another from its 'Cotton Manufacturers' and a third from its 'Sugar Refiners and West Indian Traders', expressed fears that the imposition of unfettered free trade between England and Ireland would bring financial ruin upon the town.<sup>25</sup> It was in the face of these and similar petitions from elsewhere in the country that Pitt agreed, in March 1800, to accompany the Union with protective measures designed to safeguard the cotton trade.<sup>26</sup>

The seemingly restrained attitude of Belfast's Presbyterians towards the Union is further reflected by the paucity of the pamphlet literature that emerged from the town. Newspaper advertisements indicate that the printer William Magee was both importing pamphlets from Dublin and re-printing titles that had already been published there, actions that point to the existence of a market for literature outlining the various arguments for and against the Union.<sup>27</sup> Yet, while the citizenry of Belfast may have taken an interest in these arguments, they seem to have made little effort to contribute to them themselves. Writing to McTier from Dublin in December 1798, Drennan observed that 'pamphlets are raining down on us'.<sup>28</sup> McTier could make no similar claim, for Belfast's first and only foray into the pamphlet war, William Percy's *Irish*

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, [Anonymous], *The Commercial System of Ireland Reviewed and the Question of Union Discussed in an Address to the Merchants, Manufacturers and Country Gentlemen of Ireland, Second Edition with an Introductory Preface* (Dublin, 1799), 36–7.

<sup>25</sup> These petitions, which do not seem to have been published in the *Belfast News-Letter*, were discovered by the Belfast historian and antiquarian Samuel Shannon Millin in the Four Courts, Dublin, in 1915. While the originals were unfortunately destroyed when the building was occupied during the civil war, transcriptions can be found in S. S. Millin, *Sidelights on Belfast History* (Belfast, 1932), 51 and 68–70.

<sup>26</sup> See John J. Monaghan, 'The Rise and Fall of the Belfast Cotton Industry', *Irish Historical Studies*, 3 (1942), 1–17 and Bolton, *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union*, 193–6.

<sup>27</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 11 December 1798, 26 February 1799 and 15 March 1799.

<sup>28</sup> William Drennan to Martha McTier, 6 December 1798 in Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2*, 432. For a bibliographic study of the pamphlet war that accompanied the debates over the Union, see W. J. McCormack, *The Pamphlet Debate on the Union between Great Britain and Ireland, 1797–1800* (Dublin, 1996).

*Salvation Promulgated*, did not appear until May 1800.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as a rather simplistic offering, taking the form of a congenial dialogue between a teacher—‘Teachwell’—who supported the Union, and a farmer—‘Ploughwell’—who opposed it, *Irish Salvation* offered little to boast about and was unlikely to have monopolised conversation in the drawing rooms and parlours of middle-class Belfast.<sup>30</sup>

At this point, McBride’s assertion that evidence relating to the north’s response to the Union is ‘stubbornly resistant to generalisation’ seems appropriate.<sup>31</sup> Belfast, clearly, had both its opponents and proponents of the Union, and the only meaningful generalisation that can be made is that public discourse on the subject, what little of it there was, was conducted with little heat or rancour. While the Presbyterians of Ulster are frequently characterised as argumentative and cantankerous, it seems that Belfast’s Presbyterian community had little appetite for an argument about the Union.<sup>32</sup> The obvious question this begs, is why?

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<sup>29</sup> It had been rumoured in December 1798 that Bruce was writing a pamphlet in support of the Union, but nothing seems to have come of this. See Martha McTier to William Drennan, no date (late December 1798) in Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2*, 444.

<sup>30</sup> William Percy, *Irish Salvation Promulgated; or, the Effects of an Union with Great Britain, Candidly Investigated in an Evening’s Conversation between a Farmer and Schoolmaster* (Belfast, 1800). For a useful discussion of this pamphlet see McBride, ‘Ulster Presbyterians and the Passing of the Act of Union’, 82.

<sup>31</sup> McBride, ‘Ulster Presbyterians and the Passing of the Act of Union’, 69.

<sup>32</sup> A. T. Q. Stewart, for example, has argued that ‘The Presbyterian is happiest when he is being a radical. The austere doctrines of Calvinism, the simplicity of his worship, the democratic government of his church, the memory of the martyred Covenanters, and the Scottish refusal to yield or dissemble—all these incline him to that difficult and cantankerous disposition which is characteristic of a certain kind of political radicalism’. See Stewart, *The Narrow Ground*, 83. More recently, Miller has drawn attention to the significance of congregational ‘haggling’, whereby ‘the literate but unreflective could challenge the well-read, perhaps even well born minister’. For Miller, such behaviour, which could range from ‘grilling ministerial candidates’ to ‘withdrawing altogether from the pastoral care of one’s minister to join a nearby Seceding congregation’, served ‘as a means of sustaining the social order by turning the world upside down, if only for a day’. Naturally, the campaign, led by Henry Cooke, to enforce subscription to the Westminster Confession within the Synod of Ulster reduced the scope for such theological haggling. Thus Miller has observed, with his tongue, one imagines, firmly in his cheek, that ‘Cooke took all the fun out of being a Presbyterian’. David W. Miller, ‘Did Ulster Presbyterians have a Devotional Revolution?’ in James H. Murphy (ed.), *Evangelicals and Catholics in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), 41–2 and 46.

## II

One potential answer to this question is that in the aftermath of their failed rebellion, those who had so recently attempted to sever Ireland's ties with Britain, the United Irishmen, were in no position to organise opposition to the Union. Problematically, however, this assumes that the United Irishmen, would, as a body, have opposed the Union, had it been possible for them to do so. Undoubtedly, many of its members did oppose the measure, but equally, others, such as Samuel Neilson and Archibald Hamilton Rowan, both of whom declared themselves in favour of the Union in the first half of 1799, supported it. Naturally, doubts have been expressed over the reliability of Rowan and Neilson's pro-union declarations, but they need not be viewed as implausible.<sup>33</sup> While it is clear that the United Irish movement moved towards separatism in the mid-1790s, questions remain as to whether this course was adopted as a means to an end, or as an end in itself.<sup>34</sup> In his *Address to the People of Ireland*,

<sup>33</sup> Writing to his wife from Fort George, Scotland, in July 1799, Neilson commented 'I see a union is determined on between Great Britain and Ireland. I am glad of it. In a commercial point of view, it cannot be injurious; and I can see no injury the country will sustain from it politically'. R.R. Madden, in the fourth series of whose *United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times* this letter was first published, encouraged readers to dismiss this evidence, arguing '[t]he opinions expressed. . . if really entertained by the writer, would imply either an extraordinary degree of inconsistency, or of sagacity, that looked to the very distant and possible results of that measure for the accomplishment of his objects. The sincerity of the opinion, however, is very problematical. It is difficult to reconcile his new-born zeal for a union with England with his previous efforts to effect a separation, especially when we find the same principles on which he started in 1791 avowed in one of his letters in 1802'. Ian McBride has recently reiterated this dismissal and applied it to Rowan's pro-union declarations. However, while it may be argued, though not proved, that Neilson was writing with one eye on the prison governor who monitored his mail, the letters of Rowan, who was in exile in the United States, were destined for no such scrutiny, and there is no reason to believe that the pro-union sentiments he expressed were insincere. See R.R. Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times, with several Additional Memoirs, and Authentic Documents, heretofore Unpublished; the Whole Matter Newly Arranged and Revised, fourth series* (2nd edition, London, 1860), 105–6 and McBride, 'Ulster Presbyterians and the Passing of the Act of Union', 70. For evidence of Rowan's support of the Union see Archibald Hamilton Rowan, *Autobiography of Archibald Hamilton Rowan, Esq. with Additions and Illustrations by William Hamilton Drummond, D.D. M.R.I.A.* (Dublin, 1840), 340 and R.R. Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times, with several Additional Memoirs, and Authentic Documents, heretofore Unpublished; the Whole Matter Newly Arranged and Revised, second series* (2nd edition, London, 1858), 210.

<sup>34</sup> For the development of the United Irish movement see Nancy Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791–1798* (Oxford, 1994), 38–66 and

published in 1796, Wolfe Tone argued that the Irish were faced with a stark choice, a choice between ‘union or separation . . . slavery and independence’; there was, he insisted, ‘no third way’.<sup>35</sup> Yet, while Tone saw things starkly, the evidence gathered by the secret committee of the Irish House of Lords in August 1798 would suggest that the opinions of his colleagues were rather more indefinite. Granted, when the subject was raised during Thomas Addis Emmet’s interview with the committee, he reiterated Tone’s position, and went so far as to claim that Ireland, if separated from England, ‘would be the happiest spot on the face of the globe’. William James MacNeven, on the other hand, appears to have been rather more ambivalent; he maintained that separatism was ‘a measure we were forced into’ and conceded that the ‘interest’ of an independent Ireland ‘would require an intimate connection’ with Britain.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, James Quinn has shown that Thomas Russell’s thoughts on the question were, when placed under scrutiny, ambiguous, if not self-contradictory.<sup>37</sup>

In the aftermath of the failed rebellion, moreover, there were compelling reasons for radicals such as Rowan and Neilson to reconcile themselves to the proposed union. While some of the United Irishmen exiled in France continued to plot and intrigue, separation became an increasingly unrealistic aim and the Union offered the best chance of fulfilling the United Irish movement’s original objectives of parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation.<sup>38</sup> Writing in December 1798, the earl of Londonderry remarked that ‘most of those who were actuated with a strong reforming spirit entertain such a dislike and antipathy to the present subsisting parliament of the country, that they will not be very adverse to any change that will rid them of what they deem so very corrupt a legislature’.<sup>39</sup> It was on precisely these grounds that Rowan supported the Union. Thus in a letter to his father, written in January 1799, he

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Ian McBride, ‘The Harp without the Crown: Nationalism and Republicanism in the 1790s’ in S. J. Connolly (ed.) *Political Ideas in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), 163–4.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfe Tone, *An Address to the People of Ireland, on the Present Important Crisis* (Belfast, 1796), 4. For a useful analysis of this pamphlet see Stephen Small, *Political Thought in Ireland 1776–1798: Republicanism, Patriotism and Radicalism* (Oxford, 2002), 250–3.

<sup>36</sup> William James MacNeven, *Pieces of Irish History, Illustrative of the Condition of the Catholics of Ireland, of the Origin and Progress of the Political System of the United Irishmen; and of their Transactions with the Anglo-Irish Government* (New York, 1807), 196 and 218. My thanks to Professor S. J. Connolly for alerting me to these comments.

<sup>37</sup> James Quinn, *Soul on Fire: A Life of Thomas Russell* (Dublin, 2002), 287.

<sup>38</sup> For the United Irish exiles see Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (London, 1982), 243–364.

<sup>39</sup> See the earl of Londonderry to Lord Castlereagh, 10 December 1798 in Londonderry (ed.), *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*, II, 39–40.

expressed his approbation of it, reasoning ‘[i]n that measure I see the downfall of one of the most corrupt assemblies, I believe, ever existed’.<sup>40</sup> Later that month, in a letter to his wife, he stated his case more piquantly: ‘[i]t takes a feather out of the great man’s cap’, he noted, ‘but it will, I think, put many a guinea in the poor man’s pocket’.<sup>41</sup> In addition to this, it was envisaged that Catholic emancipation would accompany the Union. George III’s obstinate refusal to assent to this concession was not to become evident until 1801, and it was therefore possible, in the months prior to its coming into force, to believe that the Union would fulfil this other key United Irish objective.<sup>42</sup>

While considerations of this nature reconciled some United Irishmen to the Union, the treatment that such individuals had received at the hands of the government served to stifle debate in Belfast. Though the town remained quiet during the rebellion, it had, nevertheless, been heavily implicated in the United Irish conspiracy. Speaking in the Irish parliament in February 1798, John Fitzgibbon, the Lord High Chancellor of Ireland, went so far as to declare Belfast ‘the rankest citadel of treason in the kingdom’.<sup>43</sup> A heavy, and potentially hostile, military presence daily reminded the town’s populace that they were considered to be untrustworthy and, were this not eloquent enough testimony to the perils of political fervour, the appearance, in the weeks following the rebellion, of the decapitated heads of rebels, impaled on pikes and displayed above the town’s market house, provided a visceral *aide memoire* of the fate that could befall the disloyal.<sup>44</sup> All this, it might be supposed, led those who did oppose the Union to keep their opinions to themselves.

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<sup>40</sup> Rowan, *Autobiography*, 340.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> For George III’s attitude to Catholic emancipation see Jeremy Black, *The Hanoverians: The History of a Dynasty* (London, 2004), 136–7 and 151 and, for Pitt’s attitude to the same, Patrick M. Geoghegan, *The Irish Act of Union: A Study in High Politics, 1798–1801* (Dublin, 2001), 90–6 and 222–6.

<sup>43</sup> John Fitzgibbon, earl of Clare, *The Speech of the Right Honourable John, earl of Clare, Lord High Chancellor of Ireland, in the House of Lords of Ireland, Monday February 19, 1798, on a Motion made by the earl of Moira* (Dublin, 1798), 30.

<sup>44</sup> See *Belfast News-Letter*, 3 July 1798. This practice was widespread. William Grimshaw recalled seeing it practiced in Lisburn and Carlin. Grimshaw, *Incidents Recalled*, 42. So too, passing through Carlow, in May 1802, the diarist Anna Walker recorded ‘the jail is a handsome looking building; over the gate are 5 heads of some rebel chiefs who were taken, tried & condemned in 1798. . . Some of the hair yet remains, & some of the skin, but the bone of the skull is quite white. The country round this town’, she went on to comment somewhat incongruously, ‘is extremely pretty’. Anna Walker Diary, PRONI, T/1565/1–2, f.20 and McBride, ‘Memory and Forgetting’, 480.

Such behaviour was certainly not unprecedented; when war with France had been declared in 1793, some of the town's politicians had pursued just such a course. As the young United Irishman John Tennent informed his brother, Robert, in June of that year, '[g]reat alterations have taken place here within these few months in political opinions. . . it is found the safest way either to say nothing about politics or, to be a vehement supporter of government let your real sentiments be what they may'.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, Belfast's small and close knit populace was doubtless somewhat traumatised by the arrests and executions that had taken place during the summer of 1798. This, too, stifled debate, particularly when combined with frequent reports of imminent invasion and renewed insurrection. Though the majority of these reports proved to have little basis in reality, they were rendered all too believable by the continuing depredations taking place in the country surrounding Belfast. On 21 April 1800, the Seceding minister John Tennent, writing to his eldest son, William, from Roseyards, County Antrim, reported, 'of late here very numerous have been deaths some in an ordinary [way] some violent under force of law others alas murders'.<sup>46</sup> In a similar vein, McTier, writing in December 1799, had noted darkly, '[h]ow near and frequent murder is become here, the papers can inform you'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, with rumour and counter-rumour rife, Belfast's inhabitants seem on occasion to have been on the verge of hysteria. Thus, on 26 December 1798, McTier wrote to her brother and reported:

I am writing this composedly at twelve o'clock the 25th, the day report says this town is to be attacked by the rebels. . . 'Tis said a number of letters have been received giving information of this design. . . This you may believe has raised a panic and last night at ten o'clock, the bells ringing for five minutes during a very high wind I suppose added almost certainly to fear.

<sup>45</sup> John Tennent to Robert Tennent, 15 June 1793, PRONI, Tennent papers, D/1748/C/1/210/7.

<sup>46</sup> Reverend John Tennent to William Tennent, 21 April 1800, PRONI, Tennent papers, D/1748/B/1/317/26.

<sup>47</sup> Martha McTier to William Drennan, 15 December 1799 in Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2*, 543. While the major hostilities of the 1798 Rebellion ended in September of that year with the defeat of the French invasionary force in the west of the country, it is clear that skirmishing and disaffection continued long afterwards. For a useful study of this see James G. Patterson, 'Continued Presbyterian Resistance in the Aftermath of the Rebellion of 1798 in Antrim and Down', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 22 (1998), 45–61.

More humorously, she went on to recount the disruption that had been caused when the receipt of a letter, falsely detailing the death of Napoleon Bonaparte, was announced in the middle of a church service; ‘the ladies’, she quipped, ‘fainted or tried to do it’.<sup>48</sup>

In this milieu, some chose to disclose their true opinions of the Union while others, without necessarily displaying any enthusiasm, tacitly accepted it in the hope that it would usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. Speaking in the Irish parliament, in February 1800, the recently elected MP for Belfast, Edward May, asserted that, among supporters of the Union in Belfast, ‘a part thought it would give a perpetual protection to the commerce of Ireland, but much the largest part thought it would produce tranquillity and end all political jealousies’.<sup>49</sup> That such sentiments existed is eloquently confirmed by the young Belfast woman, Eliza McCrone. Writing to the Reverend John Tennent, two days after the Union had come into force, she noted:

Yesterday we became united with the mother country. . . It was feared there would have been some adverse to it, and that perhaps more disputes would be the consequence, but thank goodness all was quiet as if nothing had happened. Long may we continue so. I will never again be an advocate for any opinion, that persevering in, will be attended with bad consequences to any of my fellow creatures—had a good part of the world been so inclined, so many would not now have been from their families and friends, but I trust the day is not far distant that reunite them. . .<sup>50</sup>

In referring to absent friends in this way, McCrone touched upon yet another powerful reason why people who did not necessarily support the Union were able to look upon it with equanimity; it was anticipated that its passage would be followed by the return of those who had been exiled or imprisoned in the aftermath of the rebellion. As McCrone herself went on to note:

it is pretty generally thought that this Union will be attended with some happy consequence, and that all our friends will be permitted to return

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<sup>48</sup> Martha McTier to William Drennan, 26 December 1798 in Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2*, 443.

<sup>49</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 7 March 1800.

<sup>50</sup> Eliza McCrone to Reverend John Tennent, 3 January 1800, PRONI, Tennent papers, D/1748/A/1/2/1. Though dated the 3 January 1800, it is clear from the content of this letter that it was written in January 1801.

home by giving good bail for future good behaviour. . . how many cheerful faces would then appear, that have long been clouded by grief, and shadowed by anxiety and disappointment.<sup>51</sup>

The persuasive power of such considerations becomes apparent when we consider, as McCrone doubtless did, the impact the rebellion had had on the Reverend Tennent's family. His eldest son, William, a founding member of the United Irishmen, was imprisoned in Fort George, while a younger son, Robert, who McCrone was eventually to marry, was lobbying frantically in a bid to secure his brother's release, and a third son, John, was in exile in France, from whence he was never to return.<sup>52</sup>

### III

The immediate response of Belfast's Presbyterians to the Union was, then, complex. If anything, it is 'ambivalent', rather than 'steadfast', that best captures the nature of their attitude to the British connection. Yet, as the nineteenth century progressed, a more resolute adherence to the Union was to develop, one manifestation of which can be seen in the trajectory of William Drennan's political thought. Despite claiming to be more interested in his own impending marital union with the young English Unitarian, Sarah Swanwick, Drennan produced three pamphlets in opposition to the Union during the period 1798–1800.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> This paper is based, in part, on research for a Ph.D. thesis on the contribution of Robert and William Tennent to the political, intellectual and philanthropic life of late Georgian Belfast. At present no full-length study of the family has appeared, but some useful information can, however, be found in the following: Eileen Black, 'John Tennent, 1798–1813, United Irishman and Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur', *Irish Sword*, 13 (1977–9), 157–9; George Chambers, *Faces of Change: The Belfast and Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1783–1983* (Belfast, 1985), 98–102; W. A. Maguire, 'Banker and Absentee Landowner: William Tennent in County Fermanagh, 1813–32', *Clogher Historical Record*, 14 (1993), 7–28; Allan Blackstock, 'The Rector and the Rebel' in Sabine Wichert (ed.), *From the United Irishmen to Twentieth-Century Unionism: A Festschrift for A. T. Q. Stewart* (Dublin, 2004), 61–78.

<sup>53</sup> William Drennan to Martha McTier, 25 May 1799 in Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2*, 506. For Drennan's marriage to Swanwick see, A. T. Q. Stewart, *A Deeper Silence: The Hidden Origins of the United Irishmen* (London, 1993), 187–8 and Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (London, 1998), 67–8. Drennan's pamphlets were entitled *A Letter to the Right Honourable William Pitt* (Dublin, 1799), *A Second Letter to the Right Honourable William Pitt* (Dublin, 1799) and

In contrast to the productions of the ‘pamphleteering barristers’ of Dublin, who he critiqued for debating the Union ‘without a spark of Hibernicism’, these were markedly nationalistic in tone.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, McBride has gone so far as to suggest that they ‘anticipated the full-blown romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century’.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, by September 1810, Drennan was using the pages of the *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, the literary journal he had established in 1808, having resettled in Belfast some two years previously, to advocate adherence to the Union and attack the calls for repeal that had been raised by the Dublin guilds.<sup>56</sup>

As a fervent reformer who came to support the Union, Drennan was by no means unique; but, while Rowan and Neilson’s advocacy of the Union seems to have been founded on its potential to fulfil, if only in part, the frustrated aims of the United Irish movement, Drennan’s position was the result of a more comprehensive shift in political outlook. Put simply, he had stopped looking at Irish problems from an Irish perspective, and had begun to develop a ‘British’ political outlook. This development may, in part, be attributed to his marriage to Swanwick, for it strengthened his connections with the English Unitarian community and drew him, in particular, into radical Unitarian circles in Wem, Shropshire; circles which were also frequented by the celebrated essayist and radical, William Hazlitt.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, in opposing the Dublin guilds’ calls for repeal, in September 1810, Drennan referenced the English reformer Sir

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*A Protest from One of the People of Ireland, Against an Union with Great Britain* (Dublin, 1800).

<sup>54</sup> William Drennan to Martha McTier, 20 December 1798 in Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2*, 442.

<sup>55</sup> McBride, ‘Ulster Presbyterians and the Passing of the Act of Union’, 81–2.

<sup>56</sup> Between August and October 1810, twelve of Dublin’s twenty-five guilds, alarmed by an economic depression and a rise in the window tax introduced in a bid to meet Ireland’s national debt, declared themselves in favour of repeal. The controversy rumbled on into November 1810, but abruptly ended when it was made known that George III had once again succumbed to porphyria. Under such circumstances, the guilds did not wish to run the risk of appearing disloyal. See, Hill, *From Patriots to Unionists*, 266–9 and *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, 26.5 (30 September 1810), 223–4.

<sup>57</sup> Swanwick’s brother, Joseph, was a close friend of Hazlitt (the two attended Hackney New College together in the 1790s) and her family worshipped at the Wem church ministered to by Hazlitt’s father, also named William Hazlitt. Noting these intriguing links, the literary critic Tom Paulin has tentatively observed, ‘we can begin to trace, I believe. . . a particular dissenting counter-culture which embraces among others Hutcheson, the Drennans and the Hazlitts’. See Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty*, 67–8. For an examination of Hazlitt’s thought and his significance in the culture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain see A. C. Grayling, *The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt* (London, 2000).

Francis Burdett and tetchily noted that his ‘struggle for liberty and reform did not produce one sympathetic movement in that city’. It was, he argued, only self-interest, brought about by economic hardship, which had raised Dublin from its ‘torpid apathy’.<sup>58</sup> For Drennan, the passing of the Union had signalled the death of the Irish nation; having discovered, on the day of its ratification, that his wife had fallen pregnant with their first child, he observed, in a letter to his mother:

Strange co-incidence that the day in which my country died should be the happiest day which I have spent on this earth, the day in which I begin to live, out of myself. My country is now contracted into the limit of this house. I have done my duty to that parent, without much pleasure or advantage, and now that she has died without a groan or a struggle, I should not wish to be employed in writing her epitaph. I cannot praise her character or her conduct, her morality, or her spirit. We have now no country. We are individuals. The world is all before us where to choose and adopt a country, and whether that be England, or France, or America, the liking of each individual must direct him. I am no longer Irishman or petty pamphleteer, but I am a husband and I hope will be father. If I be so, I should not envy the childless Bonaparte.<sup>59</sup>

While Drennan continued to support and propagate the cause of reform, he excoriated those who he believed disingenuously used the patriotic language of nation for selfish demagogic ends. Thus, when Henry Grattan spoke of an ‘Irish feeling’, an ‘Irish interest’ and an ‘Irish heart’ at a dinner in support of Catholic emancipation held in Dublin in December 1811, Drennan used the pages of the *Belfast Monthly Magazine* to lambaste his inconsistency, and declared that ‘the best way of annihilating the *Irish* feeling and the *Irish* heart, and the *Irish* question, is to accede as soon as possible to Catholic emancipation’. ‘There is not union, *now*’, he continued,

neither in spirit nor in fact, but the only means by which it can ever be accomplished, is by the perfect and complete abolition of all civil and political distinction. Then indeed the Irish feeling that still burns under the ashes of national independence, may be gradually

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<sup>58</sup> *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, 26.5 (30 September 1810), 223.

<sup>59</sup> William Drennan to Ann Drennan, 4 August 1800 in Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier Letters: Volume 2*, 616.

extinguished: then the fondest wish of our hearts may be obliterated, and we may say at least say to each of our *children*—Be Britons with all your souls—and forget that your father called himself an Irishman.<sup>60</sup>

For those who did not share Drennan's political perspective, the exponential economic expansion that Belfast experienced in the early years of the nineteenth century offered an equally powerful incentive for them to reconcile themselves to the Union. Between 1791 and 1831, the town's population grew from 18,320 to 53,287, and it was in these years that it began to undergo the rapid industrial expansion that was to turn it into one of the workshops of the empire.<sup>61</sup> The extent to which this can be attributed to the Union is unclear; Belfast was by no means a backward town in the years before the Union.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, in the minds of its merchants and manufacturers, Belfast's prosperity seems quickly to have become associated with the Union. Thus, when the merchants and bankers of the town met, on 30 December 1830, to discuss the propriety of issuing a declaration setting out their position on the question of repeal, they agreed that a revocation of the Union was undesirable and that, as Robert Grimshaw noted, '[t]hey derived great benefit from a close connexion with England'.<sup>63</sup>

The Reverend Dr Henry Cooke, the Presbyterian divine considered by some to be the founding father of Ulster unionism, famously articulated such thinking in a speech delivered to the town's anti-repeal conservatives, on 21 January 1841. '[B]efore the Union', he declared:

Belfast was a village; now it ranks with the cities of the earth. Before the Union it had a few coasting craft, and a few American and West Indian ships—and that open bay, which now embraces the navies of every land, was but a desert of useless water. . . . The centre of our town was studded with thatched cottages, where now stands one of the

<sup>60</sup> *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, 41.7 (31 December 1811), 489.

<sup>61</sup> Raymond Gillespie and Stephen A. Royle, *Irish Historic Towns Atlas, Number 12: Belfast: Part I, to 1840* (Dublin, 2003), 10. Note that these figures exclude Ballymacarrett which, during the period, formed part of Belfast's hinterland. For a useful summary of the changes Belfast underwent during this period see also E. R. R. Green, 'Early Industrial Belfast' in J. C. Beckett and R. E. Glascock (eds.), *Belfast: Origin and Growth of an Industrial City* (London, 1967), 78–87.

<sup>62</sup> Green, 'Early Industrial Belfast', 78.

<sup>63</sup> They did, however, disagree over the propriety of issuing a statement on the question, with some objecting that to do so would merely serve to provide O'Connell with publicity. *Belfast News-Letter*, 9 November 1830.

fairest temples to the genius of industry and commerce. . . Look at Belfast, and be a Repealer—if you can.<sup>64</sup>

Cooke's grandiloquent oratory greatly exaggerated the nature of the transformation that had taken place in Belfast. With a population in 1791 of over 18,000, Belfast before the Union was rather more than a village. While it was not until the nineteenth century that the town underwent the development that was to see it emerge as a major centre of British industrialism, it was nevertheless the case, as E. R. R. Green has observed, that late eighteenth-century Belfast was no 'mere market town'. Quite the reverse, it was 'a thriving seaport with considerable foreign trade'.<sup>65</sup> Yet, to focus on the inaccuracies of Cooke's hyperbolic rhetoric is to miss the point somewhat, for it remains the case that, in the years following the passage of the Act of Union, Belfast and its hinterland flourished, while the rest of Ireland did not. This fact, in itself, provided a powerful 'economic argument', which, as R. Finlay Holmes has observed, 'was to become one of the principal foundation stones of the edifice of Ulster unionism'.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, while Cooke presented this argument to a meeting of the town's anti-repeal conservatives, it appealed also to the town's liberals. Indeed, two weeks prior to Cooke's speech to the Belfast conservatives, a similar argument had been outlined in the liberal Belfast newspaper, the *Northern Whig*, and, by October 1844, Mary Ann McCracken could legitimately aver, in a letter to R. R. Madden, that 'many sincere and ardent liberals who were violently opposed to the Union before it took place, are now as much opposed to Repeal'.<sup>67</sup> Though they had initially looked upon it with indifference, it seems that the Presbyterians of Belfast were, by the 1840s, well on their way to becoming 'steadfast supporters of the British connection'.

#### IV

Recent research, carried out under the auspices of the Northern Ireland

<sup>64</sup> William McComb, *The Repealer Repulsed!* Patrick Maume (ed.) (Dublin, 2003), 193–4. For an example of the appropriation of Cooke as the founding father of Ulster unionism see Gordon Lucy (ed.), *The Ulster Covenant: A Pictorial History of the Home Rule Crisis* (Belfast, 1989), 5.

<sup>65</sup> Green, 'Early Industrial Belfast', 78.

<sup>66</sup> R. Finlay Holmes, *Henry Cooke* (Belfast, 1981), 148.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 148 and Mary Ann McCracken to R. R. Madden, 15 October 1844, PRONI, McCracken letters, T/1815/46.

Life and Times Survey, suggests that Ulster Presbyterianism continues to be strongly marked by an adherence to the Union. Some 70% of Presbyterians surveyed in 2001 used the term 'unionist' to describe themselves.<sup>68</sup> While such continued devotion to the Union suggests that there is something inexorable about the unionism of Ulster Presbyterians, the initial ambivalence displayed towards the Union by the Presbyterians of Belfast, and the significance of Belfast's economic growth in reconciling them to the British connection, should remind us that its initial development was by no means unthinking or illogical. There were, certainly, other factors at play in the development of unionism; besides 'economic self-interest', McBride has pointed to the impact of 'anti-Catholicism. . .and an emerging sense of historical and cultural apartness'.<sup>69</sup> Yet, whatever else may have influenced it, it is clear that among the Presbyterians of Belfast the development of unionism reflected something more complex than a counter-revolutionary knee-jerk to the 1798 rebellion and the emergence of a disciplined Catholic voice under O'Connell.

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<sup>68</sup> In addition, this research reveals that, since the signing of the Belfast agreement, Ulster Presbyterians have increasingly emphasised their 'Britishness' and de-emphasised their 'Northern Irishness'. See Duncan Morrow, *Presbyterians in Northern Ireland: Living in a Society in Transition* (ARK Research Update 21, Belfast, 2004), 2. Alternatively, view <http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update21.pdf> [15 August 2008]

<sup>69</sup> McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 226.