

Building opposition: the Mant controversy and the Church of Ireland in early Victorian Belfast

On 4 October 1842, Richard Mant, the Church of Ireland bishop of Down and Connor, presided over the first meeting of the Down and Connor Church Architecture Society in the Clerical Rooms in central Belfast. The scholarly Mant doubtless was in his element as he introduced this initiative dedicated to promoting discussion about historical and contemporary aspects of Anglican church architecture. The *Ulster Times*, the city's self-proclaimed newspaper of the Church of Ireland, welcomed the new society, arguing that it was good to have 'correct views' on these matters and hoping that features like arched roofs, Gothic windows and lengthened aisles could be maintained so that Anglican churches could be distinguished from their Dissenting counterparts.¹

Within two months, this seemingly innocent church organisation lay at the centre of a heated controversy, as opponents accused the society's proponents of Puseyism, a charge that referenced the contemporary Oxford Movement's calls for catholic renewal within the established church.² The *Belfast Newsletter* simply termed the group a Popery-approximating society, a label that reflected the increasingly sharp rhetorical tone of the clash.³ Led by some of the city's most influential Anglican ministers, the movement against the architectural society quickly grew to impressive size, using the Belfast press to mobilize a powerful alliance of evangelical ministers, Conservative political elites and middle and working class supporters distrustful of anything associated with Roman Catholicism. The Reverend William McIlwaine, rector of St George's church, led the rhetorical assault on the Church Architecture Society, writing a series of scathing public letters that were published in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* under the pseudonym *Clericus Connoresius*. In these pointed epistles, McIlwaine explicitly linked the group to the 'dangerous and heretical practices' of the

¹ *Ulster Times*, 8 Oct. 1842; *Report of the first meeting of the Down and Connor and Dromore Church Architecture Society*, October 4, 1842 (Belfast, 1842). The term city is used throughout though formal city status was not granted to Belfast until 1888. Belfast, by Irish standards, had physically reached city size by the 1840s.

² For brief treatments of the controversy, see Nigel Yates, *The religious condition of Ireland, 1770–1850* (Oxford, 2006), pp 285–6; David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster society, 1740–1890* (London, 1992), pp 118–20.

³ *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 Nov. 1842. Puseyism refers to Edward Bouverie Pusey, regius professor of Hebrew and canon of Christ Church, a leading advocate for the Oxford or Tractarian Movement. The classic account is Owen Chadwick's landmark *The Victorian Church: part 1* (Oxford, 1966), pp 167–231. For more recent specialized work, see Chadwick, *The spirit of the Oxford Movement: Tractarian essays* (Cambridge, 1992); C. Brad Faught, *The Oxford Movement* (University Park, PA, 2004); P. B. Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in context: high Anglican churchmanship, 1780–1857* (Cambridge,

Oxford Movement and argued that the organisation's focus on architectural form was an unwanted distraction from the real task at hand: the need for church accommodation to expand the reach of vital religion in Belfast's rapidly growing working class districts. This was certainly the view of the Reverend Thomas Drew, the controversial minister of Christ Church, who lent his support to an anti-Puseyite petition drive that garnered more than thirteen hundred signatures. The petition was presented to the bishop at a meeting in February 1843 by a deputation that included some of Belfast's leading religious, political and business elites.⁴ While Mant survived this public challenge to his authority, he was damaged by the controversy and struggled to regain the initiative for the remainder of his tenure as the bishop of Down and Connor (he died in 1848).

This seemingly arcane episode in Belfast church politics provides historians with a valuable window on shifting relationships between Anglican clergymen and various lay communities in this rapidly industrialising city. On one level, it reveals the significant growth of evangelical Protestantism within the Established Church and the consequent tensions that influence generated within the Church of Ireland. Backed by their congregants and with the critical support of city and regional political elites, McIlwaine and Drew mobilized public opinion through the press to challenge Bishop Mant and his allies; a move that reflected Irish evangelicals' increased propensity to confront an episcopal establishment still disproportionately led by high churchmen.⁵ But the Mant controversy was not simply an intra-Anglican squabble between emergent evangelicals and powerful high churchmen. One of the central points levelled against Mant was that he was needlessly offensive to the region's Presbyterian majority; that both his lectures on the 'dangers of Puritanism' and his emphasis on external form and rubrical conformity divided Ulster Protestant communities at a time they needed to be more closely united. In short, this fight over the Church Architecture Society also underlines the complexity of continuing tensions between Anglicans and Presbyterians and highlights the ways in which religious controversies facilitated the use of pan-Protestant rhetoric, an increasingly important feature of religious and popular politics in Victorian Belfast.

I

Early Victorian Belfast was a rapidly changing city. The most fundamental force reshaping the city was a demographic one: Belfast was one of the fastest growing urban centres in the British Isles. In 1801, it was a city of 19,000; sixty years later, the northern capital's population had risen to 121,602, with a sizable proportion of these families living in overcrowded and substandard housing. Belfast's rapid growth created a series of challenges for the city's religious communities. By 1830, it was clear that more churches were needed to provide for the city's expanding population. The lack of church provision generated serious anxieties

1994); S. A. Skinner, *Tractarians and the 'Condition of England': the social and political thought of the Oxford Movement* (Oxford, 2004).

⁴ *Ulster Times*, 2 Feb. 1843.

⁵ Yates, *Religious condition*, pp 266–7.

for the city's religious, political and business leaders, who argued that effective social reform had to work from a fundamentally religious template. The various reports and memoirs of the period convey a fearful sense that substantial numbers of the city's Protestant working-class population were either Protestant in name only or completely unattached to any church, a situation with obvious parallels across the new industrial communities of the British Isles and the United States.

Recent studies of Belfast church attendance records reinforce the substance of many of these anxieties. Using the 1834 First Report of the Commission of Public Instruction, Andrew Holmes estimates that approximately half of the city's 25,939 Presbyterians were unconnected with any church.⁶ The Church of Ireland faced a similar challenge. Even after Drew's Christ Church opened in College Square in 1833, the Church of Ireland only had three churches and four clergymen ministering to an estimated 19,000 nominal Anglicans in Belfast.⁷ Remedying this problem was seen as the only real cure for the city's burgeoning social ills; predictably, elites spilled a disproportionate amount of ink on working-class prostitution and the evils of drink. Not surprisingly, working class men and women do not seem to have immediately climbed on the temperance bandwagon – one Presbyterian minister reported that the 'smallest quantity I could induce them to promise to use was three glasses of spirits in the day'.⁸ If these social ills were to be tackled, there was a clear need for church extension. Led by increasingly influential evangelical ministers like Henry Cooke and James Morgan (and with critical support from the city's business and political elites), each denominational community responded with energy and effect, making the period between 1825 and 1860 a dynamic one for church construction in the city – more than fifty new Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches were built in these years.⁹

As essential as this church construction was to the city's spatial, social and spiritual landscape, the arrival of a coterie of talented and ambitious evangelical clerics in the city was just as critical. While the growth of Belfast's evangelical Protestantism is typically associated with the famous Presbyterian ministers Henry Cooke and John Edgar,¹⁰ in many ways it was the Church of Ireland's Rev. Thomas Drew who exemplified the energy that this new generation of religious leadership brought to the northern capital. Born in 1800 near Limerick and educated at Trinity College Dublin (B.A., 1826), Drew was appointed the first

⁶ Andrew Holmes, *The shaping of Ulster Presbyterian belief and practice* (Oxford, 2006), p. 66.

⁷ Reverend Thomas Drew, *The Church in Belfast* (Belfast, 1838). For Christ Church, see Reverend Abraham Dawson, *Annals of Christ Church* (unpublished typescript, 1858, P.R.O.N.I., T.2159). My thanks to the Rev. Niall Bayly for letting me consult the original manuscript. For the analogous situation faced by Belfast Presbyterianism, see Rev. James Morgan, *Recollections of my life and times: an autobiography* (Belfast, 1874), pp 40–1.

⁸ Morgan, *Recollections of my life and times*, p. 35.

⁹ See Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster society*, pp 108–11.

¹⁰ For Cooke, the classic study is R. Finlay Holmes, *Henry Cooke* (Belfast, 1982). For a recent reassessment, see David W. Miller, 'John MacHale, Henry Cooke and the curious demise of the confessional state in Ireland', in Michael de Nie and Sean Farrell (eds), *Power and popular culture in modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2010), pp 109–24. For a recent take on the importance of Morgan and Edgar, see Jonathan Jeffrey Wright, *The 'natural leaders' and their world: politics, culture and society in Belfast, c.1801–32* (Liverpool, 2012), pp 215–18.

minister of Christ Church in Belfast in 1833 and remained there until 1859. A fierce low church evangelical and active member of the Loyal Orange Order (he served as the organisation's grand chaplain in the early 1840s), Drew's combustible combination of ambitious energy, working-class advocacy and a talent for generating sectarian controversy helped to frame popular politics and religion in early Victorian Belfast. His approach was certainly successful at Christ Church, which attracted four hundred regular attendees by 1838, greatly aided by the provision of free pew sittings. Although a majority of the men and women who made up the new church were broadly working class, it is vital to note that Christ Church's congregation also featured a number of middle- and upper-class participants.¹¹ Amongst many other notables, Charles Lanyon, the famous architect, and Richard Davison, a prominent Belfast attorney and future Conservative M.P., were long-time members of the congregation. Davison, in particular, would play a central role in the Mant controversy.

While it was Drew's public sectarian politics that received the most attention (his Twelfth of July sermon in Christ Church is often viewed as one of the precipitating factors of the infamous 1857 riots¹²), his energetic advocacy for plebeian Protestants is essential to understanding his potent appeal. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, Drew's Christ Church led a series of initiatives to bring charity, aid and practical support to working-class families in Sandy Row and central Belfast. By 1836, Christ Church had set up a series of prayer stations for the unchurched, ran both a day and Sunday school and had created extensive adult and juvenile libraries for its mostly proletarian congregants. Amongst the publications listed in the library's 1837 catalogue are a number of texts that demonstrate Drew's pragmatic evangelicalism; pamphlets designed to help families struggling with ageing, illness and death – issues that were all too familiar to Belfast working-class families in the hungry 1840s.¹³

Richard Mant, the bishop of Down and Connor, certainly supported his energetic clergyman in his efforts to expand the reach of Anglican ministry in working-class Belfast; he presided over the creation of societies designed to bring additional resources to church extension: the Clergy Aid Society in 1837, the Church Accommodation Society and the Additional Curates' Society in 1838.¹⁴

¹¹ In their useful survey, David Hempton and Myrtle Hill make particular note of Christ Church's success in bringing working-class congregants into the congregation. See Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster society*, pp 105, 109.

¹² For the 1857 riots, see Mark Doyle's *Fighting like the devil in the name of God: Protestants, Catholics and the origins of violence in Victorian Belfast* (Manchester, 2009), pp 76–106. See also my *Rituals and riots: sectarian violence and political culture in Ulster, 1784–1886* (Lexington, KY, 2000), pp 125–53. For open air preaching, see Janice Holmes, 'The role of open-air preaching in the Belfast riots of 1857' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, cii, part C (2002), pp 47–66.

¹³ *Catalogue of the Christ-Church Library, Belfast, established 1836* (Belfast, 1837). For biographical information on Drew, see Patrick Long and C. J. Woods, 'Drew, Thomas (1800–70) in *D.I.B.* For a rich social portrait of Christ Church parish, see the 1852 parish census undertaken by the Rev. Abraham Dawson: Christ Church Census, 1852 (P.R.O.N.I., CR1/13D/1–2).

¹⁴ For the origins and early workings of the Clergy Aid Society, see *Account of the proceedings of the Down and Connor Clergy Aid Society, for the year ending 9/11/1838* (Belfast, 1838). A copy of this publication can be found at the library of the Representative Church Body in Dublin.

Despite this support, Drew and his evangelical allies felt that still more energy and resources were needed to bring the word to potential congregants across the rapidly expanding city. In 1838, Drew published *The Church in Belfast*, where he detailed the plight of Belfast's Protestant working-class families and the real need for the provision of new churches – particularly in the city's fast-growing industrial suburbs. Comparing Belfast to Liverpool, Drew outlined the desperate need for more Anglican churches in the northern capital. Moreover, he sketched a vision for a ministry that was active, energetic and practical:

But it is not merely church accommodation that the poor require – there are a thousand wants that 'Never haunt the rich man's door' that knock at the poor man's and bid him seek the sympathy and counsel of a pastor. The laity cannot form an idea of the unnumbered excuses which the poor man thinks sufficient to bid him 'open his mind to the pastor' – the line of recommendation – the admission of children to the schools – the little loan and the little alms – the clothing for the naked – the office of interceding with the rigid creditor – the advice in perplexity – the instruction in ignorance – the consolation in affliction – the sympathy in sickness – and the mournful offices connected with the house where death has become resident: all these things surround the pastor, and surround him in such a way as often to make him forget the pressure of his own domestic trials in the necessities of his people. But there are thousands of this parish who have not this comfort from a minister.¹⁵

There was nothing particularly novel about Drew's vision of vital and practical Protestantism; in many ways it was emblematic of the activist ministry that was a defining characteristic of evangelical religion across the Atlantic world.¹⁶ In Belfast, Drew's call was supported by a number of Anglican and Presbyterian ministers, including in a public letter from the Rev. James Morgan, the minister of Fisherwick Place Presbyterian Church. To raise funds for church extension in Belfast, the Church of Ireland formed the Church Accommodation Society in November 1838. It was Drew who initiated this process and his leading role in this project is underlined by the fact that the meeting which led to the organisation's formation was held in Christ Church. As one contemporary newspaper put it: 'Whatever merit may be due to others, it is to this excellent man the community are mainly indebted for the establishment of this Society, and for the wide spread of Gospel truth in the suburban districts of Belfast'.¹⁷ Richard Mant may have presided over the meeting, but this was Drew's church and Drew's project. It proved to be a successful one; by 1843, the Church Accommodation Society had raised £17,500 for church construction and poor relief, dispersing the funds for church construction through twenty grants.¹⁸ The resultant construction of a series of architecturally simple, low-church houses of worship helped to

¹⁵ *Ulster Times*, 8 Sept. 1838.

¹⁶ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1790s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp 10–12. For an interesting collection of comparative studies, see Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk, (eds), *Evangelicalism: comparative studies of popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and beyond, 1700–1990* (Oxford, 1994).

¹⁷ Quoted in Dawson, *Annals of Christ Church* (P.R.O.N.I., T.2159/57–8).

¹⁸ See Drew, *Church in Belfast*; Dawson, *Annals of Christ Church* (P.R.O.N.I., T.2159/48–57); W. B. Mant, *Memoirs of the Right Reverend Richard Mant...* (Dublin, 1875), pp 380–8; Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster society*, p. 112.

strengthen the Church of Ireland's presence in the city and region.¹⁹

While Bishop Mant had certainly backed these efforts, the church accommodation project revealed growing tensions between the bishop and his active and increasingly forceful evangelical clergymen. According to Drew and his allies, the English-born Mant lacked energy and commitment. More directly, the bishop seemed overly concerned with matters of hierarchy and form that paled in importance with the call of bringing vital religion to the urban masses. Both the leading high churchman and one of the most learned figures in the Church of Ireland, Richard Mant's abiding interest in matters of public worship and his efforts to implement often-neglected church rubrics had generated conflict with evangelicals throughout his career in England and Ireland. As early as 1812 he had provoked their ire with his critique of the evangelical rejection of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration and his general distrust – evangelical is 'a word too often used' – is clear in his official biography.²⁰ For Mant, rubrical conformity and the use of consistent, legitimate forms of public worship were important matters because they distinguished the Church of Ireland 'from other classes of Protestants'. Some of these tensions can be seen in a clash between Drew and Mant over an 1836 plan to create a diocesan mission for Belfast's unchurched population.

The idea of domestic mission was certainly not a new one in Belfast. The Belfast Town (later City) Mission had been founded in 1827, part of the broader effort to bring scripture and greater civility to the urban poor.²¹ Whereas the Belfast Town Mission had been nondenominational, however, Drew's idea was for a specifically Anglican initiative, clearly part of his efforts to carve out a larger space for the Church of Ireland in the Presbyterian-dominated city. When Drew brought his plan to Mant, the bishop rejected it outright, calling it an unauthorised interference with his jurisdiction. Some of the issues at hand can be seen in Mant's 1836 charge, entitled 'The Church: the guide for her ministers'. In it, the bishop sketched out the need for an Anglican *via media* between the errors of Roman Catholicism and the dangers of heterogeneous Puritanism, a course that underlined the importance of episcopal authority, rubrical conformity and discipline. In particular, Mant made clear his support for church extension efforts that clergymen bringing their ministry to places outside of church, as long as those sites were properly licensed. Accordingly, in 1837, when Drew brought a revised plan that was more sensitive to Mant's sense of episcopal authority and existing parochial boundaries, the bishop gave his consent. While the rift was resolved, the episode highlights the differences between the establishment-minded Mant and his energetic and independent evangelical lieutenant.²²

¹⁹ Many of the churches were designed by Charles Lanyon, architect and a member of the congregation at Christ Church. Lanyon is most famous for a number of other Belfast buildings: the Palm House in the Botanic Gardens (1840), Queen's University, Belfast (1849) and the Customs House (1857) amongst others.

²⁰ For the controversy over baptismal regeneration, see Nockles, *Oxford Movement in context*, pp 229–35. For a more general account, see Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain*, pp 9–10.

²¹ See R. B. Sibbett, *For Christ and crown: the story of a mission* (Belfast, 1926), pp 1–10.

²² Mant, *Memoirs*, pp 313–51. Drew also ran afoul of the church establishment when he tried to increase his income through celebrating marriages and christenings of men, women and children who did not reside in his district. See Edward Stopford to Primate Beresford, 5 Feb. 1836 (Church of Ireland diocesan papers, P.R.O.N.I., DIO/1/125A/17B).

In many ways, however, this clash was as much a matter of political temperament and style as theological emphasis, an opinion revealed in a July 1842 letter that Drew wrote to the influential Belfast Conservative M.P., James Emerson Tennant: ‘... Mant is an Ultra; honest, learned, active in bookwriting and unsurpassed in letter writing but timid – too isolated ...’.²³ This contrast between the bishop’s scholarly and elitist orientation and Drew’s action-oriented populism underlines a broader tension that is all too apparent in Belfast church politics from 1835 onward. For all his formal support for church extension in Belfast, the fault lines between Mant and his evangelical clerics were clear by the time the Mant controversy erupted in late 1842.

II

While Mant long had taken a scholarly interest in the history of the Anglican Church, his advocacy for a society dedicated to the study of church architecture was inspired by a more recent emergent group in the Church of England. This was the Cambridge Camden Society, an organisation founded in 1839 by Cambridge undergraduates John Mason Neale, Alexander Hope and Benjamin Webb to promote ‘the study of Gothic Architecture and Ecclesiastical Antiques’.²⁴ Also termed the Ecclesiological Society, the group quickly gained adherents and influence with its core argument that the corruption and ugliness of Victorian Britain could best be countered by an attempt to recapture the piety and beauty of medieval church architecture. The Cambridge group was closely associated with John Henry Newman’s famous Tractarian movement, an effort to renew the theology, ecclesiology, sacraments and liturgical practices of the Church of England. The long-term impact of the Cambridge Camden Society is undeniable; by the end of the nineteenth century, the society’s standards for church architecture had become the norm, effectively reinventing the design of parish churches across England. In the short term, however, reaction to the organisation was divided, with many British and Irish evangelicals hostile to the Camden Society’s romanticised vision of the medieval church. The image of this association and its links to the Oxford Movement was a particularly powerful weapon for Belfast evangelicals and their allies, who argued that the Church Architecture Society acted as a kind of beachhead for the Romish invasion of Protestant Belfast. In nineteenth-century Ulster, where sectarian lines of division were seemingly always awaiting reinvention, this kind of controversialist rhetoric crackled with potentially explosive power.

The first meeting of the Down and Connor Church Architecture Society made the group’s sympathy with the aims of the Cambridge Camden Society quite explicit. According to one account, the bishop argued that the society had a positive role to play in the diocese, for ‘whatever tends to add dignity and majesty to “the houses of God in our land”, provided it be free from all superstitious admixture, is deserving of our encouragement: whatever tends to

²³ Rev. Thomas Drew to J. Emerson Tennant, 29 July 1842 (Emerson Tennant papers, P.R.O.N.I., D.2922/C/12/3).

²⁴ For an overview of the history of the Cambridge society, see James F. White, *The Cambridge Movement* (Cambridge, 1962).

diminish these qualities, is deserving of censure and reprobation'.²⁵ It would be difficult to find a more lucid statement of the Cambridge Society's goals linking architectural and spiritual beauty. Mant further illustrated the importance of spiritual aesthetics with a story about a local church, where a beautiful ancient pulpit and reading desk made of black oak had recently been painted a muddy yellow. James Saurin, the archdeacon of Dromore and rector of Seagoe, quickly asserted his innocence in the commission of this particular aesthetic sin,²⁶ but Mant's general point was clear – external beauty and tradition mattered and parish churches should reflect the majesty and splendour of the Established Church.

Saurin's letter of denial was the first printed in response to Mant's address. It was not the last, however, as public reaction to the creation of the Church Architecture Society quickly grew heated and the organisation soon became a controversial touchstone. Shortly after the meeting, the Rev. William McIlwaine, the rector of St George's church, engaged in a fierce argument with the staff of the *Ulster Times*, furious that they would not print his letter on the spot (the newspaper maintained its support for Mant and the fledgling architectural society for the first few months of the controversy).²⁷ Given his leadership of the ensuing campaign against the Church Architecture Society, McIlwaine's argument that the *Ulster Times* was actively provoking Belfast Presbyterians and flaunting Puseyism, was telling.²⁸ McIlwaine moved his own critique to the more sympathetic *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, and both opponents and defenders of the new organisation rushed into the breach and an emotional public discussion quickly emerged across the Belfast press. Although Bishop Mant attempted to quiet the controversy at the organisation's second meeting in early November, arguing that attacks on the society were based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the group's goals, it was too late and rhetorical temperatures continued to rise throughout the winter of 1842 and 1843.²⁹

McIlwaine was the person most responsible for ratcheting up the debate. Born in Dublin in 1807, he came to St George's church in 1836 after short stints in Balteagh, County Londonderry, and Cloughjordan, County Tipperary. Frequently allied with Christ Church's Drew, McIlwaine seemingly shared his friend's taste for conflict, actively participating in controversialist anti-Catholic street preaching in the 1850s and bitterly breaking with the Church of Ireland Young Men's Society in the mid-1860s (an organisation he had helped to found in

²⁵ *Report of the first meeting of the Down and Connor and Dromore Church Architectural Society*, p. 13. For a detailed examination of the topic across the Victorian era, see Stephen McBride, 'Bishop Mant and the Down and Connor and Dromore Church Architecture Society, 1837–1878', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, Belfast, 1996).

²⁶ *Ulster Times*, 15 Oct. 1842.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 Oct. 1842. This struggle was not picked up in either of Belfast's major newspapers, the *Belfast Newsletter* or the *Northern Whig*, a fact that underlines the key role played by McIlwaine's public journalism in widening the sphere of debate.

²⁸ *Ibid.* The subject seems not to have been a passing one for St George's rector; McIlwaine's second lecture before the Church of Ireland's Young Men's Society in 1851 was entitled 'Some Thoughts on Church Architecture and Ecclesiastical Remains' (Annual Reports of the Church of Ireland Young Men's Society, P.R.O.N.I., D.3936/A/1/1).

²⁹ *Ulster Times*, 3 Nov. 1842.

1850).³⁰ In October 1842, these clashes were still far in the future, however, and McIlwaine's invective was focused on the high church novelties of the Church Architecture Society. Writing in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* under the pseudonym 'Clericus Connorensis', McIlwaine wrote a series of nineteen public letters entitled 'What is Puseyism?' Later published as *Ecclesiologism exposed*, McIlwaine's vitriolic journalism helped to keep the controversy in public view for nearly half a year.³¹ Since his arguments effectively reflected the main tenets of evangelical and popular opposition to the society, it is worth examining these letters in some detail.

McIlwaine's extended critique of the Church Architecture Society was rooted in the notion that the society's emphasis on external form strayed too far from the principles of true Protestantism. Simply put, Puseyism was Popery, and even if many of the new organisation's members were well intentioned, he argued that the association reflected a dangerous effort to move the Established Church closer to Rome. Throughout the series, McIlwaine equated the new organization with both the Cambridge Camden Society and the Oxford Movement, moving back and forth between local lectures on medieval church architecture and John Henry Newman's controversial Tract 90 on the Thirty-Nine Articles. His critique of the Tractarians was particularly trenchant: '... that more false and libellous glosses on Gospel truth, and more derogatory to the doctrine of England's national faith, never came from the pen of an open or concealed enemy'.³² Constantly referring to the Oxonian cant of his opponents, McIlwaine's basic message was clear; this was Catholicism in disguise, and needed to be opposed as such by all true Ulster Protestants.

More particularly, McIlwaine and his allies argued vociferously that Mant's emphasis on church architecture was a waste of money and effort. What was needed was an unrelenting drive to bring true religion to Belfast's lamentably large population of unchurched men, women and children. As Drew put it: 'In my humble opinion, with architecture we clergymen have little to do; ... nor have we hitherto wanted the assistance of an architect of acknowledged generosity [Charles Lanyon]; under his direction our buildings were becomingly constructed and adapted to the real wants of the people – namely – CHURCH

³⁰ For the relationship between street preaching and sectarian violence in the 1850s, see Holmes, 'Role of open-air preaching', pp 47–66. For his break with the Church of Ireland's Young Men's Society, see Norman McNeilly, *The first hundred years: a history of the development of the Church of Ireland's Young Men's Society* (P.R.O.N.I., D.3936/H/5/6). According to J. B. Leslie, McIlwaine was the first clergyman in Belfast to have hymns sung, to hold early morning Holy Communion, preach in the surplice and to hold Harvest Thanksgiving service: J. B. Leslie, *Clergy of Connor from Patrician times to the present day* (Belfast, 1993), p. 469. McIlwaine's increasing interest in 'high church' forms late in his career underlines the danger in assuming that 'high church' and 'evangelical' are necessarily oppositional terms in the Church of Ireland.

³¹ The letters were published in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* from mid-October 1842 to the end of February 1843. They were later published in pamphlet form as *Ecclesiologism exposed: being the letters of 'Clericus Connorensis', as originally published in the Belfast Commercial Chronicle* (Belfast, 1843). For simplicity's sake, further references to McIlwaine's letters will be to this single publication.

³² McIlwaine, *Ecclesiologism exposed*, p. 16.

ACCOMMODATION'.³³ A number of commentators framed their critiques of the Church Architecture Society by detailing its negative impact on the Church Accommodation Society, a valuable organisation undermined by both a loss of 'sufficient subscribers' and the 'moral taint' attached to the Church Architecture Society. As the Reverend Abraham Dawson later put it in the *Annals of Christ Church*, this more valuable society was dissolved because of the 'baneful influence of the Romanizing party in the Church of England', particularly those people concerned with the architecture and ornamentalism of churches.³⁴ This was by no means a unanimous opinion. R. A. Agar, the curate of Drumgath, argued that, 'The fact is, he [McIlwaine] either is ignorant, or affects to be so, of our real objects when he argues thus absurdly...'.³⁵ Another correspondent failed to see the connection between the two societies, wondering how 'one body of men [was] to be hindered in building churches, because another body of men would wish them to be built in a peculiar way?'.³⁶ However plausible, this argument failed to convince many Belfast evangelicals and their supporters, who continued to see the Church Architecture Society as a potentially heretical association that diverted scarce resources away from church accommodation. In the seventeenth letter of his series, McIlwaine asked why the Church was spending money on stained glass for the new Kilwarlin church near Hillsborough, when so many people remained ignorant of the primary tenets of the Bible.³⁷ In short, even if this new association was harmless, it drew time and resources away from the central project of Belfast Protestantism – spreading the Gospel.

Not surprisingly, there was an important theological element to this argument. For McIlwaine and his many fellow evangelicals, Puseyism was heresy; its emphasis on external factors was an unwanted distraction from the central truth of the Reformation and of Protestantism – that true religion was justified by faith alone. Using Richard Hooker's *Discourse on justification* as the Anglican standard on the subject, McIlwaine argued that justification by faith only had long been the common denominator of Protestantism, and that Puseyism, with its emphasis on human tradition, physical edifice and centralized episcopal authority, created needless division between Protestants. Even if the movement's adherents were not aiming to return the Church of England to Rome, McIlwaine was certain that Puseyism was a threat to God's truth and that the Tractarian advocacy of these Popish innovations inevitably led to the Eternal City.³⁸ Ornate

³³ *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 16 Jan. 1843.

³⁴ For a sampling, see *Ulster Times*, 18 Oct. 1842 and 12 Jan. 1843; *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 16 Jan. 1843; McIlwaine, *Ecclesiologism exposed*, pp 44, 47–9. See also Dawson, *Annals of Christ Church*, p. 76. Opponents of the Church Architecture Society placed this point at the centre of their petition to Bishop Mant: *Ulster Times*, 2 Feb. 1843.

³⁵ *Ulster Times*, 29 Nov. 1842.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22 Dec. 1842.

³⁷ McIlwaine, *Ecclesiologism exposed*, pp 50–2.

³⁸ For the main tenets of McIlwaine's theological argument against Puseyism, see *Ecclesiologism exposed*, pp 9–13, 15–18, 26–8, 31–8, 45–7, 52–4. For a solid introduction to Richard Hooker's notions of justification, see Corneliu C. Simut, *Richard Hooker and his early doctrine of justification* (Aldershot, 2005), pp 1–12. For Hooker and historiography, see Michael Brydon, *The evolving reputation of Richard Hooker: an evaluation of responses, 1600–1714* (Oxford, 2007).

tradition could not replace the simple truth of faith in God's word. As he put it, 'I love the chaste and beauteous structure of my National Church' and he did not want to change them, particularly not by 'groping amid old ruins for the deformed remains of a rude age ...'.³⁹

Finally, opponents of the Church Architecture Society grounded their critique in a popular British historical narrative that featured the Protestant heroes and enemies of the English Reformation. As scholars such as J. C. D. Clark and Linda Colley have made clear, this Protestant historical narrative was central to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of national identity across the British Isles. These historical narratives doubtless retained a vibrant relevance in mid-nineteenth century Ulster even as the power of anti-Catholicism faded somewhat in Great Britain.⁴⁰ McIlwaine's frequent references to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historical figures make it clear just how vital it was for evangelicals to portray themselves as the true inheritors of the English Reformation. In his first letter, McIlwaine tellingly opened with the story of Archbishop William Laud, wielded here as a powerful warning against those who supported the novelties of the Oxford theologians and their allies.⁴¹ This historical claim was not limited to McIlwaine, as one clerical correspondent in the *Ulster Times* made clear when he argued that no one connected with the Cambridge Camden Society should be allowed to hold office to protect '... the pure principles of the Reformation for which Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley suffered martyrdom ...'.⁴² Simply stated, McIlwaine and his allies argued that the Tractarian veneration of artifice, tradition and the medieval past was suspicious and downright Catholic, a narrative rooted in a resonant morality tale of principled Protestant heroes and base Catholic treachery. By equating the Church Architecture Society with Laud and King Charles I, he made it clear that the new organisation and its sponsors were on the wrong side of British history.

If McIlwaine believed that Puseyism posed a real threat to true religion, he remained confident that the common sense and faith of the Ulster Protestant laity would see these innovations for what they were. To counter the 'popish threat', Belfast evangelicals mobilized their congregants against Puseyism, a populist

³⁹ McIlwaine, *Ecclesiologism exposed*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ For religion and English and British nationalism, see J. C. D. Clark, *English society 1688–1832: ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien regime* (Cambridge, 1985); Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1994). Colley has rightly been criticized for understating the denominational fractures within British Protestantism. For searching critiques of Colley's treatment of religion and nationalism, see Steven Pincus's review in *Journal of Modern History*, lxxvii, no. 1 (Mar. 1995), p. 134; Gerald Newman, 'Nationalism revisited' in *Journal of British Studies*, xxxv, no. 1 (Jan. 1996), p. 124; Colin Kidd, 'North Britishness and the nature of eighteenth-century British patriotisms' in *Historical Journal*, xxxix, no. 2 (June 1996), pp 364–81.

⁴¹ McIlwaine, *Ecclesiologism exposed*, pp 9–10. While there are references to various seventeenth-century English figures throughout McIlwaine's letters, letter xvii contains an extended treatment of this theme, focusing on early Tractarian critiques of Jewel, Luther, Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer: *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴² *Ulster Times*, 14 Jan. 1843. Of course, these martyrdoms remained a critical symbolic power within certain conservative narratives of the Ulster past and present. Drew, for example, scheduled special services at Christ Church in 1855 and 1856 to commemorate the tercentenary anniversaries of the sixteenth-century martyrdoms of Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley: *Annals of Christ Church* (P.R.O.N.I., T.2159/185 and /195).

move that Mant and other elites clearly viewed with distaste. Across the spectrum, evangelicals consistently contrasted their faith in the true Protestant impulses of the laity with the hierarchical and authoritarian distrust of the people displayed by their opponents.⁴³ As the editor of the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* opined:

The Laity of our Church are now called upon to make a move – let them do so with firmness and determination – let them act with the temperance which becometh their Christian profession, the zeal of men who recognize the magnitude of the interests at stake; not for the purpose of achieving a vain triumph, but the noble object of resolutely maintaining the liberty with which Christ has made them free.⁴⁴

McIlwaine used similar language in the introduction to his *Ecclesiologism exposed*; the lay movement against heresy proved that those who believe their ‘poorer brethren are unable to form an opinion on the merits of an issue’ were quite mistaken.⁴⁵

The clearest expression of the evangelical faith in the Protestant zeal of the laity came in an effort to draw up a memorial to the bishop of Down and Connor. The first notice of this effort appeared in a mid-January report of the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, which argued that the laity had finally begun to stand up against the ruinous mixture of ecclesiology and much needed church accommodation, reporting that ‘many of the most influential and respectable gentlemen of Belfast, all subscribers and friends of the Church Accommodation Society’, had recently met to take a firm stance against the Church Architecture Society.⁴⁶ The avenue they chose was a petition, itself a device with resonant seventeenth-century connections. In this case the memorial was drawn up and circulated throughout parts of Belfast and the surrounding villages of Counties Antrim and Down. It was this circulation that drew the sharpest comment. Richard Davison, one of the members of a committee appointed by the leaders of the Church Architecture Society to examine the relationship between the organisation and the Cambridge Camden Society, clearly was angered by the methods employed to obtain signatures for the petition:

... one thing that is offensive is the effort to raise the laity in opposition to their bishop, without solid evidence. I’m not charging those who signed the petition with this offence, their motives were pure – but the others, who hawked it through Antrim and Down villages for signatures from the humblest people in life and saying that they should sign against Puseyism ...⁴⁷

Other supporters accused opponents of running a misinformation campaign against the bishop. One minister complained to the marquis of Downshire that in Dundrum he knew ‘... that signatures were asked for the memorial because of the alleged intention of the Bishop to introduce candles on the Communion Tables of

⁴³ McIlwaine makes reference to an awakened laity in letters 7, 9, 18 and 19: *Ecclesiologism exposed*, pp 25–8, 52–5. In addition to the petition controversy described below, see *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 Nov. 1842; *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 18 Jan. 1843.

⁴⁴ *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 9 Jan. 1843.

⁴⁵ McIlwaine, *Ecclesiologism exposed*, p. vii.

⁴⁶ *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 18 Jan. 1843.

⁴⁷ *Ulster Times*, 28 Feb. 1843. Chosen in early February, the committee consisted of Davison, Archdeacon Walter Mant, Colonel William Blacker, Colonel F. Crossley and the Rev. J. S. Monsell: *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 1 Mar. 1843.

the several churches!⁴⁸ For all the complaints about their populist methods, the petition against the Church Architecture Society certainly garnered a sizeable measure of popular support; more than thirteen hundred people signed the memorial, which was formally presented to the bishop on 1 February 1843 by a deputation led by Colonel John Ward, Conway Dobbs and former M.P., W. G. Johnston.⁴⁹

The petition appeared in the 4 February issue of the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, with a complete list of signatures and Bishop Mant's response. The list of signatures was topped by an impressive array of northern elites, including the mayor of Belfast and fifty-one justices of the peace from across the province. This was not simply an elite campaign, however, and a brief analysis of the social background of the signatories provides a window into existing cross-class networks in early Victorian Belfast. By cross-referencing the 1843 petition with data from an 1852 religious census of Christ Church District in Belfast, we get occupational data on a sample of fifty-one of the men who signed the petition.⁵⁰ The signatures reflect the social range and makeup of this crucial Anglican community in Belfast: twelve were labourers and eleven were weavers, while three carpenters, two sawyers, two merchants and two publicans signed. While it is not possible to be absolutely sure that any of the individual names that appear on both lists are not duplicates (it is quite possible that there may be two different Anglican men named Hamilton Wardlaw), the broad contours of the results seem incontrovertible – significant numbers of middle- and working-class Belfast Anglican men signed the petition against the Church Architecture Society.

The memorial itself was a relatively simple document; one that neatly reflected the publicly expressed concerns of leaders like McIlwaine and Drew. After highlighting the long history of 'unity and amity' between clergy and laity within the diocese and emphasizing the value of recent organisations like the Church Accommodation Society, the petition expressed 'alarm and apprehension' at the spread of the dangerous ideas associated with 'Tracts for the Times' and the Cambridge Camden Society. Although the memorialists were convinced that these doctrines had not yet made significant progress in the province, they argued that this wrong-headed association had undermined church accommodation efforts and '... that the same evil effects will be speedily and fatally felt, in paralyzing the operations of our other Diocesan Institutions'. The petition concluded by asking the bishop to 'withdraw his countenance' from the Church Architecture Society.⁵¹ In short, the memorial was a direct challenge to the bishop's authority, and his interest in, and support for, the fledgling organisation.

Mant's reply to the memorial only exacerbated the conflict. While thanking the memorialists for the opportunity to explain openly his views on these subjects (for '... to answer anonymous calumniators has been morally impossible ...'), both the tone and much of the substance of his answer reinforced evangelical and

⁴⁸ W. Smyth Cummings to the marquis of Downshire, 3 Mar. 1843 (Downshire papers, P.R.O.N.I., D671/C/209/19).

⁴⁹ See Col. John Ward to the marquis of Downshire, 26 Jan. and 5 Feb. 1843 (Downshire papers, P.R.O.N.I., D671/C/209/10–12); Dawson, *Annals of Christ Church*, pp 79–82.

⁵⁰ Christ Church Census, 1852 (P.R.O.N.I., CR1/13D/1).

⁵¹ *Ulster Times*, 2 Feb. 1843; *Belfast Newsletter*, 4 Feb. 1843.

popular opposition to the bishop. Most of the letter is respectful and measured in tone and content, as Mant thanked the respectable gentlemen who brought him the memorial for providing him the opportunity to explain his views on these matters. Along these lines, the bishop provided a detailed refutation of the charge that the Church Architecture Society was a Catholic or proto-Catholic organisation. Mant tried to counter this argument by asserting his own anti-Catholic credentials, highlighting recent diocesan charges that had warned against ‘some of those false doctrines that you have lamented as being promulgated by the “Tracts of the Times”’. Moreover, he underlined his long-time support for the Church Accommodation Society, arguing that it had been designed as a temporary association, but expressing a willingness to reconstitute a society based on similar principles if that is what was needed and desired.⁵² Above all, he called for respectful and rational discussion, exhorting his parishioners to ‘put their confidence in their Bishop’, to look with ‘charity and brotherly love’ on their brethren and to study and learn the actual principles and workings of the Church Architecture Society rather than depending on the emotional hyperbole that had dominated public discourse.⁵³

Unfortunately, for many of his readers, less temperate sections of Mant’s public letter overwhelmed this moderate and almost academic call for the reasoned study and debate of the issues surrounding the Church Architecture Society. Clearly angered by the challenge to his position, the bishop opened with a muscular assertion of episcopal authority, critiquing clergymen for not giving him ‘...the respect due to my office’ and arguing that among those who deviated from the Church of Ireland the real danger came from those with ‘... anti-episcopal, anti-liturgical, anti-ritual [beliefs] and irregular zeal’ rather than the high church ritualism of the Tractarians.⁵⁴ This was not a message likely to soothe evangelical hearts and minds and was particularly disturbing to those concerned about growing tensions between Presbyterians and Anglicans.

Anglican–Presbyterian relationships in Belfast in the early 1840s were replete with seeming contradictions. On the one hand, the increased presence and influence of evangelicals within the Church of Ireland created something of a common language for members of the two denominations and enhanced opportunities for tangible alliances, a tendency most famously embodied in the storied career of the Rev. Henry Cooke. This was reinforced by both the demographic growth of Belfast Catholics and the rise of organised Irish Catholic nationalist politics, elements that helped create an environment seemingly ripe for pan-Protestant endeavours. But denominational tensions remained high in both Ulster and across the British Isles, with traditional Anglican anxieties sharpened by Presbyterian and other Dissenting sects’ dramatic growth in urban centres. In the early 1840s, these tensions found expression in the heightened anti-Dissenter rhetoric of high churchmen (doubtless shaped by the rise of evangelicals within their own established church), an 1840 Anglican challenge to the validity of Presbyterian marriages that remained controversial until its

⁵² Mant clearly was serious about this point, writing to the British prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, about the issue: Mant to Peel, 12 Dec. 1843 (B.L., Peel papers, general correspondence, vol. ccclvii, f. 433).

⁵³ *Ulster Times*, 2 Feb. 1843.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

resolution in 1844 and, of course, that continual theme of denominational strife – religious education.⁵⁵

In many ways, these seeming contradictions were embodied in Drew's career. As a low-church evangelical, Drew was a natural ally for evangelically-minded Dissenters and throughout his tenure at Christ Church he worked with Presbyterian leaders like Rev. John Edgar and Rev. James Morgan on questions of social and moral reform ranging from temperance and anti-slavery to animal cruelty and Famine relief. Despite these cooperative relationships, however, Drew struggled to maintain interdenominational harmony, intermittently provoking clashes with Presbyterian ministers sensitive to establishment-minded critiques (and at times, his conservative and Orange politics). Part of this was a product of Drew's agenda of institutional growth, and as we have seen, his efforts to carve out an Anglican space in Belfast through the creation of denominationally-specific initiatives in church outreach, domestic mission and education generated tension with non-Anglicans and Anglicans alike. The Orange historian R. R. Sibbett clearly had the minister of Christ Church in mind when he later blamed such efforts for rising interdenominational tensions in the early 1840s.⁵⁶ But it was not simply Drew's commitment to the strengthening the Church of Ireland's place in Belfast that triggered controversy; his heavy-handed interventions on both national (particularly educational) and local issues in the late 1830s and early 1840s did little to foster cooperative relationships between Anglicans and Presbyterians.⁵⁷

Although Drew's bombastic public rhetoric continued to generate sporadic clashes with even like-minded evangelical Presbyterians,⁵⁸ by late 1842, he and his conservative and evangelical allies maintained that Mant was far too antagonistic toward Ulster Presbyterianism. Writing to the Conservative M.P. for Belfast, James Emerson Tennant, Drew argued that what was needed now was someone who would soothe rather than provoke conflict between the city's two largest Protestant denominations, an approach that likely was as much a matter of tactics as ideology.⁵⁹ Nor was this simply a matter of ministerial concern. In a

⁵⁵ See James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (3 vols, Belfast 1867), iii, 485–8. For a more recent view see Miller, 'Demise of the confessional state in Ireland', pp 116–17.

⁵⁶ Writing in an era where the importance of pan-Protestant unity was a more firmly established element in Ulster Unionist rhetoric, Sibbett lamented the ways that heightened interdenominational strife made mission work much more difficult: Sibbett, *For Christ and crown*, pp 71–2.

⁵⁷ Drew generated a particularly emotive controversy with remarks he made in Annalong, County Down in 1840, blaming Presbyterians for the current state of interdenominational strife, a speech that generated at least two bitter responses from ministers angered by Drew's 'gratuitous attack': *Belfast Newsletter*, 25 Aug., 8 Sept. 1840; *John Knox and the Reverend Thomas Drew or, The book of Common Order, no liturgy* (Belfast, 1840).

⁵⁸ At one meeting dedicated to bringing relief to Belfast's poor population, Cooke was exasperated by Drew's long-winded attack on the use of soup for relief, saying that he was not as fearful of soup as Drew and that the Rev. Dr's speech was 'political claptrap'. As so often happened with Drew, Cooke's anger here reflected Drew's personality and style as much as belief: *Ulster Times*, 30 June 1842.

⁵⁹ Rev. Thomas Drew to J. Emerson Tennant, 29 July 1842 (Emerson Tennant papers, P.R.O.N.I., D.2922/C/12/3).

report in January 1843, the *Belfast Newsletter* was quite critical of Bishop Mant for needlessly giving offence to Presbyterians and other Dissenters with his warnings about the dangers of Puritan excess.⁶⁰

For all his anti-Dissenter rhetoric, however, Mant's real fury was directed at the people who had circulated the memorial throughout the diocese, '... as if the object to be attained were the carrying of a contested popular election by a mere numerical majority of clamorous voices'. What made this populist mobilization particularly offensive to the bishop was what he called the 'quality' of many of the signatories – 'persons disqualified by their age, and habits, and station in life, and defective knowledge – rather, I may say, by their utter ignorance – of the points in question, for forming a proper judgment concerning them...'.⁶¹ This elitist tirade only reinforced the bishop's reputation for being 'isolated' from his parishioners and generated a number of angry letters in the Belfast press in February 1843. Even the marquis of Downshire, a man inclined to 'place confidence in our Bishop', argued that Bishop Mant needed to be made more aware of the strength of public opinion on this issue.⁶²

While disagreements over the enforcement of liturgical conformity continued throughout the remainder of Mant's tenure,⁶³ the controversy over the Church Architecture Society quickly faded from public view in the early spring of 1843, as the city's political and religious leaders laboured to quell the conflict. At a late February meeting of the Church Architecture Society, board member Richard Davison, a leading Belfast attorney, Christ Church congregant and future Conservative M.P. for Belfast (1852–60), reported that the organisation has been cleared of the charges of Puseyism. Like the bishop, Davison deplored the mobilization of the laity in church politics. With delicious irony, the report also highlighted Drew's own inconsistency, making note of the stained glass window in his own chapel of ease, while he had critiqued the same (a stained glass window that featured the diocesan arms) in the newer Magdalen Asylum Church.⁶⁴ Davison's report certainly did not go uncontested; the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* launched a rhetorical assault on the lawyer, citing '... the effable horror which seizes him [Davison] when he discovers the monstrous fact that, absolutely, many of the humbler Episcopalians in Belfast and throughout the diocese have attached their names to it'.⁶⁵ For all the rhetorical fury, however, reconciliation won the day, as Davison and other political elites, most notably the marquis of Downshire, worked hard to reconcile the two parties, recommending that the bishop dissolve the connections between the local Church Architecture Society and the Cambridge Camden Society. As Downshire put it in a letter to Davison:

... although I have been unable to approve or join in some of the means which have been taken to express the dislike of those who have protested against the Church Architecture

⁶⁰ *Belfast Newsletter*, 20 Jan. 1843.

⁶¹ *Ulster Times*, 2 Feb. 1843.

⁶² Downshire to Richard Davison, 17 Feb. 1843 (Downshire papers, P.R.O.N.I., D671/C/209/14).

⁶³ For an overview of the controversy stemming from the bishop's 1843 charge that focused on enforcing liturgical conformity, see Drew's public remonstrance against the '... occult mode of instituting the Diocesan Church Architecture Society': *Ulster Times*, 22 July 1843.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 28 Feb. 1843.

⁶⁵ *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 1 Mar. 1843.

Society – I am disposed upon principle to place confidence in our Bishop, but I also wish to be of service to our Bishop, and above all, to our Church, and I therefore have willingly joined with those who deemed it their duty to make his Lordship acquainted with the general feeling of the Established Church in his Diocese.⁶⁶

The *Ulster Times* also trumpeted the need for calm, arguing that while it was important to have fair and free discussion, ‘... it now believes that further conversation on this subject can only result in further division, at a time when all Protestants need to unite to face down Popery...’.⁶⁷ At a meeting on 27 February 1843, Bishop Mant agreed to cut all ties with the Cambridge Camden Society, and while tensions between Mant and evangelical figures like Drew and McIlwaine continued to play themselves out in public over other issues, the Mant controversy itself was over.

III

On one level, this seemingly minor episode in early Victorian Belfast religious politics had little tangible effect. The bishop retained his position and quickly regained the support of conservative elites desirous of Anglican unity. Richard Mant even remained quite active in the Down and Connor Church Architecture Society (renamed the Harris Society in 1845), presenting a number of papers until 1846.⁶⁸ Examined more critically, however, this clash yields a number of insights into the shifting nature of religious politics in this transitional period. First, the Mant controversy illustrates evangelical religion’s rapid rise to prominence in Victorian Britain and Ireland and the tensions that this growth brought to the complex mosaics of Belfast and Ulster Protestantism. By the late 1830s and early 1840s figures like Drew ministered to substantial communities of middle- and working-class Anglicans attracted by their assertive syntheses of practical Protestantism and populist evangelical faith in well-placed urban churches. Throughout the early Victorian period these evangelical ministers attempted to leverage their greater congregational numbers and links to broader communities in Belfast and beyond in an effort to challenge the high church establishment within the Church of Ireland, mobilizing support through the populist instruments of the press and petition. Henry Cooke’s effective use of

⁶⁶ Downshire to Davison, 17 Feb. 1843 (Downshire papers, P.R.O.N.I., D671/C/209/14). Downshire, a devoted and deeply conventional Anglican, had battled with Walter Mant, archdeacon of Down, over the latter’s supposed Puseyite tendencies in the 1830s and was a key player in an 1845 clash in Hillsborough: Yates, *Religious condition of Ireland*, pp 287–9; W. A. Maguire, *The Downshire estates in Ireland, 1801–1845* (Oxford, 1972), p. 81.

⁶⁷ *Ulster Times*, 14 Feb. 1843. For another letter calling for an end to the recent clerical controversies, see *ibid.*, 4 Mar. 1843.

⁶⁸ The Mant family, both the bishop and his sons, the Rev. Walter Mant, archdeacon of Down, and the Rev. Frederick W. Mant, curate of Inch, were central to the workings of the local society, presenting a sizeable proportion of the society’s published papers between 1842 and 1846. See ‘Stray papers on diocesan history and antiquities, read before the Down, Connor and Dromore Architecture Society and the Harris Society, 1842–46’ in the Reeves manuscripts (P.R.O.N.I., DIO1/24/12). My thanks to Fred Rankin and Brian M. Walker for this reference.

public opinion has been noted by a number of scholars,⁶⁹ but the Mant controversy shows that a new generation of Anglican ministers were not averse to such tactics and it is clear that Mant struggled to respond effectively in this new landscape.

While ministers and other social elites led the challenge, this was not simply a top-down initiative; beyond this rhetorical struggle over the Church Architecture Society, there are clear signs that efforts to impose high church rituals, rubrics, and standards angered substantial numbers of lay Anglicans. At a January 1843 meeting of the Church Accommodation Society designed to bring unity to Belfast Anglicanism, the *Belfast Newsletter* reported that Drew and McIlwaine received enthusiastic applause from the large crowd ('... not less than a thousand men and women') that attended the meeting.⁷⁰ Nor was this confined to Belfast. In 1845–6, two years after the Mant controversy had subsided, Mant's own domestic chaplain, the Rev. Canon William St John Smyth, faced sharp opposition from his Ballymoney congregation over what some congregants saw as unwarranted innovations in the order of the church service, the wearing of the surplice and the positioning of the font. According to one of the leaders of this challenge, these changes had been made by Bishop Mant's brother Robert when he was rector in the mid-1820s and the congregants wanted to go back to their traditional mode of service. When Smyth and his curate, Rev. James Dunseath, refused to make sufficient concessions, a number of the congregants boycotted church services, with one family placing a padlock on a church pew to prevent others from using it in their absence. The dispute continued for more than a year and the correspondence between Smyth and his congregants reveals lay voices that are sharply critical and confident, quite willing to challenge ministers on matters of religious practice. Charles O'Hara, one of the leaders of the protest, admitted that his efforts had been inspired by a similar (and successful) effort by Hillsborough Anglicans against the Rev. Walter B. Mant, the archdeacon of Down and the bishop's own son. Smyth eventually conceded to most of the demands before his death two months later in November 1846.⁷¹ By the 1840s, evangelical Protestantism was not a movement at the margins; its belief, language and practice had spread widely enough throughout the Church of Ireland in Ulster that lay congregants felt confident in refusing the imposition of what they saw as dangerous high church novelties.

It would be wrong, however, to see opposition to the Church Architecture Society in strictly evangelical terms. It is true that the Rev. William McIlwaine and other ministerial leaders were evangelicals and that a number of participants labelled their opposition as evangelical, but that term was often used as code for a more true or pure Protestantism as much as a description of a particular set of theological beliefs. In short, the boundaries between evangelical and conservative are difficult to establish here, and many of the organisation's foes were doubtless conservative Protestants offended by innovation as much as

⁶⁹ For a recent view, see Miller, 'Demise of the confessional state in Ireland', pp 109–24. See also Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster society*, pp 69, 98–9, 205–6.

⁷⁰ *Belfast Newsletter*, 20 Jan. 1843.

⁷¹ St John Smyth correspondence (Representative Church Body Library, Dublin, MS 772/6/1–17).

religious principle. In this regard it is worth noting that Drew, McIlwaine and others often emphasized the physical and visual elements of Mant's proposals and that in both the Ballymoney and Hillsborough disputes, boycotting opponents demanded an end to 'innovations' like the wearing of the clerical surplice, the order of the service and the prayer for the Church Militant. Each of these factors had theological dimensions, of course, but part of the populist appeal of such opposition was that it was both evangelical and conservative, and the fact that the majority of lay participants in Ballymoney and Hillsborough couched their objectives in terms of going back to the way that things were before Mant's efforts to enforce rubrical conformity underlines the wisdom of a more cautious approach.

If it would be wrong to describe lay activism in these struggles as simply top down, it is also important to underline the key roles played by political and social elites in this controversy. In Belfast, McIlwaine, Drew and other ministers used the press to mobilize their supporters and middle- and lower-class Protestant men signed the petition against the Church Architecture Society, but it was the city's political elites who led the delegation to present the petition to Bishop Mant, and McIlwaine and opponents never lost an opportunity to emphasize the breadth and respectability of elite participation in the campaign. This episode also illustrates the complexity of these relationships, as figures like Richard Davison and the marquis of Downshire attempted to stake a middle course of reconciliation in the crisis, critiquing Mant's high church elitism and hierarchical isolation from his parishioners while deprecating the more radical popular mobilization used by the bishop's opponents in their efforts to excoriate the Church Architecture Society. In this case, their efforts ultimately worked to dampen down intra-Anglican conflict in Belfast church politics. Prominent landowners played even more dominant leadership roles in later disputes, with Lord Downshire and Charles O'Hara leading the opposition in Hillsborough and Ballymoney respectively. If leaders like Richard Davison shared Bishop Mant's distaste for populist challenges to episcopal authority, other political elites were not so unequivocal, wielding popular opposition to affect conservative religious change. The success of the populist movement against the Church Architecture Society clearly was dependent on the support and advocacy of leaders with substantial political and social authority.

Finally, the Mant controversy illustrates how conflicts over religious matters could foster cross-class movements that brought together influential political elites, evangelical ministers and substantial lay communities of middle- and working-class Anglicans in early Victorian Belfast and beyond. Figures like McIlwaine and Drew acted as crucial linchpins in the creation and mobilization of these networks. Christ Church, located between the industrial suburb of Sandy Row and the more respectable neighbourhoods and institutions of the central city, acted as a particularly important meeting place for seemingly divergent social groups. In an era when the Loyal Orange Order was not particularly strong in the city, Christ Church's role as a site of intraclass Anglican interaction was all the more crucial.⁷²

⁷² Focusing on the 1850s, Mark Doyle has termed Christ Church as a kind of makeshift Orange lodge in an era where Orange processions were banned: Doyle, *Fighting like the devil*, p. 84.

While the importance of pan-Protestant rhetoric and cross-class networks to late nineteenth-century Belfast Protestant politics make it tempting to draw out the political implications of the Mant controversy, there is no evidence that the particular coalition brought together in the winter of 1842–3 had any lasting political impact. While Anglican ministers like the Reverend Tresham Gregg and Thomas Drew attempted to mobilize populist support for a more explicitly Protestant politics in the 1840s and 1850s respectively,⁷³ they had relatively little success, and it would be the Loyal Orange Order, comparatively weak in Belfast until the late 1850s and 1860s, that eventually brought together many of these strands to more political effect.⁷⁴ The clash, however, does illustrate the blurred lines between religion and politics in early Victorian Belfast, since much of the heat generated by opposition to the Church Architecture Society stemmed from the fact that the organisation (and what it supposedly represented) could be portrayed as a move in the direction of Roman Catholicism. For all of McIlwaine's fire and Mant's ineffectual protestations, however, it was reconciliation that won the day in February 1843, as conservative lay and religious elites patched over this clash with relative ease. Even the Rev. Thomas Drew, a frequent participant in many of Victorian Belfast's rhetorical clashes, soon called for perspective and unity, arguing that strife over these types of matters (church rubrics) was 'deadening to the soul'.⁷⁵ Although few would disagree with Drew's sentiment, even this brief examination of the Mant controversy reveals that for all that seeming simplicity of the contest, religious politics in early Victorian Belfast were anything but simple.

SEAN FARRELL

Department of History, Northern Illinois University

⁷³ For Gregg's Protestant Operative Association, see John Crawford, "'An overriding providence": the life and ministry of Tresham Dames Gregg (1800–81)' in T. C. Barnard and W. G. Neely (eds), *The clergy of the Church of Ireland, 1000–2000* (Dublin, 2006), pp 157–68. For a brief treatment of Drew's Christ Church Protestant Association, see Doyle, *Fighting like the devil*, pp 26–7.

⁷⁴ For a vivid example, see William Johnston's campaign to repeal the Party Processions Act: Sean Farrell, 'Recapturing the flag: the campaign to repeal the Party Processions Act, 1860–72' in *Eire-Ireland*, xxxii, nos. 2–3 (summer/fall 1997), pp 52–78. For an alternate view of Johnston's career, see John Bew, *The glory of being Britons: civic Unionism in nineteenth-century Belfast* (Dublin, 2009), pp 194–222.

⁷⁵ *Ulster Times*, 22 July 1843.