The Scottish Presbyterian Defence of British Protestantism: The Scottish Reformation Society and the “Papal Aggression”, 1850–52

This article is a study of the Edinburgh-based anti-Catholic organisation, the Scottish Reformation Society, in the immediate aftermath of the 1850 restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales, commonly known at the time as the papal aggression. The papal aggression sent shockwaves throughout England and was viewed by Protestants as an illegal attempt to overthrow Britain’s civil and religious liberties by Pope Pius IX. Despite in practice only affecting England, the restoration also had a dramatic impact in Scotland, resulting in thousands of parliamentary petitions and sporadic bouts of communal violence. The Scottish Reformation Society, led by the controversial Free Church of Scotland minister James Begg, was at the forefront of this Scottish Protestant response. The society was dominated by Scotland’s Presbyterian dissenters, particularly members of the establishment Free Church. The Free Church had formed out of the 1843 Disruption in the Established Church of Scotland, a momentous politico-ecclesiastical event which highlighted divisions between the British state and its Scottish church, the national kirk and dissent, and pro-establishment and voluntary ecclesiologies. By focusing on the influence of a major Scottish anti-Catholic society during a turbulent period for British Protestantism, this article examines the gulf between the rhetoric of national Protestant unity and the reality of national, ideological, and denominational divisions within mid-nineteenth century Protestantism in the United Kingdom. It builds on existing research to highlight the various ways in which the anti-Catholic movement was fractured on denominational lines and reflected the wider tensions of Scottish ecclesiastical politics in the years after the Disruption.

In late 1851, George Lyon, a solicitor from Glen Ogle in the Highlands of Scotland, claimed that the United Kingdom’s civil and religious liberties were under grave threat from the “rapid increase” and “aggression” of Roman
Catholicism. Lyon was secretary of the Scottish Reformation Society, a Protestant organisation founded amidst a renewed and often violent wave of anti-Catholic sentiment in Britain. The group, based in Edinburgh, was established on 5 December 1850 as a direct and immediate response to what its founder James Begg described as the papacy’s “desperate, and to some extent successful, attempt to regain its former supremacy in Britain.” The attempt to which Begg was referring was the papal announcement in October 1850 of the reinstatement of a formal Roman Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales, divided into twelve new dioceses with local place names (though avoiding the names of historic dioceses used by the Church of England) and headed by the newly appointed Cardinal-Archbishop of Westminster, Nicholas Wiseman. The restoration, on the face of it a simple bureaucratic transition from the previous post-Reformation system of vicars apostolic to the diocesan system already in place in Ireland, was made considerably more volatile by Wiseman’s elevation to the title of Westminster, the seat of the British parliament and symbol of the United Kingdom’s Protestant liberties. Subsequent inflammatory and triumphalist addresses by Wiseman and the convert John Henry Newman also fuelled the anti-papal fire of many Protestants, who viewed the new territorial hierarchy as an illegal threat to British sovereignty by a Roman Catholic Church aiming to govern not only its own English adherents in the re-established dioceses but the entire country itself.

The national outcry that followed what The Times coined the papal aggression united pulpit and press, churchman and dissenter. In the winter of 1850 and 1851, seven thousand meetings were organised and thousands more petitions gathered, with nearly 900 thousand signatures calling for retaliatory action. The Liberal Prime Minister Lord John Russell, hitherto associated with a conciliatory attitude towards Catholic concerns, duly responded with a display of Protestant chauvinism which culminated in the “sop to bigotry” of the mildly punitive and never prosecuted Ecclesiastical Titles Bill. The ignominy of the Pope — a “foreign prince” in Russell’s eyes seemingly laying claim to English territory ensured that, according to The Times, the papal aggression and its fallout was not a mere religious or theological dispute but a question of “national allegiance.” However, what that nation actually represented — particularly its fundamental concepts of British and Protestant identity — was interpreted in many different ways by the opponents of the papal aggression.” Linda Colley’s theory that a shared Protestantism, and thus anti-Catholicism, helped cement the bonds of Britishness in the century and more after the 1707 union has long been disputed. Colin Kidd has

1. Aberdeen Journal, 15 October 1851.
5. The Times, 14 October 1850, 5; 7 November 1850, 4, 8.

argued that the differences between the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the Episcopal Church of England, which mostly centred on their divergent views on the church-state relationship, were the “grit in the Union, not its glue.” John Wolffe has probed even further, claiming that the various anti-Catholic societies which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century reflected the existing theoretical and institutional divisions within British Protestantism over church government, religious establishments, theology, and political activity.

This article will build on this research by exploring the formative years of the Edinburgh-based Scottish Reformation Society (SRS), one of the first and most influential groups formed in the aftermath of the “papal aggression,” and one which offers a telling indicator of the fault lines within British Protestantism in the early 1850s. The mid-nineteenth century, despite the best efforts of ecumenical groups such as the Evangelical Alliance, was a period beset by intra-Protestant divisions. This was especially the case in Scotland, where the 1843 Disruption of the Church of Scotland marked the largest and most seismic of the numerous schisms which had plagued the Scottish Presbyterian Church for over a century. This article assesses the Scottish Reformation Society’s role during the aftermath of the “papal aggression” in both counteracting and cultivating the major pre-existing divisions within the British anti-Catholic movement: between English Anglicanism and multiple Scottish Presbyterianisms, the state church and dissent, and pro-establishment and voluntary ecclesiologies. By exploring the distinctive and often overlooked Scottish response to the restoration of the English Catholic hierarchy (the Catholic hierarchy in Scotland would not be restored until 1878), it examines the gulf between the rhetoric of British Protestant unity that pervaded Scottish anti-Catholicism in the early 1850s and the reality of national and denominational tension and divisions.

The Religious Landscape in Post-Disruption Scotland

Though historians such as G. F. A. Best, and more recently Mark Doyle, have argued that anti-Catholicism in Victorian Scotland was preoccupied with racial anti-Irishness, the Scottish Reformation Society continuously stressed its position as a defender of British and Protestant liberties from the threats of Rome and the “crypto-Catholicism” of ritualism and Puseyism. Nevertheless, the Reformation Society was a Scottish and therefore mainly

Presbyterian organisation (of the twenty-two members of its founding committee, sixteen were Presbyterian), and thus its membership and ideas reflected not only the divisions within British Protestantism but also within Scottish Presbyterianism itself. As Kidd has noted, the cultural, theological, and ecclesiological differences between Scottish Presbyterianism and Anglican Episcopacy could not be so easily reduced to create a single common Protestant identity in Britain after 1707 and therefore would, in the case of the perceived “papal aggression,” hamper any attempts at a unified and coherent British response. The denominational landscape in mid-nineteenth century Scotland was also a fragmented one. The bulk of the SRS, including its figurehead Begg and his fellow founding members Robert Smith Candlish and William Cunningham, were ministers in the Free Church of Scotland, the group that left the Established Kirk in May 1843 at the Great Disruption. This group of evangelical ministers, labelled the non-intrusionists and led by the greatest churchman of his age, Thomas Chalmers, emphasised the doctrines of the “two kingdoms” and the Kirk’s “spiritual independence” from the state, which drew a clear distinction between the workings of spiritual and temporal government.

Despite increasing pressure from reform movements both within and outside the Established Churches, for much of the first half of the nineteenth century the United Kingdom was a semi-confessional state. The national Churches of England (and Wales), Ireland, and Scotland, “by law established,” were supported by the government to provide religious and moral instruction, protect the faith of the nation, and express the religious conscience of the state. There were, however, fundamental differences in church government and doctrine between Britain’s national churches, stemming from the Reformation, which prevented the creation of a unified Protestant nation-state. Whereas the United Church of England and Ireland, formed in 1801 by the Act of Union that joined Great Britain and Ireland, was Anglican and episcopal in structure and governed by bishops, the Presbyterian and Calvinist Church of Scotland featured an internal hierarchy of ecclesiastical courts. Unlike the Church of England’s Anglican model of government which interlinked the affairs of church and state, with the Queen as head of the Church of England and bishops sitting in the House of Lords, the Presbyterian non-intrusionists in Scotland believed in the sole headship of Christ over the Church. They argued that, as a church of Christ and under the terms of the 1707 Treaty of Union, the British state could not interfere in the Scottish Kirk’s ecclesiastical affairs. The non-intrusionist position was crystallised during the conflict from the mid-1830s between the civil and ecclesiastical courts over the execution of the controversial policy of lay patronage, which the Kirk’s evangelicals believed infringed upon the “popular” Presbyterian right for congregations to select their own ministers.


dispute over patronage not only divided the Church of Scotland (the Kirk’s Moderate Party, though maintaining the independence of the church in spiritual matters, respected the jurisdiction of the state when the civil and ecclesiastical courts came into conflict) but also called into question the very nature of the church-state relationship, paving the way for eventual Disruption in 1843.

While the non-intrusionists argued that the Kirk should be spiritually independent from the temporal realm, they maintained that the state should still support and recognise the Established Church, which would act as the moral arbiter of the Scottish nation. This belief in the principle of a religious establishment and the importance of national religion would remain a central tenet of the post-Disruption Free Church and put the non-intrusionists at odds with Scotland’s (mainly Presbyterian) voluntary churches, the largest of which were the United Secession and Relief churches, two strands of the various eighteenth-century secessions from the Scottish Kirk. These voluntaries, generally more politically radical than their fellow Presbyterians, had spent much of the 1830s engaged in a campaign to disestablish the Church of Scotland and abolish all religious establishments, leading to a bitter dispute with the ministers who would go on to form the Free Kirk.13 After almost a decade of conflict between church and state, churchmen and voluntaries, and within the Kirk itself, Scotland’s national church finally split in two at the Disruption. In May 1843, 474 ordained ministers out of a total of 1,195 seceded from the establishment, giving up their manses and stipends, and were followed by 192 probationary ministers and roughly half of the laity.14

The Disruption had an unprecedented impact on Scottish religion, politics, and society, the effects of which were still being felt at the time of the “papal aggression.” The Church of Scotland’s hegemonic claim to Scottish nationhood, though a tenuous one long before the Disruption, was completely eviscerated following the 1843 split. The creation of the Free Church galvanised an increasingly confident Scottish dissenting contingent, which could now compete with the “Auld Kirk” on numerical as well as ideological grounds. While the Established Church remained the largest denomination in Scotland, by the 1851 national religious census (a survey which despite its clear faults nevertheless offered a telling indication of Scottish denominational trends), just over thirty-two per cent of churchgoers on census Sunday were part of the Church of Scotland; another thirty-two per cent attended the Free Church; and eighteen per cent attended the voluntary United Presbyterian Church, a new denomination formed in 1847 through the merger of the United Secession and Relief churches. A further two per cent comprised the Reformed Presbyterian and Original Secession churches, while Scotland’s non-Presbyterian dissenting population included small pockets of

Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians, which together accounted for fifteen per cent of Scottish churchgoers.\(^{15}\)

The aftermath of the Disruption also coincided with a rapid increase in the number of Irish — mostly Catholic — immigrants to Scotland. The Irish potato famine from 1845 resulted in the largest sustained period of immigration from Ireland to Scotland in the nineteenth century. It changed the face of Scottish society, anti-popery, and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, which for the first time threatened to challenge the traditional pre-eminence of Presbyterianism in the newly industrialised towns and cities of the central lowlands, a key hub for Catholic newcomers not only from across the Irish sea but also from the traditional Catholic heartlands of the southern Outer Hebrides and rural northeast, northwest, and southwest Scotland.\(^{16}\) By the time of the “papal aggression” controversy in 1851, Scotland’s Irish-born population (three-quarters of whom were Catholic) had risen in a decade by 90 thousand to over 207 thousand, accounting for over seven per cent of Scotland’s total.\(^{17}\) However, the initial organisational and structural inability of the Scottish Catholic Church to accommodate the rapid increase of Irish immigrants in the immediate post-famine years ensured its attendance numbers in 1851 remained relatively low.

The emergence of this more pluralist denominational picture saw the Established Kirk’s position as the “true” Church of Scotland repeatedly challenged in the decade after the Disruption. This challenge was inevitably led by the Free Church, which viewed itself as the rightful heir to Scotland’s Protestant heritage and condemned the Establishment as “an anti-Christian community,”\(^{18}\) but also, from 1847, by the United Presbyterian Church. Though they were bitter rivals during the Voluntary Controversy and even after the Disruption advocated very different visions of Presbyterianism, the late 1840s and early 1850s saw the Free and United Presbyterian churches work together to promote Protestant unity; oppose the Church of Scotland; and shape Scottish politics, education, and society. By dulling the sharper edges of each churches’ respective establishmentarian and voluntary ideologies in order to facilitate co-operation, the two largest non-established Presbyterian denominations generally succeeded in creating a looser and broader quasi-dissenting identity, which was voluntary in practice, anti-erastian yet national in its scope, and eventually led to the commencement of negotiations for union between the two churches in 1863.\(^{19}\) The earlier 1847 union to create the United Presbyterian Church and the amalgamation of the Original Secession into the Free Church in 1852 also formed part of a wider if


\(^{17}\) *The Census of Great Britain in 1851* (London, 1854), 75, 103, 218.

\(^{18}\) *Glasgow Courier*, 1 January 1844.

overly ambitious aim among a growing number of Scottish dissenters to create a grand non-established Church of Scotland to rival, and eventually topple, the current “residual” Established Kirk.\textsuperscript{20} However, despite an evident thawing in relations after the Voluntary Controversy, the ideological divisions of the 1830s remained entrenched enough in some quarters to occasionally cause friction when members of the Free and United Presbyterian churches co-operated in religious, social, and political issues on the common ground of “dissent.” This would prove particularly the case within the Scottish Reformation Society despite the group’s stated aim to unite all of Britain’s Protestants in the fight against Rome.

The Protestant Response to the ‘Papal Aggression’

According to the Free Churchman Robert Rainy, the restoration of the English Catholic territorial hierarchy in 1850 “set the country in a blaze” and produced “an anti-Papal ferment, which a year before no one would have believed that any Papal proceeding whatever could produce.”\textsuperscript{21} The crisis within British Protestantism that emerged after the restoration marked the culmination of the anti-papal fervour that dominated the mid-nineteenth century. It reawakened the agitation against the controversial government grant afforded to the Roman Catholic seminary at Maynooth and incited communal violence in Liverpool, Cheltenham, Dunfermline, and Greenock during 1850 and 1851.\textsuperscript{22} On Guy Fawkes Night, only eight days after the restoration became common knowledge in Britain, effigies of Wiseman and Pope Pius IX were burned, and a number of Catholic churches in London were vandalised.\textsuperscript{23}

The national response to the ultramontane policies of Pius IX also reinvigorated hopes for united action among Britain’s Protestants of all denominations. At the fifth annual conference of the Evangelical Alliance, the first meeting of this pan-denominational Protestant group following the “aggression,” resolutions were passed to challenge the “revived zeal of the Romish priesthood.”\textsuperscript{24} However, amendments calling for specific action were defeated, while the vague nature of the resolutions which were passed highlighted an apparent lack of commitment to anti-popery within the Evangelical Alliance, a society often plagued by denominational tensions and internal rivalry. The strength of anti-Catholic feeling in Britain and desire for a cohesive Protestant response, coupled with the Alliance’s failure to satisfy

\textsuperscript{20} Memorials of the Union of the Secession and Relief Churches, Now the United Presbyterian Church, May 1847 (Edinburgh, 1847), 211–4.
\textsuperscript{23} S. Matsumoto-Best, Britain and the Papacy in the Age of Revolution, 1846–1851 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 149.
\textsuperscript{24} Evangelical Christendom: Its State and Prospects, 5 (November 1851): 433.
these hopes, resulted in the creation of numerous militant Protestant organisations. In the five years after the “papal aggression,” nine major Protestant societies were formally constituted in Britain. The two most influential, active, and zealous were the Scottish Reformation Society and the Protestant Alliance. The latter was founded by the Earl of Shaffesbury and John MacGregor in 1851 and largely centred on English evangelical anti-Catholicism with over forty provincial societies established throughout England. Unlike the Evangelical Alliance and the Protestant Association, which were dissenting and Church of England-dominated, respectively, both the SRS and Protestant Alliance were at least nominally interdenominational. The two societies primarily acted as political pressure groups, focused almost exclusively on the Maynooth debate, and as commentators on the effects of “Rome rule” in Ireland and mainland Europe. However, their main mutual object was the defence of British Protestantism.

Like its counterpart south of the Tweed, the general objectives of the Scottish Reformation Society were to “resist the aggressions of Popery, to watch over the designs and movements of its promoters and abettors, and to diffuse sound and scriptural information on the distinctive tenets of Protestantism and Popery.” Though never quite constituting a mass movement, the society achieved considerable visibility in a significant number of Scottish towns. Glasgow, which had its own anti-Catholic organisation — the Glasgow Protestant Laymen’s Association — was the only major exception. Though the restoration of Catholic bishops only applied to England, the Scottish Reformation Society proved a central feature of the Protestant response. Meetings were organised in Edinburgh by the SRS throughout 1851 in protest at the restoration, and the society claimed that they had been attended by “almost every eminent individual of the Protestant persuasion in the Scottish capital.” By the end of the society’s first year, 43,700 members in Edinburgh had signed a petition against the aggression (around one-fifth of the city’s population), whereas over 130 thousand signatures had been added to 540 petitions across Scotland. The SRS’s influence ensured that Scottish Protestants responded with disproportionate vigour compared to the rest of Great Britain and Ireland: while Scotland’s population in 1851 accounted for roughly ten per cent of the United Kingdom’s, their petitioners totalled almost thirteen per cent of the one million signatories denouncing Rome’s actions in the year after the “papal aggression.”

The ceaseless activity of the SRS throughout the 1850s ensured its leading role in the British anti-Catholic movement. Between November 1853 and November 1854, 460 committee meetings and lectures were organised by

27. Caledonian Mercury, 30 December 1850.
29. Despite the apparent success of the SRS, the organisation was £91 in debt following its first year of operation (Caledonian Mercury, 11 December 1851).
30. Paz, 342.
thirty-five of the society’s sixty-four branches. The Leith branch alone organised twenty-six lectures that year. In 1855, the society’s secretary Edward Marcus Dill, an Irish Presbyterian minister, and his assistant visited around seventy towns in Scotland and the north of Ireland as part of a sustained deputation effort. The society’s periodical, the Bulwark, initially edited by the group’s founder James Begg and still in existence today, also became the best-selling Protestant journal in nineteenth-century Scotland. In the journal’s first year of publication, it claimed to have circulated 30 thousand copies and was published simultaneously in Edinburgh, London, and Dublin. Begg himself achieved infamy as the driving force behind Scotland’s “anti-popery” movement. A Free Church of Scotland minister at Newington, Edinburgh, Begg was a charismatic yet divisive figure even within his own church. He was known for his domineering personality and stubborn dogmatism, along with his prominent role in working-class housing initiatives, social and electoral reform movements, and the early flickerings of nineteenth-century Scottish nationalism. However, he became most associated with the ultra-Protestantism of the Reformation Society and the Bulwark, which he edited for twenty-one years. His first major published work was a fiercely polemical response to the “papal aggression,” A Handbook of Popery (1852). A best-seller, it earned him instant notoriety among Scotland’s growing Irish Catholic population.

Beyond the immediate Protestant response to the “papal aggression,” the SRS also reinvigorated opposition to the controversial Maynooth grant. Initially introduced in 1795 to provide domestic training for Irish candidates to the priesthood who had lost access to education in Europe following the French Revolution, in 1845 the Tory Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel proposed a measure to make permanent and increase from £9,000 to £26,000 the annual governmental stipend afforded to the Roman Catholic seminary at Maynooth, County Kildare. This decision followed the Charitable Bequests Act of a year earlier, which allowed Roman Catholics to bequeath money to the Catholic Church in Ireland and unleashed a torrent of public opposition from all Protestant churches and across the political spectrum. The emergence of a similar national outcry against the “papal aggression” five years later reignited the anti-Maynooth campaign. Begg claimed that through the state-funded seminary “popery” was taking “the fullest advantage of liberty conceded to her by Protestant nations, for the very purpose of overthrowing their liberties, and trampling them under her feet.”

The Scottish Reformation Society appealed to MPs to vote against the endowment and attempted to persuade electors to vote only for candidates

openly opposed to the grant, a strategy that would prove spectacularly successful in Scottish elections during the 1840s and 1850s. At the 1847 and 1852 General Elections, candidates standing on an anti-Maynooth platform (and often little else) secured seats throughout Scotland, including impressive wins in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, Perth, and Paisley — and a famous victory for the Free Church businessman Charles Cowan over the renowned Whig historian Thomas Macaulay in Edinburgh in 1847. Backed by an electoral pact between the Free and United Presbyterian churches as well as the radical faction of the Scottish Liberal party, these anti-Maynooth candidates were instrumental in overturning the Tory and Whig hegemony in Scottish politics and securing their anti-Catholic Presbyterian electors a considerable stake in the country’s affairs. The reinvigorated political campaign against Maynooth, which once again emerged as the most prominent talking-point during the 1852 election, also coincided with popular nationwide engagement. In 1852, approximately 325 thousand signatures were added to 951 public petitions against the Maynooth grant across Britain, the largest number since the first year of the agitation in 1845.

However, this would prove the high-water mark for the anti-Maynooth campaign. Three years later, though the number of petitions had doubled, almost 8 thousand fewer signatures were collected, a number that would fluctuate greatly over the next decade before the campaign petered out in the mid-1860s. By the mid-1850s, the anti-Maynooth electoral alliance, a loose and combustible compromise even at its most successful, had also collapsed, the victim of interdenominational squabbling between the Free and United Presbyterian churches over the future of Scotland’s education system and the role of religion in the proposed national schools. This decline in popular enthusiasm for anti-Catholicism was bemoaned by Begg in the seventh volume of the *Bulwark*, which maintained its crusading zeal in the face of popular “melancholy.” Nevertheless, the success of the SRS, the general fervour of Scottish anti-Catholicism, and its importance within the wider British militant Protestant framework facilitated the “partial shift of gravity” of the movement in the 1850s from London to Edinburgh.

A Distinctly Scottish Society?

Though the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in practical terms only affected England, it is no surprise that Scotland played a leading role in the

38. Wallis, 547.

subsequent protests. Like the Protestant Alliance, the Scottish Reformation Society’s mandate was focused on collective action by all British Protestants. At its inaugural meeting, the society claimed to have the support of “all classes of the Protestant community.” Indeed, the first acting committee of the society included members from each of Scotland’s major Presbyterian churches, along with Episcopalian, Methodist, Independent, and Congregationalist representatives. The committees of both the Scottish Reformation Society and the Glasgow Protestant Laymen’s Association were claimed by the *Bulwark* to “indicate the powerful combination which Popery must contend with in Scotland.” An editorial for the *Bulwark* in October 1851 argued that “the organisation of British Protestantism is absolutely necessary” not only because “we are dealing with an enemy most thoroughly united and disciplined over the three kingdoms” but also “because we all have one object, and because without union and co-operation we can neither discharge our duty to ourselves nor to the Papists around us.” While attempting to drum up support for the society at the 1852 General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, Begg described the battle “against the enemy of our common Protestantism.” This battle, he believed, would return Protestantism to the “very ground of Reformation, anterior to all the sects into which we are now divided.” To the supporters of the SRS, united action from all “earnest” Protestants was crucial to the success of their anti-papal crusade, and the expansion of the Scottish Reformation Society was viewed as pivotal to this endeavour. The desire to present a unified front against the perceived papal threat was also evident in the society’s claim that they had a “perfect accord” with their English counterparts in the Protestant Alliance. In 1854, a deputation consisting of the Free Churchmen Begg and William Robertson, David Drummond of the Edinburgh English Church, and the Scottish Episcopal clergyman Berkeley Addison visited London to address MPs and members of the government on Maynooth and other Protestant issues, as well as to foster closer co-operation between the city’s Protestant societies and the SRS with the hope of “producing united and vigorous action in opposition to the aggressions of Rome.”

The pan-Protestant rhetoric of the Scottish Reformation Society formed part of the group’s broader belief that the fight against popery was a British one and that the defence of Protestantism was bound up with British patriotism. The re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England,
according to Begg and his colleagues in the SRS, was “prejudicial to the Protestant interests of the nation.”\textsuperscript{51} This apparent attack on British institutions was believed by the SRS to be part of Rome’s attempt to subject Britain “to the degrading slavery of the Vatican.”\textsuperscript{52} The threat of ultramontanism to British sovereignty yielded a patriotic defence of the state’s constitution and institutions. While the creation, at least in rhetorical terms, of a unified British Protestant identity in the eighteenth century was fuelled by the fear of war with the Catholic European states, the growth from the 1820s of premillennialist eschatological ideas within British evangelicalism, shared by Begg and Shaftesbury, led these ultra-Protestants to view the Vatican’s aggressive strategy in the context of a coming struggle between British Protestantism and the Roman Antichrist.\textsuperscript{53} The 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act, which gave British and Irish Catholics the right to sit in parliament and hold most positions in government, was also viewed by millenarians like Begg as evidence of an increasingly corrupt society sliding towards ruin. As Frank Wallis has noted, this premillennialist thought coincided with the belief that Britain’s status as a Protestant state and nation should be defended.\textsuperscript{54} By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was clear within evangelicalism that Rome had replaced France as the greatest threat to British Protestant liberty, and British and Irish Catholics, as well as the Anglo-Catholics of the Oxford Movement, were viewed as disloyal and potential traitors in this new, all-important conflict. Anti-papery was therefore situated in a geo-political context and according to the Bulwark Protestant Britain stood as a “mighty barrier” in the way of Rome’s international supremacy.\textsuperscript{55} The progress of popery within Britain, aided by Maynooth, was also regarded as synonymous with the increasing degradation of the country’s national, moral, and social character, with Begg claiming that only a “social reformation” could reinvigorate British Protestantism and patriotic pride.\textsuperscript{56}

In an attempt to achieve this social reformation, Begg toured Scotland to raise funds for the creation of a Protestant Institute, which would act as an educational wing of the SRS and provide the “head-quarters of a mission for Roman Catholics.”\textsuperscript{57} Eventually established in 1860, the Protestant Institute organised public lectures across Scotland and maintained a library of anti-Catholic literature. Operating alongside groups such as the Edinburgh Irish

\textsuperscript{51} Smith, ii, 170.
\textsuperscript{52} Bulwark 1 (July 1851): 1.
\textsuperscript{54} Wallis, 528.
\textsuperscript{55} Bulwark 1 (July 1851): 1.
\textsuperscript{56} J. A. Wylie (ed.), Tercentenary of the Scottish Reformation as Commemorated at Edinburgh, August 1860 (Edinburgh, 1860), 204.
\textsuperscript{57} Appeal in reference to the extension of the Edinburgh Irish Mission and Protestant Institute, addressed to the friends of Protestantism (Edinburgh, 1851).
Mission, the Institute aimed both to promote and defend Protestantism at home and in Europe and to convert the Catholic masses of Britain and Ireland to Protestantism. Alongside Maynooth, the rapidly growing Irish Catholic presence in Scotland during this period was viewed by the SRS as indicative of the increasing internal threat to British Protestantism. The disproportionate effect of Irish immigration to Scotland compared to the rest of Britain also partly accounted for the strength of Scottish anti-Catholic sentiment following the “English” restoration of 1850. While first-generation Irish immigrants made up seven per cent of Scotland’s population in 1851, the Irish-born percentage in England and Wales was less than three per cent (though as in Scotland, where three-quarters of mid-century Irish immigrants settled in the west central lowland towns and cities, England’s Irish population was unevenly distributed across the country and concentrated in the northwest). Begg claimed that only a “concentrated home mission operation upon Irish Romanism by the combined Protestantism of Britain” would “dry up this cause of mischief at its source.” According to Begg, Irish Catholic immigration to Scotland was yet another component of the Vatican’s strategy to control Britain by “deluging all parts of the Kingdom with determined emissaries of Rome.” He argued that while it was easy to rebuke the scriptural arguments of Catholicism, meeting “the policy of Rome is a very different matter. Rome professes to be a religion, but she is nothing else than a banded conspiracy against the rights of God and the liberties of men.”

By invoking the national, social, and political significance of Catholicism’s threat to the United Kingdom, Begg and the Reformation Society moved the debate beyond the relatively narrow implications of theological truth and error and placed the hostile reaction to the “papal aggression” within the context of the renewed anti-Maynooth agitation. In the years after 1850, a series of conferences, pamphlets, and public meetings not only lamented the “stealthy progress of Popery” in Britain and its associated “evil” side effects, such as the increasing number of nunneries in this period, but also criticised the “suicidal policy of our rulers” in sanctioning and endowing the perceived threat at Maynooth. In the wake of the “papal aggression,” groups such as the SRS were viewed by their supporters as having “taken the initiative” in the renewed war against the Maynooth grant by pressuring MPs to oppose the measure in parliament. In 1853, J. A. Wylie, an Original Secession minister and leading member of the society, argued that the Maynooth grant was “viewed religiously, a sin,” viewed “politically, unconstitutional,” and “viewed rationally, a folly.” Wylie linked the endowment to the threat to

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58. *Home and Foreign Record of the Free Church of Scotland* [hereafter HFRFC] 3 (August 1852): 11; *Free Church Magazine* 2 (September 1853): 423.
63. *Bulwark* 1 (January, 1852): 162; *HFRFC* 3 (June, 1853): 298.

British sovereignty caused by the aggression and claimed that “every penny given to Maynooth expedites the advent of a state of things in which Britain will resemble the Spain of two hundred years ago.” According to Wylie, it took the seemingly open, direct, and overt hostility of the “papal aggression” finally to open liberal eyes to what he regarded as the true character of Rome’s motives.

Other SRS members did not share Wylie’s confidence in the Protestant response to the restoration. Speaking at the society’s annual meeting in December 1851, the Reformed Presbyterian William Goold warned that the Vatican’s new ultramontane policies multiplied the “dangers” of 1845. Goold directly linked the passing of the Maynooth Act to the abortive Young Ireland rebellion of 1848 — “in which many of the priesthood were implicated” — and the “insult” of the “papal aggression.” According to Goold, popery was the “unrelenting enemy of light and freedom,” and “all the education you give its priests at Maynooth, only serves to render them the more able to undermine the fabric of your civil and religious liberties.” This evangelical fear of the enemy within, an endowed and energetic Catholic priesthood, underpinned and strengthened the anxiety surrounding the “papal aggression,” the external danger to Britain’s Protestant state and society. To the Scottish Reformation Society, if Rome housed the imperial Antichrist, Maynooth was the centre of rebellion.

However, by including the Maynooth endowment as a key arm of the Vatican’s attempt to subvert British sovereignty, the society’s brand of anti-popery extended beyond simple British Protestant patriotism to incorporate the very Scottish and Presbyterian kind of “unionist-nationalism” that had flowered most spectacularly during the Disruption of the Church of Scotland. The events of May 1843 provoked a significant if short-lived outpouring of anti-state and quasi-nationalist sentiment in Scotland, which centred on a critique of the Anglo-British parliament’s handling of Scottish affairs. Robert Buchanan, a member of the “wild party” of young militant non-intrusionists alongside Begg, Candlish, and Cunningham, argued that if the state’s intrusion into the church’s affairs was the price to pay for the temporal benefits of being part of the ecclesiastical establishment, it then was preferable to be a “rebel against Caesar” by “dissolving her union with the state” rather than be a “rebel against Christ.”

The emergence of this religiously charged brand of Scottish patriotism at the Disruption led a number of SRS members, such as Begg and the Free Church elder, geologist, and anti-Catholic zealot Hugh Miller, to partake in the short-lived proto-nationalist Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights, which between 1853 and 1856 protested against English and parliamentary indifference towards the supposed “union of equals.” According to Begg, the

64. HFRFC 3 (February, 1853): 172–4.
65. J. A. Wylie, Pilgrimage from the Alps to the Tiber: Or, the Influence of Romanism on Trade, Justice, and Knowledge (Edinburgh, 1856), 37.
67. Wallis, 527.
68. R. Buchanan, The Ten Years’ Conflict (2 volumes), ii, 494–5.
government’s refusal in 1843 to acquiesce to non-intrusionist demands for the Church’s spiritual independence from the state (particularly concerning the thorny issue of lay patronage in the selection of ministers) was proof that the politicians at Westminster — especially English ones — were the “enemy” in a conflict which had “overturned our poor Church.”

In the wake of the Maynooth controversy and “papal aggression,” this non-intrusionist rhetoric of distrust directed towards the British government was repurposed by the SRS. Speaking during a parliamentary debate in 1845, the Whig MP and Free Church supporter Fox Maule contrasted the government’s apparent disregard for the Scottish demand of spiritual independence in 1843 with its support for the Maynooth endowment, a measure which Maule claimed “had for its object the creation of another establishment in the sister country over which there was to be no state control.” Following the “papal aggression,” Britain’s politicians were charged by Begg with “invincible ignorance” and “ludicrous deceit” on the subject of Maynooth, while the *Bulwark* accused MPs who had voted for the bill as “aiding and abetting” the “suppression of the Bible” and “liberty of conscience.” In the *Handbook of Popery*, Begg was scathingly critical of the Westminster political elite: “Prating about liberty, they openly subsidise its greatest enemy… what are we, then, to think of the would-be wise men of the present day, who not only defend such a system, but give £30,000 a-year to reconstruct it?” At a meeting of the Protestant Alliance in London, Begg sarcastically noted that “any old woman in Scotland, with her Bible and Catechism, might be matched against the Peels and Russells for guiding the nation to a sounder conclusion.” Even more severely, the SRS founder also directly implicated these politicians in what he regarded as the papal conspiracy to oppress Britain, lamenting the “amount of treachery implied on the part of statesmen in conniving at the restoration of the dark dominion of Rome.” According to George Badenoch, who replaced Dill as the society’s secretary in 1858, the endowment of Maynooth, along with Lord Palmerston’s ultimately failed attempt in 1854 to provide state support for Catholic prison chaplains, was evidence of the British government acting inconsistently with the constitution. While statesmen in London were deemed to be “determined to throw aside the great principles of the Reforma
tion and Revolution,” organisations such as the SRS were viewed by their supporters to be safeguarding Protestantism as the “essential” principle of that constitution.

70. Smith, ii, 14.
73. *Caledonian Mercury*, 1 December 1851.
75. SRS General Committee minutes, 30 December 1853.
For the Scottish Presbyterians of the Free Church, their concept of religious and national liberty and their no-popery rhetoric were intrinsically linked. By “fighting for the constitution,” the Scottish Reformation Society, in a similar manner to the non-intrusionist appropriation of Scotland’s covenanting tradition in the run-up to the Disruption, could portray itself and its members as the historical Protestant defenders of British liberty and sovereignty from Romish tyranny and oppression and as “worthy of the heroic men from whom we are descended.” Combined with an inherent suspicion of the British government’s motives, this defence of British liberty from the “primary idea of the Papacy,” that is, that supreme jurisdiction resides with the Pope, closely resembled the establishmentarian yet anti-erastian model of spiritual independence advocated at the Disruption. In this case, however, the spiritual independence of the church was transplanted onto British Protestantism in general, free from the encroachments of both popery and erastian government. While Anglicans generally viewed the close connection between church and state as central to the fight against popery, Begg linked the perceived erastianism and remoteness of the British government to the papacy, arguing that “the great despotisms of the world have all been established on the basis of ignorance of the Word of God, and by combining all power, civil and ecclesiastical, in a single human centre.” To SRS leaders like Begg and Wylie, Britain’s “independence” from the foreign power of Rome could therefore only be safeguarded by its Protestant churches and not by an erastian and “ignorant” temporal government.

Begg’s suspicion of the Westminster government was grounded in his broader disdain for English “neglect” of Scottish national grievances. In the wake of the Disruption, he frequently criticised English people “ignorant” of Scotland’s customs and religion, and argued that it is “the dream of English Statesmen … to rule Scotland in defiance of the Treaty of Union, not as an independent kingdom, but as a mere province of England.” Though many within the Free Church did not share his political nationalism (in 1850, Begg even argued for some form of Scottish Home Rule), the SRS founder’s distrust of English motives towards Scottish Presbyterianism was a key part of non-intrusionist rhetoric at the Disruption and underlines John Wolffe’s observation that Protestant solidarity in this period was “more apparent than real.” According to Karly Kehoe, Begg’s enthusiasm regarding his plans for the Protestant Institute after 1851 highlighted not only the conversionist priorities of the Free Kirk but also deeper insecurities over the ability of

78. Protestant Magazine 16 (April, 1854): 110.
79. HFRFC 3 (February 1853): 173.
81. HFRFC 3 (February 1853): 173.
82. J. Begg, Scottish Public Affairs, Civil and Ecclesiastical (Edinburgh, 1879), 10.
83. Wolffe, Protestant Crusade, 249.
Britain’s “weak and divided” Protestants to tackle the threat of Rome.\textsuperscript{84} This insecurity was heightened by the lack of a unified Protestant voice throughout Britain. The traditional divide between Presbyterian Scotland and Anglican England, notwithstanding denominational fissures within both countries, was clearly felt in Scottish concern about the increasing ritualism of England’s Established Church. For Begg and the SRS, the rise of the Oxford Movement rendered the Church of England ineffective and even dangerous to the Protestant opposition to popery. Tractarianism, or Puseyism, was regarded by evangelicals as a step towards Rome, exemplified by the conversion of John Henry Newman, and symptomatic of the failings of “only half reformed England.”\textsuperscript{85} The thoroughness of the Scottish Reformation, which Begg nonetheless believed was not enough on its own to stave off popery, was often positively contrasted with the incomplete English version, “disfigured by Erastianism, prelacy, and liturgy.”\textsuperscript{86} In many respects, though the ultimately elusive dream of Protestant unity was actively encouraged, Begg and the SRS depicted Scotland and its religion as more firmly Protestant than its English neighbour and therefore more effective in defending British interests in the battle against popery.

Despite their self-appointed roles as the guardians of British Protestantism, the violent conjecture and heavy-handed approach of the “ultra-Protestants” in the Scottish Reformation Society ensured that they were readily dismissed as bigots by more moderate critics throughout Britain and Ireland. In 1853, the Scottish Episcopal minister Berkeley Addison was publicly reprimanded by Charles Wordsworth, the bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld, and Dunblane, for his active role as a member of the SRS and its “great anti-popish movement.” Wordsworth criticised Addison’s co-operation with Presbyterians, whose stance on church government, according to the bishop, “is no less destructive of the Unity of the Body of Christ than belief of the Papacy.” While Wordsworth warned Addison of the “appearances of union with those from whom we are substantially separated” at the expense of the “realities of disunion” among Scottish Episcopalians, the SRS’s committee responded by asserting that the various Protestant churches could unite for the “common purpose” of anti-Catholicism without weakening their own denominational identities.\textsuperscript{87} Despite this claim, the Scottish Liberal MP and Congregationalist W. E. Baxter argued that the society was “doing a great deal of harm to Protestantism, not only in Scotland, but in [England].” Baxter criticised Begg’s self-avowed “evangelical militancy” and accused the editor of the \textit{Bulwark} of “spiritual terrorism,” which he claimed was “rendering the cause of Protestantism ridiculous, and offending its best friends.”\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{84} S. K. Kehoe, \textit{Creating a Scottish Church: Catholicism, Gender and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Scotland} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 59.
\textsuperscript{85} Holmes, 145.
\textsuperscript{86} Smith, ii, 220.
\textsuperscript{87} B. Addison, \textit{Remarks on Bishop Wordsworth’s recent letter, “reprobating” the author’s conduct for taking part in public meetings of the Scottish Reformation Society} (Edinburgh, 1853), 6–7; SRS Acting Committee Minutes, 15 November 1853.
\textsuperscript{88} Smith, ii, 349–50.
MP for Cork Vincent Scully also claimed that the Free Church members’ campaign against Maynooth was simply part of their “wish to upset all church establishments.”

While they remained committed, at least in nominal terms, to the ideal of a spiritually independent state church, the Free Church’s hostility towards the Kirk they had left behind in 1843 alarmed even the most zealous of anti-Catholic activists in England. The anti-tractarian Church of England clergyman Richard Paul Blakeney believed that Free Church members of the SRS such as Candlish were “doing the work of Popery more effectively than Wiseman, Newman, and Cahill” due to their repeated “attacks” on the Established Church of Scotland. The Irish-born Nottingham vicar Blakeney was a leading member of the British Reformation Society (one of Britain’s longest-standing Protestant organisations, founded in 1827), and along with Martin Foye, a fellow Church of England vicar based in Wimbish, Essex, helped collect and produce a series of seventeenth-century anti-Catholic tracts the year before the “papal aggression.” These tracts acted as a supplement to Edmund Gibson’s *Preservative against Popery*, republished in eighteen volumes during the 1840s by the famous anti-Catholic zealot John Cumming, a hugely popular evangelical Church of Scotland minister to the Crown Court congregation near London’s Covent Garden and a fierce critic of the Free Church at the Disruption. The BRS claimed that Foye, Blakeney, and Cumming’s collections would together “form a complete suit of Protestant armour.”

At the height of the “papal aggression” controversy in early 1851, Blakeney and Cumming held a series of four meetings and ten lectures in Edinburgh on the subject of popery, organised with the help of the solicitor and leading anti-Catholic activist in the Church of Scotland John Hope. During one of these meetings, Cumming claimed that the close and intertwined relationship between the Established Church and the state — the antithesis of the Free Church’s doctrine of the “two kingdoms” and spiritual independence — was essential in preserving the Queen’s “rightful supremacy” in Britain. “He might be called Erastian,” he argued, “but it was better to be that than Popish.” Cumming’s remarks, and the Edinburgh meetings in general, opened a rift between the British Reformation Society and the newly formed SRS. Blakeney and Cumming’s trip to Scotland, arranged by Hope months before the re-emergence of anti-Catholic hostility in Britain, directly clashed with the Scottish group’s own meetings and events in Edinburgh. The Episcopalian evangelical David Drummond, minister of the Edinburgh English Church he had founded in 1842 and a member of the *Bulwark*’s editorial committee, wrote to Blakeney accusing him and the British Reformation

90. Wolffe, *Protestant Crusade*, 255.
Society of attempting to usurp the Scottish anti-Catholic movement. He also claimed that their presence in Edinburgh was “sowing dissension” between those in the Church of Scotland, like Hope, who supported the London-based society and establishmentarian critique of popery proffered by Cumming, and the city’s non-established Protestants who favoured the SRS. The Scottish Reformation Society’s hostility to “rival” anti-Catholic activities in the immediate wake of the “papal aggression” highlighted the lack of unity not only between English and Scottish Protestantism but within Scotland itself.

Presbyterian Divisions within the SRS
Despite their pretensions towards unity, the creation of multitudes of anti-Catholic societies across Britain after 1850 only served to stifle and undermine calls for unified action by promoting competition between the new Protestant groups and pre-existing organisations. Common ground was also noticeably lacking even within most Protestant societies. For instance, the failure of the British Reformation Society to establish a committee consisting equally of dissenters and Established Churchmen was indicative of the lack of unity between England’s Protestant clergy. This problem would be repeated in Scotland, and especially in the Scottish Reformation Society. Though it espoused Protestant unity, the SRS in practical terms operated as an anti-Catholic vehicle for Scottish Presbyterian dissent, and in particular the Free Church and its leading no-popery activists such as Begg and Wylie.

While the Free and United Presbyterian churches accounted for roughly half of Scotland’s churchgoing population, their influence in the SRS was even more pronounced and somewhat unreflective of the national outlook. Though eleven different denominations were represented, of the twenty-two SRS committee members in 1851, nine were Free Churchmen; three were United Presbyterians; two were Established Churchmen; and the Reformed Presbyterians and Original Seceders had one member each. Two Free Churchmen, John Gibson and George Lyon, acted as treasurer and secretary, respectively. This pattern was replicated in the editorial board of the Bulwark: of the eight members of the original committee, half were from the Free and United Presbyterian churches. However, as Wolffe points out, the dissenting dominance of the Scottish anti-Catholic movement was greater than even these numbers suggest. The SRS had close links with the Free Church’s General Committee on Popery, and Established Churchmen were absent from the original meeting that inaugurated the society. The two Church of Scotland ministers on the society’s committee in 1851 lacked the clout of Free Church heavyweights such as Robert Candlish and William

94. Wolffe, Protestant Crusade, 247–8, 253.
95. Oliver and Boyd’s New Edinburgh Almanac, 1851, 551. The Original Seceder on the committee was Thomas McCrie, who would join the Free Kirk after the union between the two churches the following year.
96. Bulwark 1 (October 1851): 77.

Cunningham, while William Stevenson, the sole representative of the “Auld Kirk” on the Bulwark’s editorial board, was “clearly no match” for the domineering personality of Begg.⁹⁷ Even members who did not belong to the Free Church, such as William Goold, the Reformed Presbyterian minister who would join the Free Kirk at the 1876 union between the two churches, were in broad agreement with its principles.

The dissenting character and membership of the SRS ensured that support from the Church of Scotland was lukewarm at best, a general apathy that prevented the organisation from becoming a truly mass movement. As we have seen, the Establishment’s answer to Begg, the lawyer and philanthropist John Hope, arranged the controversial BRS meetings in early 1851 and only joined the committee of the SRS in 1852, though he did assist in the organisation of the society’s set-piece conferences in February and March 1854.⁹⁸ His caution was largely due to his concerns over the attitudes of many SRS members towards ecclesiastical establishments and his resentment at the Free Kirk’s usurpation of the anti-Catholic movement in Scotland. Hope had initially sought the support of Free Churchmen for the creation of an anti-popery society in Edinburgh in 1845 but proved unsuccessful due to the Free Kirk’s unwillingness to engage in an organisation associated with the Establishment so soon after the Disruption.⁹⁹ He thought that the likes of Begg and Wylie were “very active and talked much, yet they did not come down with the money, proposing to make everything pay for itself, and to publish tracts at 2d each — a price beyond the working class.” Instead, Hope favoured the distribution of cheap or free anti-papal literature. To Hope, the energies of the SRS were “mostly spent in talking, and but little work of a practical kind was done.”¹⁰⁰ Like his church, Hope remained in the “independent” tradition of anti-popery, preferring to work and publish either alone or through his own denomination. Though he played a limited and even divisive role in the beginnings of the SRS, he was integral to the creation of the Church of Scotland’s Anti-Popery Committee in 1851 and founded and acted as secretary of the Scottish Protestant Society, the Established Church’s riposte to the SRS founded in 1854.¹⁰¹ Despite disagreements over the organisational structure and hierarchy within anti-popery, Hope’s views echoed those of his dissenting counterparts and combined the philanthropy, social reform, and no-popery rhetoric associated with Begg. While he argued for an expanded Protestant franchise, he believed that Catholics were unfit to vote because “they were not qualified to rule, not being civilly or religiously free, but in subjection to priests, bishops, and Pope.”¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Wolffe, Protestant Crusade, 249–50; Caledonian Mercury, 30 December 1850.
⁹⁸ David Jamie, John Hope, Philanthropist and Reformer (Edinburgh, 1907), 131; Protestant Magazine 16 (April 1854): 111–2.
⁹⁹ Wolffe, Protestant Crusade, 138.
¹⁰⁰ Jamie, 129, 333.
¹⁰² Jamie, 333.
Though Hope acted as a standard bearer for anti-popery within the establishment, he attracted little support from his own denomination. By 1852, a number of churches withdrew their circulation of Hope’s monthly tract, *The Banner of Truth*, and seven years later the Church of Scotland General Assembly’s committee on Popery merged with the Home Missions Board. This move highlighted the realisation within the Established Kirk by the late 1850s that the fight against popery now formed only part of the broader struggle against the erosion of the church and Scottish Presbyterianism. The general ambivalence towards anti-Catholicism within the Church of Scotland, with the notable exceptions of Hope and the evangelical anti-Maynooth campaigner Norman MacLeod, was indicative of the peripheral role the establishment played in the Scottish anti-Catholic movement. While the Free Church dominated the meetings, committees, and pamphlet literature of the SRS, Established Church members showed more interest in the English anti-Catholic movement, participating in the Protestant conferences of the 1850s and fostering close links with the British Reformation Society. In this respect, the overt influence of Scottish evangelical dissent, and in particular the Free Church, prevented Scottish anti-popery from becoming a broad, non-sectarian movement encompassing all of Scotland’s “earnest” Protestants.

While institutional anti-popery in Scotland was mostly divided along dissenting and establishment lines, distinctions between the Free and United Presbyterian churches, though initially blurred during the first anti-Maynooth agitation, plagued the movement after 1850. Despite a thawing in relations after 1843, mostly brought about by co-operation in groups such as the Scottish Reformation Society, the National Education Association, housing and urban reform societies, and within the emerging Liberal party, tensions dating from the Voluntary Controversy remained between the two churches — particularly ones concerning the church-state relationship — and those often threatened to overshadow any prospect of a dissenting alliance. The tension between the establishmentarian and voluntary strands of Scottish anti-Catholicism reflected fissures in England in which opponents of the Maynooth Act were divided into “Spooner” and “Miall” camps, named after the leading proponents of the ultra-Protestant and voluntary critiques of the grant, respectively. Reporting on an Edinburgh meeting of the SRS, the *Aberdeen Journal* noted the apparent sectarian and ideological divisions within a group nonetheless “unanimous in their object.” According to the paper, while the Free Church members of the society condemned the Maynooth grant “on the ground that it implicated the nation in the guilt of supporting a false and idolatrous belief,” the voluntaries of the United Presbyterian Church “were as much opposed to the endowment of any of all the forms of Protestantism,

103. Jamie, 130; Bruce, 38–9.
or of Roman Catholicism, or any other “ism” in the whole category of religious creeds.”

Begg, one of the Free Church’s most violent critics of voluntarism and the most prominent opponent of union with the United Presbyterian Church after 1863, stressed what he viewed as the fundamental distinctions between the churches’ respective stances on Maynooth. According to Begg, while the United Presbyterians were willing to “treat truth and falsehood as if they were alike,” the establishmentarians of the Free Kirk believed that “it is wrong to endow error” but “it is a right thing to endow truth.”

To many of the Free Church establishmentarians in the years following 1843, distrust of voluntarism and Catholicism went hand in hand. As Kehoe has pointed out, these suspicions were not entirely unfounded. The rise of the voluntary movement between 1830 and 1860 facilitated Catholic ambition by enabling the beginnings of an ecclesiastical system in which non-established churches could flourish. The complete disendowment of Protestantism as propagated by Scotland’s voluntaries, Begg argued, would not strengthen the vitality of Christianity in Britain but would drag it “down to Atheism’s level” and offer “fair play to Romanists” to “overthrow the Protestantism of the throne.”

Despite Begg’s protestations, while Scotland’s voluntaries maintained their opposition to “Protestant ascendancy” or “mere political religion,” they remained equally opposed to Roman Catholic ascendancy and provided a number of activists to the Scottish Reformation Society. Though never reaching the hostility associated with Free Church anti-Catholicism, Scotland’s voluntaries often shared similar concerns regarding the perceived progress and threat of popery at home and abroad. The Glasgow United Presbyterian minister William Lindsay’s appraisal of Roman Catholicism “not simply as a religion, but as an infamous conspiracy against the religious liberties of mankind” bears striking similarities with the critique of the society’s Free Church zealots such as Begg and Wylie. Lindsay agreed with members of the Scottish Reformation Society that there were “special reasons for the abolition of Popish endowments” and voiced his support for any agitation which sought to “deliver the country from the sin and folly of upholding the delusions of the Papacy.” This emphasis on united Protestant effort offered even the most divisive of Scotland’s dissenters, such as Begg, a common platform on which to unite against the perceived threat posed by Rome. Though a staunch anti-voluntary until his death (while the Free Church as a whole shifted towards disestablishment from the 1860s),

106. J. Begg, Voluntaryism Indefensible; Or, A Nation’s Right and Duty to Profess and Practise Christianity (Edinburgh, 1879), 6.
110. Caledonian Mercury, 11 December 1851.
111. Protestant Magazine, 16 (April 1854): 111.
Begg nevertheless admitted to the United Presbyterian Synod at Queen Street, Edinburgh, that it gave him “pleasure to meet them on a battle-ground where they could all heartily unite together in opposing their old enemy — Popery.”

However, the simple brand of anti-popery promoted by Lindsay — most amenable to establishmentarians such as Begg — was often placed firmly within the context of the voluntary movement. For instance, the United Presbyterian leader John Brown believed that the disendowment of all religion was “the only safeguard against the endowment of Popery.” The Liberal politician and United Presbyterian layman Duncan McLaren defended his support for the removal of all church establishments, “not because I hold Popery to be innocent … but because I hold, that if these were taken out of the way, she would be tenfold more assailable.” Lindsay also maintained that “all our efforts to effect the disendowment of Popery in this country will prove altogether unavailing, so long as Protestant churches and schools are sustained by the funds of the state.” The minister was “convinced that ‘if the Protestant world could tear itself free from all dependence for support upon national funds, then at once we could compel Popery to stand among us upon her own legs,’ and, ‘in a straight up fight between the two systems, I could have no doubt that Protestants … would speedily, with the blessing of Heaven, achieve a complete victory.’” For United Presbyterians such as Lindsay and McLaren, the removal of funds for English dissenters and the regium donum to Irish Presbyterians was as crucial to the Protestant defeat of popery in Britain as the repeal of the Maynooth Act. This belief that the voluntary principle provided an effective barrier to the encroachments of Rome, and the clearest route to ultimate “victory” sharply contrasts with the ultra-Protestant view that voluntarism instead offered an open door to popery, a fear espoused by Free Churchmen such as Begg. With Protestantism seemingly at stake in Britain after the “papal aggression,” the United Presbyterians in the SRS considered voluntarism its most effective defender.

Fissures between the ultra-Protestant and voluntary interpretations of anti-popery dogged the society’s meetings and events and highlighted the lack of ideological unity within the group. At the annual public meeting of the SRS in December 1851, a disagreement between the society’s Free Church treasurer John Gibson and chair of the meeting Duncan McLaren emphasised the gulf in principle that existed on the common ground of the SRS. Though McLaren acknowledged some reticence from his fellow United Presbyterians towards the group, the newly elected Lord Provost of Edinburgh commended its apparent catholicity and argued that as a voluntary “he saw no inconsistency whatever” in participating in a meeting of the Scottish Reformation Society. However, while he stressed his opposition to the Maynooth grant

113. Elgin Courier, 23 May 1851.
and support for the Protestant struggle against Catholic “error,” McLaren argued that the anti-Maynooth agitation would be strengthened by further opposition to all other religious grants, and that the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland would cause Protestantism to prosper. To a hostile reception from the society’s Free Church members, he predicted that “when the missionaries would have nothing in their hands but the Bible to meet the Irish peasantry, they would meet with a success which they did not now meet” due to the alienation felt by Ireland’s Catholics towards a Protestantism “so mixed up with questions affecting their civil rights and interests.” Responding to McLaren’s comments, a worried Gibson feared that the Lord Provost’s remarks would potentially damage the principle and standing of the society. Though he maintained the interdenominational character of the SRS, Gibson stressed that its fundamental ethos was to oppose popery as the “grand evil against which all Protestants are bound to fight” and vowed to never place the voluntary principle on the same platform as his opposition to popery. McLaren then suggested that if Gibson’s views reflected those of the SRS, “consistent voluntaries ought not to give this Society their support.”

Seventeen years later, in 1868, the controversial and obstinate McLaren once again disrupted a SRS meeting by proffering “extreme” voluntary views on state endowments, provoking the ire of Begg who condemned the United Presbyterian’s motion as “inconsistent with the constitution of the Society.”

The conflict between voluntary and establishmentarian views in the Scottish Reformation Society, a relic of the pre-Disruption period, highlights the lack of unity evident on the otherwise common ground of Scottish anti-popery. The fissures within the SRS also offer a compelling and distinctly Scottish microcosm of Wolfe’s assertion that the apparent unity of the anti-Catholic movement in Britain merely provided a reflection of pre-existing denominational differences and disputes. The Scottish Reformation Society’s membership, ideology, and rhetoric were rooted in the international, national, and denominational context of the early 1850s, one which highlighted the divisions between England and Scotland, Anglicanism and Presbyterianism, Church and dissent, erastian and non-intrusionist principles, and establishmentarianism and voluntaryism. The society was very much a product of the religious turmoil of the mid-nineteenth century, and its successes — and indeed shortcomings — were as much based upon the intra-Protestant tensions that defined this period as they were the geopolitical struggle against popery.

This intra-Protestant conflict was not only key to dividing Britain’s anti-Catholic societies along denominational lines, but it also created a myriad of competing visions of Protestantism, each of which were viewed by their respective proponents as essential to its defence from the apparent Roman

117. Caledonian Mercury, 11 December 1851.
118. Smith, ii, 427–8.
Catholic threat. In fact, the narrow definition of Protestantism espoused by the SRS, one which challenged Anglican, erastian, and voluntary interpretations of anti-Catholicism, allowed the society to position itself among the most forceful of Britain’s Protestant “defenders.” It is notable that as Begg and his society’s militant anti-popery became increasingly redundant in Scotland as the nineteenth century progressed (in favour of a more racial anti-Irish inflection which eschewed the “embarrassing” pope-baiting activities of the SRS), so too did his personal position within Scottish Presbyterianism.120 By the end of his life in 1883, the Free Church had embraced liberal theology, voluntaryism, and union with the United Presbyterians at the expense of the polarising Begg’s Calvinist orthodoxy and staunch establishmentarianism. Like the Free Church itself after the Disruption, whose members often talked up Presbyterian co-operation to no real practical effect, in the wake of the “papal aggression” the SRS drew a sharp distinction between the rhetoric and reality of Protestant unity. While expressing hope for a national and unified Protestantism, the Scottish Reformation Society was very much a Scottish, Presbyterian, and Free Church movement, and one which had the defence of a distinct and often divisive vision of Britishness — ultra-Protestant, anti-erastian, and anti-voluntary — at its core.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

120. Scotsman, 29 May 1928.