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The Ulster Covenant and the Pulse of Protestant Ulster

Abstract: The signing of the Ulster Covenant on 28 September 1912 by almost 450,000 men and women was a powerful act of defiance on the part of Unionists in the context of what they perceived as the threat to their way of life represented by the Liberal Government's policy of Irish Home Rule. This article attempts to look beyond the well-studied leadership figures of Carson and Craig in order to fashion insights into the way Ulster Protestant society was mobilised around the Covenant and opposition to Home Rule. It draws attention to hitherto over-shadowed personalities who can be said to have exerted crucial local influence. It also contends that although pan-Protestant denominational unity provided the basis for the success of the Covenant, the Presbyterian community was particularly cohesive and purposeful in the campaign. The article further argues that the risk-taking defiance that came more easily to the Presbyterians, on account of a troubled history, largely evaporated in the new political circumstances of Northern Ireland when it became a separate devolved political entity within the United Kingdom from 1921.

Key Words: Ulster, Covenant, Unionism, Protestantism, Presbyterianism

The annual twelfth of July celebrations in Belfast in 2012 did not neglect to mark the centenary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant. The Orange Order demonstration featured a float given over to the Covenant theme with a striking image of Sir Edward Carson marching into Belfast City Hall to be the first signatory. On the lorry Ulster Unionist politician (Lord) John Laird was dressed in period costume, and the Covenant was described as ‘Northern Ireland’s Foundation Stone’. This was a variation on the historian Alvin Jackson’s identification of the document as ‘the birth certificate’ of Northern Ireland, and both terms are apposite (Jackson, 1992). Indeed, when some of the language of the Covenant is recalled – ‘our time of threatened calamity’, ‘the present conspiracy’ – it might further be observed that it was Northern Ireland’s horoscope. In assessing the legacy of the Covenant, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that it confined Ulster Unionism within a mindset of permanent crisis, and that it cast Ulster Protestants in a role they felt they had to continue to play to survive.

As the historian of religion Ronald Wells has pointed out, it is the essence of evangelical civil religion to believe that God has a special arrangement with a specific people, and that this people’s historic role is to stand for righteousness in society enabling the conquest of liberty and the defeat of tyranny (Wells and Livingstone, 1999, p. 97). This belief lies at the heart of the American myth. Significantly, writing some seven years after the Covenant, the Ulster Unionist politician Hugh Smith Morrison prophesied that ‘Ulster Day’ of 28 September 1912 would have ‘for this province as much significance as Independence Day has for the United States.’ (Morrison, 1920, p. 18).

Lord Laird's float on 'the Twelfth' highlighted the role played in the Covenant commemorations by the Ulster-Scots agency.¹ The Ulster-Scots movement has considerably re-shaped the cultural debate in Northern Ireland over the last twenty or so years, and it has come in for much criticism over its claims for Ulster-Scots to be recognised as a language in its own right. Yet in a sense it is appropriate that the Ulster-Scots lobby should be a leading player in the Covenant commemorations: for it can be contended that the original enterprise was deeply imbued by an Ulster-Scots ethnic assertiveness (Officer and Walker 2000). Indeed, for the Covenant to have been credible – or to have appeared so to those who signed it and pledged to uphold it – there had to be a vision of independence, if as a confidence-boosting measure rather than a political aspiration, and certainly a sense of self-sufficiency.

1

The Anti-Home Rule campaign, at least in the 1912-14 period, was less about protecting the Union than Protestant Ulster's assertion of itself as a distinctive people. There was keen resentment of the apparent refusal of metropolitan elites to acknowledge Ulster in the UK's ethno-national mix, and of Irish Nationalists and British politicians appearing to combine to decide *their* future. Protestant Ulster felt sidelined, talked over, overruled. The notion of their fate being sealed over their heads fuelled the fervour and the determination around the Covenant in 1912, just as it brought the masses again to City Hall in 1985 to protest against the Anglo-Irish Agreement of that year. We might recall Alvin Jackson's percipient observations on Ian Paisley and James Molyneaux's re-enactment of Carson and James Craig's original performance (Jackson, 1992). In addition, there was the feeling that progress,

synonymous with the Presbyterian self-image especially, would be disrupted. It has been well noted that the Calvinist idea of Covenant was conjoined with the Whig theory of history (Wells and Livingstone, 1999, p. 97; Jackson, 2012, p. 237).

The Ulster Unionist campaign against Irish Home Rule from 1910 was able to strike an effective balance between respectability and radical militancy.² At the risk of oversimplification it might be suggested that the involvement of all the Protestant denominations was central to this success (Megahey, 2001), and that the Church of Ireland as the old establishment supplied the respectability, and the Presbyterians (and maybe to a degree the Methodists) the radicalism. Andrew Scholes's richly informative recent work on the Church of Ireland makes clear that the Church played at least as vigorous a role as the Presbyterians – that in fact there were more Church of Ireland services held on 'Ulster Day' – and that there is no evidence of Church of Ireland clergy balking at the definitively Presbyterian form of protest the Covenant represented (Scholes, 2009). Neither should the crucial part played in the anti-Home Rule campaign by the landowning class in Ulster be forgotten (Purdue, 2009). When the fractious history of inter-Protestant denominational rivalry is borne in mind, and in particular the strength with which many Presbyterians held grievances over being disadvantaged for public positions in the past,³ the unity of purpose is all the more remarkable.

Nevertheless, it can still be contended that Presbyterianism provided the most usable narrative for the Ulster cause. The Presbyterian story was one of feats of endurance and great achievements being wrought out of adversity; it contained the vital ingredient of victimhood. It supplied the requisite spirit of defiance and principled

rebelliousness (Elliott, 2009, pp. 131-137). It is not surprising that the appearance of Rev. J.B. Woodburn's monumental work *The Ulster Scot* in 1914 was widely viewed as a timely contribution to the debate over the Ulster question and an intervention designed to explain the stubbornness of the Ulster people to those in Britain who could not fathom the depths of their resolve and the intensity of their objections to Home Rule (Woodburn 1914; Walker 2004b; Holmes 2009). The Covenant was clearly the symbol of a Scottish heritage and Covenanting a tradition that gestured to the contractual basis of the UK as a 'State of Unions' (Aughey 2003; Mitchell, 2009, pp. 1-15). The Covenant's draftsman, Thomas Sinclair, had long given Unionist arguments against Home Rule the inflection of Ulster-Scots ancestral voices. As well as being a prominent Presbyterian layman, Sinclair was one of the leaders of the Ulster Liberal Unionists from the time of the split with Gladstone over Irish Home Rule in 1886, and the mastermind behind previous Unionist anti-Home Rule 'spectaculars' such as the Convention of 1892.⁴ The value of the Liberal Unionist mercantile and industrial interest to Ulster Unionism was repeatedly displayed over the course of the period spanning the three Home Rule measures.

On the day of the Covenant signing *The Northern Whig*, Belfast's Liberal Unionist newspaper, published a poem by William Forbes Marshall, then a student at the Presbyterian College in Belfast. The poem was called 'The Blue Banner' and it explicitly linked the struggle of seventeenth century Scottish Covenanters with that of Ulster Unionists. Marshall went on to achieve local fame as the so-called 'Bard of Tyrone', and was certainly a pioneer in the study of Ulster's language and dialect (he was elected to the Royal Irish Academy). He also proceeded to publish more poetry, a

novel, some plays, and a history of Ulster's links with America; all the time his day job was that of a Presbyterian minister.⁵

Marshall's 'Blue Banner' poem – there was an alternative version entitled 'The Flag' – identified Unionists with 'the course our fathers followed in the Cov'nant days of old', referred to 'kith and kin and clansmen of our name' in the land – Scotland – 'whence we came', and averred that in swearing the Covenant oath 'Britain may be told' that they stand for faith – 'the martyr's faith' – and freedom, and the memories of old (*The Northern Whig*, 28 September 1912).

It should be said that Marshall published another poem, 'The Twain', which celebrated the coming together of those from respective Scottish and English backgrounds in Ulster to form a united community in opposition to Home Rule. There is certainly no suggestion of old quarrels between Presbyterians and Episcopalians being allowed to cloud the unity of purpose of 1912. Yet much of the determination and drive summoned to demonstrate opposition to Home Rule sprang from these 'memories of old': the sense, on the part of Presbyterians, that they had emerged from the subjugation of the Anglican ascendancy in Ireland, and that it was imperative to prevent themselves being put under a Roman Catholic equivalent in the event of a Dublin Parliament. In this connection, the reverberations of recent controversies over the *Ne Temere* decree of 1908, the subsequent McCann case in Belfast, and the Universities Act of 1908, were crucial in firming up a pan-Protestant, but particularly Presbyterian, resolve (Walker, 1996; Walker, 1997; Holmes, 1990).

It was a crucial part of the Ulster Unionist campaign that the jibes about their opposition being merely an ‘ascendancy conspiracy’ to protect privileges be effectively countered. The Unionist campaign quite simply would not have carried conviction without the implicit – and at times explicit – repudiation of landlordism and elitism. The Covenant was in this sense an eminently democratic exercise. However, we still need to know more about the democracy in question.

2

For too long the attention paid to the Covenant has carried a preoccupation with its leadership. It has been difficult to get beyond the compelling figure of Edward Carson with all the apparent contradictions and conundrums of his position and conduct,⁶ and to a degree also the role played by James Craig given his subsequent part in shaping the political life of Northern Ireland from its inception until the Second World War (Buckland, 1980). There has of late been due recognition of Sinclair’s role in the background (Murphy, 2012), and the story as it continued from the Covenant to the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) has given the mercurial Fred Crawford a starring role (Haines, 2009).

However, the focus might now profitably shift to the way that local communities reacted, how they were mobilised, and who might have been the mini-Carsons or the mini-Craigs. David Fitzpatrick’s luminous biography of Frederick MacNeice helps considerably in this respect regarding Carrickfergus (Fitzpatrick, 2011).⁷ Hugh Morrison’s book, *Modern Ulster*, published in 1920, recalls quite vividly the impact of the crisis in his district of Aghadowey in County Derry, and the surrounding area.

Morrison, who became an Ulster Unionist member of the Northern Ireland Parliament when it was set up in 1921, sought to present the Unionist struggle against Home Rule as a righteous one waged by a sturdy people who would now proceed to shape their own future. His book, along with others produced at the same juncture, was intended to serve as a confidence-booster for the Unionist community as partition loomed, and a celebration of what were viewed as distinctively Ulster qualities.⁸

Morrison, a local doctor, explains in detail how, as Secretary of the Unionist Party in South Derry, he ‘had his finger on all the political wires.’ He stresses that in each district the executive committee would be half Episcopalian and half Presbyterian or other Protestants, a formula in his view that avoided ‘all religious difficulties.’

(Morrison, 1920, p. 91). Like Carson himself, Morrison was struck by the commitment and sacrifices of ordinary working men and women. The challenge for the Unionist leaders lay not in galvanising their followers but in channelling their fervour in politically effective ways. There is little doubt that the Covenant proved a masterly way of doing this and that the outcome at once cooled the tempers arising from incidents such as the outrage at Castledawson that had led to shipyard expulsions of Catholics and other disturbances in the summer of 1912,⁹ and strengthened the appearance of a collective and communal purpose.

But Morrison’s account is perhaps more notable for the clues it affords to the dynamics and motivations of Presbyterian Ulster; Aghadowey was predominantly Presbyterian as was the surrounding area and nearby towns like Coleraine. This was a locality that reverberated with historic Presbyterian civil rights struggles and educational controversies; it was also much affected, like the nearby Route district of

North Antrim, by fierce agitation over the matter of land ownership and tenant rights throughout much of the 19th century (Mullin, 1972, pp. 107-130). It was an area that produced radical campaigning ministers such as the Reverend John Brown (Mullin, 1972, pp. 173-189). However, notwithstanding the prominence of pro-Home Rule Presbyterian minister J.B. Armour from nearby Ballymoney (McMinn, 1985), the North Derry area was adamantly Unionist during the era of the Home Rule Bills and the MP for the constituency from 1906 through to 1922 was a Scottish Presbyterian, Hugh T. Barrie, who was as well versed in ‘No Surrender’ rhetoric as any local Orangeman (Hughes, 2014, pp. 144-6). Barrie was the first to sign the Covenant in Coleraine Town Hall, and the words on an arch of welcome to Carson when he visited the town were definitively Scottish (Mullin, 1979, p. 25).

The Preface of Morrison’s book was penned by the editor of *The Irish Presbyterian* newspaper, D.B. Knox. In it Knox made reference to Morrison and himself as former pupils of Coleraine Academical Institution and as having enjoyed the privilege of being taught by the school’s longest-serving Principal, Thomas Galway (‘TG’) Houston, whom Knox called ‘the greatest of Irish educationalists’, and ‘the most influential and proficuous character-builder among the Irish Schoolmasters of his time...’ (Morrison, 1920, p. 14). In 1913 *The Belfast Newsletter* warmly congratulated Houston for making the name of the School ‘known throughout the kingdom’ with its former students occupying ‘responsible positions in all parts of the world.’ (17 September, 1913)

Houston was indeed an interesting figure, and some consideration of his influence helps us to appreciate the workings of some – in this case Presbyterian – Unionist

networks of the day, and to appreciate Presbyterian concerns and preoccupations. Houston was principal at Coleraine from 1870 until 1915 and he did not finally retire until he was 72 years of age.¹⁰ Houston's education encompassed Belfast Royal Academy, the Queen's Colleges of both Belfast and Cork, and, peculiarly for one belonging to the Presbyterian tradition,¹¹ Trinity College Dublin. He was a man of high ideals and was often styled 'The Irish Thomas Arnold' after the legendary headmaster of Rugby Public School in England. He was also nicknamed 'The Chief' whether in acknowledgement of his Parnellite bearing and serene sense of authority is not clear. It is certainly worth speculating.¹² He may even have been something of a 'Presbyterian Pearse' in the light of his thinking on education – in 1895 he authored a book entitled *School and Home* that struck at least the occasional modern and enlightened note amidst much 'Arnoldian' commentary on morality and character.¹³ He certainly held an advanced view of the importance of teaching citizenship, and he did not conform to stereotypes of 'dour, philistine Presbyterians' when it came to the arts or to aesthetic matters in general. His daughter was an artist and attended the Slade Art School in London. Houston, moreover, periodically riled people in his own community with his opinions on all manner of subjects and was singularly unrepentant: 'When a speaker has nothing but flattery to address to the community to which he belongs, it goes without saying that his object is not the good of his hearers but some selfish end of his own.' (Houston, 1895, p. 126)

Houston was quite willing to intervene publicly in political debates, and he was a notable letter-writer, pamphleteer, and public speaker for the Unionist cause against Home Rule in the 1912-14 period.¹⁴ At a massive Presbyterian Anti-Home Rule Convention in February 1912 – another event orchestrated by Sinclair - he made a key

point: 'It was beginning to dawn on the people of England and Scotland', he declared, 'that they had made a serious mistake about Ulster. They thought that they were listening only to an ebullition of jingoism. But to their astonishment and indignation they had found that it was not with the jingo spirit, but with the martyr spirit that they had to deal...' Houston then went on to say that they were influenced 'by no feelings of religious bigotry or intolerance, but that, on the contrary, they were animated by a broad, tolerant, kindly, and appreciative spirit towards their Roman Catholic fellow countrymen.' (Walker, 1997; Bew, 1994, pp. 40-41)

At the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1913 Houston responded to the charge that those who signed the Covenant were 'bigots': 'Is that a term we merit from our Roman Catholic fellow countrymen, whose battles we fought in days when they really were downtrodden.' Houston, along with Thomas Sinclair, was perhaps the most eloquent advocate of a Unionist case that drew on past Presbyterian struggles for equality alongside Catholics, and which portrayed Irish Nationalism as essentially retrogressive and vengeful. For Houston, the Presbyterians were 'the backbone of Ulster'; the Covenant was a nod to their Scottish forefathers that the faith had been kept, and like W.F. Marshall, Houston was not averse to playing the 'martyr' card, perhaps to underscore that Nationalists had no monopoly on either suffering or righteousness (Walker, 1997). Houston and others habitually drew on Presbyterianism's Dissenting history to produce a form of contractarian Unionist argument (Miller, 1978) that was unappreciated in metropolitan governing circles, and which, in its own way, resembled the exalted claims and the penchant for drama of contemporary 'advanced' Nationalism. Thus Houston rhetorically matched Pearse in this set of utterances in 1913 at a by-election meeting in Scotland: 'There must be no

yielding, no compromise', he declared. 'There were worse things than death; there were even worse things than the cry of the widow and the wail of the orphan. There was treason to their country; there was treason to their God; and while their life lasted, God helping them, they should never commit these crimes. That was their message to the whole world.'¹⁵

For Presbyterians, and Liberal Unionists in general, education was central to the 'Rome Rule' that Home Rule was feared to guarantee if passed. Presbyterian pride in their community's distinction of possessing markedly higher literacy rates than Episcopalians and Roman Catholics¹⁶ could afford them a sense of entitlement to advocate on behalf of society as a whole. Houston, Sinclair and others had long been vocal against denominational education of any kind being endowed by the State (Morrison, 1920, pp. 79-80; Walker, 1996). They viewed Catholic manoeuvring on education as blatant sectarian power politics, evidenced in the recent Universities Bill controversy. At the Convention of February 1912 Sir William Crawford, a millowner, accused the Catholic Church of 'wrecking' hundreds of prosperous schools where Protestant and Catholic children had happily mixed; and further charged it with subverting the undenominational character of the new National University (*Belfast Weekly News*, 8 February 1912). An editorial in the Presbyterian newspaper *The Witness* at this juncture stated trenchantly: 'The new university is now Roman Catholic and denominational from the President to the door porter.'¹⁷ Presbyterians believed they were being true to their Liberal heritage in opposing Catholic educational machinations and seeing in them the very essence of the demand for Home Rule on the part of Catholic Ireland; nonetheless, this perception could not bridge the divide between them and much Presbyterian opinion in Scotland and Non-

Conformist opinion in England where education was such a staple of the party divide between Liberal and Tory. As has been discussed elsewhere, while much effort was made by Unionists, and Presbyterian Liberal Unionists in particular, to sway progressive opinion in Britain around appeals to anti-popery, the success of this project was limited (Walker, 1995, pp. 23-43; Dunn, 2010).

To return to Houston. He is in many ways a pivotal figure. His influence on former pupils who became, like Morrison, deeply involved in Unionist politics, was clearly profound. As well as Morrison, there was D.B. Knox the *Irish Presbyterian* editor; there was Samuel Willis, school teacher under Houston at Coleraine Academical Institution, organiser of a local UVF battalion, and killed like so many other Ulster Protestant soldiers at the Battle of the Somme in 1916; and there was the Rev. Robert Moore of the Presbyterian Church at neighbouring Ringsend whose sermon to the Ulster Volunteers of the area in 1914 is quoted at length by Morrison. Moore, later to become a Cabinet Minister in the Northern Ireland government, was fond of stressing his family background in Radical and tenant-right politics¹⁸; yet in his 1914 address he stated to the Volunteers that ‘we are fighting for our religion, for its very existence in this land.’ For Moore the Catholic Church was primarily a ‘political organisation’ working through ecclesiastical channels to the fulfilment of political ambitions. ‘We are seeking no ascendancy’, declared Moore, ‘we are only claiming to be left alone and as we are.’¹⁹

It is not difficult to discern in such remarks the ‘zero-sum’ political outlook that would come to define the politics of Northern Ireland in which both Morrison and Moore played significant parts. And it is instructive to consider the links that bound

such figures as Houston, Morrison and Moore in this small area: at Coleraine Academical Institute under Houston the latter two men did not learn to be narrow-minded or lacking in civic responsibility; yet in the context of the Home Rule crisis there is a sense of the dutiful and forward-thinking citizen that Houston urged his charges to become assuming instead the character of tribunes of the tribe, conducting the swirl of fear, anger and defiance. Houston himself, in a letter to the press in 1913, declared that if Carson wished to enrol a regiment of veterans to fight Home Rule, 'He will find the old schoolmaster who has spent long years in trying to teach his pupils how to live, and who will now deem it a high honour to teach them the greater lesson of how to die.' (*Belfast NewsLetter*, 11 September, 1913)

Beyond the Houston circle, there is also something poignant about W.F. Marshall, the 'Bard of Tyrone'. Marshall, as well as providing the literary accompaniment to the Covenant, became a pillar of the UVF in Sixmilecross, County Tyrone and was, reputedly, high on an IRB death list. In post-partition Northern Ireland he pursued his ministry and his life as a scholar but there was an acute sense of frustration with the tightly-drawn political culture that developed: it left little room for someone as unorthodox as Marshall, and little opportunity for expressions of radicalism. 'I was probably – outside the IRA – Craigavon's strongest opponent', he wrote to an Irish Nationalist acquaintance in the South in 1933. 'On every possible occasion', he went on, 'public and private, in the pulpit and on the platform, I glorified the men of '98. I did it in Orange Halls and in sermons to Orangemen. In all official circles my name was mud. But from 1923 I stopped making political speeches. There was no alternative to the Craig Government, and I had no admiration for Independents who went into the lobby with Devlin 95 times out of a hundred.' In a footnote to this letter

Marshall added: 'Craig's people can't understand folk like the brother and myself. They think we're Home Rulers in disguise...They're very far mistaken. I do wish we were a Dominion. But into the Free State – never, never, never, while there's breath in our bodies.'²⁰

These are comments that provide clues to another Ulster Protestant world that the conditions of Northern Ireland later kept in check. There is more than a hint of the 'New Frontier' spirit about Marshall – it is surely no coincidence that he should write such a celebratory history of Ulster's impact on America - the book *Ulster Sails West* (1943) – and, in common with many fellow Presbyterians, revere the contribution made by their forebears to America's struggle for independence. In Marshall's case, as previously noted, the radical spirit extended to honouring the Irish Presbyterian rebels of 1798. There is indeed a clear sense of the Unionist regime's political priority of maintaining Unionist unity post partition producing a deadening conformity alien to a spirit like Marshall's and he evidently could not look upon the various species of Independent Unionism as any kind of answer. He became an 'outsider' figure, perhaps even foreshadowing a later one, Ian Paisley, whose voice can almost be heard in Marshall's words.

3

In relation to the Covenant of 1912 and the quickening of the pulse of Protestant Ulster, historians perhaps need to do for this community what has been done so tellingly for the world of Irish Nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period (Maume, 1999; Paseta, 1999). We need to take account of the roles

played by the teachers, the ministers, the newspaper editors and journalists, also the family doctors like Morrison and other professionals – the strata of society whose influence on the education and outlook of the young, on the opinions and disposition of their community, was so vital. This was also the segment of society in which Presbyterians were predominant.

Other observations might be hazarded. In the passages of his book concerning his meeting with the Rev. Robert Moore and Moore's sermon to the Ulster Volunteers, Morrison reports that Moore was greatly perturbed that in strategically accepting Home Rule for certain parts of Ireland, Unionists were betraying their pledges in the Covenant. This was the summer of 1914. Morrison relates that he attempted to reassure Moore by saying that the important thing was that they should not 'yield on essentials' (Morrison, 1920, p. 94). The 'essentials' were, of course, Ulster – or by this time a probable six county 'Ulster'. This story indicates that Presbyterians, not surprisingly given their concentration in Ulster, were much less uncomfortable with the likelihood of partition and indeed may have been culturally and psychologically prepared for it for some time.²¹ There was a clear contrast here with the Church of Ireland which, as partition loomed, was much more internally divided as a body (Scholes, 2009).

In addition, the crisis also revealed the greater social and cultural coherence of the Presbyterian community. As Scholes points out, membership of the Church of Ireland covered a broad social spectrum, from the aristocracy to a high proportion of the labouring classes (Scholes 2009, p.10). David Fitzpatrick makes clear that in Carrickfergus there was a disproportionate number of Episcopalians among the poorer Protestants in that district (Fitzpatrick 2011, pp. 95-6). This phenomenon – that the

Church of Ireland has historically been the Church of the richest and the poorest Protestants – is seldom highlighted and it could be pertinent in all kinds of ways. Presbyterians seem also to have been significantly more likely to attend church in this early twentieth century period. An historian of Church of Ireland disestablishment and of Ulster Unionism, Hugh Shearman, thought that less than 7% of his grandfather's parishioners at St Mathew's Church of Ireland Church on the Shankill Road in Belfast attended worship in 1915 (Shearman 1949, p.160). In 1920, the Church of Ireland minister John Redmond, conducted a semi-rigorous survey upon his appointment to St Patrick's Ballymacarrett which concluded that 'about 13,000 nominal Church people [out of more than 17,000] had no active church connection' (Redmond 1960, p. 33). By contrast the Presbyterian newspaper *The Witness* estimated in 1922 that up to 40,000 of its 145,000 members did not come to church (17 March 1922).²²

In relation to the Covenant and the period of crisis around it, it is possible to discern a more coherent sense of purpose and pragmatic readiness on the part of the tighter knit Presbyterians, notwithstanding the different varieties of Presbyterianism, and certainly a claim to 'Ulster' as such, in whatever form it might emerge. Presbyterians felt they had 'made' Ulster, and that it fell mainly to them to continue to drive it forward. Their outlook may also have been shaped by a belief that their community had not only endured and overcome hardships and disabilities, but that it had taken risks. A risk-taking and pioneering culture maps congenially on to the Belfast of the 'Titanic' and, of course, the global distinction of her industries in this period.²³

However, Protestant and Unionist unity was, in the final analysis, the reason for the enormous impact of the Covenant, and later for the avoidance of coercion into an all-

Ireland political arrangement; the ‘essentials’, as Morrison put it, were not yielded. And such unity shortly claimed its price: a new Unionist political establishment in Northern Ireland that eschewed risk-taking and embodied paternalism. The Unionist Party in government had to be seen to look after – in the only way it could through an insistence on ‘step by step’ with the rest of the United Kingdom in matters of social policy – the worst off Protestants, most of whom were at least nominally Church of Ireland (Walker 2004, chs. 3-5). In such ways the risk-taking defiance of 1912 that Presbyterianism arguably did most to project, was watered down to meet the perceived political demands of the post-partition world. The frontier spirit became an obsession with protecting the frontier. In a political and cultural sense, as well as economically, Northern Ireland stagnated (Elliott 2009, pp. 140-1; Mitchel, 2003, pp. 78-87; Longley, 2000), although the constant political – and at times physical force – pressure exerted by Irish Nationalism played an important part in confining the space for less narrow-minded views to be expressed. At the outbreak of the troubles in 1969 the Irish news magazine ‘Hibernia’ perspicaciously observed that the Church of Ireland did not speak with the ‘solid assurance’ of the Presbyterians who more accurately reflected ‘the ethos and mentality of Ulster, historically and today.’ (Quoted in O’Corrain, 2006, p.157). Moreover, the maintenance of pan-Protestant unity led to injustices being inflicted upon the Catholic minority, and travestied the old Presbyterian boasts about seeking no ascendancy and cherishing the ideal of religious equality.²⁴

In conclusion it might be salutary to return to Lord Laird, with whom this study began. This colourful character happily styles himself – variously – ‘a true Ulster liberal’ and ‘an Ulster Scots rebel’. His recently published memoir ends with another celebratory account of Ulster’s contribution to American history and the Ulster roots of a string of American Presidents – all reminiscent of WF Marshall. He claims Thomas Sinclair, the man who drafted the text of the Covenant, as one of his heroes. But Laird also concedes that the conditions under which Northern Ireland had to carve out its existence ‘undermined some traditional Ulster Scots values.’ In relation to Northern Ireland becoming a ‘cold house’ for the minority Laird writes: ‘Pointing to the Republic as not being welcoming for anyone except those of an Irish or a Roman Catholic background may give short-term satisfaction as an excuse. But we were the people of the Scottish tradition of equality and fairness. Narrow-mindedness should not be in our nature.’ (Laird 2010, p. 55).

¹ See also the various booklets produced by the agency, for example, *Understanding the Ulster Covenant* (2012). Laird, a Unionist Peer, has championed the Ulster-Scots cause over recent years, and some within the Ulster-Scots movement have not been comfortable with what they have viewed as the resulting politicization.

² For the most recent scholarly account see Parkinson, 2012; see also Boyce and O’Day (eds.), 2006; and Lucy, 1989.

³ Such grievances prompted the establishment of the Presbyterian Unionist Voters’ Association in 1898. See Walker, 1996.

⁴ See Walker, 1996. For a recent history of Liberal Unionism in this period throughout the UK, see Cawood, 2012.

⁵ See the booklet published by the Ulster-Scots agency, *The Life, Work and Legacy of W.F. Marshall* (2012); also Blair, 1995. Marshall became minister at Castlerock, near Coleraine, in 1928, succeeding the Reverend J.B. Woodburn of ‘Ulster Scot’ book fame.

⁶ The latest scholarly biography is Lewis, 2006; Carson’s Nationalist antagonist, Joseph Devlin, gestured to the Unionist leader’s complexities by coining the soubriquet ‘the academic anarchist’.

⁷ See also Orr, 2013 for Ballymena.

⁸ Other notable self-justifying Unionist texts at this time included Logan, 1922, and McNeill, 1922. See discussion in Jackson, 1994.

⁹ In June 1912 a party of Presbyterians, mainly children, on a Sunday school trip to Castledawson, were attacked by members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH). The incident provoked all the more alarm among Protestants for their belief that the Catholic fraternal society (AOH) was the driving force of Nationalist, pro-Home Rule politics. For an account by the Presbyterian minister in charge of the excursion see Barron, 1928; for a contextual assessment see Bew, 1994, chapter 3.

¹⁰ For an assessment of his headmastership, see Cassells and Twigg, 2010, chapter 4; and for the reminiscences of another former pupil, see Frazer-Hurst, 1962, chapter 2. I am grateful to Mr. Joe Cassells for alerting me to this latter source and to Houston's writings and speeches.

¹¹ Houston was raised in the Reformed Presbyterian 'Covenanting' Church which he attended for many years in Ballyclabber. However, he had joined the mainstream Presbyterian Church by the time of the Covenant and was thus free to take part in politics – and indeed to vote. The Covenanting Church's members generally did not vote.

¹² Unionists might be said to have been long on the look-out for a leadership figure to rival Charles Stewart Parnell who led Irish Nationalism so astutely in the 1880s: for a recent treatment see P. Bew, *Enigma*. Carson at last fitted the bill when he assumed leadership of what was effectively Ulster Unionism in 1910. For insightful studies of Carson's leadership see Gailey, 1996, and Foster and Jackson, 2009.

¹³ See Houston, 1895. Houston's rhetoric on political occasions also echoed Patrick Pearse, leader of the Easter Rebellion in Dublin in 1916. See below, example of Linlithgow by-election.

¹⁴ Some of his letters to the press on the subject were collected in the pamphlet *Ulster's Appeal* (Belfast, 1913).

¹⁵ *The Scotsman*, 7 November 1913. 'Anti Home Rule Meeting in Edinburgh'. See also Parkinson 2012, pp. 95-6. For discussion of Pearse's revolutionary thought and leadership of the 1916 rebellion see Townshend, 2005, especially chapter 1.

¹⁶ For literacy statistics taken from the 1911 census see Woodburn 1914, Appendix 4. For example, the percentage of illiterate persons nine years old and upwards in County Antrim was 11.1% Catholic; 6.4% Episcopalian; 2.8% Presbyterian. For County Armagh the figures were 16.7%, 9.5%, and 3.3% respectively.

¹⁷ *The Witness*, 12 January 1912. See also Sinclair, 1912.

¹⁸ So too did future Unionist Cabinet Minister and Attorney General in Northern Ireland, John C. McDermott, who signed the Covenant and joined the UVF. See his memoir, *An Enriching Life* (1979), in which he links the Liberal Presbyterian tradition to both the American War of Independence and the French Revolution.; also Bew, 1994, p.39.

¹⁹ Morrison, 1920, pp.93-99 ; see also quote in Elliott, 2009, p. 140; and discussion of Moore and question of Catholics in UVF in Bowman, 2007, p.65

²⁰ Quotes from Blair, 1995 on Marshall. Marshall refers to the Northern Ireland Government led from 1921 by Sir James Craig, later Lord Craigavon. 'Devlin' is Joseph Devlin the Irish Nationalist leader in the Northern Ireland parliament who died shortly afterwards in 1934. 'The brother' is the Rev. R.L. Marshall, at this time Principal of Magee Presbyterian College in Derry. In a speech in Omagh in 1926 Marshall alleged that 'our own people' were not getting a fair 'crack of the whip' regarding employment, that jobs were going to people with the 'Oxford manner' and the 'Oxford speech', and that there had been no proper recognition of the sacrifices made by Ulstermen 'when our right to fulfil our own destiny was challenged and when death lay in wait for those who took up that challenge.' I am grateful to Dr James Greer for this source.

²¹ See Bew, *Ireland*, p. 351, fn. 216 re Thomas McKnight's *Ulster As It Is* (1896); also see Akenson, 1992.

²² I am grateful to Dr Tim Wilson of St Andrews University for this information on comparative church attendance. See also Wilson, 2010.

²³ However, see Christopher Harvie's astute point about Unionism as 'a form of ethnic sectarian insurance' against a global market that was in many ways fragile and uncertain (Harvie 2008, pp. 103-4)

²⁴ It should nonetheless be noted that many Presbyterians found it difficult to take on the establishment role, and there were lingering grievances over matters like public appointments. Education was also an area in which Presbyterians could cause political trouble for the Unionist government (Walker 2004, pp. 66-70, and pp. 113-116). The Rev. JB Woodburn, author of *The Ulster Scot*, made a blistering final speech as Moderator of the General Assembly in 1941 in which he criticised the Church for not being 'militant enough' and urged it to 'get a little more iron into its blood and mete out more justice'. In 1956 there was a protest at the Presbyterian General Assembly against the government's proposal to restrict Family Allowances, a proposal which, had it been implemented, would have disadvantaged Catholics disproportionately (Holmes and Buick Knox 1990, p. 179). In a BBC Northern Ireland documentary on the Presbyterians, 'An Independent People', first broadcast in 2013, a former Moderator of the General Assembly, Rev. John Dunlop, and a former Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Alliance Party leader, (Lord) John Alderdice, both reflected critically on the Church's close association with the Unionist regime and its ideology. See also Dunlop 1995, pp. 53-5.

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