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# *The Presbyterians of Ulster, 1680-1730.* Robert Whan. Woodbridge, Sussex, England: The Boydell Press, 2013. 251 pages. ISBN: 978-1-84383-872-2. U.S. $115.

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The early seventeenth-century Plantation of Ulster is one of those reference points in the tangled historical relationship of Ireland and Britain which academics, politicians, and the person in the street readily invoke in offering explanations. But that century's opening decades may not be the most helpful analytical context for understanding the development of Presbyterianism. Today, the Presbyterian Church is the largest Protestant denomination in Northern Ireland and the second-largest non-Catholic faith in the Republic—a consequence of seventeenth-century Scots migration, to be sure, but not directly a result of the Plantation. Both the unofficial colonization schemes in Counties Antrim and Down and the government-sponsored plantation elsewhere in Ulster facilitated the movement of tens of thousands of Scots into the north of Ireland. The ethnoreligious organization of Scots in Ireland's northern-most province followed. The emergence of both a discernible community and a religious institution, less obvious as historical markers than the Plantation, represent a development of considerable and lasting significance.

The Scots brought with them their Presbyterianism together with its theology, ritual, organizational structure, culture, and politics. At the turn of the eighteenth century Presbyterians represented about a third of Ulster's population of nearly a half million (at a time when Ulster was the most populous Irish province), and outnumbered adherents of the officially established Church of Ireland. Presbyterians of Scottish origin organized the first four presbyteries in Ireland in the core areas of their settlement—north Down, south Antrim, the contiguous northern coast of Antrim and Derry and the Laggan area centered on the Foyle and Mourne Valleys of eastern Donegal, northwestern Derry and western Tyrone. By 1700, Presbyterians had erected an impressive bottom-up structure of sessions (ministers and elected elders), presbyteries, sub-synods, and the overarching Synod of Ulster. "The strength of Irish Presbyterianism in the eighteenth century," as Raymond Gillespie has remarked, "lay in the fact that it had a coherent organization."[1] This "Presbyterian Revolution" in effect erected an unofficial, semi-legal national church by creating "a tight-knit church organization" on a Scottish model.[2] Peter Brooke proposes that this state within a state was "a whole community organised according to its own principles."[3] These institutional structures helped create community cohesion and


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ethnoreligious identity—and excited the fears of the established church, the Church of Ireland. Consistent with the High-Church Toryism dominant during Queen Anne's reign (1702-14), the emergent Protestant Ascendancy responded with punishing legal measures intended to curb Presbyterians' potential power in the north.[4] The Presbyterians of Ulster found themselves, in Patrick Griffin's evocative phrase, "second-class subjects in a second-class kingdom."[5]

The great strengths of *The Presbyterians of Ulster, 1680-1730*, published in 2013 as part of the Irish Historical Monograph Series of The Boydell Press, are author Robert Whan's recognition of the importance of the period he examines in detail, his interest in documenting the efforts of conformity, and, in particular, his exploration of the transformation of Scots settlers into Ulster Presbyterians. Whan rightly argues that the years 1680 to 1730 represent "a significant, and defining, period in Presbyterian history" given too little attention by historians.[6] He properly reminds us that the last and largest seventeenth-century movement of Scots into Ulster occurred in the 1690s. Thus, the decades studied by Whan not only include the "end of the beginning of Irish Presbyterian history," but also the reordering and revitalization of a discernible Irish subculture.[7]

Although connections to Scotland remained important, Whan tells us, Ulster's Presbyterians came into their own at the turn of the eighteenth century. In constructing a "social profile of Ulster Presbyterianism", *The Presbyterians of Ulster* exhaustively discusses various social strata in turn. Pride of place, the opening chapter, is reserved for ministers as the acknowledged leaders of Ulster Presbyterianism. And Whan's discussion of ministers points to a diminishing Scottish presence. As we might expect, Scots-born ministers predominated in the first eight decades of the seventeenth century. But after 1680, a majority of ministers were born in Ireland and not in Scotland. Following the organization of the General Synod of Ulster in 1690, the number of ministers from Scotland who relocated in Ulster began to sharply decline. The triumph of Presbyterianism in post-Revolution Scotland created both appealing prospects for Presbyterian clergy and a demand for ministers to fill now vacant charges of deposed Episcopalians. The growth of Presbyterianism in Ulster, meanwhile, required the expansion of home-grown clergy.

The Presbyterian requirement that clergy receive a university education helped maintain Scottish influence and connections. Most scholars hoping for a ministerial career at that time attended Scottish universities, a majority actually attending the University of Glasgow, the institution of higher learning physically closest to Ulster. As many clerical candidates would have had Scottish parents or grandparents, their Scottish journey may have been perceived by the young men as naturally allied with their intellectual and spiritual journey.

At the same time, both the upbringing and subsequent career path of Irish-born ministerial candidates reinforced a sense of their community's regional identity and distinctiveness. As children, the lads who went on to Glasgow and Edinburgh first acquired an education closer to home. Local schools offering instruction in reading and writing were generally conducted under church supervision. Preparatory academies, often staffed by ministers, provoked the suspicions of the establishment—irritants which may have reinforced the developing self-awareness of a distinctive Presbyterian community. Upon completion of their studies, most of the young scholars returned to Ireland. The source-areas of Presbyterian

ministers during the period tracked the areas of seventeenth-century Scots settlement, with Counties Antrim and Down supplying more than half of the Ulster-born ministers. More than three-quarters of the ministers between 1680 and 1730 were ordained in Ireland; more than two-thirds spent their entire careers in their home province.

The evidence for the numerically miniscule Presbyterian gentry also suggests the formation of a regional and ethnoreligious distinctiveness. The gentry tended to find marriage partners both within their own social class and from within Ulster, often from within their native county. The relatively small numbers of Presbyterian gentry declined in the period, Whan writes, as numerous well-to-do Presbyterians converted to Anglicanism to preserve their political influence and social standing. But those who remained faithful to the Scots-born denomination proved helpful by providing Presbyterian congregations with access to land and assisting Presbyterian education. Some who conformed did not sever connections with their dissenting past, using their exalted positions to offer help and advice.

Merchants, too, by working in Ulster towns within the context of the Irish economy and by participating in the life of the burgeoning Presbyterian Church, helped to create and sustain a distinctive Ulster Presbyterian identity. As was the case with the gentry and ministers, merchants had a shared Scottish origin and particular Scottish business and familial connections. Further, as gentry families conformed to the established church, Whan writes, "merchants (along with professional men) were the obvious candidates to fill the vacuum in social leadership."[8] However, Whan suggests that the conformity of many gentry families did not lead to the emergence of a new middle class. Rather, the substantial costs required for entry into medicine and the law limited recruitment to gentry and wealthy mercantile families. The social origins of such professional men therefore differed from that of many ministers; as Whan points out, "The Presbyterian ministry was a relatively open social group, in that men from outside the clerical profession could enter the service of the church." Sons of the poorest tenant farmers could expect assistance from presbyteries in obtaining the education necessary to pursue a clerical career.[9]

The book's reluctance to engage with the transatlantic context of mercantile activity in its discussion of merchants and commerce is both surprising and disappointing. Ireland participated extensively in an Atlantic economy heavily dependent on the slave trade and on slavery; Irish agricultural production and Ulster linen supplied the needs of overseas slave-powered plantations and British navies and armies. Ulster's Presbyterian merchants engaged extensively in these far-flung but tightly woven transactions. The book makes reference to merchants' involvement in "the provision trade," contacts in Barbados, and the import of sugar and tobacco, without adding to our understanding of how Ulster-based commerce fit into the broader Atlantic World. These references lack any indication that the forced labor of kidnapped Africans had anything at all to do with Ulster merchants' robust commerce. (This is all the more surprising and disappointing, as Whan worked within the same institution as Dr. Nini Rodgers, the leading scholar on Ireland and slavery.)[10]

At the risk of seeming unfair, this monograph might more accurately be entitled, *An Account of the Handful of Well-Connected Ulster Presbyterians For Whom Records Are Available.* The overwhelming majority of Presbyterians in this heavily rural province had a connection to the land, as Whan recognizes: "Most people in Ulster lived in rural areas and

engaged in farming activities on farms of varying sizes and quality." Ministers—those whose calling, education and training gave them standing in Presbyterian communities—lived and farmed among their congregants, "and in many cases [were] drawn from the same socio-economic background."[11] Gillespie has called attention to the social cohesion of early Ulster Presbyterianism, citing an observation made in the 1680s that Presbyterians were often those who possessed land of relatively little value.[12] The majority of the Presbyterians of Ulster, those whose interconnected activities largely created a discernible community, are not those with whom the book is largely concerned; the soil and toil which produced both the province's material wealth and its ministers receive disproportionately less attention.

Whan recognizes that the "Presbyterian landowners in the province were not numerous, and numerically as a proportion of the Presbyterian population almost insignificant."[13] Nonetheless, the chapter on the gentry is the longest at forty-four pages. The ministers receive thirty-nine pages; legal and medical professionals, thirty-two pages; merchants and commerce, twenty-five. The non-elite, Whan observes, "formed the largest group in Presbyterian society" in the period under study.[14] However, the chapter on "The Lower Orders" is the least voluminous account at only twenty-two pages.

These criticisms are mitigated by recognition of the serious challenges Whan faced in locating sources. In his introduction, Whan notes that ministers are "the only social group among Presbyterians to have received attention from historians," mainly due to the paucity of available documentation on this demographic. The sizeable chapter on the ministry suggests the nature of available sources.[15] Despite these obstacles, *The Presbyterians of Ulster* contains a praiseworthy bibliography which is a testament to the author's admirable efforts to unearth evidence. And indeed, the book, apparently based closely on Whan's Queen's University, Belfast 2009 dissertation, is replete with valuable information. Its origins as a thesis, however, may perhaps also offer a partial explanation for both its strengths and weaknesses.

Chief among the book's goals, as stated in the introduction was the construction of "a social profile of Ulster Presbyterianism" and an exploration of "how the Presbyterian community operated in Ulster and… where power lay in Presbyterian society."[16] The result of Robert Whan's considerable efforts is a study rich in detail but less successful in conveying the dynamics of social processes—how strata interacted to create a Presbyterian community. Whan, to his credit, proposes to consider groups other than the ministry who were "numerically more significant but historiographically neglected."[17] The organization of the book according to social groups with particular emphasis on the well-connected both contributes to and limits the sought-after social profile. Whan recognizes that "Early modern Irish society was a complex series of overlapping layers," but his book's methodology somewhat inhibits the readers' comprehension of that complexity.[18] With one significant exception, the chapters are organized by their specific study of social strata. That exception, Chapter Six, "Organisation and Social Practice," is largely successful in bringing to life the social content of Ulster Presbyterianism in this period. We learn, for example, that Presbyterians generally submitted to the disciplinary measures decided by church sessions, that church discipline tended to be more humane than corporal punishment, and that church discipline was "redemptive rather than punitive" in its aims.[19] In addressing his goal of determining where the power lay in early eighteenth-century Presbyterianism, the author interestingly sees church governance becoming *more* democratic over time. Whan argues

convincingly that the Presbyterian Church in Ulster "was never run by an oligarchy," with ecclesiastical governance open to the laity and lay leaders primarily "drawn from the middling and lower orders."[20] This important conclusion—to this reader, at least—calls into question the author's decision to focus so heavily on the minority belonging to the landed elite, mercantile families, and professionals.

This reviewer wishes that rather than serving as the odd-man-out, final full chapter, Chapter Six, "Organisation and Social Practice" had served as the basis and organizing principle of a study that engaged more fully with the "middling and lower orders" who constituted the overwhelming majority of Ulster Presbyterians, 1680 to 1730.[21] That said, Robert Whan has succeeded in his primary goal of building on the work of other scholars to create a needed portrait of Ulster Presbyterians and their social structure in a crucially formative period, helping us to grasp the transformation of Scots settlers into Ulster Presbyterians.

## Endnotes

[1] Raymond Gillespie, "The Presbyterian Revolution in Ulster, 1600-1690," in W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood, eds., *The Churches, Ireland and the Irish* (Oxford: Blackwell for The Ecclesiastical History Society, 1989), 169.

[2] The phrase "Presbyterian Revolution" comes from Gillespie, op. cit.; Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism: The Historical Perspective, 1610-1970* (Dublin, 1987), 62.

[3] Ibid.

[4] This process is particularly well described in Patrick Griffin, "Defining the Limits of Britishness: The 'New 'British' History and the Meaning of the Revolution Settlement in Ireland for Ulster's Presbyterians," *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 2000), 263-287.

[5] Griffin, "Defining the Limits of Britishness," 267.

[6] Robert Whan, *The Presbyterians of Ulster, 1680-1730* (Woodbridge, Sussex: Boydell Press, 2013), 1.

[7] Robert Whan, *The Presbyterians of Ulster*, 1. The phrase "end of the beginning" is from Finlay Holmes, cited by Whan.

[8] Whan, 99. Members of the gentry conformed both to maintain access to political power and social prestige and to safeguard inheritance: "A valid marriage was particularly important for the upper classes as it affected the legitimacy of children and inheritance…. [S]ome of the wealthier members married in the Church of Ireland to avoid questions about the validity of their marriage." (192-3)

[9] Whan, 21.

[10] Dr. Rodgers' *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery: 1612-1865* was published in 2007.

[11] Whan, 162, 179.

[12] Gillespie, 161.

[13] Whan, 55. Whan makes it quite clear that there were no Presbyterian peers. He points out, "Ulster Presbyterians were drawn from all social groups below the aristocracy." (199)

[14] Whan, 156.

[15] Whan, 13.

[16] Whan, 13.

[17] Whan, 13.

[18] Whan, 13.

[19] Whan, 185.

[20] Whan, 199.

[21] The book contains suggestions that the author's extensive research could have fueled a different exploration into Ulster Presbyterian society. A brief reference in a small paragraph in the chapter on "The Lower Orders" (p164) informs the reader that on occasion, when individuals attempted to obtain leases on farms without the consent of the sitting tenant, such matters would be taken to the kirk session. There is no comment, unfortunately, as to what this information might suggest about tenant farmers' understanding of their faith or intra-Presbyterian class relations.