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the Origins of Unionist Hegemony

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Irish immigrant correspondence has great scholarly value. It provides insight, of course, into the processes of Irish migration and adaptation, but occasionally it can also illuminate contemporary events, developments, or concerns that historians have either not noticed or failed to investigate or appreciate fully. Such may be the case with the following letter, written by William Coyne in Belfast on St. Patrick's Day, 1816.¹

William Coyne was probably a master cooper, and he may have been in his mid-forties when he wrote this, his only surviving letter, to his brother in Duchess County, New York. Very likely William Coyne was a Protestant and perhaps a member of the legally established Church of Ireland. Early nineteenth-century Belfast was a rapidly growing city of migrants, principally from East Ulster's Lagan Valley, and, given the reference in his letter, it is probable that Coyne had moved to Belfast from the predominantly Anglican parish of Magher-

1. I would like to thank Roger Hayden of Ithaca, N.Y., for providing photocopies and transcripts of Coyne's letter and for granting permission to publish it.

The violent incident that Coyne described is omitted from the standard histories of Belfast—by J.C. Beckett and R.E. Glasscock, eds., *Belfast: Origin and Growth of an Industrial City* (London: BBC, 1967), and by W.A. Maguire, *Belfast* (Keele, England: Ryburn, 1993)—but is mentioned briefly in Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), 259; John W. Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 15–16; and E.R.R. Green, *The Lagan Valley, 1800–50* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), 101.

agall, in the barony of Massareene Upper, in Southwest County Antrim.²

In the early 1800s transatlantic mail was expensive, and its delivery uncertain. Consequently, Irish immigrant correspondence was filled primarily with information that was, for its authors and recipients, vitally important but which often appears to contemporary scholars as mundanely personal or familial. The principal subjects of William Coyne's letter, however, were very public and quite dramatic, and his missive's exceptional character indicates that he and his neighbors in Belfast considered the developments he described to be extraordinarily significant—and that he assumed his brother in faraway America would consider them equally so. Hopefully, social and political historians of early nineteenth-century Ulster will also find Coyne's letter of interest.

2. According to the *Belfast Street Directory* (c. 1813) and *Bradshaw's Belfast Directory* of 1819, William Co[y]ne (or Cain), cooper, lived at 10 Bluebell Entry, off Waring Street. Perhaps he was the same "Mr. William Coyne" who died, aged 75, on 31 Aug. 1846, at his home on the Falls Road. *Belfast News-Letter* (BNL hereafter), 4 Sep. 1846; from the death records in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, which also contains the BNL on microfilm.

Assumptions as to Coyne's religious affiliation are based on early census data from Magheragall parish, to which Coyne refers in his letter. In 1766 Magheragall contained 420 households, 365 (86.9 percent) of which were Protestant, 55 (13.1 percent) Roman Catholic. Employing the eighteenth-century households-to-persons multiplier devised for Ulster by Dickson, Ó Gráda, and Daultrey, in 1766 Magheragall probably contained about 1,840 Protestants and 277 Catholics. By 1831 Magheragall's population included 2,279 Anglicans (67.0 percent of the total, 74.6 percent of the parish's Protestants), 646 Presbyterians (20.8 and 23.2 percent, respectively), 63 "other Protestants" (2.0 and 2.3 percent, respectively), and 314 Catholics (10.1 percent of the total). Thus, by 1831 the Protestant proportion of Magheragall's inhabitants had risen to nearly 90 percent. However, due to heavy migration to America, Britain, or nearby industrial towns such as Belfast and Lisburn, between 1766 and 1831 the annual growth rates of Magheragall's populations had been extremely low: merely 0.64 among the parish's Protestants, and much less (0.19) among local Catholics.

Religious census data for Magheragall in 1766 is in T.808/14,900, in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast; and for 1831 in the First Report of the Commission of Public Instruction, Ireland, *British Parliamentary Papers*, H.C. 1835, xxxiii. Also see D. Dickson, C. Ó Gráda, and S. Daultrey, "Hearth Tax, Household Size, and Irish Population Change, 1672-1821," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 82C:6 (1982), 125-50.

*William and E. Coyne, Belfast, to Henry Coyne, Pleasant Valley, Duchess County, New York, 17 March 1816*³

Belfast 17th March 1816

Dear Brother

I have rec^d your Letter of the 24th Dec^r which give us great Satisfaction to hear that you and your Familey were in good health; my aunt also rec^d one from you and She and Nancy desires to be remembred to you they are both well and would have wrote but as they had nothing particular to mention they thought the one Letter would do us both, I Showed your Letter to all your acquaintances that is here who was all particularly happy to heare from you, but John Mullan and Michal Roney is both in Scotland; and Mr M^rPharson,^s Congregation is disolved his wife Died here and he is in England his Church is Converted into a Muslin ware-house and ocupied by an old acquaintance of yours W^m Shaw⁴ who is an acting Partner in a Concern that is doing a good dale of business at present however trade is in general but verry flat⁵ yet thank God I have had the best of work Since I went to M^r Bell⁶ and the two oldest boys Henry and John is doing pretty well at the Loom. We have now and then a little Stir as usual between the Weavers and Manifecturiuers particularly Thomas How and Frank Johnson⁷ Several voilant attacts have been made

3. The following transcript reproduces William Coyne's original punctuation and spelling—the latter often indicating his pronunciation, e.g., *dale* (deal), *attact* (attack), *extronary* (extraordinary), *rachedness* (wretchedness), *laveing* (leaving), etc. Occasionally the text is emended by explanatory footnotes or by the insertion of square-bracketed words in the text itself. This minimal editing may cause readers some difficulty, in part because Coyne frequently abbreviated words and/or omitted vowels or entire syllables; thus, *rec^d* (received); *Dec^r*, *Feb^y* (December, February); *Covred*, *covring* (Covered, covering); *evry* (every); *modrate* (moderate); etc. Also, Coyne often employed commas in place of apostrophes—e.g., *M^rPharson,^s* (M^rPharson's), *Ruth,^s* (Ruth's), *Subscriber,^s* (Subscriber's), etc.—or, less commonly, to indicate contractions or abbreviations, as in *rec,^d* (received) and *per C,^t* (percent).

4. *W^m Shaw*: according to *Bradshaw's Belfast Directory*, in 1819 William Shaw was a merchant at 24 James's Street, off Waring Street.

5. *but: only. trade is in general but verry flat*: i.e., in general, trade is only very poor.

6. *Mr Bell*: *Bradshaw's Belfast Directory* of 1819 lists several merchants, bleachers, and cotton manufacturers named Bell—most prominently John Bell & Co., cotton spinners and manufacturers at John Street, off Donegall and Waring streets; and John Bell, Richard Bell, & Co., muslin bleachers, also at John Street—many of whom could have employed Coyne's cooping skills.

7. *Thomas How*: According to *Bradshaw's Belfast Directory*, in 1819 Thomas How (or Howe) was a muslin manufacturer with business premises in Long Lane, adjacent to his house on Church Street. He was also listed, at 12 Long Lane and 11 Church Street, in *Pigot's Provincial Directory* (London, 1824). On 29 June 1838, the *BNL*

on the property of these 2 individuals but the most daring of all was on the night of the 28th of Feby on the House of Mr Johnson as his place had been twice Set on fire before he was well prepaired for a third attect haveing the out Side of his windows and door Covered with Sheet Iron and well prepaired in the inside to meet his asealants however notwithstanding they made the attact about 3 Oclock on the morning of the 28th by forseing off the iron Shutters while he⁸ and his inmates with Small arms from the uper windows of the House attected the Guards that was covering the working party at the windows when a havy firing Commenced on both Sides to⁹ the party that was at work forsd the Shutters and entroudeced either a bomb Shel or Some other extronary Combustable preperation that Soon exploded and rent the House from top to bottom not a wall nor inside partation that was not torn to pices yet despirate as it was and wounderfull to relate not a life was lost on either Sides, large rewards are offerd for apprehending any one Concernd no less than £2000 for prosacution and £500 for private information, four quiet well disposed men have been taken¹⁰ on Suspecion but it is hoped there is nothing against them that will affect their lives. Jonathan Gardner Stood a trial at our last Assises for murder and is Still Confind on account of Some [parenciable?] evidences not coming forward, the nature of the Circumstance was thus he haveing kept a public House down Street about 4 Months <ago> he Shut the doar in <debt for> £700

recorded the death, eight days earlier, of “Thomas How, Esq., merchant, aged 56 years.”

Frank Johnson: Francis Johnson, a leading muslin manufacturer at North Street, on Peter's Hill. According to Jonathan Bardon's *History of Ulster*, 259, Johnson was a “hated employer” whose home had been attacked at least once before (as Coyne's letter states), in summer 1815, by “[d]esperate weavers” who daubed it with tar and set it on fire. Bardon, *History of Ulster*, 259. On 2 Jan. 1818, the *BNL* printed a lengthy announcement of “the death of our worthy and lamented townsman, Mr. FRANCIS JOHNSON, another victim to the dreadful scourge, Typhus Fever, with which our town is so severely visited. According to his obituary, Johnson's “character was held in the most elevated range by his fellow-citizens. . . . for he was honest, ingenuous, and single-hearted; possessing a cultivated mind, talent, and integrity. In religion and morality, a bright example—in politics, liberal and constitutional—as a merchant, useful and intelligent—and for firmness and unshrinking determination, a man scarcely to be equalled. To his resolute conduct, the country is indebted for the preservation of its most useful manufactures. He was cool, dispassionate, and humane, and amidst difficulties that might have paled a less determined heart, he succeeded in putting down a system of combination which threatened to subvert the very basis of every principle of commercial good order.”

8. *he*: i.e., *Frank Johnson*; see n. 7.

9. *to*: until.

10. *taken*: arrested.

and it was in an attempt of the Creditors to arrest his person that the above accident haptned,¹¹ how Soon one trouble Succeeds an other his Son John who was Clarke in the Bottle House having Committed a breach of trust was turnd out and having inlisted a few days after onley got the lenth of England when he died¹² laveing a wife and 2 Children Ruth,s fortune has been little better She maried a man of the name of aken and after gowing throw a Considerable property in a Short time She and her man is in the Antrim Militia thus the whole Family is reduced to rachedness and distress I have very little particulars to mention only as I am writeing¹³ I have no doubt it will be a Saticefection to you to hear any thing interesting to the place, among many valuable institutions that has been established here Since your departure none deserves more general approbation than the Saving Bank this is instituted for the Saveings of the poor and is Conducted by the foremost of the place a Comettee of 25 is appointed as directors and manager Consisting of the principle Magastrates and Bankers of the town who meets every Friday Evening to receive deposits from evry discription of working people male and female young and old and each Contributor puts in from 10 pence up according as they find it Convenient and as no fines is levied off any member every one makes their payments Convenient to their Silver¹⁴ and when any Subscriber,s payments amounts to 10^s they draw interest at the rate of 5 per C,^t this is one of the most valuable institutions ever invented for the benifet of the lower Class of the Community and you may guess the general approbation it meets with from the Sum alredy Colected in 12 nights onley Since its Commensement amounting to £1256-14-9 I must draw this Letter to an end but I cannot Conclude dear Henry without expressing our Sorrow at your determination in gowing to the Indian teritories if there was any posibelity that you Could get home I think it would be much better than to exile your Self and your Family into Such an uncertain and in all probability uncomfortable Situation for things are [not] altogether So bad here but working people can live in my openion as Comfortable and Contented as they can

11. See the BNL of 5 March 1816 for an account of the travails of Gardner, a publican on William Street. *haptned*: happened.

12. *Clarke in the Bottle House*: clerk in a glass bottle manufactory or a bottling plant, perhaps for whiskey. *haveing inlisted a few days after onley got the lenth of England when he died*: i.e., John Gardner enlisted in the army only a few days after he was dismissed (turned out) from his former employment, but he only got as far as England when he died (probably on his way to military service overseas).

13. *only as I am writeing*: i.e., but since I am writing anyway . . .

14. *Convenient to their Silver*: i.e., according to their means (whatever they can afford).

do in america¹⁵ for all those that has to earn their Bread by the Sweat of their Brow has to work there as well as here and the rate¹⁶ of our provisions is likely to be very modrate we have not Seen the oat Meal these 2 years more than 15^s per C,^{wt},¹⁷ and the rent of Land and Houses is falling in praportion Land in general is down from 25 to 35 per Cent; the rate of victuling at present is Meal from 9^s.6^d to 10^s per C,^{wt} Patatoes from 15^d to 19^d per do¹⁸ Beef from 3½^d to 6^d per lb fresh Butter from 1^s to 1^s.3^d per lb Eggs from 3½ to 5^d per doz Sweet Milk 2^d per quart and other things in praportion. Ann Coyne was here last week from Magheragell they are all well there and desires to be remembered to you, Wm Witherops Familey is also well and likewise Sends their Love, Jery Lee,s Sister lives here and desires to let you know that he is dead he was wounded at the Battle of Waterloo and died Shortly after, the name of the man that tom,s wife bore the Child to is John Johnson, I Can add no mor but remains your affectionate Brother and sister Wm & E Coyne

According to the *Belfast News-Letter*, the rewards offered for the apprehension of Francis Johnson's assailants soon proved effective. By August 1816 the alleged culprits, all journeyman weavers from the outskirts of Belfast in North County Down, had been captured, tried, and convicted. In September, two of them were hanged, in Belfast's last public execution. Another was transported for life to New South Wales, and two others were whipped publicly and imprisoned for eighteen months. At least four clergymen were present at the hangings, before which the condemned men made repentant speeches: "I have offended God," one admitted, "dishonoured religion, and injured society, for which I am truly sorry."¹⁹ Thus was smashed what the *News-Letter* later called "a system of combination which threatened to subvert the very basis of every principle of commercial good order."²⁰

15. *things are [not] altogether So bad here but working people can live in my openion as Comfortable and Contented as they can do in america: i.e., in my opinion, conditions are bad here, but not so bad that working people cannot live as comfortably and contentedly (in Belfast) as they can in America.*

16. *rate: cost.*

17. *we have not Seen the oat Meal these 2 years more than 15s: i.e., during the last two years we have not seen oatmeal priced at more than fifteen shillings. per C,^{wt}: per hundredweight (a unit of measurement equal to 112 lbs).*

18. *per do: per ditto (i.e., per C,^{wt}); see n. 17.*

19. *BNL*, 1 March, 13-16 Aug., and 10 Sep. 1816; Bardon, *History of Ulster*, 259.

20. *BNL*, 2 Jan. 1818.

In reality, commerce and industry in early nineteenth-century Belfast, and in Ulster generally, were scarcely in “good order,” and the assault on Johnson’s house and business premises can be understood only in the contexts of the profound economic dislocations and often severe distress that afflicted northern Irish society in the decades following the Act of Union. Between 1800 and 1831 Belfast’s population increased from about 20,000 to more than 53,000, as men and women from rural Ulster migrated to the city or its hinterland to work as handloom weavers or as spinners in cotton factories and, increasingly after 1830, in linen mills. However, economic growth was unsteady and its prosperity distributed very unevenly. In 1806 the American embargo acts, followed by the Anglo-American War of 1812, caused bankruptcies and unemployment. In 1815 the return of peace precipitated a depression in the textile industry, the effects of which on the laboring poor, in town and country alike, were exacerbated by poor harvests, rising food and fuel prices, and outbreaks of typhus. In the mid-1820s the crisis deepened when severe industrial depression throughout the United Kingdom coincided with Parliament’s withdrawal of tariff protection for Irish cotton goods.

By the early 1830s Ulster’s cotton industry had been eclipsed by linen manufacturing, but although the latter expanded and flourished, most of its new factories and economic advantages were concentrated in the province’s eastern corner. Beyond the vicinity of Belfast and a few other East Ulster towns, cottage wages and industries collapsed. Rural spinners could not compete with cheap, factory-spun thread, and country weavers could rarely survive far from eastern supplies of yarn and the industry’s principal markets. Social conditions among the North’s rural poor rapidly deteriorated, but living standards among weavers in Belfast and other towns also declined sharply. In 1802 a visitor to Belfast had claimed its cotton weavers earned at least 18s. per week, but their wages had begun to decline before 1815, and by the mid-1820s, when one-third of the city’s weavers were unemployed, wages had fallen to merely 7s. per week. In the early 1830s the *Belfast News-Letter* reported that the weavers in the Belfast suburb of Ballymacarrett were obliged to eat “oatmeal unfit for cattle” and were “reduced to skeletons from overwork and lack of sleep.” In 1838 local weaver James Boyd claimed that he and his peers labored daily from

fourteen to eighteen hours for as little as 3s. 6d. per week, while others testified that Belfast's working-class neighborhoods were "a mass of filth and misery."²¹

Socioeconomic strife among northern Irish Protestants had been common at least since the Oakboy and Steelboy uprisings of the 1760s and early 1770s. In the 1790s poor Ulster Protestants' affiliations with the violent activities of either the United Irishmen or the Loyal Orange Order had stemmed, at least in part, from economic anxieties. After 1800 the unsettling processes and inequitable results of industrialization (which spelled de-industrialization for most of the countryside) provoked among Ulster's poor—especially among proletarianized weavers in and around Belfast—new waves of anger, organization, protest, and reprisal against perceived exploitation. As early as 1802 the *Belfast News-Letter* expressed concern about the spread of trade unionism among the town's workers. In 1811 Lisburn's cotton weavers formed an illegal "combination" and destroyed the webs and looms of those who would not work for what union members considered "fair wages." In April 1815 the Lisburn weavers' march into Belfast, to protest wage reductions, resulted in riots when police tried to arrest their leaders. Thus, in 1816 the North Down weavers' attack on Francis Johnson's house was only one of the most dramatic examples of contemporary class conflict. Indeed, the execution of Johnson's assailants seems to have had no immediate effects. Throughout 1816 the *News-Letter* continued to bewail the "outrages"—rivaling in frequency and severity those in proverbially "disturbed" Tipperary—committed largely by Presbyterian weavers and other poor Protestants on the persons, livestock, homes, and businesses of East Ulster's landlords, agents, bailiffs, strong farmers, and manufacturers.²²

21. Bardon, *History of Ulster*, 259–60; Beckett and Glasscock, *Belfast*, 82–87; Boyle, *Irish Labor Movement*, 28; F. Geary, "The Rise and Fall of the Belfast Cotton Industry: Some Problems," *Irish Economic and Social History* 8 (1981), 30–49; Green, *Lagan Valley*, 100–2; Maguire, *Belfast*, 31; and, generally, Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw, eds., *An Economic History of Ulster, 1820–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), chps. 1–2. An excellent local study of socioeconomic changes in Belfast's western hinterland is Marilyn Cohen, *Linen, Family and Community in Tullylish, County Down, 1690–1914* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997).

22. Boyle, *Irish Labor Movement*, 15–16; Green, *Lagan Valley*, 101; BNL, e.g., 5 Aug. 1816.

Yet by the 1830s evidence of strong or violent social or class conflict among Protestants in Belfast and elsewhere in Ulster seems to have virtually disappeared. For example, in 1838 James Campbell, a Belfast manufacturer, testified that weavers' combinations had been extinct for more than a decade; ever since 1825, Campbell reported, "labour [was] perfectly free" in the city's textile industries, and he rejoiced that, even when faced with wage cuts, his workers' behavior was "very respectful and proper." Likewise, although in Belfast and elsewhere in Ulster the franchise was extremely restricted, and political power monopolized by a wealthy few, the 1830s witnessed in Protestant Ulster no workers' movement for equal rights that was remotely comparable to the Chartist agitation in Britain. Indeed, it was particularly during these pre-famine decades that visitors to Belfast and to East Ulster, generally, became lavish in their praise for the "industriousness" and "steadiness" exhibited by the city's and the region's inhabitants. Significantly, observers, native as well as foreign, almost invariably associated this "spirit of commercial enterprise" with Protestantism, the benign effects of the Act of Union, and equally salutary "British" influences. Thus, in 1843 the Halls concluded that Belfast was full of "English virtues—'so much bustle, such an aspect of business, a total absence of all suspicion of [that] idleness'" and insubordination which, they believed, characterized southern Ireland and its Catholic populace.²³

How and why had this remarkable transformation occurred? How had Ulster's turbulent Protestant underclass been transformed into alleged exemplars of industry and deference? Put another way, how had Protestant Ulster's upper and middle classes, so beleaguered in the early 1800s, succeeded in forging a sense of pan-Protestant identity and community, characterized by unionist loyalties and bourgeois social norms, that usually transcended social and denominational divisions?

According to Rev. Henry Cooke and others, Belfast's and East Ulster's vaunted economic growth explained their Protestant inhabitants' contentment with both the union and élite rule, and their all-class unity in the face of Catholic nationalist agitation. But as we have seen, the North's prosperity was by no means widespread, even among

23. Boyle, *Irish Labor Movement*, 26–27; Maguire, *Belfast*, 33.

Protestants. Another explanation for Protestant workers' apparent docility was put forth by Alexander Moncrieffe, a Belfast manufacturer, who in 1838 testified before a Parliamentary commission that "Catholic and Orange rivalries made trade unionism impossible and ensured a supply of cheap labor."²⁴ Yet Moncrieffe's assertion confuses cause and effect. It appears based on the assumption that Protestant-Catholic animosities were, if not primordial and inevitable, at least always sufficient *in themselves* to mitigate intracommunal class conflict and to ensure that poor Protestants would defer to the leadership and embrace the capitalist values of their wealthy co-religionists.

The processes by which Ulster's Protestant élites achieved socio-cultural and political hegemony over the Protestant poor may have been much more complex than either Cooke's or Moncrieffe's explanation implies. Indeed, it is likely that the construction of the "Ulster Unionist community" had many of its most important origins neither in shared Protestant prosperity nor in Protestant-Catholic strife (local or national), but rather in the upper- and middle-class resolutions of the class struggle revealed by the incident described in William Coyne's 1816 letter.

For example, in the early 1800s it was by no means certain that Ulster's predominantly Anglican upper class and its largely Presbyterian middle classes (themselves bitterly divided over contemporary political and religious issues, including the United Irishmen's legacy) could join to present a united front to their own subtenants and laborers.²⁵ Yet in the aftermath of the weavers' assault on Francis Johnson's home, Belfast's and East Ulster's gentry, magistrates, merchants, and manufacturers—Anglicans and Presbyterians, Whigs and Tories—united as "gentlemen" and mobilized their considerable resources against the workers' threat to property and order.²⁶ Surely this was not an isolated instance of such convergence. Given the prevalence of lower-class unrest and violence in the early 1800s, the mobilization of élite opinion, if not overt power, concerning class issues must have

24. Boyle, *Irish Labor Movement*, 28–29.

25. Significantly, the *Belfast News-Letter's* campaign against East Ulster's lower-class Protestant combinations occurred simultaneously with its crusade to purge the city's Academical Institute of faculty and students who allegedly harbored "disloyal" and "heretical" opinions—e.g., see the issue of 7 May.

26. *BNL*, 1 March 1816.

become semi-permanent and self-perpetuating, creating common interests and sympathies that could transcend other differences.

Equally important is that after 1800 a re-formed Ulster Protestant élite could no longer rely solely or even primarily on *its own* legal and military resources to confront lower-class insubordination, because after the union statutory power and its enforcement were centered in London and Dublin Castle. To be sure, members of the Ulster Protestant gentry and magistracy often chafed at British reforms that, by professionalizing the Irish legal and policing systems, reduced their autonomy and increased their dependence on British authority. In the crisis of the early 1800s, however, when it appeared that “commercial good order” teetered on the brink of collapse, their own spokesmen cried out for strong, effective action that could emanate only from Westminster and Dublin. Thus, in late 1816 the *Belfast News-Letter*’s exasperated editor announced that, since “declarations, resolutions, and subscriptions have been tried and found unavailing[, new] energy must be infused, [new] measures must be matured and acted upon to reclaim the misguided multitude.” If landlords and manufacturers could not convince their tenants and workers by traditional means of “the illegality of their proceedings, . . . stronger [methods] will have to be resorted to”; for otherwise, he warned, “the turbulent [will only] become more audacious.”²⁷

In short, Ulster’s Protestant upper and middle classes were obliged not only to unite but also to rely heavily on the coercive mechanisms of the post-union British state to regain authority over their refractory inferiors. In the process, they inevitably developed a community of interest both among each other and with the union that was now their first and last reliance in their efforts to tame the nocturnal armies of “idle vagabonds” who assailed them.²⁸ For the union protected Irish Protestants, generally, by submerging Ireland’s Catholics in a British Protestant majority. At least equally important, it protected propertied Irish Protestants against Protestant “men of no property” by merging the interests of the smaller, weaker, and more vulnerable Irish élite

27. *BNL*, 5 Aug. 1816. In 1816 the *News-Letter* also lobbied intensively for the creation of a more effective police force in Belfast—e.g., the issue of 6 Sep. In the same year the British Parliament responded with a Police Act that increased the authority of the city’s police commissioners.

28. *BNL*, 6 Sep. 1816.

with those of Britain's ruling classes—then perhaps the most dynamic and powerful in the world.

Unlike Ireland's Catholic élites, who felt alienated and betrayed when denied their promised Emancipation for three decades after 1800, propertied Protestants soon enjoyed every reason to be loyal to a British government that long proved able, in Ireland and Britain alike, to protect essential upper-class privileges, to placate middle-class (Protestant) demands, and to suppress or neutralize lower-class challenges. For seventy years after the Act of Union, Westminster denied Ulster farmers' every plea for the legalization of tenant-right, passing instead a series of subletting acts and other laws that augmented landlords' authority over their tenants. Ulster's manufacturers were no doubt equally gratified, as in 1803, for example, when Parliament legislated for Ireland a special anti-combination act, the terms of which were "decidedly harsher" than either the earlier laws passed by the Irish Parliament or the post-union acts that applied only to British workers.²⁹ In addition, the union's alliance of Irish and British property buttressed Ulster's Protestant élite in its class-biased interpretation and enforcement of both those and ordinary laws. Thus, in late 1816, only a few months after the two weavers were hanged in Belfast for bombing Francis Johnson's home, John McCann, a manufacturer in Lisburn, was acquitted of murdering his employee, Gordon Maxwell, the leader of the muslin weavers' union, on Belfast's Malone Road, despite Maxwell's dying declaration that McCann was his killer. And of course it was ultimately by British authority that thousands of convicted Irishmen and women were transported to the Australian penal colonies—nearly six thousand between 1825 and 1835 alone—many of them for violating the combination acts.³⁰

Many mechanisms of élite persuasion, however, depended neither on overt force nor on British legislative or administrative authority. Indeed, if ordinary Ulster Protestants were to internalize the lessons which their superiors wished to inculcate, the latter needed to initiate a variety of measures offering rewards as well as punishments. It was

29. J. Dunsmore Clarkson, *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), 55–56.

30. Barton, *History of Ulster*, 259; Boyle, *Irish Labor Movement*, 15–16, 37; and Green, *Lagan Valley*, 101.

significant, to be sure, that 1816 witnessed not only the weavers' assault on Johnson's premises but also the establishment in Belfast of a House of Correction—a new prison with a strict work regimen designed to instill “morals and industry” among its seventy-five to one hundred inmates.³¹ At least equally important, however, was the sort of initiative that William Coyne described in his eulogy of the new Belfast Savings Bank, “instituted for the Savings of the poor and . . . conducted by . . . the principle Magistrates and Bankers of the town.” Such charitable efforts by Ulster's upper and middle classes were most obvious in cities such as Belfast but were not confined there, as during the early 1800s benevolent loan societies, usually operated by local landlords and Protestant clergymen, sprang up in towns and villages throughout the island. At least equally pervasive and effective were the pan-Protestant revivals of the Second Reformation and the host of charitable and educational institutions that were established or transformed and invigorated under their inspiration. The financial, political, and ideological linkages between Irish revivalism and upper- and middle-class Irish (and British) Protestant loyalism and conservatism are well-known, as all sought to purge Protestant (as well as Catholic) Irish society of the Jacobin “French diseases” of political radicalism, religious infidelity, and lower-class insubordination. In this respect, the new Hibernian Sunday Schools that flourished in East and mid-Ulster were but one example of the new forces that contributed to “the inculcation of religious respectability which was so prominent a feature of nineteenth-century Ulster life.”³² Perhaps less obvious are the quasi-charitable and material benefits of lower-class Protestant membership in the Orange Order and in Ulster's disproportionately large Yeomanry corps. Surely a crucial function of the Orange lodges, for example, was to insulate its ordinary Protestant members against the dangers of eviction, unemployment, and emigration. Likewise, during the economically distressed early 1800s the *pay* that plebeian Yeomen earned for their service was perhaps at least as important as—indeed, was inseparable from—the political and psychological status conferred by this evidence

31. *Bradshaw's Belfast Directory . . . 1819* (Belfast, 1819), xx.

32. David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society, 1740–1890* (London: Routledge, 1992), 59–60.

of their commitment to the Union and to their élite officers' definitions of law and order.³³

Like the Petty Sessions Courts (established in 1827), such bodies reinforced hierarchy and deference on local levels and connected those local relationships with supra-local or metropolitan rules, institutions, and power structures. In Ulster especially, perhaps, they not only strengthened traditional, cross-class social bonds but also instilled, encouraged, and rewarded new proto-*bourgeois* habits and outlooks compatible with the needs of commercialization and industrialization.³⁴ Equally important, they sifted Ulster's and Ireland's inhabitants into two broad groups—the "loyal" and the "disloyal," the "respectable" and the "insubordinate," the "worthy" and the "unworthy" of patronage and respect—and ensured that *ultimately* the distinctions between them would be made almost invariably on Protestant *versus*

33. Martin W. Dowling, *Tenant Right and Agrarian Society in Ulster, 1600–1870* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 99, paraphrasing Frank Wright's argument concerning Orangeism in his *Two Lands on One Soil: Ulster Politics before Home Rule* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996). On the Yeomanry, see Allan Blackstock, *An Ascendancy Army: The Irish Yeomanry, 1796–1834* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998). The Orange Order and the Yeomanry had other symbiotic relationships that greatly benefited their overlapping memberships. For instance, yeomen enjoyed easy legal and financial access to firearms, which in turn gave Orangemen an enormous advantage over their Catholic competitors (note the generally huge discrepancies between Protestant and Catholic casualty rates resulting from early nineteenth-century Orange-Green clashes). At the risk of cynicism, moreover, it is arguable that one of the Orange Order's important functions was to provoke what would be denominated as "Catholic aggression" against the "Protestant community" and "rebellious conspiracy" against the union, either of which demanded the mobilization of the Yeomanry and hence extra service pay for its members.

Scholars who emphasize the often contentious relationships between élite and plebeian Orangeism may disagree with this essay's implicit argument as to the importance of the Orange Order's role in enforcing upper- and middle-class hegemony. I suggest, however, that the distinctions some historians make between the two phenomena have been overdrawn, in part because I suspect that local studies would demonstrate the dominance, in virtually every Orange Lodge, of small gentry, clergymen, or, perhaps most important, of middle-, lower middle-, or quasi-middle-class men of local status, influence, and "reputation," whose socioeconomic roles and functions constituted vital linkages of authority and dependence in Ulster society (both rural and urban-industrial).

34. *Bradshaw's Belfast Directory . . . 1819*, xix. For a unique study of these processes, focusing on Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny, see Marilyn Silverman, *An Irish Working Class: Explorations in Political Economy and Hegemony, 1800–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), esp. 119–41.

Catholic lines. To be sure, the clergymen who officiated in 1816 at the hangings of Johnson's assailants probably included Belfast's parish priest and future Catholic archbishop, William Croll, and both he and many affluent Protestant liberals no doubt would have been happy to enlist their Catholic peers among the "friends of order."³⁵ Unfortunately, however, for three crucial decades after 1800 the Tories largely controlled the British government and Dublin Castle, and their refusal to grant Catholic Emancipation and their support for ultra-Protestantism virtually ensured that Irish unionism would develop, in a climate of rising Catholic alienation and nationalism, as a predominantly (and militantly) Protestant phenomenon. Yet perhaps even more crucial was that, given the rampant class-conflict of the early 1800s, the Protestant elite's successful imposition of capitalist relationships and mores on Ulster's Protestant poor necessitated the creation and continual reinforcement of a sectarian moral economy that combined "free labor" ideology with the selective reality, or at least the seductive rhetoric, of Protestant patronage and privilege.³⁶

Discrimination of various kinds was present of course in the operations of charitable and other institutions and in many other, less formal social relationships: most obviously in anti-Catholic sectarianism as enforced, for example, by ultra-Protestant landlords and magistrates, or by ordinary Orangemen and Yeomen—the latter often synonymous. At least initially, however, both elite and plebeian distinctions between the "loyal-respectable-worthy" and the "disloyal-insubordinate-unworthy" were also made among Protestants, often on denominational grounds. During the 1798 Rebellion, for instance, Protestant liberals in Donegal and elsewhere were fearful that loyalist Orangemen, then overwhelmingly Anglican, were "Sworn to Dstroy all Prisbitearans" as well as "Rommans": an apprehension that helps explain Presbyterians' subsequent, if always underrepresented, membership in both the Orange Order and the Yeomanry—their enrollment in the latter albeit

35. On Croll, see Ambrose Macaulay, *William Croll: Archbishop of Armagh, 1835–49* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994).

36. On the ideological and practical tensions in unionism between sectarian privilege and free-market capitalism, see Kerby A. Miller, "The Lost World of Andrew Johnson: Sectarianism, Social Conflict, and Cultural Change in Southern Ireland during the Pre-Famine Era," in James S. Donnelly, Jr., and Miller, eds., *Irish Popular Culture, 1650–1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 222–41.

often expedient or even “insincere,” as Dublin Castle recognized.³⁷ Likewise, in the 1820s loyal Protestants felt obliged to “all show themselves” in the annual Twelfth of July parades, as one Orangeman demanded, “else how could we tell whether they are of the right or wrong sort?”³⁸ Yet at least equally important was that these distinctions were made and pressures imposed along class lines as well. During the social crises of the early 1800s, Irish municipal authorities often instructed parish relief committees not to grant charity to applicants who lacked certificates of “good character” from clergymen or employers, testifying, for example, to the petitioners’ non-membership in working-class combinations.³⁹ Similarly, Ulster’s few remaining “rhyming weavers”—formerly the heralds of sociopolitical discontent and religious liberalism—learned, often from bitter experience, that elite patronage and publication prospects were generally closed to those who resisted the tide of convention. And after 1831, especially, the North’s Protestant schoolmasters fell under the sway of conservative clergymen, their own ranks successively purged of “disloyalty” and “heresy” by men, such as Cooke, who increasingly dominated the Ulster Synod and other religious bodies and who distributed their resources according to political and doctrinal criteria.⁴⁰

Over time such influences, and others less obvious but continuous, were instrumental in shaping the *mentalité* of ordinary Ulster Protestants. No doubt most crucial and pervasive were a multitude of everyday signals, hierarchically imposed but laterally reinforced, that conformity to “respectable” and “loyal” norms of behavior and opinion—the two at

37. James Steele, 15 May 1797, cited in Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 230.

38. Thomas Reid, *Travels in Ireland, in the Year 1822* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1823), 189.

39. Boyle, *Irish Labor Movement*, 18–19.

40. On the rhyming weavers, generally, see John Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers and Other Country Poets of Antrim and Down* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1974). On the political and doctrinal struggles in Ulster Presbyterianism, generally, see Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism: The Historical Perspective, 1610–1970* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987); and, especially on the conservatives’ selective distribution of the *regium donum* to create what one dissenter called a “pious and loyal servility” among the Presbyterian clergy, see Ian McBride, “Ulster Presbyterians and the Passing of the Act of Union,” in Michael Brown, Patrick M. Geoghegan, and James Kelly, eds., *The Irish Act of Union, 1800: Bicentennial Essays* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003), 68–83 (quotation, 75).

least rhetorically indivisible—were essential prerequisites for favorable leases, steady employment, decent wages, extended credit, rapid promotion, and charity during hard times—as well as for the subtler comforts of social and religious fellowship, for a sense of “community,” that lessened the sting of poverty in psychological if not material ways. The most important signals, especially at first, were made by those who had the greatest resources and power to bestow or withhold rewards, but eventually they were reinforced by sub-élites, social intermediaries, and, in the end, by all those who, consciously or unconsciously, acknowledged their legitimacy. Thus, the early and mid-nineteenth-century transformation of the Harshaws, Presbyterian farmers in West Down, from open sympathizers with Catholic emancipation and repeal into unionists and Orangemen, was instructive and perhaps typical, as its younger members were enmeshed in webs of credit and other obligations to members of the Orange Order, while the older ones were publicly attacked by local clergymen for refusing either to join the Order or to acknowledge the unionist dictum that Protestantism, unionism, and respectability were synonymous and interdependent.⁴¹

Finally, the success of these hegemonic pressures was both revealed and, most important, ensured by the massive size and selective character of early and mid-nineteenth century Ulster Protestant emigration. Between the end of the American Revolution and the beginning of the Great Famine, at least one quarter-million and probably closer to one half-million Protestants—principally small farmers, cottiers, and weavers, and disproportionately Presbyterians—left an Ulster which, near its demographic height in 1831, contained fewer than 1.1 million Protestants.⁴² To be sure, centuries-old links with America and, especially in South and West Ulster, competition from Catholics no doubt encouraged much northern Protestant emigration. Significantly, however, it was precisely in mid-Ulster’s parishes, in the most heavily industrialized regions that in the early 1800s were subject to

41. For the Harshaws’ story, I am grateful to Marjorie Robie, of Ipswich, Mass., who generously shared the results of her important research which, when published, will expand significantly historians’ understanding of the local dynamics of East Ulster Protestant society in the early and mid-1800s.

42. According to computations of the parish data in the First Report of the Commission of Public Instruction, Ireland (see n. 2), in 1831 Ulster contained approximately 1,077,500 Protestants (and 1,197,100 Catholics).

the greatest socioeconomic dislocations and conflicts—and that also were the epicenters of Anglican loyalism and Orangeism—where the largest disparities between Anglican and Presbyterian growth rates and, hence, out-migration occurred.⁴³ Many fugitives were like John McBride, a Presbyterian weaver from County Antrim, who emigrated so he would not “have to stand like a beggar at a manufacturer’s door.”⁴⁴ Others included the predominantly Presbyterian small farmers and cottage artisans whom John Gamble observed, shortly after the Napoleonic Wars, who explained their decisions to emigrate in terms that mixed bitter criticism of landlordism and of post-union Ulster’s social and political hierarchies with republican dreams of the political “freedom” and socioeconomic “independence” they hoped to enjoy in the United States.⁴⁵ And still others were the weavers and laborers who migrated to northern England’s industrial towns where, in the early 1800s, they became notorious for the radicalism of their trade unionism and political activities, and where—in a revealing example of Irish and British élite convergence—they often fell victim to spies and informers whom the British government recruited among yet other Ulster migrants who were members of the Orange Order.⁴⁶

43. For examples—as from Moira parish, in West Down, where in 1766–1831 the Presbyterian proportion of the population fell from 34 percent to merely 19 percent, while the Anglican share soared from 34 percent to 54 percent—see Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling, and David N. Doyle, *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675–1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Appendix 2, “Irish Migration and Demography” (with Liam Kennedy), esp. 663–68.

Significantly, the Anglican-Presbyterian differentials in growth and emigration rates continued into and beyond the famine era, again suggesting that patronage from a landlord class and a magistracy that was overwhelmingly Anglican, plus membership in the Orange Order, may have sheltered poor Anglicans in large part from the economic pressures that encouraged emigration—and in 1845–50 caused severe suffering—among less-favored Protestants. See Kerby A. Miller and Bruce D. Boling, with Liam Kennedy, “The Famine’s Scars: William Murphy’s Ulster and American Odyssey,” *Éire-Ireland* 36:1–2 (Spring/Summer 2001), 98–123; reprinted in Kevin Kenny, ed., *New Directions in Irish-American History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 36–60.

44. John McBride, 9 Jan. 1820, cited in Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 202–3.

45. John Gamble, *Views of Society and Manners in the North of Ireland* (1819; New York: AMS Press reprint, 1981), 367.

46. Kevin Haddick-Flynn, *Orangeism: The Making of a Tradition* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1999), 202–8.

In conclusion, the “taming” of Ulster’s Protestant lower classes would be a prolonged and uneasy development, involving the transformation of “Wild Irish” in America and Britain into respectable “Scotch-Irish” and “loyal Britons,” as well as the creation of staunch unionists in Northern Ireland itself.⁴⁷ Even the latter process would remain bedeviled by intracommunal conflicts—over tenant-right and industrial relations, for example—as Ulster’s Protestant upper, middle, and lower classes sought to define the practical implications of unionism in different ways. From at least the middle of the nineteenth century, however, such issues would be contested almost invariably within the “unionist family”: within a hegemonic framework of shared political, social, and cultural assumptions that had been forged and imposed by Ulster’s Protestant élites in the early 1800s. Thus, “Belfast’s first bomb” in 1816 was by no means the most destructive that would be exploded during the next two centuries. To historians, however, it may signal the importance of a hitherto-unappreciated, intra-communal social conflict, the resolution of which was of momentous importance for the future of Ulster and Irish society.

47. With regard to the development of “Scotch-Irish” identity and community in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America, this argument is elaborated in Miller, et al., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan*, especially in chps. 49–68.