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# Henry Cooke: 'A True Son of the Church of Scotland'

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## Introduction

It has pleased God throughout the ages of the Church to raise up particular men in his service. Men who evidently stood head and shoulders above their counterparts and opponents. Men raised to stand for the truth of God in whatever age God had providentially placed them. Some of these men are better known than others, and while the knowledge of some may be restricted to the locality of their calling, others are known throughout the whole of the Church. The annals of the Church have recorded such names as those of Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Chalmers, who each in their own time and place had to contend for biblical truths and principles.

To this list of such 'men of God', we can unashamedly add the name of Henry Cooke (1788<sup>1</sup>-1868). As a Presbyterian minister in Ireland during the nineteenth century Henry Cooke was raised up by God to be a champion of orthodoxy and a defender of the truth. It was known that during the Arian<sup>2</sup> conflict in Ulster Cooke was hailed as 'the Presbyterian Athanasius',<sup>3</sup> combating with this old enemy of the Trinitarian doctrine.

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<sup>1</sup> This year has been disputed by W.T. Latimer in his *A History of the Irish Presbyterians* (Belfast: R.W. Hunter, 1893). He dates Cooke's birth to 1783.

<sup>2</sup> So named after the Libyan churchman Arius (256–336) who advocated the heresy which maintained that God the Father alone is eternal and that Jesus his Son was simply the first-created creature. Arius's views were rejected by the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. The Nicæan Creed maintained that the Son was of the same substance (*homoousion*) with the Father.

<sup>3</sup> *Henry Cooke: An Introduction* (Great Ulster Scots series, Ulster-Scots Community Network), p. 1 (available online).

Henry Cooke was a reformer who in surveying the history of great reform in the Church was cognizant that with great reform came great conflict. And as he once remarked, ‘Just so was the life of Knox, the apostle of Presbyterianism in Scotland. Controversy, oral and written – banishments and returnings – revilings, accusations, and imprisonments, mark the whole course of his pilgrimage.’<sup>4</sup> There were many in Ulster who drew the analogy between Knox and Cooke; one such was his biographer and son-in-law, Professor J.L. Porter, who wrote: ‘He was a true son of the Church of Scotland, firm in his allegiance to Throne and Constitution, as well as to the doctrines and ecclesiastical polity developed by Knox.’<sup>5</sup> Although there are many interesting facets to the life and work of the Rev. Henry Cooke, it is the intention of this article briefly to consider his life and times with a concentrated emphasis on those major ecclesiastical issues that brought him into contention with the opponents of orthodoxy and the Church.

## I. Brief biographical sketch

### 1. Early years

Henry Cooke was born near to the town of Maghera in County Londonderry on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1788. He was a child of turbulent times, some of the worst recorded in the history of Ireland. It was sometime before his birth that the country was threatened by foreign invasion which led to the formation of a native volunteer force consisting of all ranks of society. But it was the commencement of the French revolution in 1789 that led to some of the worst days. The pernicious principles of the Revolution found a resting place in the hearts of men within the volunteer force which lead to the scenario of a volunteer force formed for the defence of the crown now becoming its most dangerous enemy. The ‘United Irishmen’ were formed in 1791 with the aim to separate Ireland from the crown and form it into a republic. This rebellion was composed mainly of Roman Catholics but there were also some Presbyterians who sympathized actively with the unlawful uprising. Although some Presbyterians were implicated in the rebellion the Church itself remained loyal to the crown.

Henry Cooke’s family were themselves loyal to the crown being connected hereditarily to the Presbyterian Church. His father was an ordinary man of little learning, yet industrious, who was descended from

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<sup>4</sup> J.L. Porter, *Life and Times of Henry Cooke, D.D., LL.D.* (Belfast: Marcus Ward & Co., 1875), p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

a family of English Puritans. His mother Jane Howe was descended from Scottish stock who had settled near Bellaghy. It was from his mother that Cooke derived his desire for knowledge and extraordinary memory along with the skilful ability to communicate his knowledge persuasively. Porter describes her as follows:

Proud of the struggles of her forefathers in defence of faith and freedom, she never forgot fact or legend connected with their history in Scotland and Ulster...To her, Henry was indebted for most of those anecdotes, incidents of Irish History, and scraps of ballad poetry, which in after years he recited with such pathos and power.<sup>6</sup>

It is easy to see how at such an early age Cooke's political and religious principles were formed strongly in his mind. He once remarked of his mother that, 'I received my first instructions in theology, at my mother's side. The Shorter Catechism was her text-book; the *Confession of Faith* was her Christian Institutes; the Bible was her final and sole standard of appeal.'<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Education

After an excellent elementary education in which Cooke was trained in the classics (Latin and Greek) he entered the University of Glasgow in 1802 at the tender age of fourteen. The journey to Glasgow itself was quite an undertaking for a boy of fourteen years, let alone the work that was before him. But he would not be alone; the University of Glasgow was home to many Irish students and in particular, the candidates for the ministry of the Irish Presbyterian Church were chiefly trained there. There is little known of this period in the life of Cooke. What is known is that he completed his undergraduate course in 1805 but due to illness he was prevented from taking his degree. He would return to the University of Glasgow in October 1815.

After being permitted leave by his Presbytery, Cooke attended lectures on moral philosophy, natural history, and anatomy. In November 1816, he entered Glasgow to study theology, chemistry, geology, metaphysics, and medicine. There was a great appetite for learning and Cooke again proved himself studious when he entered Trinity College, Dublin, in 1817 to attend some classes at the Royal School of Surgeons. The emphasis that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

Cooke placed upon education and learning in his own life is evident in the concern he displayed throughout his ministry for a good education for divinity students. In 1835 Dr Cooke was appointed to lecture in Ethics and Natural Theology for the training of students for the ministry. Along with this position he would also hold from 1845 the Presidency of Queen's College, Belfast, and Professorship of Sacred Rhetoric, both which he held till his death.

### 3. Ministerial life

After his completion of a full College curriculum, Cooke was licensed in 1808 by the Presbytery of Ballymena to preach the gospel. Preaching would be the practice of a lifetime now for Cooke who became renowned for his ability in the Sacred Rhetoric. According to Ross:

In order to train his voice he would resort to a glen on the slopes of Cairntogher, a hill near his home. In this natural amphitheatre he would read aloud a poem, a portion of Scripture or declaim an oration of his own composition. It is said that at times he would induce the local shepherd boys to stand at varying distances from him to test the carrying power of his voice.<sup>8</sup>

The Presbyterian congregation at Duneane in County Antrim called Cooke to be the assistant and successor of Rev. Robert Scott. He was duly installed on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1808. This first charge was not a good experience for him. Although only twenty years old, Cooke was of the 'Old Light' theology while the minister and congregation at Duneane were 'New Lights'. His time at Duneane came to an end in November 1810 when Cooke resigned to become a tutor to the Brown family of Kells. It was during his time at Kells that a most remarkable opportunity arose for young Cooke to display his ability in the things that pertain unto God. A communion service at which he was present was taking place in the village of Connor. The minister Rev. Henry Henry normally had two assistants to help conduct the services, but they were unexpectedly withheld from attending. In a strange turn of events, Henry himself became ill and was unable to proceed. The elders, knowing of Cooke's presence, asked if he would officiate. He at once consented and, Porter records,

with perfect calmness, he took up the order where Mr Henry had stopped. He delivered address after address with ease and fluency. In power and pathos, he far excelled their venerated pastor. The people were astonished

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<sup>8</sup> John S. Ross, *Responsible Renewal: Lessons from the Life and Times of Henry Cooke* (Ambassador, 1986), p. 12.

and delighted. There was a variety, an appropriateness, a depth of thought, a pointedness of reference to the time and the peculiar circumstances, a happiness of illustration, and a tenderness of appeal, which showed a mind not only ready but amply stored with the richest materials. That communion was long remembered in Connor, and the impression left on some of the hearers remains to this day.<sup>9</sup>

The news of events at Connor spread far and wide. The nearby congregation of Donegore, being vacant, issued a call to Cooke. This call was better suited to the 'Old Light' theology of Cooke and on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1811, Cooke was installed at Donegore by the Presbytery of Templepatrick.

His time at Donegore was generally a good one for Cooke, and while there he married Ellen Mann in 1813 who would prove to be a supportive helpmeet in the ministry. He also used his time at Donegore to further his personal reading and study; while he was on the 'holy ground' of Ulster Presbyterianism he would give himself to reading good theology. The first theological work read was John Calvin's *Institutes*, followed by Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1679–85) and also Petrus Van Mastricht's *Theoretico-Practica Theologia* (1699).

It was also during this period of his ministry, Porter records, that Cooke became known as a preacher. He states: 'His fame as an orator was already spreading over the church. Sermons preached in Ballymena, Broughshane, Randalstown, and other places had attracted attention. It was seen that he was in earnest and that he was not satisfied to permit the church of John Knox and John Calvin to degenerate into cold rationalism.'<sup>10</sup> As has been mentioned above, it was when a minister in Donegore that leave was granted Cooke from the Presbytery to study in Dublin, and it was during this time that his missionary zeal was evident in helping to establish a congregation in Carlow around fifty miles from Dublin. In recognition of his efforts Reid records that, 'The Synod of Munster, in July 1818, at a meeting held in Dublin, unanimously agreed upon a vote of thanks to Messrs. Cooke and Stewart for "the zeal, prudence, diligence, and ability" with which they had recently supported Carlow.'<sup>11</sup>

Although the congregation at Donegore had borne the absence on several occasions of their beloved minister with patience, a sense of

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<sup>9</sup> Porter, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 3 vols., London: Whittaker and Co., 1853), Vol. 3., p. 468. All subsequent references with be to Vol. 3.

permanence to his absence was now inevitable with his translation to Killyleagh. Cooke accepted a call from the congregation of Killyleagh and resigned his charge at Donegore on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1818. Two days later on 8<sup>th</sup> September, Cooke was installed as the minister of his new parish. Even though Cooke's time in the Presbytery of Templepatrick was good, he did struggle to get men sympathetic to his desire for reform and the eradication of Arian doctrine. But as suggested by Porter, 'the Presbytery of Dromore, under whose ecclesiastical jurisdiction the congregation of Killyleagh was now placed, was a subscribing Presbytery; and among its members Mr Cooke found some prepared to aid him in the work of reform.'<sup>12</sup> The conflict with Arian doctrine upon which Cooke would embark was carried out mainly during his ten years in Killyleagh.

It was in this congregation that he would find a most trusted friend in Captain Sydney Hamilton Rowan who was a ruling elder and who had been influential in bringing Cooke to Killyleagh. Captain Rowan was a fellow soldier in the cause, a man of encouragement and sound judgment, possessed with a theological depth of knowledge and an undaunted courage. He also shared with Cooke an evangelical piety and zeal with the same strong attachment to the Church of Scotland and desire to eradicate Arianism from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

In 1829 a new church was built for Cooke in May Street in Belfast city centre. The opening service of this church building was conducted by Cooke himself on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 1829; such was the demand that this service could only be conducted by ticketed entrance with hundreds grouping themselves around the windows and doors. On Sabbath 8<sup>th</sup> November, Cooke delivered his farewell sermon to the congregation at Killyleagh. In summing up the sentiment of the congregation, Porter writes: 'In Killyleagh, Arianism received its first decided check when Smithhurst was silenced; and in Killyleagh, it received its final overthrow, in so far as concerned the Synod of Ulster, when that reply was made to Montgomery. The people, in bidding farewell to their beloved pastor, had the satisfaction of knowing that, during the ten years of his ministry among them, he had been the means of accomplishing the greatest work ever achieved for the Presbyterian church in Ireland.'<sup>13</sup> Cooke was installed as the minister of May Street on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1829 and was to remain the minister of this congregation for nearly forty years, delivering three sermons each Lord's day.

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<sup>12</sup> Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Henry Cooke was a pastor with a heart for the people. He was known to be of a gentle nature and tenderness of heart in the shepherding of his flock. He was a man of self-denial; during his ministry many assailed him both publicly and privately, but he bore such attacks in silence. It was only when public interests were affected that he thought it necessary to reply.

#### 4. Political interests

As has been mentioned, the early years of Cooke framed both his religious and political outlook. Cooke was a Conservative which brought him some heartache even amongst his Presbyterian brethren, but he was unapologetic for what he believed to be right. There were a number of issues that Cooke involved himself in throughout his time in the public square. He denounced the National Schools and their exclusion of the Bible, established by the Whig government in the early 1830s. He also favoured a measure of 'Catholic Emancipation'. Cooke's biggest political concern was that posed by Daniel O'Connell's agitation in the desire for the Repeal of the Legislative Union. O'Connell hated English rule and was hailed as patriot-chief of the Roman Catholic population of Ireland. Cooke was the man to step up to this challenge to the union; he challenged O'Connell to a public debate. Porter records, that

the news of the challenge sped through Ulster and Ireland. The excitement was unprecedented. Cooke had hitherto been regarded as the leader of the Conservative party. Whigs and Radicals had opposed him with all their might. Now, however, he touched a chord that vibrated through every loyal heart. Liberal Protestants were almost as enthusiastic in supporting the champion of the Union as Conservatives.<sup>14</sup>

This was the ability of Cooke to rally a mixed people under the one banner; his boldness and presence were mesmerising to the people of Ulster. Cooke was successful in bringing together Protestants of every denomination under the one cause; he was in this sense a true ecumenist: the political ideal for Cooke was a pan-protestant alliance.

Although not pleasing to some of his own Presbyterian brethren, Cooke was an influential figure at two demonstrations held at Hillsborough in 1834 and 1867; his decision to attend was based upon a platform of common Protestantism. The demonstration in 1867 was to resist the attacks

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 350.

then being vigorously commenced against the Protestant institutions and endowments of Ireland; this was to be his last appearance before the public and his last speech on a platform.

## 5. Death

The consistency of Dr Henry Cooke was evident to all throughout his life and labours, but also as he approached his time of departure from this world. His biographer, J.L. Porter, who read daily from the Scriptures to the ailing Cooke, remarked that

the very principles which he adopted in 1798, when his country was torn by revolution, he enunciated in 1868, when, from his death-bed, with the eye of a seer, he saw the dark clouds again gathering around her. 'Be faithful to your country, to your religion, and to your God.' These were noble words, and they were worthy of one whom it may be truly said that he lived for his country, for his religion, and for his God.<sup>15</sup>

In the context in which Cooke lived and laboured, these three things could not be separated: his country was a Protestant country, with a Protestant religion, which set forth the only true and living God and Jesus Christ his Son. This is exactly what Cooke had so laboured with much toil to maintain to the end of his life: the right of Christ over a nation, over a people.

In his weakness Cooke would speak of his wondering why in God's gracious purpose he was being kept so long when his desire was to depart. The reason for his being kept may be seen in the effect that the manner of his death had on his congregation and those close to him; it was reported that he faced death with faith, hope, and joy. His deathbed was a sermon that testified clearly to all. The venerable Dr Henry Cooke breathed his last on Lord's Day 13<sup>th</sup> December 1868. He had requested a private funeral, but this wish was not to be honoured. A public meeting of civic authorities passed a resolution that such a great man deserved a civic funeral. The headlines of the Belfast-based *Newsletter* read the next day 'A Prince of the church has fallen'. It was recorded that

the funeral procession to Balmoral stretched two miles, 154 carriages following the hearse. Thousands lined the route, businesses closed and shops along the way to Balmoral cemetery were draped in black.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>16</sup> *Henry Cooke: An Introduction*, p. 30.



## II. A champion of orthodoxy

### 1. The Unitarianism of Presbyterianism in Ireland

Until the year 1702, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland had shown a strict attachment to the system of Divine truth as set forth in its own standards and that of its mother church, the Church of Scotland.<sup>17</sup> On this adherence to the standards, Reid remarks that,

No departure from the doctrines of this admirable confession had yet appeared among the ministers in Ulster, or elsewhere in Ireland; and when, in June of this year, the Rev. Thomas Embyn, one of the ministers of Wood Street, in Dublin, was suspected of denying the deity of the Saviour, the other Presbyterian ministers of the metropolis were greatly alarmed at the prospect of so vital an error creeping in among their congregations. They instituted an inquiry into the matter, and Embyn, having avowed himself an Arian, he was immediately deposed by them from the ministry.<sup>18</sup>

The problem of heterodoxy within Presbyterianism was only to get worse with the formation of 'The Belfast Society'<sup>19</sup> in 1705. The main aim of this Society of ministers was the loosening of subscription to the Confession of Faith under the arguments of a violation of private judgment, and an inconsistency with Christian liberty.

The Synod of 1721 set forth a 'Declaration of belief in the Deity of Christ' which led to a long and violent debate regarding subscription. It was the events of this Synod that led to a designation by which both camps would be known from this time forward: they were respectively referred to as Subscribers and Non-Subscribers. This uneasy alliance, or as others would call it, this indifference to doctrine continued in the Presbyterian Church until the time of Henry Cooke.

The Presbyterian Church was not yet considered as one complete entity but rather three separate parts consisting of the Synod of Ulster,

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<sup>17</sup> That is to say, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1645).

<sup>18</sup> Reid, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> The two leading members of the Belfast Society, Mr Abernethy and Mr Kirkpatrick, had been fellow students with Professor John Simson (1668–1740) in the Divinity Hall in Glasgow University. Professor Simson, and the leniency he received from the Scottish General Assembly (1714, 1715 and 1716) for erroneous views such as his Pelagianism, has been well documented. See, for example, J.H.S. Burleigh, *Church History of Scotland*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), Part IV, chapter II; A.L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church, 1688–1843* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1981), pp. 31-35; Anne Skoczylas, *Mr. Simson's Knotty Case: divinity, politics, and due process in early eighteenth-century Scotland* (Montreal, 2001).

the Synod of Munster, and the Presbytery of Antrim (Unitarian). Reid comments that it ‘had frequently manifested an anxiety to be known as one great Presbyterian fraternity’. He continues, ‘The current of events was, meanwhile, gradually leading to a crisis between the orthodox party and the Unitarians. The Synod of Ulster was silently assuming a more decidedly evangelical character, and was tolerating, with increasing impatience, the deadly heresy with which its energies were paralysed or oppressed.’<sup>20</sup> Andrew R. Holmes sees this as an evangelical awakening, commenting that ‘from the 1790s onwards, the dominance of New Light refinement was eroded gradually by the reawakening of conservative and evangelical Presbyterianism, led by Henry Cooke, the most prominent Presbyterian of the nineteenth century and figurehead of the evangelical movement.’<sup>21</sup>

## 2. Cooke translated to Killyleagh (1818)

Two years after Cooke was installed in Killyleagh an advertisement appeared in all the Belfast newspapers informing of a ‘Unitarian Mission’ to the province. This mission was to be conducted by the Rev. J. Smithhurst who had been appointed by the English Unitarian Fund to visit the province. One of the towns named for the mission was that of Killyleagh and it was here that Smithhurst would face his greatest foe. There were few Arians in Killyleagh but it was thought that a visit from this Apostle of Arianism would revive its declining cause. The first encounter between Smithhurst and Cooke is vividly described by Porter:

A house was engaged; Smithhurst’s visit was announced; friends were summoned from far and near. The hour came, and the meeting was crowded. Among first to take their places were Mr Cooke and Captain Rowan. The lecture was brilliant. New Light views, political as well as theological, were expounded. The orator concluded amid great applause, and the Arians looked round with triumph upon their orthodox brethren. But their triumph was short-lived. Captain Rowan rose and said – ‘I have listened, sir, with deepest attention to your lecture. I have heard your doctrines with much surprise. They are not the doctrines that our pastor teaches. He is here himself to say so, and to tell you and this meeting that the views you have propounded are opposed to the word of God’...Mr Cooke was not to be so taken at a disadvantage. With tact equal to that of his antagonist, he replied:- ‘You, sir, have chosen your own time and

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<sup>20</sup> Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 470.

<sup>21</sup> A.R. Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief & Practice, 1770–1840* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 4.

mode for invading my parish, and stating your views: I shall choose mine for reply. I here declare your doctrines to be false and pernicious. I invite this assembly, and the whole parish of Killyleagh, to my church on next Sunday; you, too, sir, shall be welcome; and I pledge myself fairly to review, and fully refute, by scriptural arguments, every dogma you have this day propounded. When I have thus removed the evil impression now made on the minds of my people, I shall be ready to meet you in public discussion, here or elsewhere in Ulster.<sup>22</sup>

Henry Cooke was a man of his word and the following Lord's Day, with many unable to gain admission due to the crowds, he tactfully placed every point propounded by Smithurst in the light of Scripture. With the instrument of Divine truth, he demonstrated to all the erroneous views that had been so eloquently set forth by Smithurst. The powerful persuasion of Scripture and the pulpit eloquence of Cooke carried the conviction of the people and the first victory had been won for the truth. Cooke also kept to his word that wherever Smithurst would preach he would follow. Pulpits throughout the province were opened to Cooke and it soon became clear that Ulster was too hot a bed for the emissary of the English Unitarian Fund Association. The hopes of the Unitarian party of a revival in their cause were dashed and their champion chased by the formidable champion of orthodoxy.

### 3. Synod of Strabane (1827)

At the 1827 meeting of Synod in Strabane a motion was moved by the Rev. Robert Magill of Antrim that the then clerk, Rev. William Porter, be no longer continued clerk. The reason behind this move was that Porter had publicly avowed himself to be an Arian. This motion led to a fierce debate that did not end until the evening of the following day. A resolution was duly introduced by the Henry Cooke which was, after a hot debate of two days, carried by an overwhelming majority. It is recorded by Reid that 'one hundred and seventeen ministers and eighteen elders voted in its support, two ministers opposed it, and eight ministers declined voting.'<sup>23</sup> This motion was basic and yet brilliant; the members were being asked publicly to acknowledge the article of the Trinity, as set forth in the *Shorter Catechism*. The noose was tightening around the neck of Arianism in the Synod of Ulster by the use of a question familiar to the Presbyterian children of Ulster. The Synod minutes record Cooke's motion:

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<sup>22</sup> Porter, op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>23</sup> Reid, op. cit., p. 479.

We do hold it absolutely incumbent on us, for the purpose of affording a public testimony to the truth, as well as of vindicating our religious character as individuals, to declare, that we most firmly hold and believe the doctrine concerning the nature of God contained in these words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, namely, ‘that there are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory;’ and that we do affix our signatures to this declaration, in the Minutes of the Synod.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Synod of Cookstown (1828)

During the period between the Synods of Strabane and Cookstown, many publications had been set forth and speeches made by the opposing parties. The great leader of the ‘New Lights’, the Rev. Henry Montgomery of Dunmurray had been busy in replying to the teaching of Cooke and the ‘Old Light’ theology with warnings to the Orthodox party to get ready for a struggle. The minutes of Synod record the continued effect of Cooke’s motion during the previous Strabane meeting of Synod:

A Declaration of belief, respecting the doctrine of the Trinity, was required from such Elders as had not been constituent members of the last Synod. Fifty-nine voted ‘believe;’ fourteen voted ‘not;’ two protested against any such question being put; and two declined answering.<sup>25</sup>

On the Friday of the Synod, Cooke moved eight overtures, that according to Reid, were, ‘pledging the synod to establish a committee for the examination of candidates for licence and ordination, with a view to exclude from the sacred office all who either denied the doctrines of the Trinity, original sin, justification by faith, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, or who appeared to be destitute of vital godliness.’<sup>26</sup>

With this motion being seconded by Rev. Samuel Dill of Donoughmore, a debate followed that continued to late afternoon on Saturday. Henry Montgomery waxed eloquent for two hours with an ingenious speech opposing the adoption of the overtures moved by Cooke. The overtures were carried by a majority of 82, with 99 ministers and 40 elders voting ‘pass’, and 40 ministers and 17 elders voting ‘not pass’. What was the significance of these overtures? What did this now mean for the Synod

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<sup>24</sup> *Minutes of the General Synod of Ulster, 1820 to 1830* (Law Agents Copy, A.J. Macrory, Belfast), ‘Minutes of a General Synod, Held at Strabane, 1827’, Fifth Session, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Minutes of the General Synod of Ulster, 1820 to 1830*, ‘Minutes of a General Synod, Held at Cookstown, 1828’, Fifth Session, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Reid, op. cit., p. 480.

of Ulster? Surely this was another major victory for Cooke and orthodoxy. The passing of these overtures was slamming the door shut against the admission of Arians into the ministry of the Synod of Ulster.

### 5. Synod of Lurgan (1829)

A particular event that preceded the Synod of Lurgan was to set the stage for the final struggle between Arianism and orthodoxy. This event was the death in early 1829 of Dr John Young, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Belfast College. Professor Young was replaced by John Ferrie who was a licentiate of the Church of Scotland. Ferrie had views that were contrary to the fundamental doctrines of the *Westminster Confession* and it was thought that Montgomery was influential in having him elected over the favoured Mr Carile. It did not take long for the proceedings to be brought to the subject of the election of Mr Ferrie against which Cooke spoke strongly. It was during this debate that the powers of Montgomery and Cooke were brought into direct collision. Montgomery had come prepared and ready to inflict a mortal wound to this antagonist and his cause. After a commanding three hours from Montgomery, the house was forced to adjourn for a short time with the Orthodox party wondering just what Cooke would do now. He had been personally assailed by Montgomery, who questioned the integrity of his opponent while striving to keep Arianism alive in the Synod of Ulster. The Orthodox party thought their cause to be lost. The scene is described for us by Porter:

At a quarter past four o'clock the Synod reassembled. The crowd was, if possible, denser than before. Cooke rose amid profound silence. He stood in a pew beside the pulpit. Montgomery was seated before him, almost within arm's length. He began in calm and measured sentences to review Montgomery's speech... No description could convey any adequate idea of the speech that followed. The charges of Montgomery were taken up in detail and torn to shreds. His alleged contradictions were shown to be misrepresentations. His most powerful arguments were proved to be plausible sophistries. Cooke had no notes, yet not a point was overlooked. He had no documents, yet his marvellous memory enabled him to supply the designed omissions, to expunge the damaging interpolations of his adversary. His defence was clear, full, triumphant.<sup>27</sup>

Montgomery charged Cooke with being a relentless persecutor, even describing him as a 'blood sucking vampire'. Montgomery especially

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<sup>27</sup> Porter, op. cit., p. 174.

deprecated the introduction of the question into Synod. Montgomery's main objective was to convict Cooke of contradiction in statements made at different times and to different purposes. If Montgomery's charges had of been proved they would have amounted to perjury. He sought to prove that Cooke's sworn testimony before a Parliamentary Committee was directly at variance with his statements at Synod.

When Cooke resumed his seat in the house the assembly arose with great applause in celebration of this victory. In the midst of continued acclamation, lasting for several minutes, Montgomery was forced to bow to the decision of those now standing with their champion. Montgomery was not again to speak or challenge the champion of orthodoxy for the remainder of the sitting. The result of the conflict was now sealed with the Unitarian party's withdrawal from the General Synod. A meeting was held in Belfast on Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> May 1830 where they formed themselves into a distinct body under the name of 'The Remonstrant Synod of Ulster' which later became the 'Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church in Ireland'. The contribution of the Rev. Henry Cooke to the eradication of Unitarianism from the Presbyterian Church cannot be underestimated: he was universally accredited as the chief agent in its demise.

### **III. An advocate of Church principles**

#### **1. Unqualified Subscription**

One of the major factors in the victory for orthodoxy in the Presbyterian church was Cooke's incessant drive for an unqualified subscription to the *Confession of Faith* for all candidates for the ministry. Although a number of victories (1825, 1828, 1832) had been won toward the goal of an unqualified subscription this was not actually realised until 1835. At this meeting of Synod in Cookstown, Reid records that 'the Synod accordingly agreed to a declaratory overture, announcing a determination to receive in future no exceptions or explanations, and to require all about to become licentiates or ministers to sign the prescribed formula.'<sup>28</sup> This was carried by a majority of 97 and with it came the completion of the doctrinal reformation of the Church. This decision was quickly followed by the renewal of communion with the Church of Scotland.

Another result of this doctrinal reformation was one of the most important events in the history of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. In

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<sup>28</sup> Reid, op. cit., p. 502.

1840 a union was effected between the General Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod; and this happy union was one of the results of Cooke's reforms. Porter records the words of Cooke during the Synod of 1839; he wrote: 'Unlike their Scottish brethren, the Seceders of Ireland had adhered to the Confession of Faith, as a whole, without reservation or exception, as it had been originally adopted by the Church of Scotland. The Seceders of Ireland are not Voluntaries.'<sup>29</sup>

## 2. Establishment Principle

Henry Cooke was a strong supporter and defender of the Establishment Principle<sup>30</sup> set down in chapter 23 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Just when the Scottish Establishment was beginning to come under attack from Voluntaryism<sup>31</sup> the controversy would commence also in the province of Ulster. The leader of the Voluntary movement in Scotland was the Dr John Ritchie of Edinburgh. In the spring of 1836, at the invitation of a small number of adherents, Dr Ritchie was to bring the crusade for Voluntaryism to Belfast.

The first meeting of these two opponents was on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1836 at a planned meeting of the Voluntaries that Dr Ritchie was to address. It had been thought that Cooke would be present at this meeting and he did not disappoint. It would seem that Ritchie expected an easy victory as his address was reported as light and shallow. Cooke arose to speak as soon as Ritchie had finished. Porter records some of Cooke's remarks:

He said Dr Ritchie had invaded Ireland; he had come to assail a principle which was dear to nine-tenths of the Protestants of Ulster; he must, therefore, be prepared to discuss its merits. To refuse would be cowardice. His very presence in Belfast was a challenge; his speech that evening was a challenge; and now he, Dr Cooke, was there to accept the challenge, and meet him in fair and open controversy.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Porter, op. cit., p. 325.

<sup>30</sup> This principle sets forth the concept that God is the sovereign ruler over both Church and state; therefore, these two spheres of Church and state are related, and should mutually support and encourage one another without intrusion into each other's sphere of governance.

<sup>31</sup> The Voluntary Church Association 1832, held 'that a compulsory support of Religious Institutions is inconsistent with the nature of religion, the Spirit of the Gospel, the express appointment of Jesus Christ and the civil rights of man'; see G.F.C. Jenkins, 'Voluntary Church Association', in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 846.

<sup>32</sup> Porter, op. cit., p. 296.

A public meeting was arranged for discussion on the evening of 17<sup>th</sup> March. Dr Ritchie was to start the proceedings which saw him speaking through to half-past ten that evening. Cooke began to speak and did so until the light of the next morning broke through into the meeting. The meeting was adjourned until six o'clock that evening and the hall was quickly filled to capacity and more. Cooke picked up where he had left off as if there had been no break in his speech; he proceeded at great length to lay down and enforce his arguments and proofs. Cooke spoke for five hours. Ritchie's reply occupied three hours. The debate continued in brief addresses and replies until six the next morning. Porter again describes the scene:

Point after point, objection after objection, was brought forward by Dr Ritchie with much tact and skill: but each argument and statement was placed under the knife of a logical anatomist, cut in pieces, and held up a subject for surprise and laughter to every thoughtful man...He (Cooke) reduced his argumentation to a complete absurdity. And the debate closed, leaving a deep impression on the mind of every impartial witness, that the cause of Voluntaryism was indefensible, and that Dr Ritchie had received such a castigation, as the man merited who came to disturb the peace of the Churches and ministers of another country.<sup>33</sup>

Just as it was with Smithhurst, the apostle of Unitarianism, so it was with Ritchie, the giant of Voluntaryism. Both were publicly overcome and chased from the province never to be seen again in Ulster. The defeat of Ritchie at the hands of Cooke was received with delight by the Church of Scotland which it duly reported in the *Church of Scotland Magazine*, saying, 'We were previously aware of Dr Cooke's pre-eminent powers as a controversialist and debater; but our perusal of this report has increased our admiration an hundredfold.'<sup>34</sup> As far as Cooke was concerned Voluntaryism only leads to national atheism.

### 3. Exclusive Psalmody

Henry Cooke was raised upon the family diet of the exclusive use of the biblical Psalms both in private and public as produced by the reformed Church of Scotland. But upon his entrance into the ministry in 1807, paraphrases had begun to be used in the public worship of the Church. For a time Cooke embraced the use of a selection of paraphrases and hymns in public worship, but he was soon to return to the principle of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 311-313.

<sup>34</sup> Cited by Porter, *ibid.*, p. 315.



his childhood. Cooke was to put into writing 'A Testimony to Exclusive Psalmody' when he was requested to write a preface for the Irish edition of *The True Psalmody* (1861).<sup>35</sup>

Of this request, Cooke writes in the preface: 'I have most cheerfully complied; – partly on account of the importance of the subject – partly on account of the talent displayed in the work – and partly that, by a detail of my own experience, I may add my humble testimony to a great principle.' He goes on to add:

Now, while I set not up my own convictions as a rule or measure of the consciences of others, I cannot fail to pity those who can find, as they assert, so little of Christ in the inspired psalmody of the Bible, that they must seek and employ an uninspired psalmody as exhibiting Him more fully. Our Lord Himself found Himself in the psalms – (Luke xxiv. 44, 45) – and thereby 'opened His disciples' understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures.' Surely what was the clearest light to *their* eyes, should be light to *ours*.

In concluding, Cooke touches on the issue that was close to his heart and one against which he contended in his ministry, that of doctrinal error. He concludes, 'I never had discovered any compilations which I could pronounce free from serious doctrinal errors. This I perceived to be especially the case with not a few of the Paraphrases and Hymns, authorized by the Church of Scotland. If a doctrinal error be, at all times, dangerous, how much more when it is stereotyped in the devotions of the sanctuary!'

## **IV. A supporter of the Church of Scotland**

### **1. Visit of Thomas Chalmers to Ireland**

In the midst of the Arian controversy in the Presbyterian Church, Dr Chalmers made a visit to Belfast on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1827. The object of his visit was to open the new Presbyterian Church of Fisherwick Place, Belfast; and the following day one in Dromara. As would be expected, the views of Dr Chalmers on how Arianism ought to be pursued were eagerly sought by the Presbyterians of Ulster. A report that had gathered much momentum was that Dr Chalmers' policy would have been opposite to that of Cooke.

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<sup>35</sup> This was a work produced by 'the ministers and elders' of the Reformed and United Presbyterian Churches of Philadelphia (1859). The Irish edition had prefaces from Rev Henry Cooke, D.D., LL.D; Rev John Edgar, D.D., LL.D (Seceder Minister); and the Rev. Thomas Houston, D.D. (Covenanter Minister). See *The True Psalmody* (Belfast, 1861).

It did not take long for the enemies of Cooke to proclaim that the most celebrated of living Presbyterian divines disapproved of the proceedings of the Orthodox party in the Synod of Ulster.

Could this be the truth, or was it the whole truth? Cooke, on being familiar with the common opinion being published abroad, sought out Dr Chalmers for himself and records his findings. Porter reports Cooke's words: 'When Dr Chalmers did come to Ireland, I had the pleasure of listening to his unrivalled eloquence; and never could I have wished for anything more sincerely than that you had enjoyed the same advantage.' Having seized the opportunity to discuss the common reports with him, Cooke could say: 'I can, then, confidently state that Dr Chalmers did not disapprove of the conduct of the Orthodox members of the Synod; that, with the modesty which is the constant characteristic of a great mind, he acknowledged he knew little of the state of our church, that he did not feel qualified to offer a decided advice or opinion.'<sup>36</sup>

What is clear is that Dr Chalmers agreed with Cooke. He did not approve of the existence of Arians in the membership of the body. There was, though, a difference of opinion between these two great men, and that was on the procedure of discipline. Chalmers preferred to allow 'the present Arianism of the Synod to die a natural death', whereas Cooke, who could not adopt Chalmers' sentiments, would follow a more decided course of discipline. This was not the only issue on which Chalmers and Cooke disagreed. R. Finlay Holmes remarks that 'Chalmers and Montgomery were on the same side on another divisive issue, however, the question of Catholic emancipation. In his Fisherwick sermon Chalmers had attacked what he considered to be the folly of enlisting "the forces of the statute book on the side of truth".'<sup>37</sup>

## 2. Sympathy with the Church of Scotland

By his defeat of Dr Ritchie and the Voluntary party in Ulster, Cooke showed himself to be one whose principles were in line with those of the Non-Intrusion party of the Church of Scotland. His triumph over Dr Ritchie had important ecclesiastical implications, chiefly being that the degenerate daughter of the Old Kirk of Scotland was now restored in communion with her.

In recognition of this restoration Cooke, along with a number of others, was appointed to attend the meeting of General Assembly of the

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<sup>36</sup> Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>37</sup> R. Finlay Holmes, *Henry Cooke* (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1981), p. 54.

Church of Scotland in May 1836. Not surprisingly it was Cooke who was asked to address the Assembly and after giving a brief history of the connection between the Churches, he thanked the Assembly:

In the name of my brethren who have deputed me to the office – in the name of the Synod of Ulster, which we here represent, I return to you, and this venerable Assembly, our deep-felt thanks. After years of separation we are reunited; and though in different lands, and in different outward circumstances, we form, in spirit and communion, one Presbyterian Church.<sup>38</sup>

These words spoken by Cooke were not empty and shallow but sincere words from his heart. His love for the 'Mother Church' would be evident in his actions and support during her difficult times and struggles which led to her Disruption. In showing support for the rights of the Church of Scotland, Cooke spoke on several occasions in both Scotland and Ulster. He also sought to use his political influence with the Conservatives in London, and yet some still charged him with putting the interests of the Conservative party over that of the Church. Even with these unfounded charges, Cooke continued to have correspondence with Thomas Chalmers, William Cunningham, and Robert Candlish who pressed upon him the cause. Candlish wrote:

I have no doubt your private access to Government may avail much; and if you get a decision on our principle, you will do us an inestimable favour.<sup>39</sup>

### 3. The Free Church of Scotland Assembly, 1843

Right until the eleventh hour Cooke believed he could be useful in resolution and prevent the disruption of the Church of Scotland. He went to Edinburgh and was present for the General Assembly of 18<sup>th</sup> May 1843. He was present when Dr David Welsh addressed a Protest, which led to the disruption of the Church that day, to the Lord High Commissioner of the House, and he joined the long file of ministers and elders who followed in support. It must be noted that Cooke was not a deputy to this Assembly but was present out of concern for truth and the Church. Cooke had no claim to a seat in the Free Assembly but the new Moderator, Thomas Chalmers, requested that he address the court.

In addressing the Free Assembly Cooke commended the gathering for their honouring of their fathers' memory, for their regard to principles,

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<sup>38</sup> Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.

and for their obedience to the great Head of the Church. His words were encouraging and prophetic:

Though I do not stand in the shoes of a prophet, I think I may assume, that in these results there will be no disaster – that it will bring a thousand blessings in its train – and that though, in one sense, it may have diminished the number of your hands, it will not diminish your courage or your powers.

He continued:

I felt compelled, by a sense of personal and of general duty, to come here and witness what the Lord is doing with and by you. I conceived it to be my personal duty to bear...my personal testimony of full approbation to the principles of the Church of Scotland which you have long been struggling to maintain, and my full approbation of the decisive step which you as a Church have at length taken.<sup>40</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The Rev. Dr Henry Cooke was a mighty soldier in the fields of spiritual battles and it could surely be said of him without exaggeration that ‘he fought the good fight’, and that he warred ‘a good warfare’ in the cause of truth. Many superlatives have been applied to him by friend and foe: whether to his powers of mind, his eloquence or oratory, his commanding presence, or his consistency in contending. But the question remains whether or not Cooke is a recognisable figure today among Ulster or Scottish Presbyterians? It must be confessed that most are ignorant of his person and achievements, and the few who do know of him admire from some distance.

How would he describe himself? What would he make of all this acclaim and praise? Although these are rightly due to him, this ‘true son of the Church of Scotland’ described himself thus before his death upon the occasion of a visitor from Scotland who came just to look upon this venerable servant: ‘Then you see an old man going home – you see a great sinner saved by Divine grace – you see a frail mortal about to put on immortality.’

As his frail mortality was about to put on immortality, he was to say to another revered visitor: ‘I die in the full assurance of understanding; in the full assurance of faith, and in the full assurance of hope.’<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843* (Edinburgh: W.P. Kennedy, 1843), p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Porter, *op. cit.*, pp. 496-7.