

famine and associated problems with tenancy and tithes discussed above led to a very lawless condition in much of Ireland to which the government responded by suspending *Habeas Corpus* and passing Insurrection Acts.

Protestants - Presbyterians

These were the main issues affecting Catholics in Ireland. What about the Protestants at this time? We will see that at this time they began to reach out more to their Catholic neighbours with the gospel.

The main-line Presbyterian church, strongest in the North, was riddled by Arianism². However, in the nineteenth century this situation underwent a remarkable change, thanks largely to the work of Henry Cooke (1788-1868) who travelled up and down the North of Ireland in the wake of a “New Light” (Arian) travelling teacher. Cooke refuted the arguments of this travelling teacher wherever he went. Cooke drew large crowds to hear him and convinced the people to stick to the biblical teaching on the deity of Christ. In Ulster the Presbyterians were purged of Arianism by a split in 1829 which saw the Arians depart to form their own Presbytery (which quickly dwindled away) but the Southern Presbyterian churches were not connected with Ulster and declined because of Arianism. Southern Presbyterians had been massacred in the 1798 rebellion to a greater extent than in Ulster and few were left in nineteenth century. In the South it was the faithful ministers withdrew to form their own presbytery.

Thomas Charles’ Visit 1807³

In 1807 the Irish Society asked Mr. Thomas Charles⁴ of Bala to visit Ireland with three other gentlemen⁵ in order to ascertain whether it would be best to try to educate the Irish and reach them with the gospel in English or in Irish. The society wanted a report on the spiritual state of Ireland which they could use as the basis for a plan of action for helping the Irish, especially by promoting the reading of the Bible among them. The tour that the four men undertook was quite short (only about a month) and they seem to have travelled mainly in the southern half of Ireland but Thomas Charles was horrified by what he found. In his diary⁶ he describes how in Ireland the Church of England (Anglican) clergy “...glory in wealth and excess, forgetting their duties:...” and although he met at least one exception to this depressing rule their efforts at evangelism were unsuccessful. Among non-conformists he found serious errors – Sandemanianism, perfectionism – were widespread and those not affected by these errors were “...full of disputes and quarrels and because of this it is not strange that only a little good is done.” Horrified that the tiny Protestant community was spending its time and effort bickering rather than evangelising the vast numbers of Catholic poor he exclaimed “...their [the poor] ignorance of the Bible, the only substantial and lasting source of comfort, affected my mind intensely. O they have been neglected! Truly lamentable!” As far as the common people were concerned he found that “...The poor in their wretched cabins are quite moral and free in their thoughts but completely ignorant of God’s Word.” The priests did not encourage the people to learn to read because as Mr. Charles explained, “...the priests make a spoil of the people keeping them in ignorance for this purpose.” Catholic services were very well attended and Thomas Charles even went to one in an effort to discover as much as he could about

2 See Chapter 6 ‘Rationalism and Arianism’.

3 I have described this episode in some detail because it is not often that such a trustworthy source of information is available in Irish history. Here we have an independent contemporary Christian witness who describes the situation he as he found it, dealing with exactly the issues which interest the Christian student of history most.

4 This is the Thomas Charles who features in the well-known story *Mary Jones and her Bible*.

5 His co-travellers were Mr. Bogue (independent minister in Gosport); Mr. Hughes (Baptist Minister in London) and Mr. Mills (a churchman but not in orders).

6 Extracts from the diary quoted here in translation are to be found in *Tadau Methodistiaidd*. [Methodist Fathers] (1895)