



Background

The Presbyterian Church has of course been the biggest, and most influential, denomination throughout those four centuries, with Revival in 1625 and congregations being formed long before the official Presbytery of 1642. The famous emigrant ship Eagle Wing was led by four Ulster- Scots Presbyterian ministers (from Bangor, Newtownards, Ballywalter and Killinchy) when she sailed from Groomsport in 1636. Presbyterian Covenanters fleeing from persecution in Scotland in the 1660s and 1670s were regularly arrested at Donaghadee. In spite of this, Covenanter “United Societies” could be found in Newtownards in the late 1680s, under the ministry of David Houston - to whom the Earl of Mount Alexander turned for protection following the discovery of the infamous “Comber Letter” in 1688.

Even the more recent denominations, such as the Brethren, can trace an important part of their history to Scotland - many Gospel Halls sprang up here in the late 1800s following a visit to Stranraer by a Newtownards man called John Patton .

Throughout the 20th Century, many Scottish clergy, ministers and preachers visited the Ards and north Down; the famous Bangor-born evangelist WP Nicholson (1876-1959) was trained in Scotland before spending his life fervently and fruitfully preaching in America and back home in Ulster. Founded in 1937, the Bangor Worldwide Missionary Convention has hosted famous Scottish preachers like Duncan Campbell and James Alexander Stewart (whose parents had both been born in Ulster).

The world-famous missionary Amy Carmichael was born in Millisle in 1867 into an Ulster-Scots family – she went on to become a campaigner for the rights of women and children in India, and a renowned author. The parents of great hymnwriter Robert Lowry emigrated to the USA from Killyleagh/Killinchy in the early 1800s. Like so many Ulster emigrants, Robert Lowry and Amy Carmichael are sadly better known overseas than they are here.

The Ulster-Scots link has always been a two-way flow over at least four centuries, not just a one-way single migration in the early 1600s. As a brief introduction, here is a summary of 14 of the most historic Ulster-Scots churches which dates from the early 1600s. One of WP Nicholson’s Glasgow tutors, Alexander Whyte, sets the scene: “There were many choice Christians in that day in Scotland. Were there ever more, for its size, in any land or in any church on the face of the earth? I do not believe there ever were. Next to that favoured land that produced the Psalmists and the Prophets, I know no land that, for its numbers, possessed so many men and women of a profoundly spiritual experience, and of an adoring and heavenly mind, as Scotland possessed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries... we need go no further than Samuel Rutherford’s letter-bag; for, when we open it, what rich treasures of the religious life pour out of it! What minds and what hearts those men and women had!



And how they gave up their whole mind and heart to the life of godliness in the land, and to the life of God in their own hearts!...What was it that raised up in Scotland such a crop of ripe and rich saints? Who are these, and whence came they?

Churches are often the oldest buildings in any community. Establishing places of worship was important for James Hamilton, Hugh Montgomery and the first Ulster-Scots settlers, from their arrival at Donaghadee in May 1606 onwards.

Hamilton was a minister's son from Dunlop in Ayrshire. Just a few miles away the Montgomeries had built the "Auld Kirk" at Beith, also in Ayrshire, and near their home castle of Braidstane – "Auld Kirk" even had a gallery called "The Braidstane Laft". Both Hamilton and Montgomery recognised the importance of faith to community life in their new Ulster settlement.

Patrick and the Ancient Churches

Since earliest times, ancient churches have been built in the Ards and north Down. St Patrick is said to have been born around 385AD, possibly spending his early years near Dumbarton just outside Glasgow. For centuries a village, now a suburb, called "Old Kilpatrick" has recorded this tradition. Patrick arrived in Ulster around 432 AD and died around 461AD.

Perhaps the most important, yet forgotten, Patrick site in the area is the small graveyard and bay at Templepatrick just south of Donaghadee. It is said to have been the place where Patrick arrived in Ulster – and significantly is just across the North Channel from Portpatrick in Scotland, which Scottish tradition holds is the place where he sailed from. William Montgomery, the first historian of the Ulster-Scots, wrote in 1683 about: "ye ruins of a small church, called Templepatrick, where it is said St Patrick first landed in Ireland; there is his well also, and other traditions among ye Irish concerning it ." Other important early Christian sites in Northern Ireland are at Nendrum on Mahee Island just a few miles south of Comber, said to have been founded in the 5th Century, and Bangor Abbey which traces its origins to St Comgall in 558AD. Both Nendrum and Bangor Abbey have Patrick stories associated with them.

Anglo-Norman Churches and Abbeys

Over six centuries later, when the Anglo-Normans arrived in Ulster in the 1100s, a number of important abbeys were built. Anglo-Norman knight Sir John de Courcy arrived in 1177, and his wife Affreca had Grey Abbey built in 1193. Grey Abbey had a close relationship with both Holmcultram Abbey near Carlisle, and Melrose Abbey in the Scottish Borders (where King Robert the Bruce's heart was buried in 1330).



Within 130 years, from 1142 – 1273, the Cistercians built two abbeys in east Ulster (Grey Abbey in 1193 and Comber Abbey in 1199) and three just across the water in south west Scotland (Dundrennan Abbey in 1142, Glenluce Abbey in 1191 and Sweetheart Abbey in 1273).

Today, St Mary's Parish Church in Comber has some of the original Comber Abbey stones on display; other stones in the Church bear the same masons marks as stones at Grey Abbey – showing the common origin of the two abbeys. Other Ulster abbeys built by the Anglo-Normans in the Ards and north Down included Black Abbey, Movilla Abbey, Holywood Priory and Newtownards Priory. The old churches at Whitechurch (Ballywalter) and Ballyhalbert are also thought to have been established by Anglo-Normans.

By the mid 1300s, the old Anglo-Norman families had been replaced by the O'Neills of Clondeboya as the dominant power in the area.

From Reformation to Ruin

During the 1500s the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe – the Bible was translated into the languages of the people, the printing press made it widely available for people to read for themselves, and as a result the authority of the Popes and Church were challenged.

However, the Reformation was not as effective in Ireland as it had been in either Scotland or England.

In 1544 King Henry VIII had “dissolved” the monasteries of England and Ireland, and his daughter, Queen Elizabeth I, came to the throne in 1559. In 1571 Elizabeth granted her persuasive Secretary of State, Sir Thomas Smith, an enormous area of land in east Ulster.

A map drawn for Smith shows 20 churches, abbeys and castles in the Ards and north Down . The next year, just after 100 Englishmen arrived in Ulster as Smith's tenants, the local Irish chieftain Sir Brian O'Neill famously burned the abbeys of the Ards and North Down to prevent them being used as garrisons. In the decades that followed, ongoing English / Irish strife left the area depopulated and wasted. The former church buildings lay ruined until the arrival of the Ulster-Scots in 1606, as the Montgomery Manuscripts confirm:

“...Then came the revolt of O'Neill, during the progress of which that chieftain literally swept the country with fire and sword, burning the abbeys of Bangor, Movilla, and Comber, together with all other structures which might be made available as garrisons for the English...The abbeys and other houses then destroyed were never afterwards repaired, and when Sir Hugh Montgomery and his colonists arrived, only the walls remained...”

The interpretive signage at Newtownards Priory, Grey Abbey and Holywood Priory confirms the O'Neill burnings. As the 1500s drew to a close, religious life in Ireland and Ulster in particular was in a shocking condition – “the churches are ruined and fallen down to the ground in all parts of the kingdom, there is no divine service, no



christening of children, no receiving of the sacrament, no Christian meeting or assembly, no, not once in a year...”.

“scarce and starving – a country without happiness and without religion... ”

Ulster-Scots and the Church of Ireland

Within the Established Church / Church of Ireland, a number of new bishops emerged. The most important of these was James Ussher (1581 – 1656) who was ordained in 1601 aged just 21. Throughout his education in Dublin he had been taught by two Scottish Presbyterians – James Hamilton (the later “Founding Father” of the Ulster-Scots) and James Fullerton (a former student of the great Scottish Reformer Andrew Melville).

They had set up a school in the city in 1587, and in 1591 became founding Fellows at the new Trinity College.

Ussher went on to become Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, and his influence would help the Ulster-Scots Presbyterians in the decades that followed.

Ulster-Scots Bishops

In the early 1600s, a series of Scots were appointed to Bishopricks in Ireland:

- 1604 - Denis Campbell
(Bishop of Derry, Raphoe and Clogher)
- 1607 - George Montgomery
(Sir Hugh Montgomery’s younger brother,
Bishop of Derry, Raphoe and Clogher)
- 1610 - Andrew Knox
(Bishop of Raphoe)
- 1612 - James Dundas
(Bishop of Down and Connor)
- 1613 - Robert Echlin
(Bishop of Down and Connor)
- 1620 - James Spottiswoode
(Bishop of Clogher)
- 1635 - Henry Leslie
(Bishop of Down and Connor)



The Arrival of the Ulster-Scots

When Queen Elizabeth I of England and Ireland died in March 1603, she was succeeded by her ambitious relative, King James VI of Scotland. News of the Queen's death was brought to him by James Hamilton, and the King was escorted to London for his coronation in July 1603 by an entourage which included Hugh Montgomery. The new King James I of England and Ireland would make a number of decisions which would change life in Ulster forever. Hamilton and Montgomery – through their own finance - were to lead the first permanent lowland Scottish settlement in Ulster, which began in May 1606.

From Ruin to Restoration

They arrived at Donaghadee, and built a "low stone walled house" there. Then they headed around the "great bog" towards Newtownards, passing the ruin of Movilla Abbey on the way.

After repairing the stump of a ruined castle, the old Dominican Priory of Newtownards was the first church building to be restored by the new Ulster-Scots settlers, and by 1607 it was once again ready for worship. This was a new, Scottish, Presbyterian-influenced theology.

However, it would be another 36 years until there was an official Presbytery in Ulster (established in 1642 in Carrickfergus) so the first generation of these new settlers, whilst mostly Presbyterian in outlook, worshipped in restored Church of Ireland / Episcopal parish churches.

This period in Ulster is sometimes called the "Prescopalian" era.