

The Evidence of old Irish Session-Books on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

REID, in his *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, says that the first ministers of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland 'adhered to the ritual of the Church of Scotland'. This would mean that they used the *Book of Common Order* (1564), often referred to as 'Knox's Liturgy'. The writer has not been able to trace a specific reference by name to this Service-Book, but there are numerous references in contemporary writings to the use of the Scottish form. As the *Book of Common Order* (1564) was the only form in use in Scotland at this time, these must be taken as referring to it. However, it was probably not very closely followed, as Brownist influence was strong in Ireland.

There is, on the other hand, evidence that Calvin's Genevan *La Forme* was used in Ireland, because *La Forme des Prieres Ecclesiastiques* was bound with the Psalter for the use of Huguenot exiles. The last edition, known to the writer, to be published in Ireland was *Les Pseaumes De David Mis en vers Francois avec La Liturgie*, printed in Dublin in 1731. Apart from a few slight verbal changes this is identical with Calvin's *La Forme des Prieres Ecclesiastiques* as used in Geneva. These exiles were strongly Calvinistic, and after a time many of them joined the Presbyterian Church.

The first Presbytery met in Carrickfergus on 10th June, 1642; and in July, 1646, the Presbytery of Ulster adopted the Westminster *Directory for the Public Worship of God*. Here it should be pointed out that it was not adopted in the Westminster form, but as approved by the Church of Scotland in her Acts of 3rd and 7th February, 1645. In this connection there is ample extant evidence to prove that the various qualifying clauses in these two Acts of the Scottish Assembly were adopted in Ireland.

As it is sometimes incorrectly stated that the first revision of the Westminster *Directory for the Public Worship of God* is the English Presbyterian *Directory of Public Worship* in 1898, it may be pointed out that the Synod of Ulster issued a revision of it in 1825, the General Assembly

of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland issued revisions in 1841, 1859, and 1868, and the Remonstrant Synod in 1857 and 1904. All these Irish revisions adhere strictly to the original in substance and structure, but, in parts, make considerable verbal alteration.

With regard to the Westminster *Directory* it is interesting to note that ruling elders-elect in Cahans on 12th April, 1752, were asked, before appointment :—

‘Do you own and approve of the Directory for public and family worship compiled by the Westminster divines approven and established by Acts of General Assembly and parliament of Scotland as agreeable to God’s Word, 1645?’

These three works—*Book of Common Order* (1564), *La Forme des Prieres Ecclesiastiques*, and *Directory for the Public Worship of God* (1645)—supply the background of public worship in Irish Presbyterianism.

This fact is borne out by a study of contemporary writings and the old Session records. As the latter are almost unknown to most people the writer wishes to give a synopsis of their evidence in this article, so far as Holy Communion is concerned.

The old Session records in Ireland are scanty, only sixteen dating from prior to 1800, being known to the writer. With their earliest dates in brackets, they are :—Templepatrick (1646), Antrim (1674), Kirkdonald (1678), Carnmoney (1686), Connor (1693), Larne and Kilwaughter (1699), Drumbo (1699), Aghadowey (1702), Dawson’s Bridge and Magherafelt (1703), Third Belfast (Rosemary Street) (1725), Cahans (1751), Abbey (Dublin) (1753), Carland (1754), Glascar (1768), Anahilt (1775), and Boardmills (1784). Boardmills, Cahans, and Glascar belonged to the Secession Synod, and the others to the Synod of Ulster.

The reason for the loss of so much useful historical data was the difficult position of the Church. The most interesting illustration is that of the Minutes of the Laggan Presbytery, which were eagerly sought for by the High Sheriff of County Donegal and the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1681. The Laggan Presbytery had been guilty of the peculiarly heinous crime in February, 1681, of ordering a public fast to be observed in all their congregations. Although this fast was purely religious, and had no political significance whatever, several members of the Presbytery—Trail (Ballindrait), Alexander (Raphoe), Campbell (Ray), and Heart (Taboin)—were arrested and brought to Dublin

for examination before the Lord Lieutenant and Privy Council. During the trial, as it was thought that the Laggan Minutes might supply evidence to their disadvantage, a search was made for the Presbytery Minute-Book. The Minute-Book was hidden, and the authorities failed to find it. The four members were kept for eight months in prison, and were condemned to pay fines for the crime of proclaiming a religious fast. The book remained in its hiding place undiscovered for years. In such circumstances it is a matter for gratitude that it was not destroyed.

Templepatrick Session-Book, also, bears testimony to a similar state of affairs. The following entries speak for themselves :—

' 1652. This blank was the time of our minister's trouble, being pursued by orders from Cromwell's army, which continued so that they were debarred of public preaching from 1st of August, 1650, until May, 1652 '.

' 1670. No minutes were taken from Dec., 1660, until June, 1670, on account of the persecution of the prelates '.

In such circumstances it is natural that many old records would be hidden and so lost, and sometimes, for safety's sake, even destroyed. Possibly, therefore, one ought to be thankful that as many as sixteen have survived. Further, as is only to be expected, they vary considerably in value.

The Kirk-Session determined when the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper would be celebrated, and, in some districts, for example, Aghadowey, their purpose was announced to the congregation for 'six sabbaths'. The 1825 Irish *Directory* says 'It is proper that public notice should be given to the congregation four Lord's days before the administration of this ordinance '.

The Session, also, decided how many Communion Seasons would be observed each year. On 14th October, 1707, the Connor minute states, ' After Lecture the Session takes to consideration what conveniency and inconveniency there is in having two Sacraments of the Lord's Supper in year and having communed and heard each one another in both temporal and spiritual affairs they agreed to have two Sacraments yearly and the first occasion to be the last Sabbath of November next following '.

It is sometimes stated that Communion was celebrated only once, or twice, each year. This is true congregationally, but not for the communicants, as four or five congregations united at the Communion season and had a Communion on successive weeks. The following extract from the Larne

and Kilwaughter Session Book for 15th June, 1701, illustrates this :—' This day it was intimated that we will not have Sermon next Lord's Day because Mr Ogilvie will be at Carncastle communion and people exhorted to repair thither for hearing of the Word and communicate (as many) as may be admitted and are willing '. This shows that members might communicate as often as eight, or ten, times each year.

The Communion services began with a Fast Day, as a day of preparation, and concluded with a Thanksgiving Service on the Monday. The following account is taken from Carnmoney on 26th June, 1698 :—' Good providence ordering the affairs of this congregation the people being visited and examined intimation was made two sabbaths preceding that we proposed to administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in this place, we had the fast day on the 23rd instant Mr Jo M'Bride was a helper, helps at the Communion were Mr Tho Cobham Mr Jas Brice and Mr Jo Malcom. Mr Malcom began on Saturday Mr Brice preached, Mr Cobham began on sabbath morning. There were very nigh 8 Tables which make almost 600 Communicants the people were orderly and much of God's presence was seen at the work. Mr Malcom preached on sabbath after Tables. Mr Brice began on Monday and Mr Cobham closed the work '.

For the celebration of Communion long tables were brought in and placed in the aisles. When a new meeting-house or church was being built great care was taken to make adequate liturgical and architectural arrangements for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This may be illustrated by the Carnmoney minute of 28 April, 1697. ' God in his providence having enabled the parish to build a meeting-house and our affairs requiring a speedy dividing the said meetinghouse, the Session (that every one may be satisfied) have appointed Pat. Birney and Wm Starrat two of their number with whom they desired Math Johnson and Math Russell to confer and to see the whole house exactly measured and that David Ferguson and Robt Barnet see the through gate, i.e. room going through the house aisle and all consisting of 7 feet in breadth be measured off for the best conveniency of communicating when the Lord is pleased to allow us such a mercy '.

From the beginning all the preliminaries for Communion were the responsibility of the Session. They were respon-

sible for making suitable arrangements for an orderly celebration. The following minute is of special interest in that it is the earliest extant Session record of a Communion in Irish Presbyterianism. It is the arrangements made on 28th June, 1647, by Templepatrick Session :—

‘ For the ordering of matters at the communion, for keeping the elements drawing the wine, and cutting of the bread Adam M’Nielie. Gilbert berrihill to attend Adam M’Nielie for reaching the elements to the servers at the table.

‘ For receiving the tokens at the table Gilbert M’Nielie and John Petigrew.

‘ For serving with the bread Major Ellis and Lievt Lyndsay, major at the East door, Lievt at the West for serving with the cups Mr Shaw and Hugh Kennedy.

‘ Thomas Windrum and Thomas taggart for keeping the west door that all may be ‘ kept out ’ that wants tokens. John inglis and Thomas Loggan for the East door that none come in at that door but go out immediately from the tables.

‘ Hugh Sloan and Guian Herberson for filling the cups and delivering them to the hands of the elders, and Alexr Coruth to relieve them by turns.

‘ Collectors at the barn Wm Wallace and Wm M’Cord, and to attend them Mr Shaw and Hugh Kennedy. Major Ellis and Lievt Lyndsay to attend the collectors at the church. Hugh Sloan is to provide the table cloths. He is likewise to go to Carrickfergus with Wm. M’Cord about the elements ’.

The Kirk Session were responsible for supplying Communion plate. On 18th January, 1703/04, Aghadowey minutes record :—‘ Our Session on June the 8th having lodged the sum of thirty shillings in our treasurer’s hand to be disbursed for flagons and cups. An opportunity offering Thomas Corbett was employed to send for them from Dublin which he did and they are now come and by his account amounts to the sum of two pounds, eleven shillings, and ten pence for carriage and all ’.

The supplying of ‘ Tokens ’ was the responsibility of the Session. These were made of lead, and many Sessions owned their own mould. The Communion account of 22nd August, 1697, in Carnmoney, includes three shillings and sixpence ‘ for 700 new tokens the old being lost in time of the troubles ’.

Without a ‘ Token ’ it was not possible to communicate. The lead tokens are now replaced by ‘ cards ’ and the first congregation to make the change was probably Third Belfast

(Rosemary Street). A minute, undated, of either 1827 or 1828 reads, 'It was also agreed to that the mode of admission to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper should be changed; that Cards should be distributed on which the names of the persons to be admitted should be marked, and that on presenting their cards to the Elders, these persons should receive their tokens'. From this it appears that both 'cards' and 'tokens' were used conjointly for a time; and that eventually the former replaced the latter.

There is little definite information concerning the elements, which appear to have been ordinary daily bread, although Antrim and Carland both refer to 'biskett'. The minutes simply refer to 'wine' although Templepatrick and First Ballybay state claret and sherry respectively; and Carland testifies to the use of the mixed chalice.

Most of the Minute Books give a number of Communion accounts. The following is that in Carland for 5 July, 1755:—

The Fast Wednesday collected	.....	.....	£1	4	4 $\frac{1}{4}$
Saturday collected	.....	.....	I	4	0 $\frac{1}{2}$
Sabbath collected	.....	.....	I	15	10 $\frac{1}{2}$
Munday collected	.....	.....	I	9	9 $\frac{1}{2}$
The total collected			£5 14 0 $\frac{3}{4}$		
The disbursements first to wine	.....	.....	£2	8	0
To Cakes	.....	.....	0	12	0
To Ale	.....	.....	0	07	0
To a Door for the Meetinghouse	.....	.....	0	11	4 $\frac{1}{2}$
To Rum	.....	.....	0	01	10
To bis Cakes	.....	.....	0	00	5
To Aqua Vita	.....	.....	0	01	3
To Turf for the Retiring house	.....	.....	0	02	8 $\frac{1}{2}$
To Clerk Session	.....	.....	0	05	11 $\frac{1}{2}$
To John Muragh for work done	.....	.....	0	05	11 $\frac{1}{2}$
To Scollops for the Meeting house	.....	.....	0	03	9

Most of the accounts are followed by a list of the disbursements to the poor. This money was collected 'at the barn', 'at the kirkes doores', 'at the table' in different districts. To illustrate, the following extracts from the 1688-1697 Templepatrick Session Book may be given:— 'Widow' (13 February, 1688/89); 'ordered to John Duncan for Will M'Cleland's coffin' (9 June, 1689); 'widows Mickle, Thomson, M'Ilwrath' (22 October, 1689);

'a soldier of Derry' (27 October, 1689); 'a woman in distress with small children' (10 November, 1689); 'a poor object' (24 February, 1688/89; 15 December, 1689; 8 June, 1690); 'Hugh Brown's orphan' (8 December, 1689; 12 March, 1689/90); 'a Dutch woman' (8 December, 1689); 'an orphan' (5 January, 1689/90); 'orphan Effie (or Essie) Morison' (12 March, 1689/90); 'a stranger' (20 April, 1690; 17 April, 1692; 15 July, 1694; 25 August, 1694); 'widow Graham her child's schooling' (11 February, 1690/91); 'half-hour glass' (1 August, 1697); 'Clerk's fees' (2 June, 1695); 'an old man' (3 July, 1691); 'a poor woman that brought forth a child at Wm Gray's, a poor woman to help to pay for a child's clothing' (27 December, 1691); 'Janot Ramsey her sheet' (5 June, 1692; there are many such references); 'relief of persons taken with the Turks' (31 July, 1692; 25 February, 1692/93); 'a soft headed boy' (4 December, 1692); 'a sea man' (8 January, 1693/94); 'the two Thomson's schooling' (2 July, 1693); 'to buy a book for a poor child' (3 December, 1693); 'a lame Drummer' (10 December, 1693); 'The Turner's funeral' (18 March, 1693/94); 'a poor body's burial' (21 March, 1696/97; 26 February, 1698/99; several of these entries); 'a blind man' (2 May, 1697); 'a sheet to bury a poor body' (11 June, 1699); and the last entry is 'a poor body 1d 15 Jul '99'.

Catechumens must be admitted by resolution of the Session. While, no doubt, procedure varied in different districts that in Creggan on 3rd June, 1837, is typical. The minute says:—'At a Meeting of the Session of the Presbyterian Congregation of Creggan, held at Freeduff, on Saturday, the 3rd day of June, 1837. The following young persons, being examined in the Shorter Catechism, and in their knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, and having answered satisfactorily. It was resolved that they be admitted to partake of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper; at the approaching solemnity, and that they now may receive tokens of admission accordingly'.

On the other hand, reference ought to be made to the procedure in Connor. The minute of 2nd November, 1716, says:—'The young communicants according to appointment met at the little house with Mr Masterton and after solemn exhortation they were put in mind of the several heads of their Baptismal Covenant which they had verbally engaged to observe and adhere unto before they were ad-

mitted to the Lord's Table and were solemnly asked if they did adhere to the same now, and whether they were willing that their names should be entered into the public register of this congregation in a way of subscription to their Baptismal covenant which how they had solemnly owned at the Lord's Table on Sabbath last was eight days which was the 21st day of October 1716 and accordingly these young people desired their names to be inserted and subscribed to keep the heads of the Baptismal Covenant and at their desire their names were entered. The tenor of the Covenant is as followeth on the other side of the leaf. 'Turn over the leaf'.

'We whose names are under written do solemnly profess our hearty desire to believe in God the Father, the son, and the holy Ghost according to the several articles of the Christian faith as they are contained in the holy scriptures of the Old and New testament, summed up in our Confession of faith and Shorter and larger catechisms. And earnestly desiring to repent of all our sins we give our selves up to God the Father as our revealed Father in Christ and to Jesus Christ as our only saviour and to the holy Ghost as our sanctifier, renouncing the Devil and the world and the sinful desires of the flesh. We promise through grace in all things to behave ourselves orderly and according to the principles we have now professed and that we will deny ourselves and take up our Cross and follow Christ as the Captain of our salvation unto the death in the earnest hope of living with him in endless Glory'.

Not only was the Session responsible for the admission of catechumens. They reviewed the character and conduct of all members of the congregation prior to Communion. They jealously guarded the Lord's Table in the interests of discipline, for example, on 12th April, 1686, the minute in Carnmoney reads:—'The Session considering that after their long desolation it hath pleased the Lord in his mercy to grant them again a gospel minister settled amongst them they do ordain all the elders to make diligent enquiry concerning scandalous persons and delinquents in their several quarters that they may be brought to the session to give satisfaction, etc., and likewise that they enquire concerning each as not testified for from the places they came last from etc'.

Certificates of Transference were given to members removing to other parts to show that they were free from

censure. They took the form of brief life histories. The following from Dundonald (Kirkdonald) and Ballyclare in the Carnmoney Session Book, 1708-1720, may be given as examples :—

'Dundonald Aprile 8th 1725 That David Cook and Margaret George his wife were orderly persons while with us and were admitted to Christian Communion. And when they left us which was at May last were free of scandal and Church censure. all which are certified by me Ja Stuart'.

'That Agnes Houston lived in this congregation from her infancy until March last free of all known scandal or Church censure is certified at Ballyclare October 5th 1720 Tho. Wilson. Memoranda that she was orderly married to Andrew M'Cormick of Carnmoney before she left this place'.

These were both received by the Carnmoney Session, and as an illustration of one given by them that of 28th May, 1709, may be quoted :—'to Mary Ingles and daughter Agnes Purdy who leaves us now, the husband Walter Purdy declared none of our Communion'. The case of Walter Purdy is among the most interesting in the annals of early Irish Presbyterianism, as in it we have an excellent illustration of a Session striving for the redemption of a man's soul.

Records of 'Communion kept' are entered in the Session Books, and, also, a Roll of the communicants is kept.

From the first ruling elders had much to do with the Communion services, but 'in no fundamental document of any of the Reformed Churches is participation in the distribution of the elements included amongst the functions of elders'. Nor was it regarded as a prerogative of the office in Ireland, for there are many instances of the minister being assisted by communicants. Nevertheless it was, and is, the general practice for ruling elders to assist the minister in this way.

Most of the records testify to this duty being performed by elders, but that, on occasion, any communicant might assist is clear from the following extract from Rosemary Street Minute-Book on 17th February, 1828 :—'The Session agreed to request on this occasion the assistance of those who formerly acted on such occasions but are not members of Session. Messrs Munfoad and Annesley are deputed to request their assistance.

'The members of Session appointed to the following places in distributing the elements were—

The East Aisle	Mr Gamble and Huges aided by Mr John Suffern.
South East	Messrs Annesley, Blair, and Bottomley.
South West	Messrs Thomson, Milford, and Sterling.
West Aisle	Messrs Sinclair, Young, and Halliday assisted by Mr M'Connell'.

None of the Session-Books refer to the bringing in of the elements, so it would appear that the Table was spread before the Sunday Morning Service to be followed by Holy Communion began. However, in a few congregations the practice of bringing in the elements remains to this day, so it may have been quite a common feature although there is no reference to it, just as a few congregations still have the Tables in the aisles.

That the celebration of the Lord's Supper was 'ministerial', not 'sessional', is evident from the fact that there is not a single case of the Session being constituted before celebration. Doubtless there was a meeting for prayer before the service, but there is no reference to the Court being constituted.

The form of service may be illustrated by quoting the first Irish revision of the Westminster *Directory*, that of the Synod of Ulster in 1825 :—

'When the day appointed for the administration of the ordinance is arrived, let the bread and wine be placed upon the communion table before the commencement of any part of the service of the day. After a suitable sermon, the congregation sing an appropriate psalm; the minister shall then offer up prayer to God, for his presence, protection, and blessing. He shall then read an account of the institution from one of the evangelists, or the 11th chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians; he is to show that this is an ordinance of perpetual observance instituted by Christ; the obligations we are under to observe it; explain and enforce the use of the bread and wine, as memorials of our Saviour's body and blood shed, and a ratification of our covenant with God, the danger of unworthily partaking, the culpability of neglect, and the advantages arising to believers from observing it in a proper manner'.

'Next, the minister is, in the name of Christ, to warn the profane, the ignorant, the scandalous, and those that indulge themselves secretly in any known sin, not to approach the table of the Lord. On the other hand, he shall invite to this feast, such as are sensible of their lost and helpless state by

sin, and, depending on the atonement of Christ for pardon and acceptance, are constrained by his love to turn from the evil of their ways, to serve the living God. The minister shall then come down from the pulpit, and the communicants being seated around the tables, he shall briefly endeavour to stir up their hearts to gratitude and love; and then, after Christ's example, offer thanks, and implore the blessing of God upon himself, his assistants, and the people'.

'The minister is now to take the bread, and break it in the view of the people, saying in the manner following:—

According to the institution, command, and example of our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, I take this bread, break it, and give it unto you in remembrance of his body, which was broken for you'.

'In the like manner (that is, after again imploring a blessing on the ordinance), he shall take the cup, and distribute it, saying, According to the institution, command, and example, of our Lord Jesus Christ, I take this cup, and give it unto you: 'This cup is the new testament in Christ's blood, which is shed for many, for the remission of sins, drink ye all of it; and as often', &c.

'The minister may then communicate, if no other minister be present. He is then to address the communicants. The communicants leave the table in succession, singing a psalm to the praise of God'.

'After all have communicated, the minister is to close the service with a concluding address, thanksgiving and prayer'.

The sincerity of the early Presbyterians in Ireland is beyond question, yet the old Session-Books are unanimous in their testimony that Brownist opinions were dominant in Irish Presbyterianism, and that the practices of the Protesters were largely followed. Brownism degraded the public worship of Scottish Presbyterianism until it became the 'baldest and rudest in Christendom'; and the Protesters 'were the chief cause of the overthrow of Presbytery in 1661' in Scotland. So, to-day, Irish Presbyterians, while they must be loyal to their heritage in public worship in Christ, ought not to regard the views of Brownism and Protesterism as 'true' Presbyterianism.

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