



# CNI

## **Comment - The real legacy of Ian Paisley**

James Galway gave himself a hostage to fortune in his recent interview on Northern Ireland. The outraged were mainly from the DUP and not unnaturally included Baroness Paisley. (See Media Digest in today's CNI News Bulletin).

Galway's comments on the militant words and actions of the late politician preacher are such that I would find it difficult to disagree with. I was on the ground in Belfast when Paisley was 'stirring it up'. I had a working knowledge of that cockpit. I had crossed Divis Street every day for eleven years to get to school and university, passing within yards of the shopfront where was later displayed the Republic's tricolour and which became the locus of the first major confrontational protest Paisley organised. I also

[churchnewsireland@gmail.com](mailto:churchnewsireland@gmail.com)

observed some of his parades to the Ulster Hall which to me conveyed threat. Rather than reminisce I would bring to the reader's notice Patrick Marínan's book "Paisley - Man of Wrath". I feel it is an acute record and observation of those days, actions and consequences. (1).

Paisley's legacy is not political. The Union is no more or no less safe than when he started his political journey or was organising his red-beret night time rally on the Antrim Hills. Rather, I would see his greatest impact as affecting the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. That is some achievement for a man who was never, ever, a mainstream Irish Presbyterian.

Some background may be necessary. He was the son of a breakaway Baptist preacher who had established his own base in Ballymena. From 1945 Ian Paisley practised from little more than a tin tabernacle in East Belfast. He was not a figure of any real significance in a city where there was no shortage of such halls and hot gospel rhetoric, until he became involved in a split in a Presbyterian congregation in County

Down. "Persecuting zeal", the biography of Paisley by the late Principal of the Methodist Church's Edgehill Theological College, Rev Dr Denis Cooke, more than adequately covers this development, and it is insightful in its examination of the growth of the DUP and the failure of the Free Presbyterian Church to grow in a similar manner. (2).

In my opinion, the principal legacy bequeathed to Ireland by Paisley is the wedge he successfully hammered between existing mindsets in the Presbyterian Church. The wedge was anti-ecumenical. The World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism was utilised. He focussed especially on those areas where the World Council was active in promoting social justice and where some indigenous churches may have had contacts with militant groups. His attacks were as unrelenting, as they were insensitive in their appreciation of those areas where God's people were suffering extensively. The second aspect of his attack was what he alleged was the Romeward trend of all ecumenists as well as the WCC. Always the

publicist, chaining himself to railings and in time demonstrating against a Papal visit to the European parliament are readily recalled.

And all the while Paisley maintained a non-relenting attack on individual members of the Presbyterian Church and its central boards. The protests by this self-professed loyalist were such that the Governor of Northern Ireland and his wife were jostled by his followers as they made their way across the street to attend the General Assembly. For many, that action went a long way to bring about the termination of a permanent representative of the monarch being appointed to reside and serve in Northern Ireland.

It was not that the General Assembly or the Presbyterian Church were lacking in first-class scholars - I recall men of the calibre of James Haire and Finlay Holmes. There was no shortage of men of courage like Jack Weir who was one of four churchmen who met the provisional IRA at Feakle in an attempt to obtain peace. There was no shortage of men of genuine ecumenical intent like Gordon Gray and there were prophets

like John Dunlop - men who could help interpret where God was at work in the world and within the events of the world. And in a very direct manner, there was and still is, the mission outreach of Presbyterianism. Abroad this is secured not through a myriad of societies reflecting differing theological standpoints within the church as in Anglicanism. Rather it is from Presbyterian church to Presbyterian church. From China and India, through Africa and the West Indies, the Irish Presbyterian Church has made and continues to make a massive commitment in scholarship, healthcare, leadership and service. At home its social witness is evidenced in the provision of homes for the elderly and various other valid and appreciated endeavours.

Part of the problem for members of some other denominations - like the Church of Ireland - is that the majority of Presbyterians are located in the nine counties of Ulster. Its distribution still reflects the nature of the human and historical geography of Ireland. Presbyterians have affected the mindset which you find in the north

of the island and the values are found beyond that denomination.

I would commend John Dunlop's short commentary on this phenomenon. (3). I have lived amongst Presbyterians all my life. My ancestors and most of my cousins are of that persuasion, and it was in a Presbyterian Church that our marriage was conducted. However, John's book is one of my main "Ah -Hah" books. It made sense of my environment - and that is for one who was taught human geography at Queens by the inspirational Estyn Evans and read Irish history under James Beckett.

In essence, John shows that the Presbyterians of Ulster were affected by two principal influences - the French Revolution and the Geneva Reformation. From the revolution there is that strong sense of egalitarianism and how it works out. Phrases like, "Who does he think he is?" and "Don't forget the bowl you were baked in". And from Geneva comes that word by word examination of and respect for the written words of scripture. The mindset which

asks directly, “Why did St Paul use that comma there?”.

This focus on the written word extends beyond the Biblical. It is not merely for political reasons that pacts and treaties in Northern Ireland take time. As one wit of a political commentator put it after yet another prolonged period leading to yet another treaty - “The Micks read between the lines and the Prods read what is on the lines”.

Those sort of Presbyterian mindsets under Paisley’s unrelenting attacks sadly led to the Presbyterian Church in Ireland leaving the World Council of Churches.

I hope my Presbyterian friends will forgive me for saying that since then the breadth of theological expression in their Church has continued to narrow. Moderators used to tend to alternate between men of breadth of outlook and who were of a more formal liturgical style, and those of a more narrow theological outlook and most likely of a less traditional worship style.

Indeed today I find it difficult in some places to see much of a difference between some congregations and the mission halls of my youth in the evangelical hot bed of the Six Mile Valley. (4).

As I reflected on the reports presented and commented upon at last week's General Assembly, I saw on the one hand immense professionalism and Christian sensitivity which has shaped a major recent reformation of the structure and remit of their boards. But I share the regret as expressed in social media by Presbyterians for whose ministries I have genuine regard, who lamented the vote taken almost at the end of the annual meeting and which determined that the Irish Moderator would not attend next year's Assembly of the Church of Scotland. This was based upon the Kirk's recent policy decision on same sex marriage issues.

Ian Paisley's impact on the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is still resonating. The corporate theological stance of that great church is imbalanced and there is undoubtedly internal



division. Yet again representation at the Kirk Assembly provided an external issue was a convenient peg on which to hang internal differences, as was the case when membership of the WCC was terminated.

My concern, having watched this process over the years in the Irish Presbyterian Church, is that the Church of Ireland is showing similar evidence of internal divisions and the issue of sexuality is the peg on which these divisions and the Church itself is being hung.

The words of Bishop Paul Colton at his diocesan synod - published here in CNI Comment yesterday - should be carefully and prayerfully considered by those who currently feel he is in error or damned and those who feel he is the bee's knees.

What I took from his address is that if a church cannot demonstrate that it is a community holding differences in tension and with mutual respect and tolerance, then that

church cannot hold adversarial politicians and others to account under the Gospel.

*Houston McKelvey*

## **References**

(1). Marrinan, Patrick, 1973, Paisley: Man of Wrath. Tralee, Co. Kerry: Anvil.

(2). Cooke, Dennis, 1996, Persecuting Zeal: a Portrait of Ian Paisley. Dingle, Co. Kerry: Brandon.

(3) Dunlop, J, 1995, A Precarious Belonging: Presbyterians and the Conflict in Ireland"

A description of Presbyterians in Ireland and how their values and attitudes have underpinned political life in Northern Ireland since its beginning.

(4). Paisley, Ian R.K, The '59 Revival by Ian R.K. Paisley

<http://www.revival-library.org/catalogues/1857ff/paisley.html>

(4). Carson, John T, God's River in Spate -  
Ulster Revival

A classic account of the 1859 Revival in Ulster, covering the main events, from its beginnings, and the places affected in the province. The book was written with the sole desire that revival would come again to the province of Ulster.

**Online overview**

Bruce, Steve, Religion and violence - The case for Ian Paisley and Ulster evangelicals

[http://www.irish-association.org/papers/stevebruce11\\_oct03.asp](http://www.irish-association.org/papers/stevebruce11_oct03.asp)