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THOMAS LEDLIE BIRCH

United Irishman

by

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THOMAS LEDLIE BIRCH, UNITED IRISHMAN
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One of the most interesting periods in Ulster history is the story of the rise of the United Irishmen and the subsequent rebellion of 1798. The tragic fate of the Rev. James Porter, of Greyabbey, who was hanged within sight of his church, is known to everyone interested in the subject, but paradoxically Porter's fate has tended to obscure the fact that roughly thirty ministers of the Synod of Ulster were implicated, to a greater or less degree, with the United Irishmen, and that eight were compelled to leave their native shores.

In 1797 the Rev. Arthur McMahon of Holywood fled to France and the Rev. John Arnold of Ballybay escaped to America to avoid arrest, and after the failure of the insurrection six Presbyterian ministers were compelled to emigrate to the U.S.A. These exiles were John McNish of Clough, Co. Antrim, James Simpson of 1st Newtownards, James Sinclair of the Newtownards Old Congregation, Thomas Ledlie Birch of Saintfield, Robert Steele of Scriggan, a now extinct congregation near Dungan, and John Glendy of Maghera.

Glendy, who was chosen as Chaplain to the House of Representatives in 1806, and Chaplain to the Senate in 1815, and who counted Presidents Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and Adams among his intimate friends, is the only one of the seven American exiles about whom much has been written, and indeed it would be impossible to write a full-scale biography of Thomas Ledlie Birch—the materials do not exist, and this paper is the first detailed account of his career.

On 13th April, 1692, John Birch received from Sir John Magill a grant of one hundred and seventy six acres of land now known as Birchgrove, near Gilford, Co. Down. Birch, who was described as Sir John's agent and manager, sold the property in 1725 to James Birch, presumably a relative. James married Mary Jackson and died in 1727, and the lands passed to his elder son, John.⁽¹⁾

John Birch, 'a zealous dissenter' and an officer in the Down Militia, married Jane, daughter of John Ledlie of Carnan, parish of Arboe, Co. Tyrone, a prosperous

⁽¹⁾ John Birch died July 31, 1773, aged 62, and the property passed to his eldest son, John, who married, February 12, 1770, Jane, daughter of George Watson of Craigduff. Her sister, Elizabeth, married William Crozier, a cousin of John Birch. George Watson was first cousin of Commodore Watson, whose son, James Watson of Brookhill, was a famous Orange hero.

John Birch died November 7, 1786, aged 49, and the property then passed to his elder son, George, who was perpetual curate of Comber. The Rev. George Birch, who married in 1790, Anne, daughter of Adam Blair Johnston of Glynn, died October 28, 1827. He was succeeded in the property by his eldest son, John. John married, March 5, 1845, his cousin, Mary Jane McConnell, and died without legitimate issue, February 10, 1858, aged 55.

Birchgrove now passed into the possession of Hugh McConnell, brother-in-law and cousin of the previous owner. His mother, Anne, was the eldest sister of the Rev. George Birch. Hugh McConnell died April 24, 1898, and the last member of the family to own Birchgrove was his only son, George Birch McConnell, who died unmarried February 10, 1908, aged 46.

Birchgrove was divided several times, and from 1771 a branch of the family occupied a portion known as the Island Farm. The branch became extinct in the male line on the death of Thomas Birch, who died unmarried December 1, 1908, and the property was sold, thus ending the family's tenure of over 200 years.

Mary Jackson, the wife of James Birch, was a native of Tobermore, Co. Londonderry. She was a cousin of John Clarke of Maghera, ancestor of the families of Clark of Ampertain House and Chichester-Clark of Moyola Park and Largantogher.

Clarke married Jane, daughter of John White of Antrim. Her sister, Elizabeth, married John Ledlie of Carnan, and was the grandmother of Thomas Ledlie Birch.

linen merchant and farmer.⁽²⁾ They had nine children, the youngest of whom, Thomas Ledlie, was born in 1754.⁽³⁾

An elder brother had entered the ministry, and Birch decided to follow in his brother's footsteps⁽⁴⁾. In 1770 he became a student of Glasgow University, where he graduated two years later. The Rev. Andrew Craig, minister of the Lisburn congregation (1782-1833), and a contemporary of Birch at the university, tells us in his autobiography that Birch was one of a group of Irish students who started a weekly debating society at the university⁽⁵⁾. This society apparently flourished for several years, as Craig refers to meetings being held in Ireland in the summer of 1775.



Birch's name first appears in the minutes of the General Synod of Ulster in 1774, when it is recorded that the Saintfield congregation, vacant through the death of the Rev. Richard Walker, who died 20th January, 1774, had applied to the Presbytery of Dromore for 'a month's hearing of Mr. Birch.' The Presbytery referred the matter to the Synod, who decided that Birch should supply the congregation on the last two Sundays in July. They were probably influenced in their partial refusal by the fact that Birch was not yet a licentiate, as it is not until a meeting of the General Synod held in Antrim on 27th June, 1775, that the Presbytery of Dromore report his licensure.⁽⁶⁾ A year later, 21st May, 1776, he was ordained in Saintfield by the Presbytery of Belfast.⁽⁷⁾

⁽²⁾ Birch-Ledlie marriage settlement is dated December 28, 1732. Groves Transcripts: P.R.O., N.I.

Mrs. Birch died April 23, 1791, aged 75.

⁽³⁾ C. J. Robb, in an article, *The Rebel Minister of Saintfield* in *The Leader*, February 10, 1945, quotes the following extract from a family bible—'Thomas Ledlie, fourth child, was born betw 3 and 4 of the clock in the morning, 8th February, 1745.' The same writer, in the *Sunday Press*, May 1, 1955, states that Birch was born April 24, 1755. In view of this discrepancy I have taken the date of birth from the *Fasti of the Irish Presbyterian Church*.

The Matriculation Album of Glasgow University states that Birch was the sixth son.

⁽⁴⁾ Rev. James Jackson Birch, second son of John Birch, was born in 1740. He graduated at Glasgow University in 1758, and was ordained in Dromara, his only charge, on August 12, 1764. He retired in 1816, and died October 10, 1820.

A Short History of First Dromara (1963) by the present writer contains pedigrees of his descendants, and also of his sister, Mary, who married a son of the Rev. John King of Dromara.

⁽⁵⁾ *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*: Second Series, XIV, p. 51.

⁽⁶⁾ Until 1840 licentiates were permitted to act as ruling elders, and Birch attended this meeting as the representative elder of the Dromara congregation.

⁽⁷⁾ Records of the General Synod of Ulster: II pp. 563, 570 and 571.

It is interesting to note that both the Rev. James and the Rev. Thomas Birch were ordained in congregations in which their relatives were influential members. Their eldest sister, Elizabeth, was married to Alexander Gillmer of Dromara, and Jane Birch, their aunt, was married to Andrew Todd, one of the wealthiest members of the Saintfield congregation.

The Todd family of Carricknaveagh, which was known as Toddstown as early as 1625, were prominent United Irishmen. The names of Andrew Todd (Birch's cousin) and Andrew Todd, junior, appear in the 'Black Book of the North of Ireland,' a list of some 200 names of the leaders of the United Irishmen. When the rebellion broke out Andrew Todd, junior, joined the rebel ranks, and acted as Captain of the Town Guard when Ballynahinch was in insurgent hands. After the rebellion was crushed he was imprisoned for a short time in Lisburn. Todd later married a sister of Birch's successor, Rev. Henry Simpson (1799-1843), and his descendants still live in Carricknaveagh.

Although Birch is remembered to-day as a minor figure in the late eighteenth century political scene it should not be forgotten that he was an active minister in one of the largest Presbyterian congregations in Ireland. The present First Saintfield Presbyterian Church was built during his ministry, and a tablet in the vestibule bears the inscription: 'Consider that ye here Worship in the Presence of Him Who seeth your actions and will shortly be your judge. Built in the year 1777—Thomas L. Birch, A.M., Minister.'⁽⁸⁾

He was also a regular attender of the meetings of the General Synod of Ulster, and was six times unsuccessfully proposed as Moderator. His lack of success cannot be explained by his political views, as two of his successful opponents were the Rev. Samuel Barber of Rathfriland and the Rev. Dr. William Steele Dickson, of Portaferry, each of whom was to be implicated in the Rebellion of 1798. In 1793 he preached before the Synod, and his sermon, 'a commonplace address,' was published the next year.⁽⁹⁾

Birch's interest in the social problems of his day is shown in a letter written in 1785 to Sir John Foster, M.P., in which he deplores the hordes of strolling beggars which were harassing the community. He suggests to Foster that the matter be raised in parliament, and 'some law framed, obliging strolling beggars to keep within the bounds of their own parishes—where they are known, and inflicting a penalty upon such as harbour foreigners.'⁽¹⁰⁾

Little is known of Birch's private life. He married, in the autumn of 1783, Isabella Ledlie, his second cousin, and a daughter of John Ledlie of Arboe, Co. Tyrone.⁽¹¹⁾

⁽⁸⁾ The church was apparently in debt for some years as the *Belfast News-Letter*, January 7, 1783, records that the Earl of Moira subscribed ten guineas to the re-building fund.

The church clock was presented to the congregation by Dr. George Birch, an elder brother of the pastor. A former surgeon in the East India Company, he resided at Ballybeen House, Comber, and was the owner of considerable property in Co. Down.

Dr. Birch was a staunch Presbyterian, and a member of the Moneyrea congregation. At a special meeting of the General Synod of Ulster held in Lurgan in October, 1800, he was chosen to accompany the Moderator to interview Lord Castlereagh to press the Synod's claims for an increase to the Regium Donum and to urge the government to establish a fund to repair churches.

While in India he had married Catherine Charlotte Wilder, a young widow, one of whose daughters was later to marry Robert Rollo Reid of Ballygowan House, a noted United Irishman. Dr. Birch had three sons and three daughters, and after his death in 1814 his property passed to his youngest son, James. James joined the established church, and worshipped in Comber Parish Church, where his cousin, Rev. George Birch, was perpetual curate. His heir emigrated to New Zealand, where his descendants still live.

A daughter of Dr. Birch married Randal Johnston of Glynn, a brother of the wife of the Rev. George Birch.

⁽⁹⁾ *The Obligation upon Christians and especially Ministers, to be exemplary in their lives; particularly at this important period, when the prophecies are seemingly about to be fulfilled in the fall of Antichrist as an introduction to the flowing in of Jew and Gentile into the Christian Church, Synodical Sermon on Matt. v. 16. pp. 36, Belfast, 1794.*

⁽¹⁰⁾ Massereene Mss. P.R.O. (N.I.)

C. J. Robb, in his article, *The Rebel Minister of Saintfield* in *The Leader*, Feb. 10, 1945, states, 'One of the first references to Birch's political reform activities is contained in a pamphlet entitled "A True Account of Husbandry in the Northern Counties of Ireland" by "Liberty." In this publication one finds many references to the difficulties of the Irish farmer and weaver, in the way of excessive rents, poor markets, tythes, etc. The pamphlet is Belfast printed in 1785.' This is the only reference to this pamphlet which we have been able to trace.

⁽¹¹⁾ *Hibernian Magazine*: December, 1783. Ledlie and Birch Mss.

John Ledlie was a nephew of the Rev. Robert Darragh of Monaghan, 1697-1711. He and his brother, William, married sisters, daughters of Robert Hamilton of Monclone, Scarva, Co. Down. William was the grandfather of the Rev. James Crawford Ledlie, D.D., a distinguished figure in the Irish Non-Subscribing Church.

Birch refers in 1806 to his numerous family, but the only children known to us are Elizabeth, John Ledlie, Hamilton, and Thomas Ledlie.⁽¹²⁾ This last named is buried in the graveyard behind his father's church, the headstone bearing the inscription, 'The grave of Thomas Ledlie Birch, son of the Rev. Thomas Ledlie Birch, once the faithful beloved pastor of Saintfield in whom there was no guile, 1802.'

James Ledlie, his brother-in-law and ancestor of the Wallace family of Myra Castle, Downpatrick, owned a distillery in Saintfield. He lived in the townland of Ballycloughan, near Saintfield, and it was in this townland that Birch purchased a farm in 1784. He called the farm Liberty Hill, by which name it is still known, and here he resided until 1798.⁽¹³⁾

It has been stated that Birch, when a student at Glasgow University, issued several pamphlets in favour of the American colonists.⁽¹⁴⁾ We have failed to trace any such pamphlets, but there is no doubt that he sympathized with the colonists. In 1784 he helped to draft an address which the Yankee Club of Stewartstown sent to George Washington, expressing their joy that America had risen superior to the menaces of regal and ministerial despotism, and had thrown off the yoke of slavery. The situation in the past has caused them many anxious fears, but they assured Washington that his exertions had 'shed their benign influence over the distressed kingdom of Ireland.' Washington returned thanks, and the whole transaction was disclosed to the *Belfast Mercury* (5th October, 1784) by Birch, who mentions that the address had been transmitted to Washington by his brother-in-law, Campbell Dick, a citizen of Philadelphia.⁽¹⁵⁾

When the Volunteer movement arose to meet the threat of a French invasion, Birch was elected chaplain of the Saintfield Light Infantry. The Volunteers took an active part in the political discussions of the day, and generally speaking, were opposed to the return of Lord Kilwarlin at the Co. Down election of 1783. The Hill family were regarded as favouring the Seceders at the expense of the Synod of Ulster, so Birch supported the rival candidate, Robert Stewart, later 2nd Marquis of Londonderry who at that time belonged to a Synod of Ulster congregation.

Kilwarlin was elected, and after his return a burlesque history of the election was published in which the Saintfield minister was viciously attacked and labelled "Blubbing Birch," a title which his opponents were later to seize gladly.⁽¹⁶⁾

The last two decades of the eighteenth century saw the rise of public opinion in Ireland and the growth of a keen radical interest in political affairs. The two main political topics were parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation, and it was to support these two principles that the Society of United Irishmen was founded in Belfast in 1791.

(12) *Northern Star*: February 13, 1794.

Birch may have included in his family William Alexander and James Paxton, the orphan grandchildren of his brother, Oliver Birch. He was appointed their guardian in August, 1802. *Orphans Court Record*, Washington, Pennsylvania. Vol. B. p. 145.

(13) Index of Lands, Co. Down. Registry of Deeds, Dublin. 383.123.253184; 515.521.335828 and 521.533.343508.

Birch purchased 42 acres of freehold land in Ballycloughan and 128½ acres of leasehold land in Cultra, Holywood, from Patrick Cleland, Ballymagee, on Sept. 8, 1784.

On July 19, 1798, he sold his Ballycloughan farm to his brother, Rev. James Birch, for £500. On March 15, 1799, the Rev. James Birch sold these lands to James McRoberts of Lis-tooder, for £1,111.

(14) C. J. Robb, *Sunday Press*, May 1, 1955.

(15) Dick, a former Stewartstown merchant, was married to a sister of Mrs. Birch. He died of yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793. Some months earlier, December 25, 1783, the Donacloyne Real Independents sent a similar address.

(16) *An Historical Account of the late Election*, etc., p. 54.

Birch was in favour of both aims, and formed the Saintfield United Society of Irishmen on the 16th January, 1792.⁽¹⁷⁾ Samuel McSkimin says, 'About this time Mr. Birch threw up his portion of the Regium Donum, then only about £10 per annum.'⁽¹⁸⁾ This may be correct, but he was in receipt of it in 1798.

January, 1792, also saw the founding by a group of businessmen of a Belfast newspaper, the *Northern Star*, to spread the views of the movement. The ninth issue of the new paper gives a copy of the test, or associating principles of the Saintfield society—'I, A.B., do solemnly promise in the presence of Almighty God, that through Divine assistance. I shall endeavour to cultivate friendship with, and between persons of every religious profession, and I shall be aiding and assisting by every lawful means, in promoting the religious and civil liberties of the people of Ireland.'⁽¹⁹⁾

The early ideas of the Saintfield society are clearly set out in resolutions passed on Christmas Eve, 1792:—

1. Resolved, that we will steadily pursue every reasonable, legal, and constitutional means in our power, to obtain a more equal representation of the people in Parliament and a shorter duration of parliamentary delegation.
2. Resolved, that a radical reform in Parliament can never be affected, but by extending the rights of suffrage to all sects and denominations of Irishmen.
3. Resolved, that we look upon our brethren the Roman Catholics, as men deprived of their just rights—that we highly approve their present mode of proceeding, and sincerely and heartily wish them success.'

On Christmas Day, 1792, the Saintfield congregation held a meeting and passed almost similar resolutions:—

1. 'Resolved, that all Government does, and ought of right, to originate from the people; and its end to be the happiness of the governed.
2. Resolved, that whilst we profess ourselves attached to our present form of government, as consisting of King, Lords and Commons, we are decidedly of the opinion, that there are certain errors crept into our system (from the want of a due representation of the people in the Commons House) which cry aloud for redress!'⁽²⁰⁾

The *Belfast News-Letter* reported, 'It was proposed at the meeting, and unanimously applauded, that the congregation, for the defence of their families and properties, shall immediately proceed to acquire the military exercise whereby, with those already in arms, upwards of 500 brave fellows will be added to the "National Guards" of Ireland.'⁽²¹⁾

There can be little doubt that the majority of the Saintfield congregation were deeply infected with radical ideas which owed their spread to Birch's teaching. His political views are well expressed in a sermon preached in Saintfield to his masonic brethren on St. John's Day (25th June), 1795, in which he called kings the butchers and scourges of the human race, and accused them of revelling in the spoils of thousands, whom they had made widows and orphans.⁽²²⁾

⁽¹⁷⁾ *Northern Star*, January 14, 1792.

There appears to be some doubt if this was the first Society of United Irishmen formed in Co. Down. C. J. Robb, writing in the *Sunday Press* (May 1, 1955) states that it was, although in an earlier article in 'Ninety-Eight' he claims that a Society was formed in Ballynahinch on December 5, 1791.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Samuel McSkimin: *Annals of Ulster*, p. 5.

⁽¹⁹⁾ *Northern Star*, February 1, 1792.

⁽²⁰⁾ *ibid*, December 26, 1792.

⁽²¹⁾ *Belfast News-Letter*, January 4, 1793.

⁽²²⁾ *Northern Star*, June 29, 1795.

Birch's name does not appear in the Records of the Grand Lodge of Ireland. For the attitude of Ulster Freemasons towards the United Irishmen's movement see the writer's 'Some Aspects of Freemasonry in the late 18th and early 19th Century', in *Transactions of the Lodge of Research*, 1958-1962.

Agnes McMillan, the only member of the Saintfield congregation to record her impressions of his teaching, wrote that Birch preached freedom and liberty. As the Rebellion of 1798 approached he urged that it was the duty of all Irishmen to unite and attack landlordism and episcopacy.⁽²³⁾

Although never formally suppressed, the United Irishmen became virtually illegal in 1794. Their clubs could no longer meet publicly, and peaceful agitation gave way to armed conspiracy. Many left their ranks, and those who remained inclined more and more to republican separatism. Birch remained true to his beliefs, and in sermons and letters to the Belfast press he denounced the English link with all the adjectives at his command.⁽²⁴⁾

Birch had told Wolfe Tone that his flock were completely converted to his views, and the congregation celebrated the French defeat of the Austrian and Prussian armies, but many were dissatisfied with his political views now that the movement was illegal.⁽²⁵⁾ At the famous Volunteer Review held in Belfast on the 4th July, 1792, to commemorate the Fall of the Bastille, Birch had urged the political claims of Roman Catholics, holding that it was criminally unjust to deprive them of the franchise, and stating that he would rather transport himself to Botany Bay than live in a country which continued to keep itself in abject slavery by its internal divisions.⁽²⁶⁾ Statements such as these did not endear him to certain of his congregation, and in 1796 these dissentients formed a Burgher Secession Congregation (Second Saintfield), a proceeding which so incensed Birch that he published a most ill-natured and slanderous pamphlet, condemning not only the Saintfield Seceders but the denomination as a whole.⁽²⁷⁾

In the two years preceding the outbreak of the rebellion of 1798 a veritable reign of terror existed in the Saintfield neighbourhood, as indeed it did in many other districts in Ulster. Assaults, arson, murder and arrests were commonplace. Nicholas Price, the owner of the Saintfield estate, was a staunch loyalist, as befitted the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod with a salary of £1000 per annum. He waged a relentless war against all suspected rebels in the parish, and determined to rid Saintfield of Birch.

In March, 1797, eleven of Birch's congregation were arrested on a charge of attacking the dwelling of Hugh McKee, near Saintfield.⁽²⁸⁾ They were tried the following month at the Down Assizes, and acquitted chiefly because of the scathing attack made by their defence counsel, John Philpot Curran, of the sub-sheriff, Rev. John Cleland.⁽²⁹⁾

Birch attended the trial, and when the verdict was announced he was arrested in the court-room and imprisoned on a charge of high-treason—a capital offence.

(23) Cardwell Mss. Copy in writer's possession.

(24) For example, see *Northern Star*, January 15—March 12, 1795, for correspondence with Dr. William Bruce on the Protestant Dissenters' Address to the Lord Lieutenant.

(25) T. Wolfe Tone: *Journal*, August 15, 1792.

Northern Star, December 8, 1792.

(26) *Belfast Politics*, etc., 1794, p. 60.

(27) *Physicians Languishing under Disease. An address to the Seceding or Associate Synod of Ireland, upon certain tenets and practices alleged to be in enmity with all religious reformation*. pp. 47. Belfast, 1796.

(28) *Northern Star*, May 1, 1797.

One of the eleven men arrested was David Shaw, a prosperous cotton manufacturer. Shaw was again arrested in the following year, and his property was destroyed by the military after the insurrection. Steel Dickson relates in his *Narrative* that a few nights before the rebellion broke out he called at Shaw's house, 'where I got some excellent cold beef and drank one tumbler of punch.'

Hugh McKee was a cousin and brother-in-law of the Rev. Samuel Edgar of Ballynahinch, father of the Rev. John Edgar, the noted temperance reformer. On the day of the Battle of Saintfield McKee's house was again attacked and the entire family wiped out, the only atrocity committed by the insurgents in Co. Down.

(29) Sub-sherriff, magistrate, Chancellor of Lismore (Cork), Perpetual Curate of Newtownards, and Agent for the Londonderry and Price estates.

After three days he was released on bail till the Autumn Assizes, and the charge against him reduced to one of misdemeanour, which deprived him of the right of challenging the jury.

After a lengthy trial Birch was acquitted, but had to take the Oath of Allegiance, and William Campbell, in his History, writes: 'Mr. Justice Chamberlain, who presided in Court, expressed, in the strongest terms, his indignation at the base, malicious conduct of the prosecutor. The worthy rector of the parish, however, gave his testimony in favour of this profligate man, whom the judge represented in the light of an invidious assassin. But this infamous man had the merit of not only being an informer, but a conformist also, which must have exalted him highly in the opinion of good Churchmen. Mr. Birch was honourably acquitted.'⁽³⁰⁾

On the 6th April, 1798, just two months before the rebellion broke out, Birch again appeared at the Assizes.⁽³¹⁾ This time he was indicted by a Joseph Harper, charged with offering Harper £50 not to prosecute United Irishmen, and also with assaulting Harper's son, Richard. The prosecution was dropped, and Birch discharged, as Joseph Harper was dead, having been shot 'on the Tuesday preceding the Assize upon the road leading from Belfast to Saintfield.'⁽³²⁾

Birch, who on the 25th April, 1798, had been elected chaplain to the United army in Co. Down, took the field with his men. The insurgents defeated the royal army in a brief but bitter engagement at Saintfield on Saturday afternoon, 9th of June, and forced them to retreat to Comber and later to Belfast.⁽³³⁾

⁽³⁰⁾ William Campbell: Sketches of the History of Presbyterians in Ireland. Mss. in Presbyterian Historical Society Library.

Birch's prosecutor was John Corrough, a Ballycloughan farmer whose farm adjoined Birch's. He was a scoundrel whose evidence had falsely condemned Samuel Jamison of Saintfield to death during the Hearts of Steel outbreak in 1772. Judge Chamberlain, when a barrister, had acted for the defence in another case when the evidence of Corrough, the principal Crown witness, was shown to be false.

⁽³¹⁾ *Belfast News-Letter*, April 16, 1798.

⁽³²⁾ Downshire Letters, P.R.O. N.I.

⁽³³⁾ For a detailed account of this battle see chapter 20 of *Revolt in the North*, Dublin, 1960, by Charles Dickson.

Many of the dead of both sides were buried in the Presbyterian graveyard, which adjoins the site of the battle. Two headstones, marking the graves of rebels, are still to be seen. A mural tablet, commemorating some of those killed in the royal army, was erected in Comber Parish Church, where Birch's nephew was perpetual curate.

Part of the royal army consisted of the Newtownards Yeomanry Cavalry, commanded by Birch's brother, Dr. George Birch. Dr. Birch's two eldest sons were United Irishmen. The earliest evidence we have of their complicity with the movement is contained in a report of Colonel Stapylton of the York Fencibles, stationed at Newtownards. It is dated 10th December, 1797, and contains this extract:

'I have it by good authority that the commander of the Yeomanry in this town has two sons, John and George Birch, who are Rebels and are responsible for stealing the powder and ball from the military store. Old Birch is a royalist, and a great friend of My Lord.'

Steel Dickson in his *Narrative*, pp. 45-46, states that on 31st May, 1798, he left Saintfield to return to Belfast, but that he changed his plans and spent the night at Ballygowan. No reason is given for the change of plan, but a deposition of Dickson's in the I.P.R.O. states that when he arrived at Ballygowan there seemed to be a considerable commotion. He saw a genteel young man come running out of a public house very drunk and with his nose cut. On learning that the young man was a son of Dr. Birch, Dickson stayed with him till after seven o'clock to prevent him fighting, and then brought him home.

Both sons fought in the rebel ranks at Saintfield, and a contemporary letter, written by George A. Stewart, dated 5th July, 1798, and quoted by Alec Wilson in *Fragments that remain*, tells of the result—'The Doctor's eldest son, I hear, was shot in the engagement at Saintfield at the head of a party of rebels, and George was taken prisoner at Carlisle in the dress of a young lady accompanied by her mother and one of her sisters. I fancy he will be hanged and he will be no great loss to the community at large. Only conceive his father, who is in the Yeomanry, fighting on one side and his two sons on the other.'

Due to the influence of Dr. Birch with Lord Castlereagh George Birch was not tried, but he was compelled to go to the East Indies. He became a lieutenant in the Bengal Infantry, and died unmarried in 1808. See *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*. London, 1848. Vol. I, pp. 392-3 and 396.

The following day, Pike Sunday, Birch preached to the whole rebel army assembled at Creevy Rocks, a nearby hill, taking for his text Ezekiel IX, 1,—'Cause them that have charge over the city to draw near, even every man with his destroying weapon in his hand.' He began, 'Men of Down are here gathered to-day, being the sabbath of the Lord God, to pray and fight for the liberty of this Kingdom of Ireland. We have grasped the pike and musket and fight for the right against might: to drive the bloodhounds of King George the German king beyond the seas. This is Ireland, we are Irish and we shall be free.'

Later in his sermon he said, 'Men of the South are in arms against the common foe. Let us go forward to the flush of victory when all hands will be joined in the bond of Irish Unity.'⁽³⁴⁾

On Monday Birch marched to Ballynahinch with the rebel army, but later returned to Saintfield to encourage the necessary reinforcements for the pending battle. After the defeat of the rebels at Ballynahinch on Wednesday, 13th of June, Birch returned home. Here he was arrested at 3 a.m. on the 16th of June by a troop of the 24th Light Dragoons, and brought to Lisburn for court-martial, charged with treason and rebellion.

Lieut.-Colonel Blacker, in his autobiography, writing of Henry Monro's trial, states that 'he (Monro) conducted himself with great propriety before the Court but made no defence, indeed he seemed rather to disdain doing anything of the kind, very different from a Presbyterian minister named Birch, who was tried immediately after and entered into a long and blubbing defence, but the evidence was too conclusive and he also was found guilty . . .'

I have mentioned the conviction of Birch the minister on the same day with Monro. He was not executed, to the extreme indignation of the troops, who were very near going out and hanging him themselves, particularly those who had lost friends in the outbreak. There were some curious circumstances connected with the sparing of his life. He had a son and a brother, both active loyalists. The latter, Dr. Birch, a medical man of Newtownards, was I believe, an officer of Yeomanry Cavalry and a personal friend of Colonel Stewart (afterwards Lord Castlereagh) and of his father, the old Lord Londonderry—their loyalty and interest at headquarters was the means of saving the reverend rebel, though it was proved he had preached to the rebels at a place called Creevy, near Saintfield, on the way to Ballynahinch. The loyal doctor had a son as great a rebel as his uncle, the minister. I never heard what became of him.⁽³⁵⁾

Blacker's account of Birch's court-martial illustrates the danger of relying on a writer's memory when he is describing events many years later. Ignoring his misstatements that Birch had a son who was a loyalist and that Dr. Birch had only one rebel son, it is strange that Blacker should state that it was proved that Birch preached to the rebels at Creevy Rocks and that he was convicted.

The transcripts of the court-martial still exist in the State Paper Office, Dublin, and no mention is made in them of Birch's activities at Creevy Rocks, while the verdict of the court reads—'The court having taken into their consideration the evidence against the prisoner and his defence are of opinion that evidence is not

⁽³⁴⁾ Quoted by C. J. Robb in the *Sunday Press*, May 1, 1955. The source of the quotation is not given.

⁽³⁵⁾ *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*. Third Series, I, pp. 197-8.

sufficiently strong to affect the prisoner's life and therefore acquit him of the crimes laid to his charge.⁽³⁶⁾

Blacker, however, is correct in stating that Birch owed his life to his brother's influence. Dr. Birch told his brother, prior to the court-martial, that the court would acquit him if he would offer to go into exile. Birch agreed, and to secure a favourable verdict addressed the court as follows—'Gentlemen, I may have done wrong, but it was in error. I love my king and country and shall ever pray for their happiness. I have the most perfect confidence in the justice and humanity of this court and most cheerfully resign my honour and life to its disposal, and sensible that I cannot be any longer happy or useful in this country, I shall, when ordered by General Goldie or any other person authorised to order me, quit his Majesty's Dominions never to return without subjecting myself to such punishment as is inflicted on persons returning from transportation without leave, and retire to America or some other country not at war with his majesty.'

Birch was apparently considered too dangerous to be released from custody, and after the court-martial he was imprisoned in the guard-house in Lisburn. The following day a party of yeomen approached the guard-house with the intention of taking Birch out to hang him, but their plans were thwarted by a troop of the 22nd light dragoons, who formed up in the street outside and forced the yeomen to retreat.

Two days later Birch was taken under guard to Belfast, and on the 19th of July, 1798, he was sent on board the prison-tender in Belfast Lough.⁽³⁷⁾ Conditions on the ship were far from ideal, as so many prisoners were sent on board that it became overcrowded. To overcome this difficulty a false deck was put in between the other two. 'The head room was so confined,' Birch later wrote, 'that in walking you must crouch with your hands upon your knees. There was however, this advantage, that as chairs and tables were scarce, being no room for them, the deck served the purpose of both.'

No prisoner was permitted to retain a razor or knife of any sort, lest he should cut through the ship's timbers; forks were also forbidden, as they might be converted into pikes. Some beef in a bucket was handed down for dinner, and upon a humble petition a jack-knife was granted by the provost sergeant to the carver-general of sixteen, to be immediately returned and a fork of Adam's manufacture to hand round the repast. If any gentleman was not pleased he had (until) the next meal to come to his temper.

The beds were of canvas, stuffed with hair from the tan yard, which gave forth such a quantity of lime dust in the confined compartment, as not to be altogether palatable to weak lungs. However, it dispersed the flies. Two small port holes with an iron railing on each side, set in a wall thirty feet long, served for the purpose of windows. The heat was so intolerable, that, even without any covering in the night,

⁽³⁶⁾ Birch's court-martial began on Monday, 18th June, and lasted three days. Twenty-seven witnesses were called. Of the five principal crown witnesses one was an army pensioner, and four were arrested rebels. One of these rebels, Francis Henry Gordon, was a member of the Saintfield congregation. His late father, Alexander Gordon, had been agent for the Price estate. Gordon had fought at Saintfield, and had charge of the rebel artillery at Ballynahinch. He was arrested, but was allowed to emigrate to America. He was drowned in an accident in Lake Ontario. His mother, a sister of the Rev. Arthur McMahon of Holywood, who had to flee to France in 1797 because of his treasonable activity, gave evidence on behalf of Birch.

⁽³⁷⁾ Other ministers on the ship included William Steel Dickson, Portaferry; James Simpson, First Newtownards; William Sinclair, Newtownards N.S.; Robert Steele, Scruggan; and John Wallace and David B. Warden, licentiates.

the shirt would be wet with sweat. The air was so confined that the utmost attention to cleanliness could not prevent vermin from occasionally appearing.⁽³⁸⁾

The prisoners were seldom allowed above deck, and Birch relates that but for the humanity of Lieutenant Steel, who permitted the prisoners on deck when the commanding officer was absent, fever which had broken out would probably have spread.

Birch was released on the 16th August, 1798, to sail from Belfast to New York on board the *Harmony* of New Bedford, and reached the New World in September.⁽³⁹⁾

Early in 1799 Birch moved to Philadelphia, where he officiated for several months at the Third Presbyterian Church. Later the same year he acted as supply to the congregation in East-Nottingham. In the following year he was invited by some former members of the Saintfield congregation to found a congregation at Washington, Pennsylvania. He accepted, and 'removed there, at great expense, as a place adapted to a stranger in my situation, with a numerous family, and the small wreck of a desolated fortune.'⁽⁴⁰⁾

On 23rd October, 1800, he appeared at a meeting of the Presbytery of Ohio, asking to be taken under their care and settled in the congregation. One of the credentials presented by him was the following from the Presbytery of Belfast—'This is to certify, that the Rev. Thomas Ledlie Birch was a member of the Presbytery of Belfast, and minister of the Presbyterian congregation of Saintfield, in which station he maintained a good moral character, and was much respected by his congregation'⁽⁴¹⁾.

To his surprise, his request was refused on the grounds of want of experimental knowledge, i.e., 'knowledge of the grounds of religion, and the ability to defend orthodox doctrine, against all unsound and erroneous opinions.'⁽⁴²⁾ Similar requests were rejected in January and March of the following year, so in May, 1801, Birch appealed to the General Assembly.

⁽³⁸⁾ Thomas Ledlie Birch: *A Letter from An Irish Emigrant to his Friend in the United States. Giving an account of the Commotions in Ireland, of the United Irishmen, and Orange Societies, and of several Battles and Military Executions*, Philadelphia, 1799, 56 pp.

In this pamphlet, written in New York in 1798, Birch paints a vivid picture of the uneasy conditions in Saintfield and district in the years prior to the rebellion and gives a full account of his trial, attempted lynching, and imprisonment.

⁽³⁹⁾ One of the other sixty-four passengers was William Kane, a former clerk in the *Northern Star* office. He had fought at Ballynahinch, and had been captured with Henry Munro.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Where the source is not given, the information in this and subsequent paragraphs is taken from *Experimental Religion, Instructors Unexperienced—Converters unconverted—Revivals Killing Religion—Missionaries In Need of Teaching—or War against the Gospel by its Friends*. Being the Examination and Rejection of Thomas Ledlie Birch, a foreign ordained Minister, by the Rev. Presbytery of Ohio, under the Rev. General Assembly's Alien Act; The Trial and Acquittal of the Rev. Presbytery of Ohio, before the very Rev. General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America, for the Rejection of Birch; and Injustice in permitting the Rev. John McMillen to escape Church Censure. With Remarks thereon. Addressed to the Friends of Gospel Progress, More particularly, those of the Presbyterian Church of America. Rev. Thomas Ledlie Birch, A.M. 144 pp., 1806.

⁽⁴¹⁾ The credentials, which were dated July 21, 1798, bore three signatures—Rev. Sinclair Kelburn of Rosemary Street, Belfast; Rev. Samuel Patton of Moneyrea, and Rev. Alexander Henry of Castlereagh.

Henry, in 1794, was indicted at Downpatrick Assizes, on the affidavit of Robert Leatham, for using seditious expressions tending to vilify the king, but was acquitted.

Kelburn was imprisoned in Kilmainham, 1797-9, accused of complicity in rebellion.

⁽⁴²⁾ Robert Steele of Scrigan had an almost similar experience. He applied to the Presbytery of Redstone, Western Pennsylvania, on June 26, 1799, to be taken on probation. His request was refused, 'the Presbytery not having received all the satisfaction from Mr. Steele which they desired on the subject of experimental religion.' Similar requests were refused in June, 1800 and April and October, 1801, and it was not until April, 1802, that the Presbytery agreed to receive him as a member. In October, 1802, he accepted a call to First Pittsburgh Presbyterian Church, where he ministered until his death on March 22, 1810.

When the complaint was heard Birch had the sympathy of the Assembly, as he had been pastor of a large church in his native land and was well advanced in years. Some of the oldest and ablest members of the Assembly espoused his cause with great zeal, and in no measured terms denounced the injustice or uncharitableness of the Presbytery.⁽⁴³⁾

The Assembly was on the point of passing a vote of censure on the Presbytery, and of requiring them to receive Birch, when the Rev. John Watson rose in defence of his Presbytery. In a brief speech Watson defended the right of the Presbytery to judge whether or not a candidate for the ministry was acquainted with experimental religion; and argued that even if they had decided erroneously they were responsible only to God and their consciences.

Watson's speech changed the views of the Assembly, and it was agreed 'that no evidence of censurable procedure in the Presbytery of Ohio in the case of Mr. Birch had appeared in this House, inasmuch as there is a discretionary power necessarily lodged in every Presbytery to judge of the qualifications of those whom they receive, especially with respect to experimental religion.'⁽⁴⁴⁾

Birch's friends then induced the Assembly to examine him as to his acquaintance with experimental religion, and the Assembly found 'no obstruction against any Presbytery to which he may apply, taking him up and proceeding with him agreeably to the rules and regulations in this case made and provided.'⁽⁴⁵⁾

The Clerk of the Ohio Presbytery at the period of Birch's attempts to gain admittance was the Rev. Dr. John McMillan, 'whose failing all his life was a little too much bluntness of manner and expression, and who hated everything like hypocrisy and ministerial inconsistency.'⁽⁴⁶⁾ McMillan, the father-in-law of the Rev. John Watson, had expressed to the Presbytery his candid and unflattering opinion of Birch, and was the instigator in having him refused admittance.

When Birch learnt of McMillan's remarks he brought him before the Presbytery to answer for slander and unchristian threatenings. The Presbytery acquitted their clerk of these charges, except that of calling Birch 'a preacher of the devil,' for which they reprimanded him.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Dissatisfied with the verdict Birch gave notice of appeal to the General Assembly, 'but apprehending that he should not obtain a favourable decision, in consequence of his having committed some irregularities in Washington County, by administering the sacrament and ordaining elders in violation of the rules of the church, he gave up his appeal, and withdrew from the jurisdiction of the General Assembly; after which, the Assembly determined that they would have nothing more to do with him, and that he never had been in union with the Presbyterian church in the United States, so as to be authorized to preach as one of their ministers'⁽⁴⁸⁾.

But McMillan had not yet heard the last of Birch, who brought an action of

(43) Wm. B. Sprague: *Annals of the American Pulpit, etc.*, New York, 1859. Vol. IV, p. 209.

One of Birch's principal supporters was the Rev. Ashbel Green, minister of the Second Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, 1787-1812.

In a letter to Green, now in the library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and dated May 27, 1803, Birch wrote, 'I intend publishing a collection of psalmody, from the Old and New Testaments, framed upon the sacred text alone, without hymns, in which there (is) ground for the happy prospect of the union of Seceders and all orthodox Christians.'

We have failed to trace any reference to the publication of this book.

(44) W. B. Sprague, *Op. Cit.*, p. 209.

(45) *Minutes of General Assembly of 1801*.

(46) Joseph Smith. *Old Redstone, or Historical Sketches of Western Presbyterianism, its early ministers, its perilous times and its first records*. Philadelphia, 1854. p. 195.

(47) *ibid.* p. 196.

(48) Horace Binney: *Report of Cases adjudged in the Supreme Court—Pennsylvania*. Vol. 1, p. 179.

slander against him for calling him 'a liar, a drunkard, and a preacher of the Devil.' Birch also sued two elders of the Washington congregation for slander, and the three cases were tried jointly at the Circuit Court of Washington County in October, 1804.

Among the testimonials which Birch offered as proof of good character was the following—'We, the Synod of Ulster at our annual meeting at Cookstown, June 29, 1803, moved by a sense of justice, think ourselves in duty bound to give our attention and testimony, as we hereby do, to the character of our esteemed brother, the Rev. Thomas Ledlie Birch, of Washington, in America. He was a sober, respectable member of this body for above twenty years, particularly remarkable for piety, charity, and inflexible integrity; for a warm zeal for the interest and prosperity of the church of Christ, and for an assiduous and faithful discharge of the duties of the ministerial office. Thomas Henry, Moderator.' Similar testimonials were presented from the Presbytery of Dromore and the congregations of Tullylish and Saintfield.⁽⁴⁹⁾

McMillan admitted the charge, but pleaded that the expressions were privileged, as they were spoken by him in Presbytery, while making his defence against Birch's charge, and were not objectionable. He also pleaded that the action could not be maintained by Birch for words spoken of him in his profession of minister of the Presbyterian Church, because the evidence showed that he did not hold that office.

The jury found against the three defendants. Birch was awarded 300 dollars against McMillan, and 150 dollars and 70.25 dollars against the elders, with costs in each case.

McMillan's appeal was heard before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania on September 18, 1806, and was upheld on the grounds that the rights of ecclesiastical courts are established by long custom, and that the constitution guaranteed protection to churches in the exercise of discipline, and in the administration of their rules and regulations, so long as they do not attempt to infringe upon civil rights, or inflict temporal pains and penalties.⁽⁵⁰⁾

After his defeat in the Supreme Court Birch becomes a shadowy figure. He applied on June 16, 1802, to be taken under the care of the Presbytery of Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, but this request, and a similar one in the following year, was rejected⁽⁵¹⁾. However, at a later date he was received as a member of the Presbytery of Baltimore, although he lived outside their bounds.

On February 25, 1804, Birch purchased a 274 acre farm, Point Pleasant, situated about five miles west of Washington, Pa.⁽⁵²⁾ Here he lived until at least 1819, as the Washington *Examiner* mentions his officiating at a wedding in June of that year.

He died near Freeport, Armstrong County, Pa., on April 12, 1828. His widow died in Cadiz, Ohio, on November 25, 1836, aged 76, and a son, Hamilton, died there on March 27, 1847, aged 60.⁽⁵³⁾

(49) It is interesting to note that the Synod minutes make no reference to this resolution. The minutes of the Presbytery of Dromore and the sessions of Tullylish and Saintfield for 1803 are not extant.

(50) Horace Binney: *Op. Cit.*, p. 188.

(51) William J. Gibson: *History of the Presbytery of Huntingdon (Pa.)* Bellefonte (Pa.), 1874, p. 48.

(52) Office of Recorder of Deeds, Washington, Pa. Deed Book I—S—p. 293.

(53) Washington *Examiner*: May 24, 1828 and December 17, 1836.

Cadiz Cemetery records.

C. J. Robb, writing in *The Leader*, February 10, 1945, states 'The Rev. Hugh Lamont, who formerly hailed from Kiltrea, Co. Derry, a Covenanter, in his "Personal Recollections, etc.," published in Boston in 1834, says "Thomas Ledlie Birch called me to his death bed and in the course of conversation said, "Thank God I have lived to die in a free country."'

In answer to a query of mine about the Rev. Hugh Lamont, Professor D. M. Carson of Geneva College, Beaver Falls, Pa., the historian of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., wrote, "The records of the Reformed Presbyterian Church reveal no such person on its rolls."

A query to the Boston Public Library brought the reply that no book, pamphlet or article by the Rev. Hugh Lamont could be traced.