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## The "Absence" of Family in 19th-Century Irish Presbyterian Clerical Biographies

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# Spiritual and Ecclesiastical Biographies

Research, Results, and Reading

Editor:

*Anders Jarlert*

Konferenser 94

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KUNGL. VITTERHETS HISTORIE OCH  
ANTIKVITETS AKADEMIEN

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# The “Absence” of Family in 19th-Century Irish Presbyterian Clerical Biographies

*Janice Holmes*

In April 1847, the Revd Josias Wilson became seriously ill. He was confined to his bedroom in the house he shared with his wife Mary and their only daughter in Gibson Terrace, Islington, in London. Only recently moved from Belfast, where he had been the successful minister of Townsend Street Presbyterian Church, he had been recruited in 1844 to take charge of the Scottish Presbyterian community in London, which worshipped in the River Terrace Presbyterian Church. As the days passed it became clear that Wilson would not recover. Wilson’s behaviour, as recorded by his rather adulatory biographer, reflected what society expected at that time from the ideal evangelical death: he offered advice and guidance to his congregational leaders and, in his unswerving faith in a future heaven, he provided a model of the lived Christian life.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Wilson’s wife and daughter were a constant presence in these final days. At one point, recovered enough to sit up in a chair, with his wife holding his head and his daughter his hand, he spoke many words of advice and consolation to them. Together they prayed, read the Bible and made necessary, if difficult, plans for where Wilson might be buried. One day they had a visit from two of Wilson’s nieces whom he had not seen for some time. Soon thereafter, with two friends supporting him and with doctors about to enter the room to discuss his prognosis, he died. “The loving husband, the esteemed and affectionate father, and the faithful minister” had breathed his last.<sup>2</sup>

Wilson’s location within this highly domestic scene sits at odds with much of the rest of his biography. It is a relentlessly public account which situates Wilson almost exclusively within the contexts and locations associated with his professional life as a

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian family*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> H. Hastings, *Memoir of the life and labours of the late Rev. Josias Wilson, London*, London: James Nisbet and Co., 1850, pp. 169–195.

Presbyterian minister. Wilson's family, except for occasional and fragmentary references, is largely absent from this account. His daughter's first name, for instance, is never mentioned.

Studies of Victorian life writing point out that the biographical format emphasizes the individual and places a structure onto a life which stresses personal achievement and ability.<sup>3</sup> In addition, evangelical biographies have been shown to have a didactic purpose.<sup>4</sup> The biographies of 19th-century Irish Presbyterian clergymen like Wilson largely conform to this model. Taken together they portray the achievements of individuals, largely divorced from personal and social attachments, who lived idealised lives of faith and service that were meant to be models for the wider community. Many of these biographies present their subject as a remote and awe-inspiring figure, as a "hero" whose behaviour and actions were meant to inspire both congregation and community alike.<sup>5</sup> There was much about the ministerial role which promoted these perceptions, not least the minister's greater educational attainments and his religious authority conveyed through the process of ordination. As John Barkley points out in reference to the Irish Presbyterian clergyman in the 18th century, he was "a man apart". Barkley's account also demonstrates how he was, through marriage and the complexities of church finance and governance, part of the wider spheres of family, congregation and locality.<sup>6</sup> The biographies of 19th-century Irish Presbyterian clergymen, however, routinely neglect this communal and familial aspect of the clerical life.

This "absence" is more complicated than would at first appear. Yes, wives and children are rarely portrayed in any sustained way, but the fragmented references which can be found are enough for the beginnings of a social history of 19th-century Irish Presbyterian clerical family life to be constructed. This paper will explore the representations of family within the biographical accounts of the Presbyterian clergy who served in Belfast between 1800 and 1900. It will show that families make only stylised appearances at "appropriate" points in the biographical narrative but that this limited picture can be offset by other sources and alternative approaches.

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3 David Amigoni (ed.), *Life writing and Victorian culture*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

4 David Roberts, 'The Paterfamilias of the Victorian governing classes', in Anthony S. Wohl (ed.), *The Victorian family: Structure and stresses*, London: Croom Helm, 1978, pp. 59–81.

5 Tine Van Osselaer & Alexander Maurits, 'Heroic men and Christian ideals', in Yvonne Maria Werner (ed.), *Christian masculinity: Men and religion in Northern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011, pp. 63–94.

6 John M. Barkley, 'The Presbyterian minister in the eighteenth century', in *Challenge and conflict: Essays in Irish Presbyterian history and doctrine*, Belfast: W. & G. Baird, 1981, pp. 50–51.

## Background and context

In the 19th century, Presbyterians were the third largest religious group on the island of Ireland. They consistently represented between 9–10% of the total population. But unlike Catholics and Anglicans, who were spread out across the island, and represented approximately 75 and 12% of the population respectively, the Presbyterian population was highly regional in its distribution patterns. 96% of Presbyterians lived in the northern province of Ulster. In counties Antrim and Down, and in the towns of Belfast and Carrickfergus, Presbyterians made up a majority of the population.<sup>7</sup> Presbyterianism was brought to Ireland by Scottish settlers in the 17th-century taking up land which had been confiscated from local Irish lords. Clergy, congregations and presbyteries soon followed, although as religious “voluntaries” they had a precarious existence, operating as they did outside of the established church, which made them vulnerable to persecution. It was not until 1719 that they were granted a measure of official toleration.<sup>8</sup>

By the late 18th century, Irish Presbyterianism was well organised but also highly divided over theological matters and the practice of requiring ministers to “subscribe” to the Westminster Confession of Faith at ordination. Although the latter was the policy of the Synod of Ulster, the largest body of Presbyterians at the time, it was not widely enforced within its ranks. The Synod was dominated by a liberal, “New Light” faction which rejected subscription. This led more orthodox, or “Old Light”, elements to break away and form new denominations, such as the Reformed, or Covenanting, Presbyterians and several groups which were collectively known as “Seceders”. In the 1820s, under the growing influence of evangelical ideas, Old Lights within the Synod of Ulster sought to impose subscription onto all its clergy. They were eventually successful and in 1829 those who objected to subscription left, forming the nucleus of a liberal Presbyterian movement known for its non-subscription. With the divisive issue of subscription now resolved, and an agreed theological programme, the Synod and the Secession united in 1840 to form the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI).<sup>9</sup>

Over the course of the 19th century, the centre of gravity within Irish Presbyterianism shifted away from its traditional rural base towards the urban centre of Belfast. In 1800, with a population of approximately 20,000 there were only two congregations

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7 Sean Connolly, *Religion and society in nineteenth-century Ireland*, Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1985, pp. 3–4.

8 R.F.G. Holmes, ‘Presbyterians’, in S.J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 459.

9 John M. Barkley, *A short history of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1959, p. 118.

in the city associated with the Synod of Ulster and a further two with the Seceders. By 1901, with a population of over 350,000 and a collective Presbyterian population of over 120,000, Belfast had come to represent a significant proportion of the Presbyterian community. Of the over 500 congregations associated with the GA in 1910, 52 were based in Belfast. A further 10 were associated with the Presbyterian breakaways. Although meetings of the General Assembly were originally held on a rotational basis at locations across Ireland, from the 1850s they were held exclusively in Belfast and in 1905 the imposing Church House was built as a permanent headquarters.<sup>10</sup>

Belfast's rapid growth presented considerable challenges for the Presbyterian church. In order to form a new congregation, interested parties had to petition the Presbytery and persuade it of their ability to pay the annual running costs, in particular the minister's stipend. Initially, Belfast clergymen were reluctant to allow new congregations to be formed, fearing the loss of members and the potential reduction of their own salaries<sup>11</sup> but over time more expansion-minded colleagues were able to persuade the Presbytery to establish congregations in needy areas. This process of "church extension" progressed rapidly. As many as ten new congregations were established in Belfast in each of the 1830s, 1860s and 1890s. While this looked impressive, Presbyterians were really only keeping pace with Belfast's population growth. Throughout the 19th century the Presbyterian share of Belfast's population remained steady at 34–35%. If that share were to be divided amongst the total number of Presbyterian congregations, the results would suggest that average congregational size in Belfast increased as the 19th century progressed. In 1861, when the first census of Irish religion was carried out and statistics on the religious make-up of Belfast became available for the first time, average congregational size for Presbyterian churches was 2,130. By 1901 that figure had risen to 2,559, suggesting that Presbyterians were not entirely able to keep up with the growth of the city in the closing decades of the 19th century.<sup>12</sup>

This study, therefore, is based on an analysis of clergy in Belfast who were affiliated to the Synod of Ulster or the Seceders between 1800–1840 and with the General Assembly between 1840–1900. It has included both clergy ordained to a congregational charge (of which there were 108 appointed to 47 different congregations) and clergy who were appointed to a professorship under the denomination's control, from 1817–1843 based in the collegiate department at the independent Royal Belfast Academical Institution and from 1843 based in what eventually became the denomi-

10 David Stewart, *The history and principles of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, Belfast: Sabbath School Society for Ireland, 1908, p. 177.

11 Revd James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, III, 3 vols, new edition with additional notes by W.D. Killen, Belfast: William Mullan, 1867, p. 372–373.

12 Data compiled from tables of religious professions (Ulster), *Census of Ireland 1861–1901*, Histpop: Online Historic Population Reports [www.histpop.org](http://www.histpop.org), accessed 10 February 2016.



nation's own theological college, Assembly's College.<sup>13</sup> Twenty-three professors were appointed during this time. One was a layman (Edward Masson) and one never lived in Belfast (Samuel Edgar). Six were appointed while they were already serving in a Belfast congregation, leaving 15 who moved to Belfast and took up residence in the city in order to carry out their teaching duties. The study also includes one minister who worked as a "town missionary" and one who ran a charitable institution.<sup>14</sup> There were no doubt other Presbyterian clergy living in Belfast. Those associated with the Presbyterian breakaways, for instance, or licentiates (clerical students who had graduated but were not yet ordained to a charge), but these have been excluded. Also excluded are the "agents" of the Belfast Town Mission. Although there is some evidence that students studying for the ministry and licentiates often did mission work, either on behalf of the Town Mission or the Presbytery, most of the Town Mission's paid agents were laymen.<sup>15</sup> Approximately 125 Presbyterian clergymen, then, served in Belfast between 1800 and 1900.

But how should Belfast be defined? Presbyterians organized themselves around congregations, clustering them into "presbyteries". The Presbytery of Belfast, created in 1774, however, was not contiguous with the city, and throughout the 19th century included congregations well outside the municipal boundary, such as Dunmurry, Carryduff, Carnmoney and Whiteabbey.<sup>16</sup> Using the municipal boundary is also problematic, because it expanded in 1853 and again in 1896 when Belfast was granted city status. This study, therefore, has included all Presbyterian clergymen who worked within the Belfast municipal boundary of 1896 between 1800 and 1900.

The source base for this study has turned out to be smaller than expected. If fasti entries and obituary notices are excluded, on the grounds that every Belfast minister had one, then approximately one-third (42) of the clergy in this study have been the subject of a biographical treatment. These vary widely in terms of quality, authorship, audience and depth. About half of these (19) are a standard contemporary biography, delivered as a funeral sermon or written up as a book by a friend or family member soon after the subject's death. Of these four were written by wives or daughters and five by sons or sons-in-law. Five are autobiographies, some with additional edited material at the end. Others are collective biographies, like Thomas Hamilton's *Irish Worthies*,<sup>17</sup>

13 Robert Allen, *The Presbyterian College Belfast, 1853–1953*, Belfast: William Mullan, 1954, p. 53.

14 These were the Revd William Fleming Stevenson, who assisted the Revd David McKee (Argyle Place, 1857–1859) and the Revd John Kinghan, who founded and led the Kinghan Mission for the Deaf between 1853 and 1895.

15 S.W. Murray, *The City Mission story*, Belfast: Belfast City Mission, 1977, p. 13.

16 Reid supra n. 11, p. 338; The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, *Parish Boundaries*, n.p., after 1930?, pp. 23–33.

17 Thomas Hamilton (ed.), *Irish worthies: A series of original biographical sketches of eminent ministers and members of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, Belfast: William Mullan, 1875.

W.D. Killen's sketches<sup>18</sup> or occasional articles in the Presbyterian press. About 28 have a modern biography. A majority of these (20) are *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (1885–1900, revised in 2004) or *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2009) entries, mostly of clergy who already had a biography. The remainder are “modern” biographies, published after 1950 as books or articles; of these only two – Henry Cooke and Isaac Nelson – have received a sustained scholarly treatment.<sup>19</sup>

Surprisingly little has been written about Irish Presbyterian clergy as a distinct professional group and about Belfast's Presbyterian clergy more narrowly. David Hempton and Myrtle Hill's account of the rise of evangelicalism in Ulster is more interested in charting broad movements of religious ideas.<sup>20</sup> Andrew Holmes' study of Presbyterian belief and practice between 1770 and 1840 is largely focused on lay attitudes and behaviours as is Charles Cashdollar's collective history of congregational life within the 19th-century reformed tradition in Britain and America.<sup>21</sup> Ian Dickson's account of Irish evangelical sermons is more interested in their content and less on the characters and contexts of those who delivered them.<sup>22</sup> Robbie Gray's study of the English Nonconformist clergyman Newman Hall and John Tosh's work on Edward Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury (1883–1896) are fascinating case studies in the domestic world of English clergymen,<sup>23</sup> but Irish Presbyterian clergy still await the investigation of masculinity, domesticity and family life that is being pioneered in Europe by Tine van Osselaer and Yvonne Maria Werner.<sup>24</sup>

There have been two substantial prosopographical surveys of Irish Presbyterian

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18 W.D. Killen, *History of congregations of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and biographical notices of eminent Presbyterian ministers and laymen*, Belfast: James Cleeland, 1886.

19 Finlay Holmes, *Henry Cooke*, Belfast: Christian Journals, 1981; Daniel Ritchie, *Evangelicalism, Abolitionism and Parnellism: The public career of the Revd Isaac Nelson*, unpubl. Ph.D. diss., Queen's University Belfast, 2014.

20 David Hempton & Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society, 1740–1890*, London & New York: Routledge, 1992.

21 Andrew R. Holmes, *The shaping of Ulster Presbyterian belief and practice 1770–1840*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Charles Cashdollar, *A spiritual home: Life in British and American Reformed congregations, 1830–1915*, University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

22 J.N. Ian Dickson, *Beyond religious discourse: Sermons, preaching and evangelical Protestants in nineteenth-century Irish society*, Bletchley: Paternoster, 2007.

23 Robbie Gray, 'Pulpit and Witness Box: the case of Hall v. Hall & Richardson', in Martin Hewitt (ed.), *Platform, Pulpit, Rhetoric*, Leeds: Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies, 2000, pp. 62–73; John Tosh, 'Domesticity and Manliness in the Victorian Middle Class: The family of Edward White Benson', in Michael Roper & John Tosh (eds), *Manful assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 44–73.

24 Tine Van Osselaer & Patrick Pasture (eds), *Christian homes: Religion, family and domesticity in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014; Yvonne Maria Werner (ed.), *Christian masculinity: Men and religion in Northern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011.

clergy, one by Brown, which includes clergy from the whole of Ireland between 1840–1910 and one by Conway, which includes clergy from Ulster in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>25</sup> While neither study separates out Belfast’s clergy in any way, they do provide a useful background against which they can be compared. Their analyses, based on upwards of 1500 clergy, reinforce the conclusion that the majority of 19th-century Irish Presbyterian clergymen came from rural Ulster farming backgrounds, although a growing number towards the end of the century came from Belfast and Londonderry. Of the 60% who married, most did so in their early thirties, likely when they were appointed to their first ministerial position. The research confirms that the Irish Presbyterian ministry was very settled. Ministers moved infrequently and, as a result, tended to have lengthy pastorates. In the decade 1840–1850 74% of clergy had only a single pastorate and 60% had pastorates that lasted for more than 25 years. These figures had fallen considerably by the 1890s (to 41 and 28% respectively), but they still vastly outstripped those for Nonconformist clergy in England and Wales, suggesting that Irish clergy enjoyed better conditions of service and shared a similar social and cultural outlook with their congregations which reduced conflict and promoted harmonious working relationships.<sup>26</sup>

### The “absence” of family?

The biographical accounts that have been examined here demonstrate an “absence” of family. Absence in this context means that key details relating to the minister’s family are missing, such as the name of his mother or wife, the birthdates and number of his children, the location of his home, descriptions of his friends and details of his wider interests. It also means that references to his family are disjointed or fragmentary and a full sense of a family narrative must be collected in different places across the account. Biographers almost exclusively chose a professional chronology for their subjects and in moving from early life to education, career and then death, families are mentioned only in passing, or when they obtrude onto the professional stage, making the reconstruction of an accurate picture of family life difficult. This “absence” also refers to the portrayal of the clergymen themselves. Ministers are routinely described only in professional terms, and are rarely depicted as fathers or husbands, or for that matter as consumers or walk takers or sports players or animal lovers. As John Tosh points out, Victorian clergymen frequently worked from home, preparing sermons, holding meetings and receiving visitors, so they would have been regular features of their domestic

25 Kenneth D. Brown, ‘Life after death? A preliminary survey of the Irish Presbyterian Ministry in the nineteenth century’, *Irish Economic and Social History* 22, 1995, pp. 49–63; Kevin P. Conway, ‘The Presbyterian Ministry of Ulster in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: A prosopographical study’, unpubl. Ph.D. diss., Queen’s University Belfast, 1996.

26 Brown supra n. 25, pp. 59–61.

environment.<sup>27</sup> Irish Presbyterian biographies, however, rarely conveyed this domestic context, favouring instead the depiction of sermons, meetings and events that showed their subject in the public domain. When an evangelical context is added to this mix, the imperative to edify often trumped the need to present the life in its daily reality. Family, with its “secular” preoccupations and its daily banality, was regularly sidelined.

The Irish Presbyterian Church’s definitive biographical source – the fasti – demonstrates this absence of family most strongly. Fasti entries, available for every minister, are short, highly abbreviated, factual lists of basic biographical information. They detail, in no more than 75 words, family background, education, licensing and ordination, ministerial appointments, honours, publications, marriage and death. The Belfast-based scholar and historian the Revd James McConnell carried out this original biographical research in the 1890s. His work was later extended by his son and others, most significantly by the Revd John Barkley in the 1950s.<sup>28</sup>

Taken together, the fasti entries show a distinct lack of family details. Fathers are most commonly recorded, but still only 62% of fasti entries record their names, and only 27% list their occupations (see Table 1). Marriage entries are even more attenuated. Out of a possible 111 marriages in the Belfast fastis, 85% record wives only in relation to their male relatives (as in “daughter of ...”). Only 32% list a first name. Only seven marriages in the whole set record a first and last name (see Table 2). Children are not recorded in any systematic way, so there is no data on the number of children a clergyman had. Only children who became clergymen themselves are listed. While much of this absence no doubt can be attributed to the lack of space, or sources, it also says a great deal about the priorities of the compilers and the conservative ethos of early 20th-century Irish Presbyterian scholarship.

Description	Number
Father named, with occupation	34
Father named, no occupation	44
No father mentioned	45
Not known	2
<b>Total clergy</b>	<b>125</b>

Table 1. Fathers of Belfast Presbyterian clergymen, 1800–1900 from official sources.

<sup>27</sup> Tosh supra n. 23, pp. 48–49.

<sup>28</sup> James McConnell, *Fasti of the Irish Presbyterian Church*, revised by the late Rev. S.G. McConnell; arranged and edited by Rev. F.J. Paul and Rev. David Stewart, Belfast: n.p., 1936–1937; John M. Barkley, *Fasti of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1840–1910*, Belfast: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1986–1987.

Description	Number
First and last name	7
First name, daughter/sister of	28
Daughter/sister of	66
Miss, last name	7
Mrs, last name	1
No name listed	2
Not married	4
Not indicated	23
No data	2
<b>Total marriages</b>	<b>111</b>

Table 2. Description of women married to Belfast Presbyterian clergymen, 1800–1900, from official Presbyterian sources.

For the biographical accounts that form the bulk of this study, the absence of family cannot be explained because of a lack of space. Biographers had clear priorities about what they wanted to include and which aspects of their subjects' lives that they felt were acceptable to make public. For example, the Revd Josias Porter, Henry Cooke's biographer, was at pains to present his father-in-law's career in public, political terms. Cooke had been one of the most influential Presbyterians of his generation, responsible for securing subscription within the Synod of Ulster and laying the groundwork for the union with the Seceders. The first edition of his biography, published in 1871, contained very little about his family and personal life. Due to popular demand, however, a "people's edition" was published in 1875 which included material "calculated to throw a clearer light on his private life".<sup>29</sup> Popular interest, then, not authorial intent prompted Porter to reveal more than he had originally been willing to do. The Revd James Morgan, the hugely popular minister at Fisherwick Place Church, had wanted to set aside an entire chapter in his autobiography for the stories of families, including his own, which he believed would be most instructive to his readers. His son and editor, however, anxious about the propriety of putting such details into print, and "out of consideration to private feelings" suppressed a number of these accounts, along with an entire section on Morgan's own family circumstances. Such a "chequered story" of "light and shade as in every household", declared his son, might have been "all most

29 J.L. Porter, *Life and times of Henry Cooke, D.D., L.L.D.*, People's edition, Belfast: William Mullan, 1875, p. v.

interesting to [Morgan], but not equally so to the public”.<sup>30</sup> Porter and Morgan, like other biographers, shared a natural instinct to protect their subjects and their congregations by restricting access to the private sphere and by keeping potentially embarrassing information private. They, like others, felt that no matter their intentions they would be unable to do this private world justice. As the Revd J. Ernest Davey remarked in his 1921 biography of his father Charles, “what he was at home, the place where one is absolutely oneself, cannot be set down in cold print”.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the desire that the intimacy of the home should not be revealed in public, the “absence” of family in Irish Presbyterian clerical biographies is strangely counter-intuitive. Most accounts were written either by family members or by people who were closely acquainted with their subjects. Both would have had first-hand knowledge of their family life. The decision to exclude the family could not have been from a lack of information or knowledge but from the sense, widely held, that such material was not the stuff of biography. This is despite the fact that Irish Presbyterians clearly placed great store on marriage and family life. According to Samuel Prenter, the Revd William Johnston’s biographer, “family is, alongside the Church, one of the two great institutions God has appointed for promoting the health, the happiness, the religious, moral, and social culture of the human race”.<sup>32</sup> The Church was often described as a family and the clergy as “Fathers” and “Brethren”. When the Revd John Macnaughton, minister of Rosemary Street Church, died, the Revd Robert Watts, speaking at his funeral, declared that the Presbytery of Belfast, indeed, the whole of the General Assembly “may well feel as a family from which the head has been taken away”.<sup>33</sup> Presbyterians and their clergy exhibited a great interest in family connections, family history and genealogy. The Revd James Morgan’s son records how on Sundays during his sermon Morgan would often leave the pulpit and walk amongst his congregation, contemplating out loud their history and circumstances. The Revd William Killen, professor of church history at Assembly’s College, peppered his own autobiography with detailed descriptions of his relations and their wider connections.<sup>34</sup> The Revd Henry Cooke in an 1829 letter to a young colleague, advised him if at all possible to purchase land for

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30 James Morgan, *Recollections of my life and times: An autobiography; with selections from his journal edited by his son*, Belfast: William Mullan, 1874, p. 187.

31 J. Ernest Davey, *A memoir of the Reverend Charles Davey of Belfast, D.D.*, Belfast: M’Caw, Stevenson & Orr, 1921, p. 132.

32 Samuel Prenter, *Life and labours of the Rev. William Johnston, D.D.*, London: James Nisbet, 1895, p. 139.

33 Rev. William Park, *The unchanging friend and the heavenly home: Two sermons preached in Rosemary Street Presbyterian Church Belfast, on the 1st June, 1884, the Sabbath after the death of the Rev. John Macnaughton, A.M.*, Belfast: Robert Carswell and Son, 1884, p. 52.

34 W.D. Killen, *Reminiscences of a long life*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901, pp. 1–7, 280–286.

a dedicated graveyard. As an explanation he wrote, "I like to have the dead sleeping around me where I preach. They are a kind of witnesses for us. They attach the people to the house around which are their fathers' graves".<sup>35</sup> These examples convey the intimacy and interconnectedness of Belfast's Presbyterian community and reflect the deep sense of belonging, and *knowing*, which existed within it. Belfast's clergy were not isolated figures. They were firmly embedded within a congregational family which knew them, and which they intimately knew.

This picture of the Belfast clergyman as an integral part of his denominational family is a fleeting one and one that has been pieced together using small fragments of evidence. Although Presbyterians clearly valued the family, it does not outweigh the fact that, in their biographical accounts, they chose to marginalize references to family life. A close inspection of these partial references, however, shows that families did appear, but only in highly stylised and formalised ways. At four key stages in the minister's life – childhood, marriage, the recognition of achievement and death – families were "expected" to be part of the narrative and were "given" stylised roles to play.

The inclusion of an account of the clergyman's early life was the stock in trade of every biography. Most of these men, according to their biographers, were raised in a loving home with strong mothers who maintained family worship and kept a godly household. Henry Cooke's mother was described as "a woman of great force and strength of character, indefatigable, almost masculine energy, and a deep thirst for knowledge". W.D. Killen's mother was "gifted with strong common sense". David Hamilton's mother was "a woman of great affection, and at the same time of admirable strength of mind".<sup>36</sup> But once the clergyman went off to school, or embarked on their careers, these connections were seemingly left behind.

Marriage was another point where references to family once again came to the fore. Even though marriages were almost always mentioned, most biographies had little to say beyond the bare essentials. A courtship might be mentioned, the wife's own family background occasionally described but after that wives once again retreated into the background. They were often mentioned in the biographies, but largely as foils for their husband's actions and ambitions. Wives appeared as the recipients of letters, the companions on preaching tours, the providers of comfort, the maintainers of the home – not as individuals in their own right. When marriage was discussed, it was often in highly idealised, near impossible, terms of domestic bliss. William Johnston's biographer described his marriage as "thirty-nine years of unclouded domestic sunshine". Jane Toye, the Revd Thomas Toye's third wife, waxed lyrical about her rela-

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35 J.L. Porter, *Life and times of Henry Cooke, D.D., L.L.D.*, Ambassador Publications reprint, 1999 of 1st ed., Belfast: William Mullan, 1871, p. 138.

36 Porter supra n. 29, p. 2; Killen supra n. 34, p. 3; Thomas Hamilton, *A biographical sketch of the Rev. David Hamilton, Belfast*, Belfast: William Millan, 1875, p. 5.

tionship with her husband. It was her “privilege”, she recounted, “to spend seventeen years of happiest days in the closest and most endearing of all human relationships, with one of the tenderest, best and most affectionate of husbands”.<sup>37</sup> Such idealised language makes it hard to gauge the real status of clerical marriages. David Hamilton’s relationship with his wife sounds formal and unemotional.<sup>38</sup> Hugh Hanna’s wife Fanny is barely mentioned in his biography.<sup>39</sup> Other relationships appear more loving and mutually supportive. Henry Cooke’s letters to his wife Ellen Mann show an affectionate and intimate relationship, albeit a largely one-sided one.<sup>40</sup>

Families were also given a place in the ministerial biography when there were significant achievements or milestones to be celebrated. Congregational anniversaries, notable or lengthy pastorates or appointments to new, more senior positions were all occasions for the minister’s family and his congregation to share his success and families were often included in the festivities that were organised to honour the occasion. When the Elmwood congregation in south Belfast celebrated its 20th anniversary in 1882, it commissioned two portraits of its then minister, the Revd John Moore. One was for the Session room and the other was for his family.<sup>41</sup> The York Street congregation marked the death in 1854 of their long-serving minister the Revd David Hamilton by presenting his widow with a portrait of her husband.<sup>42</sup> When the Revd Hugh Hanna was awarded a D.D. by the Theology Faculty of the Irish Presbyterian Church in 1885, his congregation organised a social evening at which he was presented with a dining room clock and some household ornaments. The ladies of the congregation then gave Mrs Hanna a “valuable” silver service and two of their daughters a gold locket and chain and a pair of gold bangles.<sup>43</sup> Families were expected to share in the minister’s good fortune. The congregation’s gifts were a way of acknowledging the contribution which the family had made to this success and their desire to give the family a permanent record of that achievement. In 1846, the Alfred Place congregation presented their minister’s wife with a portrait of her husband, the Revd John Edgar. In their address they stated:

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37 Prenter supra n. 32, p. 85; [Jane Toye], *Brief memorials of the Late Rev. Thomas Toye, Belfast*, Belfast: A. McCormick, 1873, p. 16.

38 Hamilton supra n. 36, p. 40.

39 Nemo, *St. Enoch’s Church and Rev. Dr. Hanna*, Belfast: n.p., 1890, p. 65.

40 Porter (1875), p. 390-2.

41 James Dewar (ed.), *A History of Elmwood Presbyterian Church with Biographical Sketches of its Pastors and Founders, 1859-1899*, Belfast: M’Caw, Stevenson and Orr, 1900, p. 83.

42 Hamilton, p. 116.

43 ‘Nemo’, p. 63.



“We believe we cannot more suitably express our esteem for yourself than by presenting you with this painting, to be handed down to his posterity as a simple and affecting memorial that ... [Edgar] ... ministered to a congregation collected by his own efforts, and lived in the hearts of a grateful, united, and happy people.”<sup>44</sup>

Family members made their most significant and sustained appearances in clerical biographies at times of illness and death. The sudden and unexpected death, particularly of a child, was often enough to interrupt the flow of a narrative, presenting as they did the opportunity for the clerical life to demonstrate a suitable forbearance and a hope in heaven. There is no doubt that Belfast’s Presbyterian clergymen experienced considerable loss. Of James Morgan’s eight children, only four survived him. John Edgar also lost four of his children as did David Hamilton. Seven of Henry Cooke’s 13 children died before he did. While some accounts of these deaths are not recorded, or recorded only briefly, others are described in more emotional terms. When, in 1863, Henry Cooke’s adult daughter Elizabeth died after a long illness, Cooke was distraught. Two years later, at a public meeting held to honour his ministry, his congregation made reference to his bereavement “which we know has pressed so heavily upon you”. In his reply Cooke was so overcome by emotion that he burst into tears, although he was still able to call on his faith for comfort. “As a father”, he said, “my heart has been wounded; but the hand of the great Healer can bind up the wound it has inflicted.”<sup>45</sup>

When the clergyman himself fell ill, the biographer naturally placed him in his domestic environment surrounded by his family. Although distanced from them in the rest of the biography, now that the end was near, it was expected that he would return to be with those who loved him most. In 1866, for instance, John Edgar was staying with his friend Hugh Moore in Dublin when he became too ill to travel. Realising he was approaching the end of his life, Edgar put his affairs in order, wrote letters of farewell to his professional colleagues and was able to gather nearly all of his family around him. “To his wife he addressed many sweet words of consolation; and to all his family he gave suitable advice ... To the last he took an interest in the well-being of all his friends. He prayed earnestly for his children ...”<sup>46</sup> He spent his last hours praying and repeating portions of Scripture. Like Josias Wilson on his deathbed in London, Edgar demonstrated the “good” Presbyterian death.<sup>47</sup> It was orderly and dignified, calm and controlled. Edgar was surrounded by his family and sought to instruct them, like a good Christian father and husband should. Their roles, however central, were essentially passive ones. His family observed his death, they received the many letters of condolence but their own responses remain largely hidden. For Belfast’s Presbyterian

44 W.D. Killen, *Memoir of John Edgar, D.D., L.L.D.*, Belfast: William Mullan, 1869, p. 177.

45 Porter *supra* n. 29, p. 446–447.

46 Killen, *Memoir of John Edgar*, p. 301.

47 A. Holmes *supra* n. 21, pp. 248–251.

ministers, the biographical format pushed the intimacy and the distinctiveness of their family life into an acceptable form that would serve as an example to others.

### Alternative approaches

Clerical biographies, it has been shown, portray a fairly limited view of the domestic environment of Belfast's 19th-century clergymen. Without more detailed research it is difficult to know what domestic life was like for them and how they operated as fathers, husbands and friends. There are, however, other ways to examine the clerical life. One way is through the lens of the clergyman's wife. In 1915 the Revd Robert Barron, minister at Whitehouse Presbyterian Church on the north-eastern outskirts of Belfast, published a biography of his wife Mary.<sup>48</sup> It is the only biography considered here in which the subject is a woman. Mary was the daughter of the Revd Robert Watts, a professor at Assembly's College, and for much of her life was at the heart of Belfast's Presbyterian elite. Her first husband, also a professor, died suddenly in 1890. A few years later in 1893, after renewing their acquaintance, Mary and Robert married. Mary never had any children, but as Robert's account makes clear, she was an active contributor to his congregational work. She carried out an extensive range of visiting, she trained Sunday School teachers, she helped out at the local school and ran a friendly and hospitable home. She was also active within the Zenana Mission, a newly emerging Presbyterian women's missionary organisation, and served as its Home Secretary for many years. By focusing on his wife, Barron portrays a very different picture of the ministerial life. He demonstrates the important contribution that wives made to their husband's career and in so doing presents his own role within his congregation not so much in terms of the isolated "hero", but as part of a team, working together with his wife to deliver a range of services to the spiritual community for which he was responsible. Glimpses of this kind of team-based approach can be seen in other biographies. William Johnston's wife, for instance, appears to have taken a very active role in supporting her husband.<sup>49</sup> As a biographical sketch of Johnston in the Presbyterian newspaper *The Witness* declared in 1904, Mrs Johnston was "much more than a second in the work". "[S]he was a helpmeet indeed; assisted him in all his labours, encouraged him in all his enterprises, stimulated him in all his efforts." She was, this account concluded, his "co-worker, co-helper and ... co-minister".<sup>50</sup>

New perspectives on the family life of Belfast's Presbyterian clergy can also be gained by using different methods and approaches. Genealogical and local history

48 Revd Robert Barron, *Mary Barron: a biography*, Belfast: Sabbath School Society for Ireland, 1915.

49 Prenter supra n. 32, pp. 102, 160–161.

50 A. McMonagle, 'Ministers I have known', *The Witness*, 1904, located in Scrap Book 1, Presbyterian Historical Society, Belfast.

sources can be painstaking to use, but they can provide a much richer picture of domestic life. For example, the Revd Hugh Hanna was minister at St Enoch's Presbyterian Church from his ordination in 1852 until his death in 1892. St Enoch's was one of the largest congregations in Belfast, and Hanna played a prominent role in the educational and political life of the city, establishing and running numerous primary schools and campaigning for a range of conservative, and later Unionist, causes. The sources which chart his career make very little reference to his family, even though they overlapped and intersected with his public ministerial life. Before he became a minister, Hanna worked as a teacher in the Townsend Street schools run by the Revd Josias Wilson. When he became the head teacher, he appointed his brother William as an assistant, and later employed him in the schools attached to his own congregation.<sup>51</sup> When William died of fever in his late 20s Hanna erected a memorial plaque to his memory in St Enoch's. Evidence suggests that he erected a plaque to his mother's memory in the church as well.<sup>52</sup> He certainly sought to commemorate her memory elsewhere, naming one of the many primary schools he founded after her. Although Hanna's wife seems not to have been a very public figure, Hanna worked closely with his eldest, unmarried daughter Frances Helena ("Lena"). Lena took an active part in the work of St Enoch's but she also assisted in her father's wider charitable work. Throughout the 1880s, when Lena was in her 30s, the *Belfast News-Letter* carried reports of the two of them attending fundraising concerts and visiting their sponsored charities. Every Christmas, for instance, they distributed hot meals to the residents of the Belfast Charitable Society, a home for the poor which was located around the corner from St Enoch's.<sup>53</sup> In his will, Hanna bequeathed his entire (very modest) estate to Lena, saying "I feel that Helena preferring to abide with her parents is specially entitled to consideration, she has been most helpful to me in my Church work and is entitled to my special regard".<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

Why have the biographies of 19th-century Belfast Presbyterian clergy marginalised the treatment of family and domestic life? Some of the explanations have already been suggested. Most biographers approached their subjects in formulaic ways which tended to highlight the individuality of their careers and public lives. A natural desire to protect their subjects and present them in a positive light made them unwilling to reveal too

51 Register of correspondence with Townsend Street National School, 1845–1853, ED/6/1/1/3, f. 136, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Belfast.

52 Correspondence with Robert McClung, Clerk of St Enoch's Church, 1987–1991, 10 January 2016.

53 *Belfast News-Letter*, 26 December 1889.

54 Hugh Hanna, will, probate 4 April 1892, will calendar database, PRONI, [www.proni.gov.uk](http://www.proni.gov.uk), accessed online 3 November 2015.

much of their private lives. The evangelical imperative to present a story that would edify and instruct meant the biographies concentrated on the spiritual world of the clergyman and neglected, in consequence, the secular world of the everyday. Gender attitudes also played a part. Presbyterian biographers, both male and female, have consistently sidelined women (and their children) and the work they did as clergy wives and families. Traditional views of the minister as a man “set apart” for a special religious work meant women’s contributions were overlooked if not actively discounted. One of the most obvious reasons for this neglect is because, so far, historians have not noticed it was there. If a work of reclamation is to be started, as this chapter has tried to do, a much richer and more sophisticated picture of the domestic lives of Presbyterian clergy in 19th-century Belfast, and Ireland more broadly, will begin to emerge.