



Hazlett, W. I. P. (2019) Religion and politics in William Steel Dickson DD (1744–1824): Ulster-Scot Irishman and his modernizing thought-world. *Scottish Church History*, 48(1), pp. 34-67. (doi:[10.3366/sch.2019.0003](https://doi.org/10.3366/sch.2019.0003))

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Deposited on: 14 December 2018

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# **Religion and Politics in William Steel Dickson DD (1744–1824): Ulster-Scot Irishman and his Modernizing Thought- World\***

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## **Introduction**

This essay aims to present the lineaments and origins of the core thinking of Steel Dickson, a typically controversial representative of the progressive eighteenth-century intelligentsia in the north of Ireland who were Presbyterian ministers and inclined to radical reform of politics and religion as well as, more tentatively, to the reformatting of fundamental theology. There will be reference to short studies and general interpretations of Dickson and, more particularly, some analysis of his publications including religio-political addresses and church sermons. Discussed will be the context of his association with the Society of United Irishmen and its evolving revolutionary path, as well as his links to other reform thinkers, politicians and churchmen in Ulster. The study argues that Steel Dickson's political involvement flowed consciously from his ethical and religious convictions. Further, that he embodies (with qualification) the impact of the Scottish Enlightenment and

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\* This article is an updated and significant revision of an earlier public lecture: 'The Religious Basis of the Public Life of Dr. William Steel Dickson', published in *The Bulletin of the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland* 30 (2010), 29–58. Some critical comments by a reviewer of this new version have also been taken into account.

‘Moderate’ presbyterianism on Ireland – but along with strong appeal to biblical testimony and norms. Finally, it demonstrates with illustrations that the decisive shaping and reconstructing of the contours of Dickson’s mind occurred during his studies at Glasgow University in its intellectual heyday.

The concept of ‘religion and politics’ is often understood as a toxic mix, particularly in regard to Ireland, and with the blame put on ‘religion.’ The paradox is less well acknowledged, namely, that antidotes to the dehumanizing coarseness of both party and sectarian politics have often emanated explicitly and consciously from authentic religious premises in thinkers and activists seeking change for the common good. It is well known that along with some Catholic and Anglican laymen in Ireland, many progressive Ulster Presbyterians including some ministers were sympathetic to, and implicated in, the 1798 rebellion of the ‘United Irishmen’, an organization founded in largely Presbyterian Belfast a few years previously. One such sympathizer at least, an ex-moderator (1793) of the Presbyterian General Synod of Ulster, William Steel Dickson, subsequently accused by some of a trio of crimes, namely (as he put

it), ‘sedition, treason, and popery’,<sup>1</sup> can only but turn heads.<sup>2</sup> Later, due to the Dublin government’s unproven allegation that the arrested Steel Dickson was implicated in the military action of many United Irishmen in the 1798 insurrection, some Presbyterian church leaders treated him subsequently in an ambivalent and sometimes vindictive manner – especially after the act of union (1800) of the British and Irish Parliaments. However gifted, he was now seen by some as a liability, or at best, yesterday’s man. For to the discomfiture of some church managers and the civil authorities, ex-detainee Rev. Dr Dickson – who had been neither tried, convicted nor even indicted – had declined the traditional easy option of emigration to America. Instead he went to Keady in south Armagh as minister of a new and second Presbyterian congregation there which had called him.

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<sup>1</sup> See W.S. Dickson, *Three Sermons on the Subject of Scripture Politics* [hereafter cited as *Three Sermons*] (Belfast: n.p., 1793; republished 1817), Preface, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> A useful older account of Dickson was by W.T. Latimer, ‘Rev. William Steel Dickson, D.D.’, in *Ulster Biographies, Relating Chiefly to the Rebellion of 1798* (Belfast: James Cleland, William Mullan, 1897), pp. 75–92. Modern overviews are I.R. McBride, entry ‘Dickson, William Steel’, in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, General Editors, James McGuire and James Quinn, Royal Irish Academy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, print and online, 2009–) (hereafter *DIB*); W.D. Bailie, entry ‘Dickson, William Steel (1744–1824), Minister of the Presbyterian General Synod of Ulster and Political Radical’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, online edn, 2004–) (hereafter *ODNB*) – this supersedes the older entry by Alexander Gordon in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (London and Oxford: Smith and Elder, 1885–1900), vol. 15, pp. 46–8. For skeletal data on Dickson, see Patrick Devlin, entry ‘William Steel Dickson (1744–1824)’, in *Dictionary of Ulster Biography*, new online edn (Ulster History Circle, 2009–); *Fasti of the Irish Presbyterian Church 1613–1640*, ed. by James S. McConnell & Samuel G. McConnell, continued by David Stewart (Belfast: Presbyterian Historical Society [1936]–1951) (hereafter *Fasti*), p. 138, no. 499; Ian Hazlett, ‘Students at Glasgow University from 1747 to 1768 connected with Ireland’, in *Ebb and Flow: Essays in Church History in Honour of R. Finlay G. Holmes*, ed. by W. Donald Patton (Belfast: Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, 2002), p. 37, no. 220. In addition, see n. 4 below.

Before his exile and internment in Scotland (1799–1802), his ministry had been on the Ards peninsula, Co. Down, initially at Ballyhalbert, but mostly at Portaferry. As in his home presbytery of Templepatrick, Steel Dickson's presbytery in Down did not require subscription to the Westminster Confession, so that (unlike in Scotland) doctrinal leeway was permitted.

The unresolved question of whether he had been appointed as an ‘adjudant-general’ or even the ‘commander in chief’ of the Co. Down insurgents a few days before the ‘battle of Ballynahinch’ is not central to the evaluation of him offered here. Recent literature seems to accept there was truth in the matter.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is hard to imagine what qualifications he might have had for that other than as a kind of chaplain in uniform, although he seems to have had some basic military training in the late 1770s with the Irish Volunteers (local militias for civil defence). This study, however, is more concerned with the expression, evolution and sources of Steel Dickson’s mindset in the areas of religion, theology, philosophy, political thought and action. Like almost everyone else in Ulster, he did not have the leisure, resources and an environment to compose major systematic treatises. However, since he published some occasional small tracts and works, access to his basic thinking is convenient.

Steel Dickson’s life extended from his birth (1744) in the townland of Ballycraigy, Carnmoney parish, Co. Antrim to his death in Belfast (1824) where the progressive United Irish movement had been founded in 1791. His life and career spanned momentous events and periods in Irish, British, European, and American history, such as the Jacobite rebellion in Scotland, the war of American independence, the Enlightenment, the French revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the Irish rebellion in 1798, the parliamentary union of Britain and Ireland, the movements for Catholic emancipation and the abolition of slavery, the growth of religious scepticism and atheism, the emergence of Methodism as well as the

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. McBride, ‘Dickson, William Steel’, *DIB*.

early Evangelical Revival, and so on. He was involved publicly with many of these matters. Yet apart from dictionary articles and some more essays by Desmond Bailie there is a dearth of modern substantial studies specifically on Steel Dickson,<sup>4</sup> although the political, social, religious and cultural worlds of his era and context have been furnished with an academic *embarras de richesses*.<sup>5</sup> There is an older small anthology,<sup>6</sup> and a modern larger one of selections

<sup>4</sup> W.D. Bailie, ‘William Steel Dickson, D.D.’, in *The Bulletin of the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland*, No. 6 (1976) (single article Issue); W.D. Bailie, ‘William Steel Dickson’, in *Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter: the Clergy and 1798*, ed. by Liam Swords (Dublin Columba Press, 1997), pp. 45–80, republished in *Radicals and Revivals: A Tribute to W. Desmond Bailie*, ed. by Ivor F. Smith (Belfast; Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, 2006), pp. 86–113; W.D. Bailie, ‘Presbyterian Clergymen and the county Down Rebellion of 1798’, in *1798: Rebellion in County Down*, ed. by Myrtle Hill, Brian Turner, Kenneth Dawson (Newtonards: Colourpoint Books / Down County Museum, 1998), pp. 162–86 (Dickson: pp. 162–7). More recently, Steel Dickson has been the subject of an imaginative work of family and cultural history in which he is one of three figures considered by the Canadian writer, Derek Lundy, *Men That God Made Mad: A Journey Through Truth, Myth and Terror in Northern Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kevin Whelan, ‘A Bibliography of the 1798 Rebellion’, in *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective*, ed. by Thomas Bartlett, David Dickson, Daire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (Dublin and Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2003), 659–724 [the scope of this bibliography is much larger than its title suggests]. For an older bibliography, especially of contemporary sources, see Samuel Simms, ‘A Select Bibliography of the United Irishmen, 1791–8’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 1, No. 2 (1938), 158–80. On the vocation typically exercised by Steel Dickson, see, for example, John M. Barkley, ‘The Presbyterian Minister in Eighteenth Century Ireland’, in *Challenge and Conflict: Essays in Irish Presbyterian History and Doctrine*, ed. by anon. (Antrim: W & G Baird, 1981), 46–71.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Witherow, ed., *Historical and Literary Memorials of Presbyterianism in Ireland (1791–1800)*, Second Series (London & Belfast: William Mullan, 1880), pp. 226–42.

from his literary corpus.<sup>7</sup> After probing chiefly the public utterances and the religio-philosophical bases of the thought-world of Steel Dickson, this study will then point to the early, formative influences on the shaping of his mind at home, but particularly at Glasgow University, where he studied arts and some divinity from 1563-65.

### **Images of Steel Dickson, old and modern**

Late in life he remarked in his autobiography:

[I]n all conversations ... I used all my powers and influence to elucidate the principles, prove the necessity, and diffuse the spirit of union [of Irishmen] ... in the full conviction not only that I was labouring to ensure the security of His Majesty's throne, and independence of Ireland, but discharging a most important *moral and religious duty*.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, this encapsulates the argument that Steel Dickson's political and community activism flowed very consciously from the imperatives of his religious, philosophical and theological beliefs. This necessitates re-assessment of the view of much of the older, Irish Presbyterian historiography which condemned Dr Dickson's 'mixing' of religion and politics as erroneous and unworthy. For example: 'Dickson was a politician and a demagogue, in whose view the Church of Christ and the interests of religion seem to have

<sup>7</sup> Brendan Clifford, ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections from the Writings of William Steel Dickson, the Most Influential United Irishman of the North* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1991). This useful, but somewhat amateurishly produced, compilation and commentary is also a polemical vindication of Dickson.

<sup>8</sup> My emphasis. See W.S. Dickson, *A Narrative of the Confinement and Exile of W. S. Dickson, D.D.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Dublin: John Stockdale, 1812) (hereafter *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>), p. 24.

occupied only a secondary place.<sup>9</sup> In Steel Dickson's lifetime, such a view was already expressed in the General Synod by someone who – ironically – was himself highly 'political' in a pro-Tory government sense, the theologically liberal, 'New Light' churchman, Dr Robert Black,<sup>10</sup> key unionist ally in the Synod of Ulster of Robert Stewart the younger, Lord Castlereagh, who had Ulster Presbyterian origins and became one of the chief architects of the 1800 Irish-British parliamentary union. Black claimed in 1812 that Dickson's Portaferry congregation had been 'accustomed to hear from the pulpit what has been quaintly and irreverently termed "Scripture politics", instead of the mild and peaceful doctrines of the gospel.'<sup>11</sup>

Underlying this formative judgement was an antipathy not so much to the idea of a churchman adopting political postures as to the brands of Dickson's practical theology and politics. They were seen as deviant, in particular retrospectively after the subsequent mutations of religio-political orthodoxies.<sup>12</sup> This despite the fact that his naming and shaming by the 1812 General Synod related only to (purported) involvement in 'treasonable or seditious practices'.<sup>13</sup> Things never did get past allegation, but the imputation of being

<sup>9</sup> Witherow, *Memorials*, pp. 234–5. Similar views were expressed by Killen, the continuator in vol. 3 of James S. Reid [& W. D. Killen], *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Whittaker, 1853), pp. 429–30; also by Thomas Hamilton, *History of the Irish Presbyterian Church*, special edn (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark [1887]), p. 142.

<sup>10</sup> See Alexander Gordon, 'Black, Robert (1752–1817)', revised by A.T.Q. Stewart, *ODNB*, online edn.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Black, *Substance of Two Speeches Delivered in the General Synod of Ulster at its Annual Meeting in 1812* (Dublin: Stewart & Hopes, 1812), p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ian McBride, 'Ulster Presbyterians and 1798', in *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective*, pp. 486–9.

<sup>13</sup> *Records of the General Synod of Ulster from 1691 to 1820* (Belfast: n.p., 1890) (abbreviated as *RGSU*), vol. 3, p. 302.

among the 1798 ‘delinquent members’<sup>14</sup> of the Synod stuck on Dickson years after his release without charge.

The first relatively sympathetic portrait of ‘Dr Dickson’ (as he was widely known in his later career) was that by Latimer at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Further, in addition to Bailie, Presbyterian church historians in the last 100 years have not displayed bias or aversion, referring to Dickson in a non-judgemental manner.<sup>16</sup> As regards more general Irish historical studies: in some contributions to the understanding of the thought-world of politically agitated Ulster Presbyterians in the late-eighteenth century, Steel Dickson has in recent times been given slightly more than the usual passing mention in a way appropriate to

<sup>14</sup> RGSU, vol. 3, p. 209. The Synod tried to force Dr Dickson to sign a statement of ‘Retractions’, but he refused, asking instead that the Synod apologize, which it did to an extent. Afterwards he published the relevant contentious documents, ‘To the Proprietors of the Belfast Magazine’, in the correspondence columns of the *The Belfast Monthly Magazine*, 9, No. 49 (1812), 158–62; republished as a ‘Prelude’ to his *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> See n. 2 above, and first citation below.

<sup>16</sup> For example: William T. Latimer, *A History of the Irish Presbyterians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Belfast: James Cleland, 1902), pp. 367, 381, 385, 295, 405–6; Robert Allen, ‘William Steel Dickson, 1774–1824’, in (mimeographed) *Bulletin of the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences*, 50 (1947), entry no. 49: ‘Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies’, pp. 2–4; John M. Barkley, *A Short History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (Belfast: Publications Board, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1959), pp. 38–40; A.C. Anderson, *The Story of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland [1965]), pp. 77–8; Finlay Holmes, *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland: A Popular History* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Columba Press, 2000), pp. 74, 80, 84–5. See also James Seery, Finlay Holmes and A.T.Q. Stewart, *Presbyterians, the United Irishmen and 1798* (Belfast: Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, 2000).

his significance.<sup>17</sup> Thereby he has begun increasingly to re-emerge in mainstream historiography – not as a minor, but as a notable player. Steel Dickson's status was perceived more clearly in his lifetime. For in 1799, the British and Irish Governments arranged for twenty United Irish key thinkers and activists (mostly Protestant) to be exiled at the military base of Fort George in the north of Scotland for nearly three years. Steel Dickson was one of them.<sup>18</sup> They were to be killed, not by bullet or rope, rather by relative kindness and

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism: The Historical Perspective 1610–1970* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), pp. 119, 124–7; Pieter Tesch, ‘Presbyterian Radicalism’, in *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism and Rebellion*, ed. by David Dickson, Dáire Keogh & Kevin Whelan (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), pp. 43, 44, 46, 48; A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Summer Soldiers: The 1798 Rebellion in Antrim and Down* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1995), pp. 171–7, 200–4, 26; I.R. McBride, “‘When Ulster Joined Ireland’: Anti-Popery, Presbyterian Radicalism and Irish Republicanism in the 1790s”, *Past and Present*, 157 (1997), 63–93 (there: 79 ff.); I.R. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterianism and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 5–6, 99–100, 197–9; Stephen Small, *Political Thought in Ireland 1776–1798: Republicanism, Patriotism, and Radicalism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), pp. 55–6. And for an important study helping account for Steel Dickson's paradoxical loyalty to the Crown, see Solveig Grebe, “‘The Dissenters in Ireland Being Faithful Subjects, and True Hanoverians’: Loyalitätsbekundungen der Ulster Presbyterians zum Haus Hannover als Beispiel politischer Kommunikation im Raum ‘Personalunion’”, in *Kommunikation im Zeitalter der Personalunion (1714–1837): Prozesse, Praktiken, Akteure*, ed. by Steffen Hölscher and Sune Erik Schlitte (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), pp. 331–52. Cf. n. 28 below.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Elaine W. McFarland, *Ireland and Scotland in the Age of Revolution: Planting the Green Bough* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), pp. 210–13; Michael Durey, ‘The United Irishmen and the Politics of Banishment, 1798–1807’, in *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775–1848: Essays in Honour of Malcolm I. Thomis*, ed. by Michael T. Davis (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 96–109; Dick Douglas, *The Only Safe Place: The Irish State Prisoners at Fort George* (Auchtermuchty: Braehead Publishers, 2002) [educational pamphlet].

occasional red-carpet treatment. His companions included five other Presbyterians, ten Episcopalians, and four Roman Catholics. Among them were Samuel Neilson (editor of the *Northern Star*, the influential, Belfast radical journal so much despised by the Dublin government),<sup>19</sup> Thomas Addis Emmet (brother of the later executed patriot, Robert), Thomas Russell, Dr William James MacNeven (member of the Dublin Catholic Committee and Freemason), William Tennent (Belfast businessman, book collector), and Arthur O'Connor (Ascendancy Protestant, ex-Irish MP, political theorist and devotee of Adam Smith, and Francophile).<sup>20</sup> Dickson praised the generous treatment the detainees received at Fort George in respect of material comforts, welfare, physical recreation, and pastoral care<sup>21</sup> – contrasting it with the degrading and abusive treatment they had suffered from the Irish authorities in Belfast and with the reluctance of most fellow-ministers to visit him when interned there.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gillian O'Brien, “‘Spirit, Impartiality and Independence: The Northern Star, 1792–1797’, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr*, 12 (1997), 7–23; Dickson sometimes contributed to this paper. On occasion, Glasgow University publicized its courses in the publication – see McFarland, *Ireland and Scotland*, pp. 6, 26 n.30, 76.

<sup>20</sup> *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 112, 116.

<sup>21</sup> *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 117–29: ‘In Aberdeen, our dinner was equal to any thing of the kind I have ever seen or tasted ... we sat down to twenty-seven dishes ... five servants attended us; our wine, both red and white, was very good, and the quantity left to our own discretion’ (119) ... ‘I had been transported to a new heaven and a new earth, to a society of spirits more perfect’ (125). Dickson attributed the humane and hospitable treatment ultimately to the responsible British Home Secretary and former Whig, the Duke of Portland (William Cavendish Cavendish-Bentinck); he had a history of relatively progressive thinking on British–Irish relations, although by this time he was lobbying for the Union using all inducements – see entry by David Wilkinson in *ODNB* online.

<sup>22</sup> ‘My Rev. Fathers and Brethren kept at awful and loyal distance from my prisons. A very few ... dared to call on me ... a few more apologized ... pleading the terror of the times’, *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, p. 241.

### Dickson's writings

His publications, mostly occasional, were sermons, addresses on public issues and spiritual topics plus a discourse<sup>23</sup> on church music and psalmody. In his later years there was his substantial autobiography, the *Narrative of the Confinement and Exile* (see n. 8 above), a kind of *apologia pro sua vita* and invaluable historical source; there was also his large book of collected devotional *Sermons* (see n. 62 below). Among other things, the *Narrative* describes the degradations and horrors Dickson witnessed and endured for nine months during his first internment, mainly on Belfast Lough in a prison ship he called ‘our floating Bastille’.<sup>24</sup> It is interesting that unlike the book of another Presbyterian Irish patriot in the next century, the *Jail Journal* by John Mitchel, Dickson’s *Narrative* was never incorporated into the canon of Irish nationalist or republican literature.

This is not the place to explore this issue, other than to suggest that the later Irish nationalist and republican tradition on the one hand and the United Irishmen on the other are not necessarily the same species in all respects. For the original leadership at least, declared United Irish ideology, initially constitutionalist, was cosmopolitan, transcendental, universalist and communitarian; there was no initial flaunting of exclusivist elements such as the ‘essence of Irishness’, ‘cultural identity’, religious denominational association, or of ancient grievance narratives, historical or mythological. And while there did evolve within the United Irish Society a spectrum of concepts that included total separation and military force (given a fillip by recalling the American and French revolutions as well as by Irish government repression directed by Castlereagh), rejection of the Crown as such was not an axiomatic United Irish principle from the start (1791) in Belfast among

<sup>23</sup> See Andrew Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice, 1770–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 115–16.

<sup>24</sup> *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, p. 124.

predominantly Ulster-Scot Presbyterians, seen by many at the time (including Edmund Burke) as natural ‘republicans.’ The radicalizing evolution and reconstitution of the United Irishmen as a revolutionary organisation was manifest from the mid-1790s.<sup>25</sup> The turning of influential, Protestant (Anglican), United Irish figures like Wolfe Tone, the deeply religious Thomas Russell, and Arthur O’Connor inter alios towards armed resistance and separatist republicanism<sup>26</sup> is not something, however, for which incontrovertible evidence can be found in Steel Dickson. His somewhat inchoate notions of Irish independence within the framework of the existing Dublin parliament, seem to have taken the option at least of a formal role of the Crown for granted, even after he took the United Irish Society oath.<sup>27</sup> To be borne in mind is that in Irish Dissent (composed chiefly of Presbyterians), loyalty to the Crown was instinctive and not just prudential, as the recent German article by Grebe emphasizes (see n. 17 above). Steel Dickson had, however, no fixed views on precise constitutional architecture,<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Paul Bew, *Ireland. The Politics of Enmity 1789–2006* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> See Marriane Elliot, *Wolfe Tone. Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 94–101; 246–59; Tone was separatist at least from 1791 – see Bew, *Ireland. The Politics of Enmity*, p. 3, nn. 9 & 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 24, 27. See also the Preface to his 1793 *Three Sermons* (p. 2), where he links ‘His Majesty’s real interests’ with ‘the principles of the British constitution’, the ‘principles of justice and humanity’, since the ‘happiness of the King is inseparable from that of his people’ and their ‘union among themselves.’ And in 1793, ‘The Loyal Address to His Majesty’ of the General Synod of Ulster bore only the signature of Dickson, as Moderator. See *RGSU*, vol. 3, p. 155.

<sup>28</sup> ‘[T]he form under which [government] may be administered [is] … a matter of perfect indifference’, *Three Sermons*, Sermon I, p. 14. And after 1800: ‘In regard to a republic or democracy, political theorists have presented nothing that could satisfy my mind … the difference between a limited monarchy and a … republic is rather in name than reality … Whether [the chief magistrate] be denominated emperor, king, duke, stadtholder, consul, or president is a matter of no importance’, *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, p. 5.

other than one based on equity involving equal and so non-discriminatory human ‘rights.’

### **The religio-political sermons**

Early writings revealing Dickson’s increasingly critical approach to public issues were first: *Sermons on the Following Subjects* (1778). These included two relating to the American war of independence. Dickson’s somewhat ‘anti-war’ stance provoked objections from those who perceived his analysis as treasonous and disloyal. In one of the addresses, he speaks of a deplorable ‘civil war’, Protestants killing Protestants, a wretched folly, a disgrace for the Empire, immoral, and indicative of an irreligious spirit.<sup>29</sup> Overall, his tones are apparently quite conservative – or at least the formal, ideological framework within which he speaks<sup>30</sup> – and any critique of the state of affairs is derived from the religious perspective of God’s judgment on an empire whose people has left the paths of righteousness. He justifies the traditional Reformed and Old Testament-based, remedial first step: a government-backed, collective public repentance and fasting.<sup>31</sup> This was a corporate, spiritual exercise of humiliation designed to stay the wrath of God who, according to Dickson, might in the moral madness and weakness of the British Empire instigate a French or Spanish invasion and impose religious bondage (the papacy) to chastise the three kingdoms. Thus, he saw that crisis as ultimately a spiritual one,

<sup>29</sup> ‘[I]t is evident that our humiliation should proceed from a sense of our personal transgressions, and that it should lead us to seek the divine approbation by turning from them to the practice of every duty’, *Sermon on the Following Subjects*, Sermon I, p. 13. See also his retrospective views of the matter, which are even sharper than he expressed at the time, *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 7–8.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Small, *Political Thought*, pp. 55–6. He surprisingly states that Dickson’s appeal to ‘Britishness’ was surprising.

<sup>31</sup> On public fasts see Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief*, pp. 78–83. On their original rationale, cf. W. Ian P. Hazlett, ‘Playing God’s Card: Knox and Fasting’, in *John Knox and the British Reformations*, ed. by Roger A. Mason (Aldershot and Vermont: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 176–98 (there: 190–5).

analogous to what had often happened in Israel, the other *patria* of Irish Presbyterians.

Secondly: *A Sermon on the Propriety and Advantages of Acquiring the Knowledge and the Use of Arms* (1779). The context was the vacuum arising out of the commitment of Crown security forces overseas at the time. This led to the movement for national self-defence, the Volunteers, following an Irish security ‘stress test.’ Dickson’s address was given to a local company of Volunteers at Echlinville, near Ballyhalbert, Co. Down, where he was minister at the time. However, he jangled the nerves of some empire loyalists and militant Protestants by urging that the Catholics be allowed to join the Volunteers. Negative reaction to this among ‘all the Protestant [i.e. Episcopalian] and Presbyterian bigots’ was such that in the published version he toned down his expressions, describing only the ‘shadow’ rather than the ‘substance’ of what he had originally said – but retrospectively with regret.<sup>32</sup>

Thirdly: there are the famous *Three Sermons ... on Scripture Politics*,<sup>33</sup> twice published, in 1793 and again in 1812 as an 118-page appendix to the *Narrative*. These reflect Dickson’s increased commitment to radical political reform after American independence and the French Revolution. He had aligned himself to the principles of the Society of United Irishmen in 1791 by taking its oath in Belfast, but there is no evidence of subsequent, direct involvement in the Society or ‘Union.’ Further, while along with other churchmen and Volunteers he had attended and spoken alongside Wolfe Tone in favour of immediate full Catholic emancipation at a rally in Belfast on 14 July 1792 celebrating the third anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. There is also no evidence that before 1798 he envisaged

<sup>32</sup> *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 10, 11.

<sup>33</sup> The expression ‘Scripture Politics’ may well have been suggested to Dickson by a work published in 1735 by the Church of England clergyman-poet and classicist, Samuel Croxall: *Scripture Politics: being a view of the original constitution, and subsequent revolutions, in the government religious and civil ... in the Bible*.

anything other than reform in Ireland by ‘political’ means. A news item seeming to corroborate this appeared in the *Belfast News-Letter* of 15 May 1797.<sup>34</sup>

In the *Three Sermons*, five elements are particularly conspicuous. One is Steel Dickson’s advocacy of not only a more just and responsible society in general,<sup>35</sup> but also Catholic relief or emancipation in particular, as in the latter parts of Sermons II and III. Such an idea was no longer daring, for it was supported by progressive Whig politicians in Britain and Ireland, and by the largely pro-reform General Synod, itself outside the pale of the Protestant Ascendancy.<sup>36</sup> In his Preface, Dickson claims to have subscribed to the notion for ‘twenty years’, a cause which he understood theologically as ‘a restoration of rights … received from God’, and so inherent ‘sacred rights’, not concessions.<sup>37</sup> The franchise at least was extended to Catholics in 1793.

However, the second striking element relates to the context. The sermons include exhortations to a local Presbyterian audience in his meeting-house at Portaferry to abandon anti-Catholic hostility. Instead, they should acknowledge the institutionalized discrimination and sectarian false prophecies associated with the minority Protestant Ascendancy (of which they were not a part) which mismanaged the failed kingdom of Ireland. There should be more critique of the mediocre administration blighting public life. Above all, the people should look to the ‘peace of God’ and ‘peace among men’ enjoined by the gospel as a religious duty. For ‘the political fiction of natural enmity between … societies of men is blasphemy.’<sup>38</sup> This was Dickson’s religious analysis.

<sup>34</sup> See Bailie, ‘Dickson, William Steel’, *ODNB* online.

<sup>35</sup> As in Sermon I.

<sup>36</sup> See *RGSU*, vol. 3, p. 157.

<sup>37</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon III, 67; and ‘Speech of the Rev. Dr. Dickson, at the Armagh Catholic Meeting’, *Irish Magazine*, 5 (1812, June), p. 256.

<sup>38</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon II, p. 31.

The third major feature, made explicit in Sermons I and III, is the radical, if not original, assertion that Christianity – as in the pre-Constantinian Early Church – ought not to be tied to political powers and parties, and so to the state; this unholy alliance had degraded Christianity for 1400 years:

In all the religious contests which have distracted nations, and terminated so often in scenes of blood, the religion of the state, and not the religion of Jesus, has been the subject, and the love of power, pre-eminence, or riches, the leading principle.<sup>39</sup>

More properly, politics, society and governments are subordinate to God and subject to his judgement. True religion does not belong to them, rather vice versa. This is exemplified by the prophets of Israel who, as Dickson amply illustrates, delivered strictures against unjust, oppressive rulers, time-serving priests and false prophets. Therefore, both God's Law (the 'Law of Moses') and the gospel relate not just to the private sphere, but also the public, corporate one as normative.<sup>40</sup> He repudiates the 'slavish silence' (in relation to 'truth and justice') that is expected of compliant religion in the public, national and political domains. Such a thing is a very negative and intended consequence of 'political religious establishment, created, protected and supported by states.'<sup>41</sup>

These arguably theocratizing and certainly anti-Erastian tones would have found some resonance in areas of the Ulster Presbyterian psyche with its imprint of the Scottish covenanting past and that of

<sup>39</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon II, 33–4. Cf. *Sermons*, Sermon V, pp. 124–6: 'the sword of magistracy hath been so often drawn to "do God service" by oppression and murder' (126).

<sup>40</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon III, pp. 50, 52–7, 61–2.

<sup>41</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon III, pp. 46, 47.

Andrew Melville previously,<sup>42</sup> with his ‘two kingdoms’ notion. The basic premiss is the typically Calvinist Reformed one of the indivisibility of ethics and morality in all spheres of life, religious and secular, private and public, and which are distinct but not separate. Aware of the scriptural literacy of his listeners, Dickson holds that in light of proper hermeneutical and exegetical principles, the Bible should be used not to beat down Roman Catholics as threatening neighbours, rather to justify intercession on their behalf as wronged ‘brethren’ and accepting them as co-citizens in society.

A fourth notable element in the *Three Sermons* is a discussion in Sermon I, albeit only brief, of the triangular relationship between God, rulers, and people – a debate that had exercised Christian thinkers since Marsiglio of Padua’s *Defender of the Peace* in the fourteenth century.<sup>43</sup> In the Reformation era and beyond, this debate centred tentatively on notions of conditional sovereignty and of resistance, passive or active, in the face of arbitrary or tyrannical rule.<sup>44</sup> The major articulation of the right to revolt in the Presbyterian tradition had been that of the Scottish Westminster divine, Samuel Rutherford, in his *Lex Rex: The Law is King*: governments are subject to the rule of law, including the divine law. Dickson aligned himself with the idea of the sovereignty of the people as well as with the right and duty to disobey and resist in certain circumstances:

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Colin Kidd, ‘The Kirk, the French Revolution, and the Burden of Scottish Whiggery’, in *Religious Change in Europe 1650–1914: Essays for John McManners*, ed. by Nigel Aston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 214–34 (esp. 214–19).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 149–55, 419–32. Dickson’s Sermon II in *Three Sermons* is on the theme of ‘peace’.

<sup>44</sup> See Ian Hazlett, ‘The Church and Church–State Relations in Post-Reformation Reformed Tradition’, in *The Oxford Companion to Early Modern Theology, 1600–1800*, ed. by Ulrich Lehner, Richard Muller and A.G. Roeber (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. pp. 252–3. On the emergence in this era of autonomous natural law in perceived contrast to revealed law, see Robert von Friedeburg, ‘The Rise of Natural Law in the Early Modern Period,’ *ibid.*, pp. 624–41

And though magistracy derives its powers from the people, it possesses also the sanction of divine approbation ... [but] when ... magistracy violates the principle upon which it was established, every claim to respect and obedience is cancelled, and resistance becomes not only lawful, but necessary and honourable.<sup>45</sup>

Interesting, however, is the perspective that Dickson has on this contractual concept. He extends the sovereignty of the people to include the people's responsibility when government is bad. There was widespread complaint that government in Ireland was corrupt and maladroit – but, argues Dickson, people get the rulers they deserve, making 'patriotism a bubble' and 'religion an empty name.' The real sources of the bad state of affairs were the 'meanness, venality, and corruption' of the people (he avoids the word 'sin'), since 'the representatives derive their powers from the voice of the people.'<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, the people, too, need to change their ways towards 'virtue' and 'righteousness' if 'happiness' pleasing to God and humanity is to be attained. This involves turning away from what Steel Dickson refers to repeatedly as 'human passions' in the negative sense.<sup>47</sup> That also evoked the Stoic element of both the Classical and Christian Humanist traditions that influenced him and helped determine his appeal to 'moderation' and self-control.<sup>48</sup>

A fifth feature that appears in the sermons, notably in Sermon II on 'peace', is an echo of the 'millenarianist' tradition that re-

<sup>45</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon I, pp. 13, 14. Yet Dickson was not a campaigner for mandatory resistance in view of his Whig constitutionalism, to which he (critically) subscribed up to his apparent, momentary lapse in 1798. See also Kidd, 'The Kirk, the French Revolution.'

<sup>46</sup> *Three Sermons*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Influenced conceivably by his Glasgow teacher, Adam Smith. See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie, Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), Part I, Section ii, chap. iii, pp. 34–8: 'Hatred and anger are the greatest poison to happiness' (37).

<sup>48</sup> See especially the editors' Introduction to the above-cited work, pp. 5–10.

emerged in the eighteenth century with various manifestations: especially the ‘postmillennial’ form. This proclaimed that it is part of God’s will to realize more effectively his kingdom in this world in a millennium *before* the end of time and history. Such notions had a high profile in Ulster towards the end of the century, stimulated by dramatic political events in the world. Notable mouthpieces were Dickson’s fellow-radicals in the Synod, Samuel Barber<sup>49</sup> and Thomas L. Birch<sup>50</sup> as well as the more militant, continuing Covenanters in byways of the province. Compared to these contemporaries, however, Dickson’s appeal to any millenarianist dimension to justify progressive development is muted. He makes no special use of the trope of an apocalyptic, cosmic battle as found in the Books of Daniel and Revelation, nor of eschatological speculations. He expresses no ‘end of time’ ideas associated with pronouncements on the global collapse of kingdoms of this world and secularized church hierarchies. Dickson abides more by the visionary and messianic intimations of Isaiah 9:6-7, Isaiah 11:1-9, and Luke 1:11, 14. He highlights these passages, summing up: ‘Universal goodwill … that blissful period is at hand, even at the door.’<sup>51</sup> His inference is, for example, that the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity of the French Revolution embody exemplary moral and religious norms. They should, however, condition ‘seasonable and radical reform’ to preclude a copycat revolution involving ‘horrors.’

Dickson, therefore, was no Jacobin. His Christian Humanist and Enlightenment optimistic anthropology shapes the voluntarist and gradualist thrusts of his socio-political thinking. Were the people of Ireland to unite around such principles and their ‘community of interest’, this would ‘perpetuate their attachment to King and constitution.’ The way, however, is by ethical cleansing and

<sup>49</sup> See Ian McBride, ‘William Drennan and the Dissenting Tradition’, in *The United Irishmen* (ed. Dickson, Keogh, and Whelan), p. 55. Cf. n. 92 below.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. n. 90 below.

<sup>51</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon II, p. 35.

‘improvement’, individual and institutional, guided by the gospel of peace and goodwill or benevolence.<sup>52</sup> Thus Dickson equates the peace and kingdom of God with a good and just society which is not just civil and secular, but itself rooted in divine moral teachings as revealed in the Bible. Realized messianic values involve obedience to moral imperatives. In contrast, the eschatology in his earlier, more mystical, apocalyptic sermons of 1778 is more futuristic. ‘Heaven’ and life beyond this world in the ‘new Jerusalem’ are the ultimate goals for individuals, and to which the Son of Man, sooner or later, controls entry at the Last Judgement. It is in those sermons that he makes spiritualized use of the Book of Revelation.<sup>53</sup> By 1798 apparently, the shift to the here and now is not a change of mind or of theology, rather of emphasis.

### **Revolutionary ideology?**

It has been suggested that the *Three Sermons* are a ‘United Irish manifesto’.<sup>54</sup> But which United Irish mouthpiece and when?? The non-inflammatory essence of the ‘Declaration and Resolutions’,<sup>55</sup> articulated at the founding of the Society in Belfast in 1791, does surface in Steel Dickson’s sermons. Resonances are, for example, empowerment of the people in the exercise of political responsibility to help reform the system of government by means of representation of the entire population in the Irish Parliament, civil unity of the population transcending religious divisions, critique of religious bigotry (on all sides), civil equality for Catholics, discrediting the

<sup>52</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon II, 35. Phrase in italics is Dickson’s emphasis. For a more developed passage repudiating ‘sedition’ in favour of ‘moderate’ constitutional means involving Parliament and the Crown, see Sermon III, p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> *Sermons on the Following Subjects*, Sermons III & IV. ‘Heaven’s gates present us with a view of happiness which narrow minds, partial interests, and angry passions banish from the present life ... these prospects shall be realized in a *future* world.’ Sermon IV, p. 8 (my emphasis).

<sup>54</sup> McBride, *Scripture Politics*, p. 99.

<sup>55</sup> See *Irish Historical Documents 1172–1922*, ed. by Edmund Curtis and R.B. McDowell (London: Methuen, 1943), pp. 238–42; text also in Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, pp. 139–41.

aristocratic, Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy (defined as ‘English’, rule), and a stress initially on constitutional parliamentary means of change. And the link with the Crown is taken for granted, so that the publicized patriotic agenda is not yet markedly separatist or republican.<sup>56</sup> A few references to the (collective) ‘right of man’ and ‘rights of men’ in the *Three Sermons*<sup>57</sup> recall the contemporary impact of Thomas Paine’s ideas in Ulster and elsewhere in Ireland at this time; but while Paine’s themes of universal peace and ‘popular’ sovereignty are echoed in Steel Dickson, the Franco-American anti-monarchical concept is not.

Yet out of sixty-nine pages in Steel Dickson’s tract, the specific Irish situation is only dealt with in nine of them. The other sixty are composed of massive biblical testimony and theological prolegomena to justify the construction of a truly God-fearing, just society, and thereby engender motivation derived from religious belief and vision. All this could, of course, bolster the Irish reconstruction movement. While there is consideration of contemporary political disorder and new theory, this is the *Sitz im Leben* occasioning the extensive biblical-theological apologetic as part of the conflict resolution. In the *Three Sermons*, the priority is an appeal to first principles in relation to the will of God in his revealed Word on human destiny. In the absence of this, Dickson’s Bible-orientated, Ulster Presbyterian audience, much of whose spiritual consciousness was subsumed into that of ‘Israel’, would not be impressed. This was the idiom (not just rhetoric) through which

<sup>56</sup> See Small, *Political Thought*, pp. 232–3; cf. n. 17 above, article by Grebe.

<sup>57</sup> Sermon III, pp. 46, 65. See also David Dickson, ‘Paine and Ireland’, in *The United Irishmen* (ed. Dickson, Keogh and Whelan), pp. 135–50. In the Preface to the 1778 *Sermons on the Following Subjects* there is mention of the ‘rights of mankind’, (p. iv) – where the allusion recalls the formulation in the American Declaration of Independence (1775). However, compared to Paine and others, Steel Dickson does not express himself explicitly in terms of inherent natural rights of individuals, private persons, or groups – his thought on human rights and justice resembles more the social theory of the corporate moral personality as propounded by Adam Smith.

they had to be persuaded.<sup>58</sup> This is why designating these sermons as purely ‘political’ is invalid. For it can also give rise to those reductionist judgements of Dickson from which he and others have historically suffered in later generations; these often presuppose an a priori cleavage between theology and political thought.

### Dickson’s religio-political thought in broad context

Axiomatic in Steel Dickson’s thought is something which may seem paradoxical. This is that while religion and the secular authority, or church and state, should be separated (as in America and France),<sup>59</sup> ‘religion and politics are inseparably connected.’<sup>60</sup> This was by virtue of the universal validity of the Law of God, accompanied by the ‘universality of the gospel, extending to all nations.’<sup>61</sup> His theses were:

Christianity is a system purely moral and religious ... [W]e are not to conclude that it bears no relation to civil government ... [U]niversal morality is the great object of religion, and ought to be the basis of all government ... [T]he love enjoined in the

<sup>58</sup> See McBride, *Scripture Politics*, p. 4. In contrast, when Dickson addresses a Catholic audience, the Bible and theology recede, but an appeal to common faith and reason is made: the Irish people should anticipate ‘that happy hour’ of practising ‘the only rational love of themselves, when ... the divine light of our holy religion shall irradiate every understanding, and its benevolent spirit warm every heart with kindness.’ Speech at the Armagh Catholic Meeting, *Irish Magazine*, 5 (1812) p. 255.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. McBride, *Scripture Politics*, pp. 81, 92, 93. Dickson did not explicitly call for the disestablishment of the state Church of Ireland, although United Irish thinking implicitly envisaged it. See Dr. MacNeven’s and Thomas A. Emmet’s statements to a select committee of the Irish House of Lords in 1798, where the former also cites the American model of religious pluralism involving no state subsidies: *Documents Relating to Ireland 1795–1804*, ed. by John T. Gilbert (Dublin Joseph Dollard, 1893), pp. 166, 172, 181, 186. And Dickson (optimistically) in his *Three Sermons*: ‘[France] has opened the temple of liberty for all religious denominations at home.’ Sermon II, p. 35.

<sup>60</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon I, p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> W. S. Dickson, *Sermons of William Steel Dickson* (Belfast, 1817), Sermon XII, p. 297.

Gospel ... restrains from injury, disdains the narrow limits of religious or political associations, and rises superior to enemy and insult ... [T]he connexion between religion and politics must be preserved inviolate ... The only circumstance, relative to government, over which religion does not claim controul is the *form* under which it may be administered ... [E]very act of perfidy, oppression, cruelty, and injustice is highly offensive to that merciful and righteous God ... [L]et us endeavour to raise the kingdom of Christ to its proper dignity, and reduce its connection with the kingdoms of this world.<sup>62</sup>

He did not hold the view that the two kingdoms, of Christ and of the world (in the sense of civil order and government, also divinely ordained), should be inviolably separate in the way that some contemporary, anti-religion radicals (like Paine) and Christian, world-dismissive pietists in the old Donatist and Anabaptist tradition urged. Church and society can never indeed be the same thing, but the spiritual and secular spheres are interwoven, distinct but not separate, Dickson maintained – like Augustine and Calvin before him. Steel Dickson, therefore, does not seem to have envisaged a neutral secular state, absolutized ‘civil society’, or a society in which religion was just accommodated.

When Dickson used the word ‘politics’, it was with a broad meaning. His concept originates in Aristotle’s seminal work on the topic and about which he learned in Glasgow. This dealt with the principles of good governance of society that will generate cohesion, order, happiness, harmony, peace and unity. For Aristotle, good politics is conditioned by ethics and moral imperatives, so that where the moral compass is absent, there is bad politics. Good politics or government is constitutional and just, whereas bad

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<sup>62</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon I, pp. 7–8, 12, 14, 18, 20. For extensive treatment of the theme, see especially Sermon III, pp.44–69, in which Dickson also denounced the penal laws and exclusion of Roman Catholics in Ireland from the political process since 1727 (pp. 66–8) – a ‘violation of the Law of God.’

politics or government is arbitrary and unjust, an abuse of power. Good politics exercises prudence or practical wisdom, benevolence and concern for the welfare of others. Self-interest or party-priority needs to be balanced with restraint in the interests of the ‘common good’ (a Reformation theme also), the ultimate yardstick in any ‘commonwealth.’

Dickson not only appropriated these themes as self-evidently compatible with Christianity, but also saw them as part of positive Christian witness. Thereby he tapped into aspects of the tradition of Christian Humanism related to classical philosophy<sup>63</sup> that predate the ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘New Light’ theology. That older, world-affirming Christianity had made a significant impact on the attitude of the Protestant Reformers, particularly the Reformed branch, to ‘society’ and its governance according to the canons of equity, justice and righteousness. Jerusalem and Athens are not mutually exclusive. Zwingli’s Zurich, Calvin’s Geneva, or Knox’s Scotland were more than nurseries of religious or church reform; they were also theatres for at least addressing political, social, economic, educational, legal and welfare issues – something the later English puritans drove forward dramatically.

However, things did not always turn out well in those contexts. Corporate sanctification or a Christian society did not ensue, and other forms of tyranny intruded. This was due to two factors, direct and indirect. First: the priority given in official Reformations to coercive state religion that tended to enslave rather than liberate, as Enlightenment thinkers and Dickson argued. Secondly: there was the Reformation’s pessimistic anthropology due to the potency of original sin, so that badness and blindness are here to stay. If people do the right or good thing, it is due solely to grace, and so despite corrupt human nature. Any transformation or justification can only

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<sup>63</sup> Typified, for example, by the writings of Nicholas of Cusa, Pico della Mirandola, Erasmus, Thomas More etc. and for whom Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* were exemplary.

be due to the miraculously saving work of Christ in view of human incapacity and the bondage of the will which is not competent to achieve much beyond self-interest, selfish love or *amour propre*. In the interim existence, Reformation faith was anchored in the certainty of mercy, forgiveness and salvation through faith, but this tended to undermine moral effort, passively condone injustice, and generate anxiety rather than genuine joy or ‘assurance.’ The new Protestantism of the Enlightenment with its positive anthropology and optimism about ‘improvement’ and freedom of choice, considered those negative traits as inimical to a progressive civil and religious society and to human ‘happiness’ which involved the reformation of religion as well.<sup>64</sup> Every page of Dickson is in accord with these theories.

Accompanying impulses from classical philosophy, Renaissance and Christian Humanism were theories of natural law – a concept also undergirding much of Dickson’s reasoning. His designated it as: ‘the idea of universal morality’, or ‘the eternal principles of truth and justice.’<sup>65</sup> In his presentations, one can detect a mixture of the classical and modern theories of natural law, the first derived from Aristotle, the second originating in part in the German thinker, Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694). His works on moral philosophy were widely used as textbooks in the eighteenth century studied by

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 134–40, 159–60, especially p. 136: ‘The [Enlightenment] era is permeated by genuine creative feeling and unquestionable faith in the reformation of the world. And just such a reformation is now expected of religion.’

<sup>65</sup> *Three Sermons*, pp. 7, 57.

Dickson and numerous other Ulstermen at Glasgow;<sup>66</sup> Pufendorf was mediated by Adam Smith and before him, Francis Hutcheson. Essential to natural law is that it is universal and orientated towards harmony and social cohesion – ‘sociability.’ The classical form was combined with Christian theology in the patristic, medieval and Reformation eras.<sup>67</sup> The good purposes of nature reflect God’s will, and humans are commanded to conduct themselves appropriately. The modern, natural law theory (expressed in Pufendorf, Grotius, Locke, and later Rousseau as well as the American and French doctrines of rights) impinged more directly on Dickson who was exposed to it in its earlier stages. Among its key tenets are the natural freedom and equality of all human beings, and any inequality must be by mutual agreement. Actions or situations counter to these principles are injurious and wrong, most notably tyranny or state-sponsored terror (as occurred in Ulster in 1797). Such a theory can also be combined, as also Smith did, with the Christian religion and teleology<sup>68</sup> – God expects respect for the natural freedom and

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, p. 7. Cf. Pufendorf’s *Of the Nature and Qualification of Religion in reference to Civil Society*, transl. by Jodocus Crull, ed. with an introduction by Simone Zurbuchen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002); Mark G. Spencer, “‘Stupid Irish Teagues’ and the Encouragement of Enlightenment: Ulster Presbyterian Students of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow University, 1730–1795”, in *Ulster Presbyterians in the Atlantic World: Religion, Politics and Identity*, Ulster and Scotland Series, 4, ed. by David A. Wilson and Mark G. Spencer (Dublin and Portland, OR: Four CourtsPress, 2006), pp. 50–61.

<sup>67</sup> Calvin, for example: ‘It is a fact that the Law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of the natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved on the minds of men.’ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, 20, 16. Cf. François Wendel, *Calvin The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (London: Collins, 1965), pp. 206–8.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 135–48 for aspects of the religious dimension.

equality of others,<sup>69</sup> and the chief end of natural existence is human happiness which also pleases God. These are the modern, proto-utilitarian idioms which recur in Dickson's sermons and which he tries to synthesize with biblical testimony.

Accordingly, there was a Christian right and duty to preach on contentious national and political affairs that was grounded on Scripture or divine revelation, particularly the prophetic tradition of socio-political commentary. Implicitly inheriting a feature of the Reformed and Calvinist tradition in this respect, Dickson took for granted the notion of the unity of the Old and New Testaments in a way that Law and gospel merge. This reinforced the legitimacy of calling society and its rulers directly to account.

### **Liberation from the demon**

Steel Dickson applied the concept of Christian secular engagement to the radically disordered and dysfunctional situation in Ireland, even hinting at a cosmic struggle driven by 'that blind and tyrannical *demon* which ... in the name of party, and under the name of liberty is busied only in the forgery of chains'<sup>70</sup> – just as he had done earlier with the American colonial problem in the 1770s.

<sup>69</sup> 'Those important rules of morality are the commands and laws of the Deity, who will finally reward the obedient, and punish the transgressors of their duty ... By acting otherways ... we declare ourselves ... enemies of God.' Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, III, 5.3.7, pp. 163, 166. See also *The Scottish Enlightenment: An Anthology*, ed. by Alexander Broadie (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1997), pp. 285–97. Cf. Paul Oslington, ed., *Adam Smith as Theologian* (London: Routledge, 2011), and Lisa Hill, 'The Hidden Theology of Adam Smith', in *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 8, No. 1 (2001), p. 1–29.

<sup>70</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon I, p. 19. See p. 15, where on commenting on the 'impiety' and 'absurdity' of the historic abuse of religion as a tool of politics, he states that this 'has sacrificed religion to appearances, realities to a shadow ... it has substituted a *demon* which sounds the trump of war, spreads havoc and desolation through the world, and deluges the earth with human blood.' See also 'Speech at the Armagh Catholic Meeting', where he referred to 'a *demon* under the mask of religion', *Irish Magazine*, 5 (1812, June), p. 255.

Human rights suffer when God is disobeyed, and denying them is denying God. Crucial is that Dickson's point of departure in his analyses is always the Bible and theology as he understood it, then drawing out implications in the vestures of moral philosophy and political theory. Hence Dickson's keynote formulation: 'Scripture politics' – in modern parlance, perhaps: 'The Bible and Christian political [or social] responsibility.' He saw 'righteous' government and citizenship as part of practical theology, moral theology or Christian ethics. In anchoring this approach in the revealed Word of God, focussing on the Old Testament prophetic tradition, he appealed to the formula in the Westminster Confession, that 'the Bible is the only infallible rule of both faith and practice.'<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, if Dickson was also a kind of 'politician' and enlightened thinker, his self-justification was biblical. In one of his *Three Sermons* of 1793, the Portaferry preacher succinctly declared his position: '[I]f politics, in the proper sense of the word, are to be excluded from the pulpit, the greater part of the Bible must be excluded with them.'<sup>72</sup>

Steel Dickson belonged to a Christian generation of which many deplored the shames associated with belligerent Christianity in the seventeenth century: the religious persecutions, the Thirty Years War, the confessional and civil wars in the British Isles, the ejection of Protestants from France, and the later anti-Catholic penal laws in Britain and Ireland. This presupposed the winners-take-all and thus discriminatory basis of social, political, and religious order in most so-called Christian European countries. This tradition sanctioned institutional injustice and discrimination. Thereby 'Christianity' was tainted and compromised in a serious way, absurdly associated with a Machiavellian might-is-right philosophy. Dickson exclaimed: 'Blessed Jesus! Are these the fruits of that peace on earth, that

<sup>71</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon III, 44; cf. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. I, sect. 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon III, p. 68.

goodwill among men – the seeds of which thou camest to sow? No!!!<sup>73</sup> In particular, confessional theological dogma, or rather its authority, function, and coercive application of it in the name of God, came to be seen as a major source of the trouble, although Dickson never presses the point in such terms. The spilling of Christian blood in the name of metaphysical and theological absolutes had not strengthened or commended faith, rather it weakened it. Moreover, Christian bad behaviour, colonial or domestic, had been a hindrance to Christian mission.<sup>74</sup> The aversion and intellectual reaction to all this took various forms, partly Christian pietism and partly the Enlightenment. Ireland, Ulster in particular, had no immunity from it, so that various perceived certitudes and securities were not wholly immovable. The past was now being delegitimized.

In the eighteenth century the challenge for thoughtful believers to salvage Christian credibility was twofold. First: how (without becoming ‘rationalist’) to cope with a new unshackled and rational way of thinking which undermined either Christian belief or conventional theological norms and authority.<sup>75</sup> Secondly: how to reformat or present Christianity in a way to help society at large benefit, rather than suffer from it.<sup>76</sup> Along with many others among the intelligentsia in Ulster, Steel Dickson was a symptom of the new,

<sup>73</sup> *Three Sermons*, Sermon II, p. 34.

<sup>74</sup> Dickson remarked: ‘The covetousness, rapacity, cruelty, and violence of the professors of Christianity have universally caused the name of God to be blasphemed among the heathen, and the religion of the Messiah to be rejected.’ Sermon II, p. 34. See also *Sermons on the Following Subjects*, Sermon IV, where he refers to the slavery of Africans as a symptom of ‘the barbarity of Christians’ (p. 86).

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Margaret C. Jacob, ‘The Enlightenment Critique of Christianity’, in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, volume VII: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660–1815*, ed. by Stewart J. Brown and Timothy Tackett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 265–82.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Helena Rosenblatt, ‘The Christian Enlightenment’, in *The Cambridge History*, pp. 283–301.

modernizing wave, so that in his case as with other theologians and Christian philosophers, rescuing Christianity from ill-repute was top of the agenda. For him, there were three inter-related crises in Ireland: political, moral, and religious (exacerbated by pseudo-Christians who lived in denial of God and the gospel).<sup>77</sup>

Dickson consistently claimed that his ‘political’ concerns and activities were inspired by what he called ‘Truth’, the ‘Gospel’, the ‘Bible’, ‘God’s Law’, the ‘Spirit of God’, ‘heavenly wisdom’, the ‘revelation of Christ’, the exercise of ‘divinely gifted reason.’ Such a mission was part of his ministry, not alien to it. Those expressions are typical of his vocabulary. He appealed to them as the basis for justifying reform, change and improvement in the pursuit of virtue and well-being, individual and societal. Dickson sometimes reminded his listeners that God is the creator and father of all people everywhere – bearers of his image – even if they do not yet have the true faith. This meant that the recourse of many Enlightenment thinkers to universally equal rights of humans echoed the implication of such a primary biblical and apostolic belief. Just as there is one God, so there is one morality. In other words, Dickson took creation and humanity seriously as works of God which were being defaced – so that, as in the Knoxian Calvinist tradition, he invoked the ‘watchmen’ of Israel (Isaiah 62:6).

### **The devotional sermons and ‘New Light’ theology**

Earlier disapproving historians like Killen suggested that Steel Dickson would have been better occupied devoting more time to ‘eternity’ than to ‘this world’.<sup>78</sup> Yet if all Dickson’s twenty-three published sermons are considered, he did just that. Six, the controversial ones, are religio-political, but the other seventeen are spiritual or devotional. Indeed, in one such sermon published in

<sup>77</sup> For the broader general context, see James E. Bradley and Dale K. van Kley, *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

<sup>78</sup> Reid & Killen, *History*, vol. 3, pp. 430–1.

1778, he shows full awareness of the problems of striking a balance between this world and the next. Referring to what he calls the ‘great business of religion’, he points out that in this, people often stumble. To quote him:

The pressure of present calamities on the one hand, and the bewitching allurements of sentiment [= attachment] on the other, often mislead our judgement, attach us too firmly to the world, and divert our attention from the more noble and valuable pursuits which lead to Heaven.<sup>79</sup>

He then discusses as an example of a ‘noble pursuit’, the mandate to love one another even as Christ loved all, so that for him (as implied in the coming of the Messiah), the eternal and the temporal, the celestial and the secular, the uncreated and the created, are in fact inter-connected.

The devotional sermons reflect Dickson’s piety, theology, and homiletical style. They have inevitably been overlooked. He published fifteen sermons of this kind in the 400-page collection he published in 1817 (see n. 62). Any consideration of Dickson’s religious thought needs to take them into account. The goals of such preaching are defined in the Preface. It is intended to:

contribute to the correction of religious error, the suppression of prevailing sin, the diffusion of just views of the holy Scriptures and a sacred regard to the doctrines which they teach, the duties which they enjoin, and the services which they prescribe, to guide men by the light of truth in the way to eternal salvation.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> ‘The Hope of Meeting … Friends in a Future World.’ *Sermons on the Following Subjects*, Sermon IV, p. 98.

<sup>80</sup> *Sermons* (1817), [iii].

Here is not the place to analyse these sermons in detail. They deal with topics such as worship, the Sabbath, the human condition in relation to the will of God, revelation, faith and reason, the relevance of the Bible – ‘the oracles of God and the statute book of Heaven’,<sup>81</sup> and degrading practices of the day such as cock-fighting, swearing, and perjury.

Dickson’s reflective preaching reflects what one would expect from a ‘New Light’ thinker. Yet the application of this expression in the Irish context needs to be done with caution. It has a broad range of possible meanings and nuances. For example: opposition to the civil authority’s competence in religious affairs or to church establishment; preference for congregationalist over presbyterian church order; ‘liberal’ theology or freedom of critical thought on doctrinal matters; scepticism about the status of confessions of faith or the requirement to subscribe to them; Arianism; rejection of decretal predestination and of limited atonement (‘Arminianism’); deism – a minimally concerned caretaker God; a notion of sanctification in terms of free will and moral virtue (Pelagianism), and so on. A person adhering to any one of these notions could be described as ‘New Light’ and adjudged as ‘non-evangelical’, just as the *Fasti* does with Steel Dickson and many other Presbyterian ministers. Like the partly analogous ‘Moderates’ in Scotland, the epithets ‘cold’, ‘heartless’ and ‘rational’ were often associated with the term.<sup>82</sup> Yet there is no evidence that Steel Dickson lacked an

<sup>81</sup> *Sermons* (1817), Sermon I, p. 25.

<sup>82</sup> Formative of the negative portrayal of New Light or ‘Moderate’ attitudes as somehow heterodox was a parody by the influential, Old Light Scot, John Witherspoon: *Ecclesiastical Characteristics ... the Mystery of Moderation* (Glasgow, 1753), where he fatefully remarks that ‘All moderate men have a fellow-feeling with heresy’ (9). Cf. Steven D. Frott, ‘Scottish Theological Trends in the Eighteenth Century: Tensions Between “Head” and Heart’’, doctoral thesis (Ann Arbor, Mich.: U.M.I. Dissertation Information Service, 1992); Andrew J. Campbell, *Two Centuries of the Church of Scotland 1707–1929. The Hastie Lectures of the University of Glasgow* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1930), pp. 90–138.

evangelical spirit (in the neutral sense of the term), warmth, or direct pastoral engagement – the contrary rather. Yet he clearly did not share the notion of proclaiming the gospel from the pulpit as the reiteration of formulaic confessional dogmas.

Some of the above New Light criteria apply obviously to Dickson, others not at all (such as deism, or Arianism – depending on what one means by that; he clearly affirms the divinity of Christ, but occasionally uses possible subordinationist expressions, which are not necessarily ‘Arian’). He affirms the crucial role of Christ’s resurrection and the miracles.<sup>83</sup> Some of the other criteria may apply to Dickson by inference. Only deeper analysis can substantiate this fully – bearing in mind that in his Preface he expressed a wish to eschew contentious theological controversies, which are ‘unedifying.’ Hence, there is typical evasion rather than rejection of the Westminster Confession and the canonical dogmas of Reformed theology (as well as orthodox Christology). Not explicitly part of his discourse are Reformation loci such as justification by faith alone, imputed righteousness, the unfree will, original sin, extent of the atonement, the offices of Christ, the Trinity, gratuitous grace, election, predestination, regeneration, mercy, salvation history, the sacraments as mediating Christ’s presence (to Dickson, simply memorialist), communion with Christ, and so on. For Dr Dickson, what saves is ‘wisdom’ from Heaven.

In short: Dickson’s theology reflects not just ‘New Light’ tones, but also the older Erasmian, Christian Humanist axiom of the priority of ‘life’ over ‘dogma.’ And the essential traits of specific Enlightenment theology are self-evident: a stress on general rather than special revelation; on ‘religion’ rather than faith; on Christ the imparter of divine wisdom and the exemplar of virtue and love rather than atoning redeemer; on the essential goodness of creation and humanity that God by his moral law and benevolence wishes to enhance; on universality rather than confessionalism or

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<sup>83</sup> See *Sermons* (1817), pp. 26, 36, 50, 52, 54, 75, 101.

institutionalism; and a merging (as in Calvinism) between Law and gospel, but in a manner that leads to unCalvinist ethical religion, or salvation by works with grace and election marginalized.<sup>84</sup> Clearly, Steel Dickson is no mouthpiece of Reformed orthodoxy, seen by many of his generation as a failed theology incapable of transforming the people.

### **Dickson in the context of his own Church and community**

Dickson embodied the wider progressive and reform movement on society, politics and religion that had a strong presence in the north of Ireland at the time – especially among the more educated urban Presbyterian bourgeoisie as well as Freemason networks,<sup>85</sup> particularly in and around what Dickson called ‘the enlightened and liberal town of Belfast’.<sup>86</sup> Among ministers of the General Synod, he was one of a high profile quartet of advanced thinkers on the political front. There were a good many others, of course, but four traditionally claim most attention. Along with Dickson there were

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<sup>84</sup> On Enlightenment and often heterodox divinity, see John M. Creed & John S.B. Smith, *Religious Thought in the Eighteenth Century: Illustrations from Writers of the Period* (Cambridge: University Press, 1934); *Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Divinity* (ed. Lehner, Muller and Roeber), pp. 361–72, 387–401, 533–650. For the Scottish context, see especially M.A. Stewart, ‘Religion and Rational theology’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. by Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 31–59.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Jim Smyth, ‘Freemasonry and the United Irishmen’, in Dickson, *The United Irishmen* (ed. Dickson, Keogh and Whelan) 167–75; A.T.Q. Stewart, *A Deeper Silence: The Hidden Origins of the United Irishmen* (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp. 165–78.

<sup>86</sup> *A Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, p. 25.

Thomas Ledlie Birch,<sup>87</sup> Sinclare Kelburn,<sup>88</sup> and Samuel Barber, a co-founder of the United Irish Society.<sup>89</sup> Two of them, Dickson and Barber, became Synod moderators.

All four were said to have United Irishmen connections, although not all reformers and progressives went down that route. Yet these four belonged to the radical reform wing, if perhaps for different reasons. All were also former students of Glasgow University, which later tended to be depicted by some as a ‘notorious seminary of heresy, hot-headedness and rebellion’.<sup>90</sup> However, one must quickly point out that on theology and politics, there is a symmetry and asymmetry among these four. It is generally believed that Dickson and Barber belonged to the influential ‘New

<sup>87</sup> See James Quinn, entry ‘Birch, Thomas Ledlie’, *DIB* online; A. McClelland, ‘Thomas Ledlie Birch, United Irishman’, *Proceedings of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society* 7 (1965) pp. 24–35. See also *Fasti*, p. 131, no. 405.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Douglas Armstrong, *Rev. Sinclare Kelburn 1754–1802 : Preacher, Pastor, Patriot* (Belfast: Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland. 2001); Thomas Hamilton, revised by Douglas Armstrong, entry ‘Kelburn, Sinclare (1753/4–1802)’, in *ODNB* online; David Murphy and Sylvie Kleinman, entry Kelburn, Sinclair (Sinclare), *DIB* online. See also *Fasti*, pp. 215–6, no. 881.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. I.R. McBride, entry ‘Barber, Samuel (1737/8–1811)’, in *ODNB* online; James Quinn, entry ‘Barber, Samuel’, *DIB* online; W.D. Bailie, ‘The Reverend Samuel Barber 1738–1811: National Volunteer and United Irishman’, in *Challenge and Conflict: Essays*, pp. 72–96; A.M. Morrow, ‘The Rev. Samuel Barber, A.M., and the Rathfriland Volunteers’, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, vol. 14 (1908) pp. 105–119; *Fasti*, p. 131, no. 403; Hazlett, ‘Students at Glasgow University’, p. 31, no. 117.

<sup>90</sup> Colin Kidd, ‘Scotland’s Invisible Enlightenment: Subscription and Heterodoxy in the Eighteenth-Century Kirk’, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 30 (2000) p. 48. See also McFarland, *Ireland and Scotland*, where a list of thirty ministers and probationers involved in the 1798 rising reveals that twenty had studied at the University of Glasgow, p. 247. But see expanded list in McBride, *Scripture Politics*, pp. 232–6

Light' phalanx<sup>91</sup> in the Synod,<sup>92</sup> for they were not obliged to subscribe to the Westminster Confession, whereas Kelburn and Birch (who was a Freemason<sup>93</sup>) were 'Old Light' traditionalists or 'evangelicals' and had subscribed the Confession. Thus, there was no necessary correspondence between doctrinal stance and political attitude. In fact, the political progressive movement in Ulster, even though only a section committed itself to revolt, represented a kind of rainbow coalition among the province's diverse Presbyterians.<sup>94</sup> For the movement had adherents among ministers and people in the broad church General Synod, whether evangelical Calvinists, scholastic orthodox Calvinists (Old Light, confession subscribers), moderate post-Calvinists (New Light, confession non-subscribers); also in the constitutionally non-subscribing Presbytery of Antrim – not all necessarily New Light), among the Reformed Presbyterians or continuing Covenanters, and if not much among the theologically conservative and loyalist Secession ministers (like the Glasgow University alumnus and theologian, Samuel Edgar), then among the insurgent Secession laity. Furthermore, as the end of the century approached, millenarianist ideas became part of this mix in such a way as to further encourage direct action against whatever was

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. McBride, 'William Drennan', 52–5.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. David W. Miller, 'Presbyterianism and "Modernization" in Ulster', in *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland*, ed. by C.H.E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 94–5.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Stewart, *A Deeper Silence*, p. 163.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. R.F.G. Holmes, 'United Irishmen and Unionists: Irish Presbyterians, 1791 and 1886', in *The Churches, Ireland and the Irish*, ed. by W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood, *Studies in Church History*, 25 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 180–1.

intolerable or contrary to divine justice.<sup>95</sup> Accordingly, the ‘network of discourses’,<sup>96</sup> only ephemerally synergistic, was complex.

Dickson, therefore, was an exemplar of the new ways of thinking and seeing reality, not just concerning social and political community structures and relations, but also, implicitly, to God-world and church-state relations. The conceptual shifts which had emerged in Europe (including Britain) and America throughout the century had also migrated to Ireland, Ulster in particular.

### **Formative influences in Steel Dickson’s education**

#### **(i) Robert White**

Dickson’s educators helped fashion his acquired mental, philosophical and theological contours and thus his intellectual pedigree or genealogy. The *Narrative* has specific information on this process.<sup>97</sup> He says he was fortunate to be tutored pre-university level by Robert White, minister of Templepatrick, Co. Antrim, who ran an academy there.<sup>98</sup> He acknowledges White as the person who gave him the basic grounding in Greek, Latin, philosophy, and ‘natural theology.’ He remarks of White, very significantly, that he taught him ‘not only how to reason, but to think.’ White belonged to

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Myrtle Hill, ‘Popular Protestantism in Ulster in the post-rebellion period, c. 1790–1810’, in *The Churches* (ed. Shiels and Wood), pp. 192–3. The sermon of Steel Dickson that she refers to does not actually belong to the millenarianist genre, although the biblical text of the sermon from Luke 12, 40 about readiness for the coming of the Son of Man at any unexpected hour was a favourite for millenarist and eschatological preachers. Dickson’s perspective in this synodal sermon of 1777 was spiritual and evangelical – a challenge to fellow-ministers to more vigorously alert the people (on the basis of scriptural revelation) to the danger of mortal addiction to things of this world that are sordid with a neglect of sanctification, so that the people ‘become the prey of devouring wolves.’ See Dickson, *Sermons on the Following Subjects*, Sermon III, pp. 77, 78.

<sup>96</sup> McBride, “‘When Ulster joined Ireland’”, p. 91.

<sup>97</sup> A *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 2–7.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. *Fasti*, 178, no. 727.

the Glasgow network, as he had studied under both Hutcheson and Leechman there. Hence, he has been characterized as an abettor and ‘zealous propagator of New Light doctrine.’<sup>99</sup> This means that Dickson’s essential religio-philosophical predilections were not just infused into him at Glasgow – he already had the tendency before he went there. Further, there already was a tradition of such critical thinking in Ulster and its application to the dysfunctional Irish religio-political world. Two examples, also both alumni of Glasgow, from the previous generation were John Abernethy<sup>100</sup> and James Kirkpatrick.<sup>101</sup>

#### (ii) William Leechman

On arriving at Glasgow in 1763, Dickson found himself in a college that was experiencing a heyday. Students came from all over the British Isles – and not just Dissenters – as well as some from the Continent. Dickson cites two professors who kept up friendship and correspondence with him until they died. One was George Muirhead,<sup>102</sup> the Professor of Humanity, and who was Dickson’s effective adviser of studies. The other was William Leechman (1706–1785), the former professor of divinity (succeeded by Thomas Reid) and now, in Dickson’s time, university principal.<sup>103</sup> Both Muirhead and Leechman became life-long friends of Dickson and kept up contact, as he reports. One can sense the veneration in

<sup>99</sup> Killen and Reid, *History*, vol. 3, p. 429.

<sup>100</sup> See M.A. Stewart, entry ‘Abernethy, John’, *DIB* online; McBride, ‘William Drennan’, pp. 52–4.

<sup>101</sup> See Linde Linney, entry ‘Kirkpatrick, James’, *DIB* online; Tesch, ‘Presbyterian Radicalism’, 35.

<sup>102</sup> See Richard B. Sher, entry ‘Muirhead, George (bap. 1715, d. 1773), Church of Scotland minister and classical scholar’, *ODNB* online.

<sup>103</sup> See Thomas Davidson Kennedy, entry ‘Leechman, William’, *ODNB* online; T.D. Kennedy, ‘William Leechman, Pulpit Eloquence and the Glasgow Enlightenment’, in *The Glasgow Enlightenment*, ed. Andrew Hook and Richard B. Sher (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1995), pp. 56–72

Dickson's words: 'the learned, liberal and pious Dr Leechman, a man whose name will ever be truth and unadulterated Christianity.'

<sup>104</sup>

Dickson's general trajectory can be related to a biblical passage that was employed to help legitimize Enlightenment practical theology. It was a call to Christian engagement and responsibility, which is not just confined to prayer, devotion, and the repetition of catechetical and confessional formulae, but has implications for service in society. The passage runs: '*Therefore I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, rather a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline*' (2 Timothy 1: 6-7). It is a theme that underlies much of Dickson's self-understanding, preaching and theology.

This Pauline text had been used as the basis of a well-known published address by someone else and entitled: *The Excellency of the Spirit of Christianity* (Edinburgh, 1768). It aimed to help defend 'true' Christianity against the caricaturing allegation made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau that Christians, being indifferent to the world, are submissive and compliant in the face of authority, and essentially inattentive to civil virtue and social justice.<sup>105</sup> The author of this sermon on the Timothy text refuting that analysis was Leechman.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> A *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, Preface, p. 3.

<sup>105</sup> 'Christianity is a wholly spiritual religion, exclusively concerned with the things of Heaven – the Christian's fatherland is not of this world ... what does it matter in this vale of tears whether one is free or a serf? The essential thing is to get to paradise, and resignation is but one more means to that end ... Christianity preaches nothing but servitude and dependence. Its spirit is too favourable to tyranny ... True Christians are made to be slaves ... this brief life has too little value in their eyes', *Social Contract* (1762), in *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and transl. by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Book IV, ch. 8, [25]–[28], pp. 148–9.

<sup>106</sup> In *Sermons, by William Leechman D.D., Late Principal of the College of Glasgow*, 2 vols, ed. by James Wodrow (London and Edinburgh, 1789), vol. 1, pp. 348–78.

He had been a student of Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson, a spokesman of Enlightenment moral philosophy and its notions of social improvement<sup>107</sup> accompanied with a ‘new face of theology’ marked by civility, charity, and culture, was the son of a leading Old Light minister in Ulster, John Hutcheson. Francis had lobbied strongly for Leechman to be appointed as Simson’s successor.<sup>108</sup>

An early editor of Hutcheson’s works and his first biographer, Leechman was to become an inspiration for Dickson. Throughout much of the century, Leechman was a leading representative, if not vociferous, of ‘Moderate’ theology in Glasgow, and which dominated the Church of Scotland leadership at least. This hegemony was such that it has been playfully affirmed that the Church of Scotland at this time was like ‘the Scottish Enlightenment at prayer.’<sup>109</sup> The trend was to do theology in a more modern, ethics-focussed way, relating doctrine to the enhancement of real life, releasing it from dogmatic formulae and handbooks, diverting faith and grace from egotistic self-preoccupation to concern for neighbours, from triumphalist imposition and ‘vehemence’ to civility. Many of these aspirations were anything but alien to those of the early Reformers. However, 200 years later it involved putting the Reformed orthodoxy of, for example, the Westminster Confession, into storage, but not throwing it out, or explicitly repudiating it. However, to be borne in mind is that in this era, the Church of Scotland, as an established church whose confession of

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Ian McBride, “‘The School of Virtue’: Francis Hutcheson, Irish Presbyterians and the Scottish Enlightenment”, in D. George Boyce, Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan (eds), *Political Thought in Ireland since the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by D. George Boyce, Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 72–99; McBride, ‘William Drennan’, 55–58 (Hutcheson).

<sup>108</sup> Cf. W. Ian P. Hazlett (ed.), *Traditions of Theology at Glasgow 1450–1990: A Miscellany* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1993), pp. 17–20

<sup>109</sup> Colin Kidd, ‘Subscription, the Scottish Enlightenment and the Moderate Interpretation of History’, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 55 (2004), p. 503.

faith had the sanction of legal statute tied to the Anglo-Scottish union, was comprehensively subscriptionist<sup>110</sup> in contrast to the Irish Presbyterian churches. To illustrate further Leechman's impact on Steel Dickson:

The wiser and more concerned part of mankind generally complain about the ineffectiveness of the Gospel and the poor state of religion, despite all the public provision for religious instruction and education. It has to be admitted that this complaint is well grounded. But who is to blame? Is it due to the obstinacy, folly and corruption of the listeners? Or is it due to the ignorance, neglectfulness and worldly lives of us the teachers?

This 'Christianity-in-crisis' observation was made by Leechman in an influential address he had published on the character and duty of a minister.<sup>111</sup> And then a later sermon by Dickson:

Though men have ever encouraged public teachers ... they seem willing to allow that these have neither prejudice to remove, error to correct, nor vice to reform. All they wish for... is to hear a continual change of old words, endless genealogies, and unfathomable mysteries, rung in their ears ... [This] seldom fails of popular applause. But he who brings forth ... 'things new as well as old' ... to inform the understanding [is accused] of impertinence ... pride or depravity of heart ... and we may see also that the difficulties generally arise from the very quarter from which every possible encouragement should be derived: 'The prophets not only prophecy falsely, but the people love to have it so' [Jeremiah 5:31].<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Kidd, 'Subscription', pp. 502–5.

<sup>111</sup> Leechman, *Sermons*, vol. 1, pp. 103–4.

<sup>112</sup> Steel Dickson, *Sermons*, Sermon V, pp. 127–8.

(iii) Adam Smith

Two other names mentioned by Steel Dickson are highly significant for his development. First: the hugely seminal figure of ‘the unforgettable Adam Smith’ (1723–1790), professor of philosophy and like Leechman, a former student of Hutcheson. ‘I owed Smith much’, says Dickson, and then adds: ‘very much indeed.’<sup>113</sup> Secondly, someone who also was a big draw at Glasgow University and had major impact. This was the professor of law, John Millar (1735–1801).<sup>114</sup> Dickson speaks of him too in terms of friendship. Millar is especially significant for Dickson’s thinking on politics and government.

As for Adam Smith’s influence (like Hutcheson, he gave an ethics class for Irish students): he had already published his influential *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1759. To recall a few axioms in Smith, bearing in mind that he also was trained by Hutcheson: moral philosophy is not pure enquiry; rather it relates to the good of society and should improve mutual relationships, personal and collective. To this end, a collective or common, moral awareness or sentiment should be developed and appealed to as arbiter – what Smith calls ‘the impartial spectator’ who can see all sides of any question or conflict with ‘sympathy’ for injured parties. He affirms that the ultimate ground of such objectivity and ethical consciousness is in the mind of God, the author of nature. Enlightened reason we imagine to be the wisdom of man – but it is the wisdom of God. Virtue, and indeed prudential self-interest operate best through self-denial and restraining egotistic self-love. Altruism [‘beneficence’] is good, but in society

is less essential than ... justice ... Society may subsist among different men ... from a sense of its utility without any mutual love and affection ... Society, however, cannot subsist

<sup>113</sup> A *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, Preface.

<sup>114</sup> See Knud Haakonssen and John W. Cairns, entry ‘Millar, John’, in *ODNB* online.

among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another ... Justice is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed ... human society ... must crumble.<sup>115</sup>

To the young student in his class from south Antrim familiar with shillelagh politics, all this must have seemed rather novel. Through Smith, therefore, Dickson was being schooled further in the revival of natural law and rights theory. Among the authors studied by him at Glasgow, Dickson cites ‘Pufendorff’<sup>116</sup> and in whom Smith lectured.

#### (iv) John Millar

The possibility of applying such ethics and morality not just to individuals or interest groups, but also institutions and governments, was reinforced in the law lectures of John Millar that Dickson attended. He says it was from him that he derived his critical thinking about political systems<sup>117</sup> and church-state relations.<sup>118</sup> Millar’s fame at the time rested on his approach to the study of law as jurisprudence: the first and universal principles of equity and justice, rather than the conventional study of different laws and legal systems. Alongside jurisprudence he lectured on the principles of government. Taking his cue from Montesquieu (*The Spirit of Laws*), he stressed that the separation and balance of powers was the best guarantee of human rights and liberty. In addition, Millar did not shy away from taking up stances on the issues of the day. Accordingly, he was critical of the corrupt and arbitrary aristocratic government of

<sup>115</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part II, Section ii, chap. iii, paras. 2–4, p. 86.

<sup>116</sup> A *Narrative*<sup>2</sup>, p. 7. See also at n. 67 above.

<sup>117</sup> A *Narrative*, pp. 4–5, where Dickson summarizes his views on government systems.

<sup>118</sup> For an outline of Millar’s general thought, see William C. Lehmann, *John Millar of Glasgow 1735–1801: His Life and Thought and his Contributions to Sociological Analysis* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1960), pp. 109–44.

Britain masquerading under the name of limited monarchy and constitutionalism; he denounced the slave trade; later he favoured American independence, and he basically welcomed the French Revolution. Such themes are echoed in the later Dickson, including the assertion that the Reformation was compromised by the fact that the Reformers were no keener than Roman Catholicism was to grant their neighbours the same freedoms they claimed for themselves.<sup>119</sup>

In his *Narrative*, then, Steel Dickson intimated that he derived his approach to theology from White and Leechman, his broad moral awareness, sociology and study of human nature from Smith, and his general education in political theory and practice from Millar, whose ‘recommended’ books, as mentioned by Dickson, included Locke and Montesquieu. Locke’s *Second Treatise* arguing for the natural right of resistance to unjust authority would also have been in mind.<sup>120</sup> And even Montesquieu’s statement on the danger of the statutory privileging of a church or religion is something that is echoed in Dickson’s sermons:

A more certain way [to attack religion successfully] is to tempt her by favours, by the conveniences of life, by hopes of fortune; not by that which revives, but by that which extinguishes the sense of her duty; not by that which shocks her, but by that which throws her into indifference at the time when other passions actuate the mind, and those which religion inspires are hushed into *silence*.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>119</sup> The illustrations in *Three Sermons* (Sermon II, pp. 33–4) that Dickson cited from British Isles Church history since the Reformation are reminiscent of those sketched by Millar; cf. Lehmann, *John Millar of Glasgow*, pp. 370–5 (Millar source-text).

<sup>120</sup> See to n. 45 above.

<sup>121</sup> *The Spirit of the Laws* [1748], transl. by Thomas Nugent [1750], ed. by Franz Neumann (New York: Hafner, 1949), vol. 2, p. 53. See to n. 40 above.

In his intellectual formation, therefore, Steel Dickson, is an amalgam of these influences. What is distinctive in him, however, is the impressive energy he devoted to reconciling these principles with the interpretation of Scripture – while being wholly untouched by emerging biblical ‘criticism’ of the Enlightenment. For him, the Bible was a book of divine philosophy or wisdom. That he should in many ways try to accommodate it to aspects of contemporary thought was not novel – the Church had often been doing that for centuries.

### **Postscript and conclusion**

Of interest is the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree that Dickson received from Glasgow University in 1784.<sup>122</sup> New light on the circumstances surrounding it is derived from an examination of the original minutes of the University Senate meeting that decided on this.<sup>123</sup> Dickson’s old mentor, Principal Leechman, chaired the meeting and one of the signatories to the decision was Thomas Reid (1710-1796), successor to Adam Smith. Reid was another leading Enlightenment-era philosopher-theologian, a Church of Scotland minister and Christian apologist as well. He had come to Glasgow in 1764 when Dickson was still a student there.

‘Honorary’ doctorates in Glasgow had specific conditions. In the minutes three criteria were listed: personal acquaintance, publications of literary merit and worth, and a very respectable character. In Dickson’s case, ‘publications’ can only have meant first, the *Sermons on the Following Subjects* (1778), and second, the sermon to the Echlinville Volunteers in 1779. Leechman, and probably Reid, could testify to ‘acquaintance’ and ‘character.’

<sup>122</sup> Cf. W. Innes Addison, *A Roll of the Graduates of the University of Glasgow from 31st December, 1727 to 31st December, 1897* (Glasgow: J. MacLehose, 1898), p. 155.

<sup>123</sup> Glasgow University Archives, Senate Minutes, ms. SEN1/1/1, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1784, ff. 282–3.

However, two curiosities appear in the minutes. Glasgow University usually awarded one DD annually. Oddly, that year it awarded three, and all from Ireland. As well as to Dickson, one was given to the Strabane minister, scholar, higher educationist, translator, and author of an influential *History of Ireland*, William Crawford (c. 1740–1800),<sup>124</sup> and to a ‘Rev Mr Thomas Kennedy, Downe-Patrick.’ His identity is uncertain, since any Presbyterian minister of that name was in Holywood, but not the recipient of the degree. Dr Thomas Kennedy (‘Bailie’ was added later) seems to have been a Church of Ireland cleric in Downpatrick and with marked evangelical and missionary interests.<sup>125</sup> However, no publications by that name are traceable (yet)

There is no obvious explanation of the award of three DDSs, all to Irishmen, in one year. Maybe at least Dickson’s citation had

<sup>124</sup> See C.J. Woods, entry ‘Crawford, William’, *DIB* online; Alexander Gordon, revised by I.R. McBride, entry ‘Crawford, William’, *ODNB* online; Witherow, *Memorials*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., 203–11; Norman Vance, ‘Volunteer Thought: William Crawford of Strabane’, in *Political Discourse in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. by D. George Boyce et al. (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 257–9. Like Dickson, Crawford had published addresses to Volunteer meetings. He also translated the English edition of *Dissertations on Natural Theology* (Belfast: James Magee, 1777), from the *Cogitationes et dissertationes theologicae* (1737) on natural and revealed religion by the Genevan theologian, Jean-Alphonse Turretin, advocate of enlightened orthodoxy. The revealing list of several hundred subscribers (mainly from Ireland) included Leechman, Thomas Reid and two other Glasgow divinity professors, as well as the above-mentioned Thomas Kennedy, Robert Black, Steel Dickson, even Henry Grattan MP (Ireland) and Jonathan Swift!

<sup>125</sup> See *The Matriculation Albums of the University of Glasgow*, ed. W. Innes Addison (Glasgow, 1913), no. 2149. This refers to the MA of a Thomas Kennedy, son of a Downpatrick doctor, noting that it may well be the same person to whom the DD was awarded in 1784 but who, it states, is otherwise unidentifiable. However, cf. Hazlett, ‘Students at Glasgow University’, nos 210, 238. See also *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, 22 (1814), p. 252 (Dr. Thomas Kennedy Bailie)

something to do with the second surprise in the Senate Minutes. Over the page, at a meeting two days later, is the record of the installation of the new university Rector, and with his own signature, namely the celebrated Irishman in the British Parliament, Edmund Burke – Whig (at the time) campaigner for American independence, and advocate, like Dickson, of Catholic relief and emancipation. And earlier in the same year (1784), Dickson along with five other Presbyterian ministers in Co. Down<sup>126</sup> had campaigned unsuccessfully in the Irish Parliament election campaign in Down on behalf of the independent Whig and pro-reform candidate, Robert Stewart the elder (1739-1821), Viscount Castlereagh, earl, and then first marquess of Londonderry.<sup>127</sup> Stewart was also a Glasgow alumnus. And Dickson's DD? – apart from Leechman's influence, is there also an element of recognition of political services and progressive thinking, with Burke's imminent presence an associated factor in the decision? Of note also is that during these days in Glasgow, Burke was accompanied by a friend, ex-Glasgow professor and former Dickson teacher, namely the Rector after him, Adam Smith.<sup>128</sup>

### **Conclusion**

William Steel Dickson was one of the channels that helped convey and interpret new international currents of thought into the hazardous, if not completely unpromising highways and byways of Ulster – and in his case, at the coal face. Apart from suffering from very rough treatment by Irish security forces in 1798, he was once assaulted (allegedly by Orangemen), after addressing a Catholic

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Bailie, ‘Samuel Barber’, *Challenge and Conflict*, p. 76.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. J.A. Hamilton, revised by Roland Thorne, entry ‘Stewart, Robert’, in *ODNB online*; Bew, *Ireland. The Politics of Enmity*, p. 5.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. James Coutts, *A History of the University of Glasgow from its Foundation in 1451 to 1909* (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1909), p. 335. See also pp. 247–8.

meeting in Armagh in 1811.<sup>129</sup> Dickson underestimated the strength of the opposition among some people in church and society who, resistant to change, were not to be persuaded by ‘rationality.’ The tide of subsequent Irish history swept him away. Yet he planted some prophetic flags and extended frontiers in a way that made him arguably a precursor of a very distant new Ireland and (with qualification) a less politically degraded and compromised Irish Christianity.

There is an air of Greek tragedy about the final ends of Dickson and his two chief public opponents. These were the New Light churchman, Dr Robert Black (1777-1817),<sup>130</sup> who aligned the General Synod of Ulster firmly with the union of Britain and Ireland; and then Black’s political master, the younger Robert Stewart (1769-1822), Lord Castlereagh, second marquis of Londonderry,<sup>131</sup> and for whom Dickson had campaigned successfully in the Down election of 1790. Influenced by the writings of Edmund Burke and the excesses of the French Revolution, Castlereagh later developed, however, in a contrary essentially Tory political direction,<sup>132</sup> directed the suppression of the 1798 rebellion as Irish acting Chief Secretary, helped devise the act of union, and eventually became government enemy number one of Steel Dickson. Both Castlereagh and Black pursued a vendetta against him and saw to it that he was denied his due share of the Crown’s contribution to ministerial salaries, the *regium donum*, in

<sup>129</sup> Dickson refused to testify that he had been ambushed by Orangemen – as was being widely propagated, especially by sectarian nationalists – on the grounds that he simply did not know who his assailants were. See ‘An Account of an Assault’, in *A Narrative*,<sup>2</sup> pp. 317–52.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Witherow, *Historical and Literary Memorials*, pp. 266–72; A.T.Q. Stewart, entry ‘Black, Robert’, *ODNB* online; James Quinn, entry ‘Black, James’, *DIB* online.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Roland Thorne, entry ‘Stewart, Robert’, in *ODNB* online; Patrick M. Geoghan, entry ‘Stewart, Robert’, *DIB* online.

<sup>132</sup> Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity*, 8–9, 62.

his charge at Second Keady Presbyterian Church (illegally, since his guilt was presumed, not proven). Black and Castlereagh died by suicide (as did Wolfe Tone in 1798). Dickson's death at 80 was a natural one in humble circumstances living off the charity of Belfast friends. In their lives and legacies, the 'demon' of one kind or other never quite left these three notable men with rooted Ulster associations. Yet Steel Dickson's self-assessment was realistic and typically balanced: 'That some may be offended with me I cannot doubt ... On the other hand, I know many will be pleased and gratified.'<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Steel Dickson, *Scripture Politics*, 68–9.