

THE ORIGINS AND OBJECTS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IRELAND



The authorisation by the General Assembly in June, 1906, of the formation of an agency soon to be called The Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland brought to reality a desire long cherished by a number of historically-minded members of the Church.

Back in 1877, in response to a Memorial from the Presbyterian Historical Society of the United States of America, founded in 1852, requesting the Irish Church to forward copies of documents, books etc. illustrative of Presbyterianism in Ireland, the Assembly set up an Historical Purposes Committee to procure historical material for transmission to America. This work was soon completed and the Committee, with the approval of the Assembly, turned its attention to the collecting of original MSS., books, tractates and pamphlets of Presbyterian origin, with the intention of having them deposited in one or other of our Theological College libraries. However, the Committee's efforts met with little success and only a few documents were handed over. The Committee's principal task during its existence of 32 years was the transcribing, raising of subscription lists and publishing of the seven manuscript volumes of Minutes of the General Synod of Ulster covering the years 1691-1820.

The first thing that really stimulated interest in collecting and preserving Presbyterian historical material was a suggestion made by the Deputy Keeper of Public Records in Dublin, in response to an enquiry from a Government Committee on the collecting and calendaring of local records, that an effort should be made to gather the records of the Presbyterian Churches at Belfast. This suggestion was followed by an article in the 'Irish Presbyterian' by Mr. J. W. Kernohan in September, 1903, and by letters of support from Mr. Samuel Symington and a Reformed Presbyterian minister from Derry, the Rev. Samuel Ferguson. But nothing definite emerged as yet. Then a letter appeared in 'The Northern Whig' on 16th June, 1905, from Mr. Alex. G. Crawford of Portstewart, in which he called for the establishing of an Irish Presbyterian Historical Society with headquarters at the new Church House buildings in Fisherwick Place, stating how impressed he had been with the American Presbyterian Historical Society rooms, when he had visited Philadelphia a few years previously. His proposal was enthusiastically taken up and a preliminary meeting of interested people was held in Portrush Presbyterian Church on 9th August, 1905—Portrush, rather than Belfast was chosen because the majority of those interested were out of town during the holiday month. The chair was taken by the Moderator of the General Assembly, the Rev. Dr. William McMordie and the attendance included the Clerk of Assembly, the Rev. Dr. W. J. Lowe.

A provisional committee of clergy and laity was appointed to pursue the matter. Following a series of committee meetings, a Memorial was drawn up and signed by fourteen leading ministers and laymen and presented to the

General Assembly in June, 1906. Prof. J. Heron, Dr. W. T. Latimer and Messrs. R. M. Young and A. G. Crawford were appointed to appear at the Assembly in support of the Memorial which stated—

“That it is desirable to have some agency in connection with the Presbyterian Churches in Ireland by which records, documents, portraits and objects of value in connection with the history of these churches might be collected and preserved for the purpose of reference and in order to stimulate and encourage a closer and fuller acquaintance with the history of Presbyterianism in this country.

“That in the opinion of memorialists this object would be served by the appointment of an active Committee of not more than twenty members to co-operate with similar Committees representing other churches of the Presbyterian Order, to initiate the work, collect materials, provide a suitable room in which to place the materials collected, appoint a competent person to act as Curator or Librarian, and in general to take such steps as they might consider necessary to further the object in view.

“Memorialists therefore ask the Assembly to take the matter into consideration, to appoint a Committee for this purpose, to grant out of some Fund a sum of £50 per annum, to carry out the objects herein set forth, and to request members of the Church having objects of historical interest, in this connection to hand same over to the custody of this Committee.”

The prayer of the Memorialists was granted and the Assembly appointed a Committee to further the work of establishing the Society appointing Messrs. A. G. Crawford and J. W. Kernohan, joint-conveners.

In January, 1907, the Society secured premises in Room 20, Church House. On the 14th May, 1907, a draft Constitution was submitted by Dr. Lowe, who appears to have based the articles on those of the American Presbyterian Historical Society, and agreed to by the Executive Council. These rules made provision for members of other Irish Presbyterian Churches to become members of the Society and serve on the Executive Council. Mr. R. M. Young was appointed Treasurer and Messrs. A. G. Crawford and J. H. Kernohan, Hon. Secretaries.

Soon a nucleus of the fine collection of Manuscripts, pamphlets, books, Communion vessels and tokens and other historical items, which the Society possesses today, was handed in, thanks to the generosity of Dr. John Kinnear of Letterkenny, Dr. Wylie of Coleraine, the Rev. H. P. Glenn of Bray and others. When the collection became too large for one room, additional accommodation was obtained in Church House, Rooms 19 and 20 being merged into one large room, and this remained the home of the Society until its recent removal to the newly equipped premises in Room 218, Church House.

—W. D. BAILIE.