



Attacks on the Mayor of Belfast – another wrangle on ‘religious’ grounds.

An inscription in St Malachy’s Church, Alfred Street, Belfast, tells of its beginnings:

HISTORY OF SAINT MALACHY’S CHURCH

In 1840, Thomas Jackson of Waterford [but living and working in Belfast since 1829] had been charged with designing a new church for the Catholic Diocese of Belfast and on November 3, 1841, the Feast of Saint Malachy, the foundation stone for Saint Malachy’s Church was laid. It was originally to seat 7,000 worshippers but as the Great Famine took hold in Ireland the building funds were better spent elsewhere to alleviate the suffering of others. What was intended to be the vast sanctuary of the new Cathedral was remodelled to serve as the local Church and is now regarded as one of the finest examples of late Georgian - Tudor Revival churches in Ireland.

With its chess-rook turrets and its remarkable fan-vaulted ceiling, St Malachy’s lives up to Charles Brett’s description: ‘a superb example of Sir-Walter-Scottery at its most romantic’.

The new St Malachy’s Church, designed by Thomas Jackson (he’d designed the new Music Hall in May Street in 1839), was consecrated on Sunday 15 December 1844, ‘with the ceremony usual on such occasions’. The *Northern Whig*, Tuesday 17 December, reported on page 2 that:

Amongst the gentlemen who acted as collectors were — Wm. Sharman Crawford, Esq., M.P., Crawfordsburn; the Mayor [John Clarke, Esq.]; Robert J. Tennent, Esq., D.L., J.P.; James Grimshaw, Esq.; C. B. Grimshaw, Esq.; Edmund Grimshaw, Esq.; William Coates, Esq., J.P.; James Campbell, Esq.; John Boyd, Esq.; Robert McDowell, Esq.; Dr. Thompson; Robert Batt, Esq., J.P., Purdysburn; T. G. Batt, Esq., Purdysburn; Clotworthy Dobbin, Esq.; David Lindsay, Esq., J.P., Ashfield, Dromore; Wm. Gray, Esq., Graymount; John Sinclair, Esq., Belfast; Charles Duffin, Esq.; John Montgomery, Esq., Belfast.

So far, so good. And fascinating to see so many of the town’s Protestant gentlemen doing their bit for community relations.

Belfast Commercial Chronicle, Monday 16 December 1844, page 2

Yesterday, the consecration of St. Malachy’s Roman Catholic Chapel took place, and the ceremonial was performed with great pomp and splendour. A vast number of persons were present, including members of most of the religious denominations in Belfast; and we understand that the collection, including the sale of tickets, amounted to upwards of £700.

[The *Northern Whig* suggested a figure of £900.]

But not so fast. Don't forget this is Belfast. Some things never seem to change!

Northern Whig, Thursday 19 December 1844, page 2

ATTACK ON THE MAYOR OF BELFAST, FOR ATTENDING AT THE OPENING OF ST. MALACHY'S CHURCH. — A Belfast contemporary, *The Banner*, has attacked Mr. Clarke, Mayor of Belfast, for having attended, collected, and contributed, at the opening of St. Malachy's Church, on Sunday last; though we do not recollect, that the same contemporary ever complained of his Worship for having signed a petition against the Dissenters' Chapels Bill. With respect to last Sunday's doing, we submit, that it was such as to merit approval, instead of condemnation. Oh! but Popery is idolatrous, or something of the sort. Well, we have heard Protestant orthodoxy and heterodoxy called equally bad names; and if one Christian sect is not to afford friendly aid to another, until the one ceases to call the other ill names, we fear, that there will be no friendly assistance in our day.

If, indeed, any man, by contributing his money, were thereby to be understood as expressing an opinion in favour of the doctrines, &c., of the party to whom he contributed, then all such friendly aid, among different sects, must cease. In the same way, no Congregation should have ground granted for a house of worship, except from one of their own creed. How would Presbyterians do, if this rule were adopted? In general, their houses of worship are upon the lands of Churchmen, — a religious party whom they frequently assail, very roundly; but, if the doctrine of our contemporary were adopted, they should get no more ground from any except those of their own Church, and Episcopalians would, perhaps, have a plausible excuse for withdrawing all such grants, whenever they could, upon the allegation, that they ought to discourage error.

We confess, we feel vexed, and disappointed, that we should have to defend Mr. Clarke from an attack of the kind, He, and many others who were present, differ as widely as our contemporary from their Catholic fellow-citizens; but they wish, that those citizens should have houses within which they may bow before their God, as freely as they themselves are enabled to do. If they felt otherwise, they would be on the road of persecution; for, if it be a sin to act as they did, it would be a virtue to exert themselves to prevent their Catholic brethren from having houses of worship, or from worshipping at all, in their own way. And, if the Mayor and others did wrong, on Sunday, what are we to say of the heinous criminality of Mr. McClean, who granted the Catholics ground for their house? Had all the Protestants of Belfast refused ground, the Catholics would, we suspect, have been rather inconvenienced. If Presbyterians, in Belfast, had never got ground for their Meeting-houses except from Presbyterians, of their own respective ways of thinking, we presume, that their houses would not stand exactly where they now do.

We are told, that the Mayor is to be addressed, lectured, and so forth, because of his last Sunday's doing. Yesterday, the walls of the town exhibited an Orange placard, with the following announcement :—

“THE BELFAST PROTESTANT OPERATIVE AND REFORMATION SOCIETY. — A meeting of this Society will be held (D.V.) on Wednesday evening, Dec. 18, at 8 o'clock, precisely, in the School-room adjoining St. Ann's Church — entrance by Academy-street. The Rev. Richard Oulton has kindly consented to preside. Among other matters of interest, it is proposed to move an address to John Clarke, Esq., Mayor of Belfast, with reference to his attendance at St. Malachy's on Sunday last. Several of the Clergy will be in attendance. The members of the Society are requested to bring their female friends with them, as suitable accommodation has been provided.”

Very creditable work for Mr. Oulton! On one occasion our Reporter gave a description of a scene of *forging names to a petition*, at a meeting of the above Society; and, naturally wishing to prevent

another exposure from us, they passed a resolution against admitting a Reporter from this office again. What they did, last night, in their hole-and-corner meeting, we, therefore, do not know.

The Banner intimates, that Mr. Clarke is to be called to account, by the Town Council. It would be better if the Council would account to the town for the money which they have raised, and of which, in violation of an Act of Parliament, they have rendered no account for two years. — If, however, they do assail the Mayor, let them not overlook the Mayor elect, who, we are glad to learn, sent £10 to the St Malachy's fund.

And the news quickly spread to Dublin. Shock and horror!

Statesman and Dublin Christian Record, Friday 20 December 1844, page 2

A MAYOR IN A MASS-HOUSE.

We are sorry to perceive by the papers that Mr. Mulholland [sic], the mayor of Belfast, a respectable and valuable man, has permitted himself, in company with several other nominal Protestants, to be seduced by the false liberal, or rather atheistical, theories of the day, into communion with worshippers in an idolatrous mass-house, when high mass was celebrated in his presence. It was on the occasion of opening a new Romish cathedral called St. Malachis [sic] in Belfast, that the mayor is said to have officiated as collector. One paper says that seven hundred, and another that nine hundred pounds were collected on the occasion. On the following day, it is stated that a mass was offered up for the repose of the soul of a dead man who had left £3,000 to build this cathedral ...

Vindicator, Wednesday 08 January 1845, page 2

ADDRESS TO THE LATE MAYOR OF BELFAST.

We publish to-day [see below] the address of the enlightened inhabitants of our town to the late Mayor, Mr. Clarke. His reply does honour to his head and heart, and, we will add, gives him fresh claims on the respect of his fellow-townsmen. In our last, we took occasion to say that the Town Council disgraced themselves by joining with the ranting parsons and celebrated Greggites of this town, in their late attack on one of the most single-minded men in the community. We rejoice to see the array of names that accompanies the address; and can safely say, that the number would have been greatly increased, had it remained for signatures another day.

Fortunately, the Mayor was prepared to stand up and be counted.

[Robert Boyd and the Steens are listed amongst those supporting the Mayor of Belfast for attending a Roman Catholic church service.]

ADDRESS
TO JOHN CLARKE, Esq.,
LATE MAYOR OF BELFAST

MONDAY, the 6th January, 1845, the following Deputation — viz., Robert J. Tennent, Esq., D.L., Thomas Batt, Esq., William Pirrie, Esq., John Dunville, Esq., William Gillilan, Esq., John Thomson, Esq., John Cunningham, Esq., S.S. Thomson, Esq., M.D., W. J. C. Allen, Esq., J.P., Valentine Whitla, Esq., Thomas Read, Esq., M.D., James Campbell, Esq., and John Hodgson, Esq., waited on JOHN CLARKE, Esq., late Mayor of Belfast, and presented to him the following Address: —

SIR, — At the close of your year of office, as Mayor of Belfast, we, the undersigned inhabitants of the town, feel called upon to tender to you an expression of our thanks, for your courteous, dignified, and impartial conduct, during the period of your Mayoralty.

In a town so divided as Belfast is, in religious and political opinions, it is of great importance that its Chief Magistrate, whatever may be his individual opinions, should ever bear in mind, that, as Mayor, he ought to know no distinctions among those over whom he has been appointed to preside; and that, as you yourself correctly described it, on a late occasion, ‘the office is neither a political, nor a religious, but merely a civil one,’ and its duties cannot be satisfactorily discharged, unless the person filling the office ‘considers himself as the Mayor of the whole community, including all parties in religion and politics, and bound to show equal impartiality and equal courtesy to all.’

We thank you for having thus given the weight of your character, and official station, to this just and precise description of the spirit in which the office should be filled; and we thank you still more for having in your own person set an example of that impartiality which you recommend — an example which we trust your successors will not fail to imitate.

It was, Sir, with feelings of strong disapproval, that we perused an address to you, from a body styling itself ‘The Belfast Protestant Operative Association’ censuring you for having attended, in your official capacity, as one of the collectors, at the opening of a Catholic Church.

Sir, we fully concur with what you have stated, in your dignified and satisfactory reply, that the persons thus complaining, altogether mistook the character of the office; and we beg to express our gratitude to you for having so promptly rejected this improper interference, and repelled the attempt to pervert the Municipal Chief Magistrate of all the inhabitants into a mere sectarian officer, ‘pledged’ to promote the religious interests of a party. Your attendance, as a collector, at St. Malachy’s Church, was no more than an act of courtesy and kindness, such as you had previously extended to other bodies of Christians, implying neither approval nor disapproval of any religious doctrines or ceremonies whatsoever; and we see in this act merely an adherence to that course of impartiality, which you have stated that you marked out for yourself, when entering on the office of Mayor.

Sir, we beg once more to tender you our thanks, and to state, that, whilst differing among ourselves, and many of us from you, in religion and politics, we cordially unite in expressing our warm approval of the manner in which you have acted, as Mayor of Belfast, during the past year.

... [Then follows a very long list of 315 signatories which includes Robert Boyd, William, James and Henry Steen and James Macnamara, JP – the subjects of this webpage on BloomfieldBelfast.com of course – but so many of the major names in Belfast during this period,

viz. Batt, Tennent, Whitla, Orr, Herdman, Dunville, Simms, McCance, Henderson, Valentine, McDonnell, Bristow, Malcolm, Cranston, Workman, Coates, Kennedy, McLaine, Charley, Crawford, Garrett, Richardson, etc.] ...

To the foregoing Address Mr. Clarke made the following Reply: —

GENTLEMEN, — I beg leave to return my sincere thanks, for the very kind and flattering Address which you have been pleased to present to me. I have endeavoured to discharge the duties of the Mayoralty, during the past year, to the best of my ability. I have given my time and attention to the performance of its various and responsible engagements; and, although I am very conscious of many deficiencies, your kind and enlightened approbation assures me that I have not altogether failed in the discharge of my duty.

I quite agree with you in the opinion you express, that the Chief Magistrate of Belfast (no matter by what party he may be returned) should regulate his conduct by a principle of complete impartiality towards the various sects and parties into which the inhabitants of the town are divided. And this line of conduct I believe to be quite consistent with the firmest and most uncompromising adherence to his own opinions, whether in religion or politics.

The outcry that has been raised against me, because I attended as a collector, at the Roman Catholic Church of St. Malachy, seems to me ridiculously disproportioned to the occasion. At the same time, I cannot but know, that some persons, whose high and honourable characters I sincerely respect, have thought me wrong in attending at this place of worship. To such I can only say, that it is with feelings of deep regret I have been obliged to differ in opinion from them on this subject. Others have assailed me, in a tone of vulgar and virulent abuse; yet, allow me to indulge a hope, that, when the present excitement has died away, a better feeling may prevail amongst us, and that all may, at length, be convinced, that it is not only their duty as Christians, but their best policy as patriots, anxious for the peace and prosperity of the country, to cultivate a spirit of mutual kindness and forbearance, rather than seek, as is done at present, to convert every common and trivial occurrence into an opportunity for displaying the bitterest and most hostile disposition.

The Address which you have just presented to me, signed as it is by so very great a proportion of the wealth, the respectability, and the intelligence of the inhabitants, sufficiently proves, that, when a public officer endeavours to perform his duty conscientiously, he will always have the support and approbation of those who are the best and fittest judges of his conduct.

With feelings of deep gratitude for the honour you have just conferred upon me, I am, gentlemen, your obedient, humble servant,

JOHN CLARKE.

Belfast, 6th January, 1845.