

The Story of the First Hundred Years

1869-1969

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THE HISTORY of Greenwell Street Presbyterian Church has its origins in the Revival of 1859 so far as this movement affected the town of Newtownards. From the humble ministrations of the Town Missionary in a situation of genuine spiritual need, it has grown into one of the largest congregations in the General Assembly. To present and former members and friends of this congregation, may the following record inspire thankfulness for what has been achieved through the guidance of God—by former generations, and provide confidence for future prospects of witness to the greater glory of His Name. This is only the story of 100 years—the end of the beginning. The record is incomplete, but it is upon the past that the future is built.

I have worked with the disadvantage of total unfamiliarity with the life of the congregation. Consequently the narrative lacks record of trifling everyday incidents which serve to make such an effort vital and picturesque. It was at the invitation of Rev. T. R. Johnston, B.A., that I undertook the task, and hereby thank him for making available the records of the congregation, one of my main sources of information. I have pleasure in noting my indebtedness to the following for their help; to Rev. Professor J. M. Barkley, one of my former teachers of history, for reading the typescript and making certain alterations; to Mr. J. W. Russell, LL.B., a son of the congregation, and Rev. A. R. Scott, Ph.D., Ahorey, Portadown, for providing useful background material. The present Moderator of the General Assembly, The Rt. Rev. J. T. Carson, B.A., D.D., whose historical publications are widely known, provides the Foreword, and to him I express sincere thanks.

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May, 1970.

FOREWORD

From the Moderator of the General Assembly, THE Rt. REV. JOHN T. CARSON, B.A., D.D.

IT IS BOTH an honour and a privilege to write this foreword to the story of Greenwell Street Presbyterian Church, Newtownards. In common with all the congregations of the town, Greenwell Street has a great heritage for which they can be grateful and from which they are obviously determined not to be shaken.

This heritage consists, in part, of simple but fixed principles about God and His worship. Those who established the Church here were rightly obsessed with a profound sense of God's glory and majesty. It is fine to see their successors saying to this secular age, "The Lord forbidst me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee."

It is also comprised of Scriptural doctrine and evangelical truth. The founders of Greenwell Street arose largely out of the exciting days of the 1859 Revival and the saving truths of the Gospel which burst into a flame at that time have hurried steadily ever since. Colder, and less inspiring days are upon us. Bible knowledge and clear, doctrinal teaching is out of fashion, but Greenwell Street has maintained its tradition of an evangelical creed, warmly and winsomely taught and preached.

This tradition is also made up, in part, of a wholesome connection between religion and life and throughout its considerable history it has sent out into the public, professional, and private life of the community an army of good men and women who have adorned the doctrine and honoured the good name of the Presbyterian Church.

The congregation has been marked by a concern for the salvation of men and women, and boys and girls. Its ministers have never failed to do the work of an evangelist and God has honoured and blessed their appeals in the Gospel.

I am proud to salute the work of the present minister, my friend and fellow-student, the Rev. T. R. Johnston. To him and to all his officebearers I extend the congratulations of the Church, and express the wish that, like a river on its way to the sea, it may become bigger and even more useful to the community through which it passes.

The Rev. W. D. Weir has put the Church in his debt with his careful and painstaking recital of the congregation and its story.

May Greenwell Street continue to proclaim the Gospel of Christ with grace and power, and I am certain that the coming generations will, in their turn,

bless God for its noble history, its great traditions and supremely for the message of the Gospel of God's love in Christ which it transmitted so faithfully.

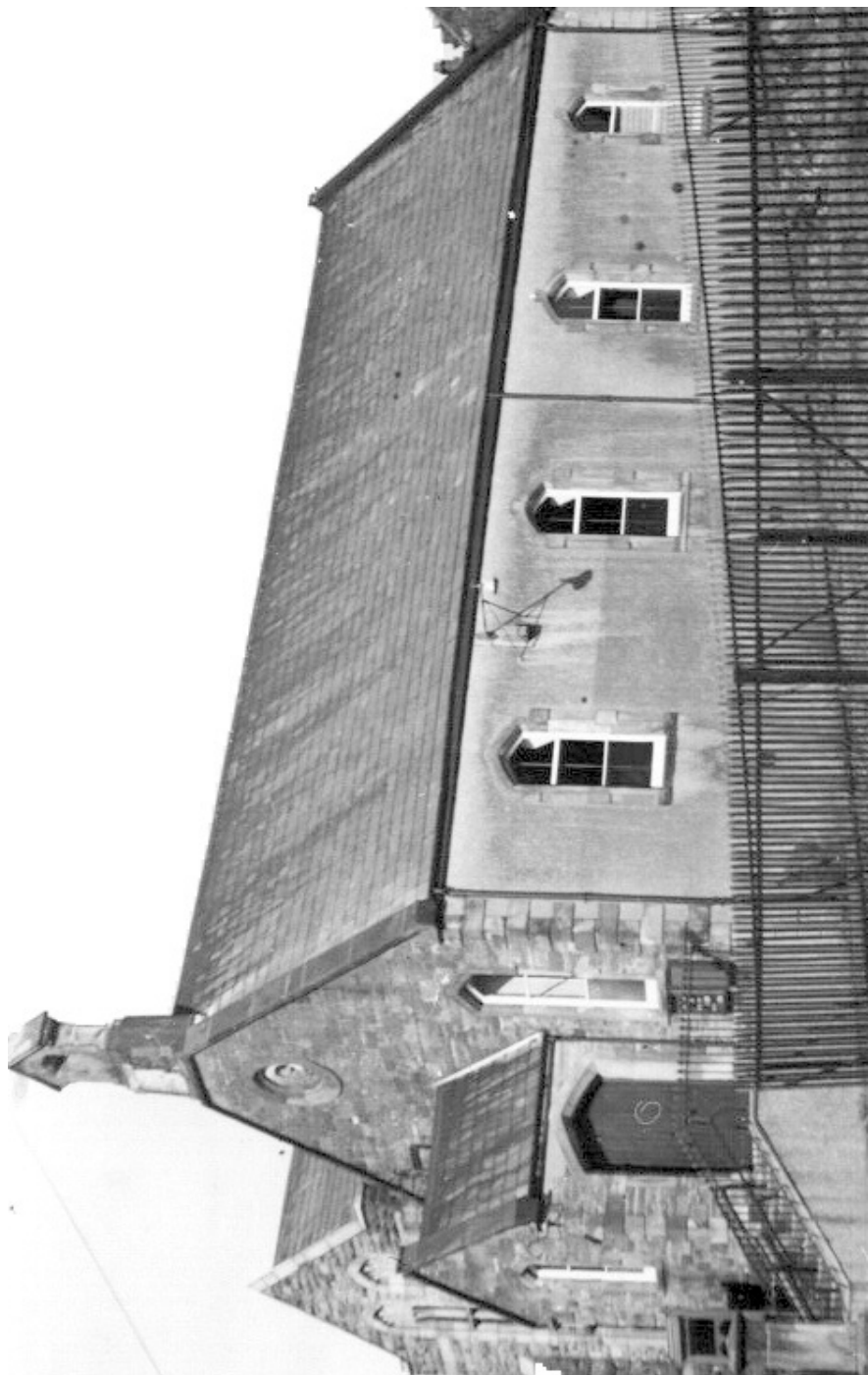
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May 30, 1970.



GREENWELL STREET CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

THE STORY of Presbyterianism in Greenwell Street, Newtownards begins in the latter half of the 19th century. In terms of the whole span of human history, this appears a relatively short time, but its true significance is realised when we consider that everyday events afford the basic material for the study of human endeavour and achievement. These are reflected in the records of Greenwell Street congregation, where may be discovered some of the influences which have shaped its past, and enable an understanding of its essential character in the present day.

The early part of the story is closely associated with the Revival of 1859. Following a similar religious movement in North America, it brought a new source of strength and purpose to the spiritual life of Ulster. Preparations for its advent assumed many forms, the most common of which was the prayer meeting, and in this respect the town of Newtownards was no exception to the rest of the Province. Such is the spiritual context in which we must look for the origins of the congregation, for the emphasis of its early fathers was moulded and determined by the impetus of the Revival. During the course of a century, the congregation has been blessed with the ministrations of three pastors, and the main part of the narrative can be presented in chapters which broadly correspond with these various ministries.

The town which provides the wider setting for the life and witness of this congregation has been endowed with a long and eventful history, and it may not be inappropriate to note some of its significant landmarks. Originally it was linked with a castle erected shortly after the advent of a band of adventurers whose ancestors hailed from Normandy. Around this castle there grew a town, which in various languages received the name "Nove Ville de Blathewyc", "Villa Nova" and "Baile-Nua", all of which basically mean "New Town". However the religious significance of its situation had been determined some centuries earlier, with the foundation of the Abbey Church of Movilla (meaning, "The Plain of the Old Tree") by St. Finian. It is worthy of record that one of the most outstanding pupils of this teaching centre was St. Columba of Iona, who subsequently sailed to Iona and became the apostle to the Northern Picts.

Later, the same area saw the foundation of a Dominican Priory which after withstanding the test of time for four centuries was destroyed by fire. Its possessions were granted to one, Sir Hugh Montgomery, who fashioned "the



INTERIOR OF CHURCH

princely mansion called Newtown House," which was also burned in the year 1644. The same gentleman, who became the first Provost of Newtownards on its erection into a Corporation, made a valuable contribution to the life of the town. History records how he built a school for teaching Latin and Greek, and with his wider view of education, made provision for archery and the playing of golf and football. Further, it was at this school, that young men who planned to enter the ministry of the Presbyterian Church received their preliminary training. In the words of a recent historian, this is "the first intimation we have of Ulster students receiving their early training at home prior to their departure to the Scottish universities."

The Church for whose ministry these students received training, had an organised congregation in Newtownards by the year 1642. Within the next three decades, the first meeting house was erected, and it has been suggested that its situation lay between Greenwell Street and Movilla Street, although somewhat nearer the latter. Greenwell Street, whose name is said to have originated from a nearby ancient well, was until recently linked to Movilla Street by what was often called "Dummy's Lane," or "Domnach's Lane," which means "Church Lane." The increase of the town's population over the years was accompanied by the extension of Presbyterianism, so that prior to the organisation of a Presbyterian cause in Greenwell Street, four other substantial congregations were already in existence.

Let us attempt to visualise Newtownards as it was on the eve of the foundation of Greenwell Street congregation. The basic unit of the town was a spacious square from which ran several streets. In this square was the Town Hall, a large and rather elegant building which had been erected in 1770 in Grecian-Doric style, by the first Marquis of Londonderry. A short distance away stood the lofty and beautiful pedestal of an ancient cross, which was defaced by rebels in 1653, and restored again in 1666 by the local inhabitants. Situated within three miles of the town was Mount Stewart, the seat of the Marquis of Londonderry.

In its economic life, the town had acquired considerable prosperity on account of the Industrial Revolution. The weaving of muslin employed a large number of the male population, while the embroidering for the manufacturers of Belfast and Glasgow required a considerable amount of female labour. Recently, a flax factory had been erected in the Castle Gardens, and not too far distant from the town, two extensive lead mines contributed to its prosperity. Overlooking Newtownards was Scrabo where several quarries produced stone, "little inferior to that of Portland." Contact was maintained with

neighbouring places, for in 1857 the Co. Down railway ran five trains a day between Belfast and Newtownards, while the Portaferry Commercial Traveller linked up the Ards Peninsula. Such in brief, is the picture of a community which had made considerable advance in its economic life.

However, the same extent of progress could not be found in the town's intellectual and spiritual spheres. In 1850, Newtownards is mentioned among 74 towns in Ireland which did not have a book-seller. In respect of the sale of Scriptures this should not cause surprise, when we consider that Bibles cost 3/6 and New Testaments 4d each, equivalent to "more than half a week's wages of a labourer for a Bible, and half a day's pay for a Testament."

The exceedingly limited demand for spiritual literature prior to the Revival may be further appreciated upon consideration of the spiritual state of the inhabitants. The ten Protestant Churches together with the Roman Catholic Chapel were adequate in terms of space for the average attendance of 1,200 on any Sabbath day out of a population of 12,000 people in town and district. By way of contrast there were 62 public houses, many of which were open on Sundays. It has been reckoned that half of the population had not even a nominal connection with any place of worship. There was evidently a marked spiritual dearth, and speaking of the population one contemporary writer observed how "*a large proportion had fallen into neglect of the means of grace.*"

When the Revival of 1859 made a deep impact on the religious life of many parts of the country, such news must have reached Newtownards. Yet it was not accompanied by an expectation of similar happenings there. The Revival did eventually come to the town when it was the experience of a large majority of the hitherto indifferent population to forsake sin and undergo a thorough spiritual reformation. The following extract from the edition of "The Revival" dated 20th August, 1859 gives some indication of the impact of the movement:

"A wonderful change transformed the town, and the sabbath ... is now so strictly observed that the stillness of the streets is seldom broken, except by the crowds that flock to the several churches. Districts of the town that on Saturday evenings used to be so turbulent, that the very police were timid . . . are now perfectly quiet and peaceful."

During the annual harvest fair, which was not renowned for peaceful proceedings, a public prayer meeting was observed in the Square from 2 p.m. until 6 p.m. with utmost solemnity. The edition of "*The Revival*" dated 15th October reports : "*It was under the circumstances interesting in the ex-*

treme, to see a large body of people kneeling down in prayer in the public market place of a populous town, many of whom had never before bent the knee for that purpose in any place. Such a scene it is admitted, was never previously witnessed in Newtownards."

For those actively involved in the work of Revival, it was a time of intense spiritual activity and incessant demand. This is portrayed for us by another writer who says :

"It is scarcely necessary to add that the Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Methodist ministers, the elders and other office-bearers of the several churches, with the Town Missionary, are so constantly occupied as to need much the fulfilment of the singularly appropriate prayer of one of the stricken, 'that they might run, and not be weary, and walk and not faint'."

At this point we meet for the first time, the man around whom the future congregation of Greenwell Street was to gather. His name, William McIlwrath, and as a Scripture Reader appointed to the position of Town Missionary, the following words of a contemporary writer indicate something of his contribution to the work of Revival in Newtownards :

"The ministers of the town have received very effective aid from the members of the Town Mission Committee, from their zealous and efficient secretary, Mr. M. Harbison, and in a remarkable degree from their agent, Mr. McIlwrath, a young man of singular devotion to his Master's work, who has laboured from the outset with a zeal that knew no bounds, and an energy that never flagged."

It is to his early life, and subsequent work as the first minister of Greenwell Street that we now turn.

THE MINISTRY OF WILLIAM McILWRATH 1869-1900

HIS PREPARATION

IN THE townland of Ballyclose, which is not far from the birthplace of the 'Fifty Nine Revival, William McIlwrath was born on 27th July, 1833, and baptized on 25th August of the same year. His ancestry was associated with the district since the time of Hugh McIlwrath, born in 1699, and from whom his father had descended in a direct line. The family appears to have originated in Ayrshire, and somewhere in its early history, one of its members was executed for firm adherence to the principles of the Scottish Covenanters. Another emigrated to America and gained prominence as editor of the New York Tribune, forerunner of the New York Herald Tribune. William's father, who was born in 1810, married his cousin, Ellen McIlwrath, also a native of the district. Of their family of ten, born between the years 1835 and 1854, William was the eldest.

His father, whose first name was Hugh, was a highly respected farmer, and renowned for his deep piety throughout his native district. His concern for the education of his children was evident, in that William along with his brothers and sisters were sent to the nearby Park Wall National School. During his boyhood days, his greatest joy was in the reading of religious books and the diligent performance of the various exercises received at Sabbath School. Being the eldest son of a large family, his secular education was of limited duration, for at an early age he was taken from school to assist his father in the various duties of the farm. Such did not prevent his attendance continuing at Sabbath School, where in due course he was given charge of his own class. His youthful piety was given further expression in the organisation of a number of prayer meetings which were largely attended. In this particular sphere of work, one of his helpers was an able scholar who assisted him to acquire a good training in the use of the English language for, by this time, he had decided to give effect to an aspiration of long standing, namely, to go to College and train for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Thus for a period of at least two years, he worked on the farm by day, and devoted his precious evening hours to his studies. It appears that in 1857 another step towards the fulfilment of his aim was taken, in that he began to prepare for entrance to university.

Two years afterwards, William McIlwrath was guided to the setting of his future work. In response to an invitation from Newtownards, which came in May, 1859, he accompanied Mr. Craig, Headmaster of the Model School, Ballymena, to narrate the rise and progress of the Revival in Co. Antrim. One of the historians of the Revival, who described it as *"The Year of Grace"*, relates the circumstances which brought this young man, already known as a Scripture reader, to Newtownards. It appears that Mr. Harbison, the teacher of the National School who longed to see a spiritual awakening in the town, had heard about the marvellous work the Lord had done in Connor, Ahoghill, and elsewhere in his native district. Thus he engaged this deputation to come to Newtownards, and relate the progress of the Revival in the area of its origin. Much preparation took place before they arrived. Harbison tells how *"a united prayer meeting had been established on the Wednesday evening which was to be continued weekly"*. He also attempted to reach the non-churchgoers by means of open-air meetings, and noted the rapid increase in the support which they received.

Shortly after the arrival of the visitors from Ballymena, William McIlwrath addressed a large gathering on the chosen subject in First Newtownards. So favourable was the impression created that he was invited to become agent of the Town Mission, which had apparently been in existence some years prior to the Revival. He entered upon the duties of this appointment on 20th June, 1859, with the enthusiasm, conviction and zeal which were to characterise his later ministry. An important part of his work consisted in preaching at the open-air meetings commenced by Mr. Harbison. There his preaching was accompanied with much effect, for many were convinced of sin and not a few led to salvation. Harbison writes about Cottage Meetings as not created but rather strengthened by the Revival. These were held *"for prayer, praise and the reading and exposition of God's word"*. At least 20 were in existence with the average attendance ranging between 30 and 50 individuals. The Town Missionary visited these meetings in rotation, and thus an effort was made to bring the gospel to the homes of the people without respect of class. In this manner Almighty God used William McIlwrath as an instrument of His grace, and promised him greater spiritual opportunities for the future.

MINISTER OF GREENWELL STREET

THE SUCCESS of the Town Missionary as an effective preacher of the gospel to all, but with emphasis on the poorer class of the town, did not cease with the abatement of the Revival. His enthusiasm and devotion soon result-

ed in the gathering of a congregation of those among whom he laboured. In May, 1860, he married Eleanor, the daughter of James Wallace, a well known merchant of the town, and a generous benefactor to his own congregation of Second Newtownards for whom he had erected a Session House at his own expense. Since there was no place of worship available for the gathered people, Mr. McIlwrath prepared a place in the store at the rear of the residence of his father-in-law, and in such humble surroundings, the future congregation of Greenwell Street, Newtownards, took its initial shape.

Although he resigned from his paid agency as Town Missionary about the time of his marriage, Mr. McIlwrath continued the work of relating the Christian message to those beyond the bounds of already established congregations. However, the spirit of loyalty which he bore towards the church of his birth and upbringing so marked his life, that he would not consider the foundation of a congregation on an independent basis. His early decision to enter the ministry of the Presbyterian Church remained unchanged, and during the year 1861 he attended theological classes in the Presbyterian College, Belfast. At the same time, the store at the rear of No. 27 High Street, his father-in-law's home, remained the centre of his preaching and pastoral ministry. As such continued to prove so acceptable among the people, he was confronted with many requests to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

This situation came to the notice of the Presbytery of Ards. In recognition of the success and importance of his work, they encouraged him to apply for ordination, and consequently a Memorial by way of Presbytery was presented to the meeting of the General Assembly of 1867. Certain sections of this Memorial are worthy of quotation, as an indication of Mr. McIlwrath's achievements. It noted that *"for the last seven years he had been labouring gratuitously as a Missionary among the poor in Newtownards, and has had many cheering proofs of God's acceptance of his work; that he has a Sabbath School with an average attendance of 70 poor children; that besides weekly meetings he has two stated meetings on the Sabbath for the ragged poor with a regular attendance of 150 to 200 persons"*. The memorial referred to the willingness of Mr. McIlwrath to offer as a gift to the Assembly *"a plain house capable of accommodating 400 persons"*, and asked that he should be ordained *"to the charge of the above described congregation, so that he may be empowered to dispense to them the Lord's Supper, and administer baptism to their children"*.

At a later session of the same Assembly, it was agreed that *“a committee of Assembly be appointed to take charge of Mr. McIlwrath, and the people amongst whom he labours; to deal with them as they see right”*. The following year it was decided that *“the Committee be re-appointed, with power to form the people among whom Mr. McIlwrath labours into a congregation with power to settle among them as soon as they may see fit”*.

The exact period of Mr. McIlwrath's academic preparation for ordination is difficult to assess, yet in 1869 he was engaged in theological study. In that year the Committee in charge of his case reported how they had examined him in theology over the past year, and heard pieces of trial from him. They were able to report that *“all his examinations and exercises were sustained, some of them with special approbation.”* At the same time, members of the Committee of Assembly visited the congregation, and administered the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The impressions of the work were entirely favourable, *“both as to the number attending on the various services, and the spirit the people were manifesting”*.

The satisfaction of the Committee with Mr. McIlwrath and his work, resulted in his licensure on 5th April, 1869. At the same time, the congregation was organised under the name of "The Greenwell Street Church, Newtownards". A short time later, the people gave him a unanimous call to be their minister, and on 25th May of the same year, his youthful aspirations were realised in his ordination to the Christian Ministry and appointment to the pastoral oversight of the newly formed congregation.

The Committee of Assembly, having dispensed with their formal duties went much further as indicated by the following part of the report:—

“They cannot close this report of proceedings which have continued over two years without expressing their great gratification with the result now announced. They believe that Mr. McIlwrath's labours have been greatly acknowledged of God; his congregation is composed really of the poor; they attend in large numbers on the Word and Ordinances; and the best results may, by the blessing of God, be anticipated”.

The new congregation was fortunate not only in its pastor, but also with regard to property. The father-in-law of Mr. McIlwrath had originally bought the ground upon which the new church was to be erected, and by his Will, whose Probate was granted on 29th March, 1858, endowed his daughter and friends, William Haugh and James Patton with the residue *“upon trust to sell”*. The money thus realised, enabled Mrs. McIlwrath to defray the cost of erecting the church for the sum of £750, and in June, 1869, her husband



UPPER SCHOOL ROOM

purchased the property from the Trustees of James Wallace, his father-in-law, and in July transferred it to “*William Edgar, John Boal, John Munn, David McMullan and James Ross Clarke, the trustees of the Sixth Presbyterian Congregation in Newtownards*”. The congregation later obtained additional property on the west side of the Church, and such was conveyed to the trustees by Fee Farm Grant, dated, 26th March, 1884.

During the year before the formal organisation of the congregation, the building of the church had commenced. Designed to accommodate 300 persons, and built at considerable cost for a century ago, the opening ceremony took the form of impressive services conducted on 10th October, 1869, by Rt. Rev. Professor R. Smyth, D.D., Moderator of the General Assembly for that year.

In 1870, it was reported to the Assembly that Mr. McIlwrath had handed to the Committee on Church, Manse, School and Debt Extinction Fund, “*a lease duly executed, making over to the General Assembly certain premises in Greenwell Street ... on which he has erected a mission church, where he ministers to large numbers, chiefly of the poorer classes*”. In 1872, the Assembly made special reference to this act of generosity as follows:—

“*... the cordial thanks of the Assembly are due, and are hereby given, to Rev. William McIlwrath and Mrs. McIlwrath for their practical interest which they have taken in the religious welfare of the working classes, and for their very considerate and exemplary liberality to this Church*”.

Within a short time, the Assembly Committee's reference to “*best results*” for Greenwell Street began to be realised. On account of the numbers who attended divine worship, it was found necessary in 1877 to add a wing to the original building, capable of accommodating 200 people. Twelve years later, it became imperative to make further enlargements of both Church and Schoolroom, and such were quickly effected. Continually increasing numbers made additional accommodation necessary, with the result that, in 1895, a new Schoolroom for infants was erected.

The remarkable speed at which all this building proceeded, is a specific indication of the close association between Presbyterianism and education which existed in the last century. It also revealed the length to which Mr. McIlwrath was prepared to go, in an effort to fulfil both the spiritual and educational needs of his people. The erection and enlargement of the schools are a reflection of the numbers for whom such provision had to be made. In a letter of 21st February, 1890, written in the names of the Minister, along

with J. Bole, an elder, and W. H. Willis, Secretary, the situation is clearly portrayed.

“The School at first was only intended to accommodate 120 scholars, but the attendance has so increased that many of the children have been obliged to stand in rows around the walls for want of seats. During the past year, the average attendance was 145, but it frequently arose as high as 180 to 190. To meet this pressing demand for room, Church and School had to be enlarged”.

The letter also referred to *“the necessity of appealing to the Christian sympathy of the friends of education”*, and spoke of the school as *“a growing one, and will now be capable of accommodating 220 children without overcrowding”*.

The same letter is of further interest in that it refers to special arrangements for those who *“attend no place of worship, and refuse to enter a church, have a regular service conducted for themselves in the schoolroom every Lord's Day at 3 o'clock p.m., and week day services in their own houses. 500 religious tracts are distributed every month besides other literature”*. The cost of this enlargement of Church and School premises was between £400 and £500, and the letter of which parts have just been quoted, advertised the Re-opening services on 30th March, 1890, when it was hoped to liquidate the debt incurred in these renovations. We may be sure that the appeal met with great success, for a few years later, a similar appeal was made in connection with the erection of the Infant Schoolroom. Special services were advertised in a letter for August 9th, 1896, to help clear the further debt incurred. The purpose for this additional building is typical of the congregation's educational programme :

“To help in carrying on the good work of elevating mentally and morally the children of the hard working sons and daughters of toil in our community”.

The letter also revealed the pressing need for the continued building programme by stating that an effort *“to restrict the attendance of pupils proved a complete failure, as the children persisted in coming, and had to be accommodated in the yard, as there was not standing space for them in the Schoolroom”*.

The services were conducted by Rev. S. McComb, B.A. (Oxon), B.D., a distinguished minister from Belfast. Large congregations were present, and in terms of the effort to liquidate the debt, the "Newtownards Chronicle"

observed that *“the response to the appeal was a satisfactory one”*. On that particular day, a gratifying spirit of co-operation and goodwill was manifest among the churches of the town, in that neighbouring ministers suspended their own evening services, and encouraged their people to be present at Greenwell Street.

Although there was much material advance on the part of the congregation during these years, the spiritual and social work of the district received Mr. McIlwrath's first attention. Despite the prosperity which Newtownards had derived from the Industrial Revolution, a remarkable amount of poverty abounded in town and district. One source at the writer's disposal, which he finds credible in the light of the social and economic conditions of many during the 19th century is worthy of observation. It comes from reminiscences of one long associated with the congregation, and indicates how Mr. McIlwrath sought to cope with the poverty which he encountered in the course of his pastoral work. Prior to the building of the church, gifts of meal and flour were provided for many who came to the meeting in the store at the rear of the Wallace home. Further, it related how some of the inmates of the local workhouse were entertained to a meal every Sabbath at 27 High Street. Nor were those in need elsewhere forgotten. Large quantities of soup were made, and taken to the homes of those known to be in trying circumstances. In this manner, Mr. and Mrs. McIlwrath gave practical expression to genuine Christian concern.

MRS. McILWRATH

IN EVERY aspect of his work, Mr. McIlwrath enjoyed the sympathy and help of Eleanor, his wife, who shared the greater part of his ministry. By her death, which occurred on 18th July, 1897, he sustained a severe loss. Reference has been made to her generosity in her provision of the congregation with a place of worship, and such was specifically acknowledged in the Finding of the first Presbytery Visitation of Green-well Street, on August 2nd, 1870, as follows :—

“The Presbytery take this opportunity to express their cordial thanks to Mrs. McIlwrath, wife of the minister of the congregation for munificent gift of the commodious and handsome church in which members of the congregation worship”.

Wherever assistance was required in any department of the work of the congregation, she was willing to offer the same, as exemplified in her tempo-

rary capacity as Treasurer of congregational funds. On the day of her funeral, the following extract from the sermon affords an adequate summary of her life and work :—

“Her religion was seen and not heard; seldom on the lip, but always and everywhere in life. She assisted her husband in succouring the helpless, reclaiming the erring, and in the very Samaritanism of charity.”

THE END OF A FAITHFUL MINISTRY

MR. McILWRATH was permitted by the grace of God to continue the work of a faithful ministry for a period of almost 30 years. During the month of December, 1899, his health had become affected by a disease called bronchopneumonia, and although he enjoyed the faithful attention of his doctors, and was surrounded by prayers for recovery, “*an inscrutable Providence*” ordered otherwise. On 28th February, 1900, he passed away in the 67th year of his age, and the 31st of his ministry.

Many were the expressions of tribute to his life and work. In its memorial record, the Presbytery of Ards justified their action in having “*dispensed in his case with the usual preliminary training, and giving him the full status of a minister in the year 1869*”. In the field of contemporary politics, he was a known Conservative, and acted as Chaplain to the Newtownards District No. 4, of the Orange Order. Yet the references to his life and work indicate that he commanded respect from all classes and creeds of the town. Such is clear from the pulpit reference by the Minister of the Old Presbyterian Church, who said that in respect of the deceased, he was reminded of the words of inscription on the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, London :—

“If you seek his monument, look around.”

To understand the dominant note of the ministry of Mr. McIlwrath, it is necessary to be mindful of the Revival of 1859 as its background. The basic emphasis of his ministry was determined by its spirit. Thus his preaching revolved around the theme “*Christ and Him Crucified*”, and the simplicity of style in which his message was delivered made it possible for it to be understood by all who attended on this part of his ministry. Such a theme, preached at the time when “*all Ulster was ablaze with zeal for God*” was never forsaken. It was further reflected in his pastoral work. With its centre in one of the poorest streets of the town, he carried out a ministry primarily spiritual, yet not devoid of its social aspects. His guideline consisted of the words above the

main door of the church, *“the poor have the gospel preached to them”*. The origin of these words is in the New Testament, Matthew Chapter 11, verse 5.

The final word of this chapter may justifiably be drawn from the Memorial Record of the General Assembly. Along with references to his early career, set in the days of the Revival, and the building of a congregation, it said :

“The Rev. William McIlwrath occupied an honourable and prominent place in Newtownards for upwards of 30 years ... He was a faithful minister, an earnest preacher, a lover of good men, and his life and labours will long be held in loving remembrance in Newtownards”.

THE MINISTRY OF THOMAS McILWRATH, B.A. 1900-1947

ON 6th MARCH, 1900, a Commission of the Presbytery of Ards, under the convenorship of Rev. H. Porter, Conlig, was appointed to assume charge of the vacancy caused by the death of William McIlwrath. However, it was evident that the congregation were set on their choice as pastor the sole surviving son of the late minister. Some time prior to the earliest date on which a Call could be made, an informal meeting of the congregation which was largely attended, affirmed that their choice would be ratified at the appropriate time. This took place on 21st April, 1900, and on 25th of the following month, Mr. Thomas McIlwrath, B.A., was ordained and appointed to the pastoral oversight of the congregation. In such a manner, the people of Greenwell Street congregation indicated the high esteem enjoyed by the McIlwrath family, and obtained the man who was to serve as their spiritual guide for a period of 47 years.

The new minister was born on 18th October, 1868, at 27 High Street, Newtownards, the house where he spent his entire life. He received his early education at the Intermediate School, Newtownards, and afterwards at the Queen's College, Belfast, where he graduated Bachelor of Arts. On 6th August, 1895, he was received as a student for the ministry, and placed under the care of the Presbytery of Ards. In the same year, he entered the Presbyterian College, Belfast. His licensure took place on 13th May, 1899, and the following year, he entered his life-long sphere of duty.

The service of ordination took place on a Friday evening, in the presence of a large congregation, which included not only the local Presbytery, but also many friends from Belfast and other Presbyteries. Among those taking part, were 'Rev. J. Moorehead, Groomsport, who preached the sermon, and Rev. W. Wright, First Newtownards who defended the Presbyterian form of Church Government. Afterwards, members of Presbytery and other friends were entertained to tea, arranged by Miss Rhoda McIlwrath, sister of the new minister, who was to prove a faithful helper to him throughout the greater part of his active ministry. On that occasion, Mr. McIlwrath received a presentation of a pulpit gown, which symbolised the dignity of the office of Word and Sacrament for which he had been set apart.

Coming as he did, in succession to a beloved and effective ministry, and having been reared in the atmosphere of the congregation, the task before

Mr. McIlwrath could not be considered easy. Yet he was sympathetic to the spiritual heritage of his father, and by the vigour and dedication which he applied to the various tasks of the ministry soon gave the congregation good reason to be satisfied with their choice. Further, the characteristics of graciousness and humility which helped him to win the affection of his people, were evident at an early date.

The first Presbytery Visitation of the ministry took place in 1909, and its finding reflects the essential nature of this minister's aspirations. After recording how William McIlwrath was succeeded by his son, it was noted that *"in his hands, the traditions of the congregation have been faithfully carried out, and the purposes for which it was established, continuously served."* The Presbytery expressed appreciation of his efforts *"by every means in his power to bring in, and preserve in connection with the church, the poor and the careless,"* and were determined to *"encourage him to prosecute diligently the mission side of his work."* The other Visitations which took place throughout the ministry, reveal favourable findings, and were along lines similar to that of 1909.

THE ELDERSHIP IN GREENWELL STREET

SINCE the eldership plays a significant part in the work and oversight of a congregation, it seems appropriate to record something of the information available with regard to Greenwell Street. The earliest records indicate the existence of an Interim Kirk Session, which included the names of Michael Shaw, David McKean and John Bole, the latter being an elder in the congregation of Ballyblack. Also associated with this Session are the names of neighbouring ministers, Reverends Hughes, Macauley and Young. The Presbytery Visitation of 1st August, 1882 recommended *"as soon as possible a Session be appointed to assist the minister in the pastoral oversight of the flock."* However, it was not until 1894 that a Kirk Session was first regularly constituted, following the ordination of J. Doggart and W. H. Willis, and the installation of J. Bole to this office. During the early days of the ministry of Thomas McIlwrath, the Session began to hold regular meetings, when the chief business was *"to examine and approve"* those seeking full membership of the congregation. The Communion Roll was revised as needed, and representatives to the higher courts of the church appointed.

After some time, it appears that the Session by itself was not considered adequate to cater for the demands of a growing congregation, for another

Interim Session was appointed, and met for the first time on 12th May, 1915. Rev. J. A. F. Young, B.A., Minister of Second Newtownards, was appointed Clerk of Session in succession to Mr. W. H. Willis, deceased. The latter is typical of many who in a lifetime of faithful service to the congregation were to adorn the office to which they had been appointed. It is worthy of note that he acted not only as Clerk of Session, but also as Congregational Secretary, Superintendent of the Sabbath School, and Principal of the Day School. On 2nd April, 1916, Mr. T. J. McCready, formerly an elder of Greyabbey congregation was co-opted a member of the Interim Session. The Visitation of Presbytery, 1st May, 1923 (which is also of interest in that it speaks of a special Sabbath afternoon service and Sabbath School for children in their week day clothes, and of weekly cottage meetings "*to reach the careless, and those straitened in worldly circumstances . . .*") recommended that the membership of the session be increased. After lengthy consideration this recommendation was given effect, when on 17th February, 1927, the session agreed to proceed with the election of new elders.

Eventually, those chosen by the congregation and ordained on 11th May, by the Presbytery of Ards, were: J. Finlay, J. Magilton, S. F. Montgomery, S. J. McDowell, H. K. McMorran, D. McRoberts, D. Wright, S. E. Wright and W. J. Wright. On the same day the Session paid a fitting tribute to the service given in the Interim Session by Rev. J. A. F. Young and James White, in respect "*of the faithful service rendered to Greenwell Street Church. . . They have given willing and regular service since they were appointed in May, 1915, and were always anxious to do their utmost for the good of the church.*"

Within a short time the new session indicated their willingness to execute the duties of their office, for on 8th August, 1927, they approved a plan for the division of the congregation into elders districts. This was for the purpose of visitation, with special attention to the upbuilding of the Sabbath Schools and care of the sick. Two years later, it was felt that the districts were too large and to give successful effect to the work, more elders were required. Consequently, on 13th November, 1929, the following were ordained: Messrs. W. J. McCullough, W. Shaw, W. J. Whalley and H. Wilson. For the sake of completeness, we may note that another ordination took place during the ministry of Mr. McIlwrath, when on 20th February, 1947, the following were ordained : Messrs. J.O. Bailie, R. Bailie, S. Conkey, H. D. McMorran, W. McNamara, R. McNeilly, W. Orme, J. W. Russell, LL.B., D. Reid, G. L. Stewart, J. C. Tate and G. R. Woods.

Many of those whose names we have recorded, have passed to higher service, many retain a keen interest or take an active part in the life of the congregation, and others have given worthy service in the full-time ministry of the wider church. Among these may be included Rev. Hugh Wilson, formerly Missionary to the Jungle Tribes in India, later a minister of the United Church in North India and at present in the service in one of the Canadian Churches. In the home church, is Rev. H. D. McMorran, B.A., B.D., formerly of First Portglenone, and at present Minister of Duncairn Presbyterian Church, Belfast. In the neighbouring congregation of Newington, Rev. J. M. Maddock, B.A., is the present minister. He is a cousin of Mr. McMorran and both are grandsons of Mr. J. Magilton, a former member of Session. Moreover, Mr. Roy Grant, a grandson of Mr. W. H. Willis, is a missionary in South America.

The records of Kirk Session show that a spirit of harmony has marked deliberations and decisions over the years. The concern of the members for the spiritual welfare of the congregation under the guidance of Mr. McIlwrath reveals a high standard, evident in the many occasions when special mission services were held, with the view of reaching those who sat on the fringe of the congregation, or as expressed in the Minutes of 21st November, 1937: *"the careless folk who claimed the church as theirs."* From time to time, these special efforts were not without effect, as in the case of the Mission Services of 1938, the result of which was described by one of the local newspapers as *"marked work of grace . . . just granted to the congregation of Greenwell Street, Newtownards."* The Kirk Session has supported the emphasis established and continued respectively by William and Thomas McIlwrath, which sought to ensure that the careless and the outsider were presented with the gospel of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

THE SCHOOL FETE

THE INTEREST of Mr. McIlwrath in the youth of his congregation was evident from the early days of his ministry in that by the year 1913, a Christian Endeavour Society was already in existence. However, he felt that something should be done to provide the children of the congregation and district with an annual excursion or picnic. Eventually steps were taken in 1921, by way of the organisation of a summer fete for the children who attended Sabbath and day schools. Arrangements were entrusted to the Sabbath school teachers and congregational committee and after some negotiations, it was reported that a certain Mrs. Moore of Milecross had granted the use of one of her fields

for the occasion. Catering facilities were organised, and the services of Second Newtownards Boy Scout Band were obtained. It was agreed to issue a general invitation, and we may guess the extent of the organisation involved with no less than 700 children and friends. On the day of the fete, the procession of children led by Mr. McIlwrath in formal clerical dress and the band made their way through the town for a picnic at Milecross. From newspaper reports, it is evident that the event was marked with much success.

The fete continued to be held in the years which immediately followed, for in 1924 we learn that the procession was led by Mr. McIlwrath and followed respectively by the infants, the band, and the senior boys and girls. Generally, it took place each year and on occasions two bands were engaged, as a decision to this effect is recorded in the Committee Minutes for the year 1924. It continued without a break until 1939, but did not resume after the close of the Second World War.

In days when facilities for the entertainment of children were not so abundant as in the present day, it is easy to imagine how this event was eagerly anticipated from year to year. For many in the congregation, it will remain a day of happy childhood memory.



SCHOOL FETE 1934

MATERIAL IMPROVEMENTS

DURING the ministry of Mr. McIlwrath, repairs to the various properties of the congregation received faithful attention from members of the Committee and the records indicate how such matters were discharged to the satisfaction of all concerned.

The year 1928 was noteworthy in respect of property. In common with many other places at that time, the congregation agreed to the transfer of the Greenwell Street Public Elementary Schools to the Co. Down Regional Education Committee *"on a yearly lease at a nominal rent."* This arrangement was subject to the condition of transfer already agreed between the Co. Down Protestant School Managers Association and the Co. Down Regional Committee. While it brought much improvement in the condition of teachers and pupils, the scheme assured that the interests of the congregation which had so greatly contributed to their origin and development were not overlooked. This arrangement continued until September, 1932, when the pupils of the day schools were transferred to Movilla Public Elementary School, Newtownards. Nevertheless, the association between church and school over the years had been marked by co-operation and happiness, and was of mutual benefit.

On 5th December, 1929, the congregation agreed to proceed with the purchase of ground offered for sale by the Newtownards Urban District Council. This was to prove a valuable acquisition, for in the following April, the congregation considered it appropriate to erect a new hall on this ground, eventually named "The Mission Hall." Plans were speedily made available for its construction and by the month of August, 1930, the Session were in a position to consider arrangements for its formal opening. Their choice of a visiting preacher fell on Very Rev. Dr. Henry Montgomery, founder of the Shankill Road Mission, and former Moderator of the General Assembly. On 24th September, 1930, Dr. Montgomery duly carried out the opening ceremony, after evening worship in the church. It is worthy of note that on the same day as the Session had agreed to invite Dr. Montgomery for the opening of the hall, they gave permission to the recently formed Boys' Club to use its facilities for their regular meetings. Such may be regarded as a further indication of the Session's concern to reach those hitherto careless and indifferent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. By its record of service, this organisation proved to be a great influence for good throughout the area served by the congregation, for a period of many years.

SHARING THE MINISTER'S WORK

WHILE the faithful work of the Minister over the years led to a marked increase in the size of the congregation, it added much to the heavy demands and responsibilities which already occupied his time. Although he was fortunate in the help afforded by his Session, Committee and a Deaconess, Miss Isobella Sloan, who worked with much acceptance, it was felt that Mr. McIlwrath deserved further help with his preaching and pastoral duties. On 11th October, 1931, a joint meeting of Session and Committee approved the request of the Minister to seek the appointment of a Lay Assistant. However, such did not materialise until the appointment in this capacity of Mr. W. H. Snoddy which took place four years later. He laboured in the congregation for almost a year, and thereafter Mr. McIlwrath enjoyed the help of various assistant ministers. Although some of them served for short periods, the assistance given by each in turn was marked with much appreciation. Among those associated thus with the congregation were : Messrs. J. M. McAuley, B.A., W. E. Williamson, B.A., W. Erskine, M.A., R. J. Skelton, B.A., A. McIlwrath, B.A. and C. D. Adams, B.A.

The assistantship of the latter continued throughout the vacancy which followed the resignation of Mr. McIlwrath, during which he shouldered a considerable amount of the preaching and pastoral work and so earned the acknowledgement of a grateful congregation.

A MINISTRY HONOURED

THE continued devotion of Mr. McIlwrath in the service of his people did not pass without notice. On the occasions of both his 35th and 37th anniversaries as minister of the congregation, the Session deemed it appropriate to record tributes to his work and worth. If one is permitted to measure some degree of his success by the numerical increase in the families of the congregation such is quite outstanding. In 1900, about 250 families claimed connection with the congregation and 30 years later this number had risen to about 625. A further increase to 975 was recorded in 1940, and by the year of his retirement, the figure of 1,000 had been reached. There is a tendency to read more into numbers than is often justified, but at least they can be considered as a reflection of the minister's intense pastoral concern, already evident in other respects.

However, it was not until the 40th anniversary of his ordination that some definite act of appreciation was arranged and in May, 1940, he received a

tangible expression of the congregation's gratitude in the form of a presentation. On this occasion, his sister, Mrs. Rhoda Russell was also made the recipient of a small gift in recognition of the faithful service she had given over the years. From the beginning of his ministry, she had been her brother's faithful helper and at one time served in a temporary capacity as congregational treasurer. There were many speeches of commendation during the evening, but their underlying theme was expressed by the chairman, Mr. S. J. McDowell as follows :

"... the early fathers of this congregation who were led to call Mr. McIlwrath to follow in the footsteps of his sainted father and build on the foundation he had laid, were truly guided aright by the Spirit of God. ... He has been most untiring and unselfish in his pastoral and public ministrations, ever leading us unto higher and holier efforts."

The tributes which he received on this and other occasions never succeeded in detracting from the notable humility of Mr. McIlwrath and his ministry continued as before. Thus it was somewhat of a surprise, when on 16th March, 1947, he intimated to the Session and congregation his intention to seek Presbytery approval for retirement from the active duties of the ministry. With much regret, the Session felt that such a wish should be honoured and decided that subject to Presbytery approval, Rev. Charles H. McKeown, M.A., should be asked to act as Convenor of the commission appointed to take charge of the impending vacancy.

Again, the people of Greenwell Street decided that the occasion should not pass without marking the close of the active part of Mr. McIlwrath's ministry. Accordingly, on 19th July, he was, in the words of the 'Newtownards Chronicle,' *"signally honoured by the members of his congregation . . . when he was made the recipient of a cheque for £300."* The speeches of that day reflected deep appreciation of his work and worth. Mr. McKeown who introduced the presentation proceedings, referred to Mr. McIlwrath's participation in the everyday affairs, and especially at the important moments in the life of his people : *"Wherever he has gone, he has radiated a spiritual sunshine."* His pulpit ministry revealed a definite aim : *"In his preaching, he always sought to proclaim the old evangel of God's redeeming love in Christ. His earnest desire was that men, women and young people should be won over from sin to wholehearted allegiance to the Lord Jesus."* Concluding, the chairman said: *"You indeed have been a people highly privileged of God to have had such a minister. Now at eventide of life, we wish him joy, blessing and peace."*

Mr. John Magilton, a senior member of Session, was able to recall the day of Mr. McIlwrath's ordination and in the course of a tribute to the recently retired minister, he made the following significant observation :

"Of no man could it be said with greater truth than of Mr. McIlwrath that the world was his parish. No one of whatever denomination who came to him for advice, comfort or support, ever left without receiving the help he needed and without feeling that here indeed was one who followed in the steps of the Master and went about doing good."

Other speeches pursued a similar vein and eventually the presentation to Mr. McIlwrath was made by Mrs. W. J. Wright, whose husband had given faithful service as Congregational Secretary throughout the entire length of his ministry but had lately relinquished this position on account of ill health.

After he had received the presentation, Mr. McIlwrath, who was deeply touched by all the expressions of kindness and appreciation, replied in words which are given in full, as supporting what has been already said of his character:

"For about 77 or 78 years this church has been nurtured by two pastors, my father and myself. His was the hard task of breaking up the fallow ground. Mine was the lighter one of reaping where he had sowed. To his 30 years of caring for the congregation, may also be added his work for 10 years as an evangelist in this town."

"When I was still a student, an old minister said to me, 'a nice little church in the country would be what would suit you.' The same was the opinion of others nearer to me, but God had ordered otherwise and condescended to use a poor weak instrument for his work. Well we may exclaim in the words of the psalmist 'not unto us but unto Thy name give glory.'"

"In the solemn circumstances of the congregation, let there be a fresh consecration on the part of all to the service of the Saviour and to winning of souls. Let us say 'take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to thee.' Let there also be earnest prayer that the man chosen to be minister may be a man after God's own heart and one filled with the Holy Spirit. Again, I thank you for your great kindness."

A MINISTER AND HIS FINISHED WORK

FOLLOWING his retirement, Mr. McIlwrath continued his interest in the welfare of the congregation and was delighted with their choice of his succes-

sor. Between the latter and himself, there existed the happiest of relations and the work of Mr. Johnston was in no way hampered by his senior colleague. The visits of the latter to the old members of the congregation were greatly valued, but few were the remainder of his days upon earth. A few months from the beginning of the new ministry, Thomas McIlwrath, after a short illness, died in the home where he was born, on 1st July, 1948, in the 80th year of his age and the 48th of his ministry. At the funeral service, attended by a widely representative crowd, tributes to his life and work recalled a ministry of devoted service and consistent faithfulness.

Writing from the vantage point of more than 20 years from the life of the second minister of Greenwell Street, one may justifiably regard him as a genuine servant of Jesus Christ and his fellow men. A definite humility kept him from seeking the limelight and he found joy in the service of the poorer classes, among whom his life was mostly spent. Not a small proportion of the money received for ministerial duties was spent on relieving those in material straits and without respect of creed or class, he was ready to impart whatever help he could, to those in spiritual or physical want. Although his underlying concern was to see that *"the poor shall have the gospel preached to them,"* he was not without a sense of humour. He was glad to tell of one occasion, when visiting in hospital, he tried to reason with a patient who claimed that he *"belonged to Mr. McIlwrath's church, but his minister never came to see him!"*

Mr. McIlwrath possessed a deep interest for people, which is evident from the attention he gave to their various problems. Yet there is no evidence to show that he would have championed any particular cause for social reform. He was essentially a man concerned with his congregation, yet not to the exclusion of interest in the life of his native town. The latter is reflected in his membership of the local School Management Committee, the School Attendance Committee and the Committee of Newtownards Coal and Poor Relief Fund. He was never known to have a car and walked to the various places to be visited in the course of his daily duty.

We have already noted his interest in young people, as seen in his organisation of the school fete. It is further revealed in his service as the Presbytery Sabbath School agent for many years. His annual reports in this sphere, indicate close familiarity with his work and meticulous care for detail.

One of his other interests merits notice. He had a great love for the unusual and archaic. Such was evident in his accumulation of a remarkable collection of pamphlets and tracts on a wide variety of subjects and records

of local incidents which had occurred during the period of his ministry. These he guarded with peculiar care and had bound into a single volume, a complete collection of copies of "The Witness," a newspaper, published during the years, 1874-1941.

While more could be said about Mr. McIlwrath, the distinctive feature of his life and character, could hardly be better expressed than the following extract from the General Assembly's Memorial Record :

"Mr. McIlwrath was an evangelist of the finest type. Greatly beloved, he influenced men for good, even more by what he was than what he said. . . . He was a gracious gentleman, who through his ministry expressed the quality of his personal devotion."

THE MINISTRY OF THOMAS RICHARD JOHNSTON, B.A., 1947-

FOLLOWING THE resignation of Mr. Mellwrath, the congregation under the guidance of Rev. C. H. McKeown, and the other members of the Presbytery Commission, set about the task of finding his successor. At a meeting of the congregation, it was decided to appoint a Hearing Committee which would listen to candidates for the vacancy preach in their own churches, or as circumstances were appropriate. From the various ministers heard, the Committee were able to report on 7th July, 1947, that Rev. Thomas Richard Johnston, B.A., of Donacloney Presbyterian Church, was willing to accept the call, provided that it was unanimous. It was therefore agreed to invite Mr. Johnston to preach in the church, and at a congregational meeting held on 27th July, he was given a unanimous call to become the third minister of Greenwell Street Congregation. This happy result only came after much diligent work on the part of the Hearing Committee, for in the words of the Convenor of the vacancy, its members *"had made several long journeys, and had covered a very large part of Northern Ireland in search of a person suitable to fill the vacancy"*.

Mr. Johnston was a native of Belfast, born on 7th February, 1907, and one of the sons of the late Mr. and Mrs. D. H. Johnston. Brought up in connection with the Crescent Presbyterian Church, he was led to the Christian Ministry as his sphere of life work. To this end, he entered Queen's University, Belfast, where he graduated Bachelor of Arts in 1929. His theological training was undertaken first at the Presbyterian College, Belfast, then at Princeton College, New Jersey, U.S.A., and completed at the Presbyterian College, Belfast, in the year 1933. During his student days in America, he acquired valuable pastoral experience at Nelson and Grand Forks, British Columbia, and on his return to Ireland which was for his final theological year, he was appointed assistant to Rev. S. R. Jamison, Ulsterville.

A few months after his licensure by the Presbytery of Belfast, Mr. Johnston received a call to the congregation of Donegal, where he was ordained on 2nd November, 1933. This was the sphere of the first five years of his ministry, during which he married Miss Caroline Mary Morrow. Thus he found one who has proved his great source of inspiration over the years. There are three sons of the marriage, Ian, Desmond and Mervyn, all of whom have adorned the professions of their choice. On 9th November, 1938, Mr. and Mrs. Johnston left Donegal to take up the work of the ministry in Donacloney, Co.

Down, and after a faithful ministry of nine years, came to Greenwell Street, Newtownards.

It was not an easy task for Mr. Johnston to come as successor to one who had ministered with such devotion and zeal to a people among whom he had been reared, and by whom was found most acceptable. Yet the third minister of Greenwell Street was adequately equipped for the work to which he had been called. At his installation which took place on 2nd October, 1947, he acknowledged the guidance of the Divine Hand *“to far-off British Columbia, to not-so-far Donegal Hills, where I found the partner of my life, who has supported me nobly in my work . . . to Donacloney, to which I pay sincere tribute to-day, and to the people of which I bade farewell with the depth of feeling that must attend the separation of friends.”* In his call to Greenwell Street, Mr. Johnston recognised that the same Guidance had brought him to *“the soil, in which the family whose honoured name I bear, had been planted some generations ago”*.

In recognition of the work of the ministries of his predecessors which he described as *“a task so prayerfully begun and so devotedly pursued,”* he expressed willingness to work in harmony with Mr. McIlwrath, yet his own ministry would bear its distinctive stamp :

“You may rest assured that while it is possible my methods may be different—and I know that you would not have me to be other than myself—the message I bring will be one proclaimed from Greenwell Street pulpit for the past 80 years. I am determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified—the shame of a world's sin and the secret of a world's sanity”.

On the day the deputation from Greenwell Street came to the Presbytery of Banbridge to support the call to Mr. Johnston, many words of appreciation referred to his gift for friendship. Early in his new ministry this quality became evident, and helped to make him a welcome visitor in every home, and win the affection and loyalty of the congregation. His interest in the spiritual progress and welfare of his people was an important feature in the changes which marked the congregation's life over the next few years.

The first alteration in practice related to the Lord's Supper. In keeping with decisions which were being taken elsewhere, the Session resolved to discontinue the Noon Thursday Pre-Communion service, and Thanksgiving on the Monday following the Lord's Supper. The offer of an individual Communion service from Mr. J. Magilton led the Session to abandon the traditional use of the Common Cup. This change was first introduced in the May

Communion of 1948, and later in the same year, facilities for the observance of the Lord's Supper were completed in the gift of a Communion Table by Mr. T. Boyce. Here it is fitting to note that in 1953, further provision for the administration of the Sacraments took the form of a gift of a Baptismal Font. It was provided by Mrs. A. McNeilly in memory of her parents. Another innovation concerned the matter of congregational praise. While the Irish Presbyterian Church was enlivened by a controversy over the use of instrumental music in worship, at the close of the last century, the records of Greenwell Street do not indicate that the Session gave the subject any thought at that time. An obvious preference existed for the customary unaided congregational praise, led by a choir, and directed by a precentor. Long after the use of organs had been accepted by the vast majority of congregations of the General Assembly, no alteration was effected in Greenwell Street, in regard to congregational praise. It was not until a meeting of Session on 18th August, 1963, that expression was given to the feelings of many, in the remark of one member that the introduction of an organ would contribute much to this aspect of worship. Accordingly, steps were taken to procure the same, and with its introduction came a happy settlement, in that the precentor, Mr. J. H. Kelso, was continued as director of congregational praise.

Within the context of this subject, reference may also be made to the introduction of hymns, which in a former age had evoked considerable controversy in the General Assembly. Following a decision of Kirk Session to introduce the Revised Church Hymnary in 1950, a congregational referendum indicated that such was backed with wide support. Yet in deference to the feelings mainly of the older members, the Session agreed to the singing of at least two metrical Psalms in public worship. At that time, the Old Scottish Version of the Psalter was in use, but later the Irish Version was adopted. As in other departments of its work, it may be said, that the congregation of Greenwell Street indicated a preference for "the ancient paths", but when it became aware of "some better thing", such it received as its own.

OTHER EVENTS OF THE MINISTRY

THE EARLY years of Mr. Johnston's ministry indicate a number of matters worthy of record, and such occurred in the midst of a flourishing congregational life. On 20th January, 1955, the date of the congregational social, an opportunity was taken to express gratitude to Mr. Johnston in recognition of a record of devoted service which extended over seven years. The congregation made him the recipient of a gift of pulpit robes, and gave a suitable

present to Mrs. Johnston on the occasion. Speaking on behalf of his wife and himself, Mr. Johnston expressed their gratitude for these visible tokens of the congregation's generosity and appreciation.

In keeping with its concern for missionary outreach, the congregation played its part in the Year of Mission, 1955, arranged by the General Assembly for the whole church. Thus the congregation re-emphasised its concern for the extension of the Kingdom of God, a characteristic of its life over the years. A decision was taken during the same year to strengthen the Kirk Session by the election of eight new elders. These were : Messrs. G. Ashmore, J. Auld, J. Best, H. Gibson, T. Maddock, J. McGimpsey, M. Moss and J. Wright. The service of ordination by the Presbytery of Ards took place on 2nd November, 1956, and in the same year, Messrs. D. Best, F. Cromie and G. Wallace were co-opted as members of Kirk Session. At a later stage in Mr. Johnston's ministry, the need arose for further members of Session. Thus on 3rd July, 1966, the following were ordained to the eldership by the Presbytery of Ards : Walter J. Alien, John Lemon, Robt. Lockhart, Scott Mawhinney, Wm. Mitchell, Samuel McAuley, William K. McIVtbrann, Thos. M. Shaw, Frederick Simpson and Harold Turney.

As in the case of his* predecessor, Mr. Johnston had found it necessary to have the help of others in the discharge of the work of a large congregation. In addition to the help given by Mr. C. D. Adams, B.A., at the beginning of his ministry, the following have also served as Assistant Ministers: Messrs. S. L. S. Fullerton, B.A., J. Fullerton, B.A., and T. A. Houston, B.A. He had enjoyed valuable help given as Deaconess by Miss M. E. Coey, who was dedicated to this office on 1st January, 1951, and served with acceptance until her resignation on 31st October, 1956.

However, it had been evident for some time that distance from Belfast made it difficult to obtain the services of student Assistant Ministers, and this, in conjunction with the need to provide Mr. Johnston with a more continuous form of help, necessitated a new look on the part of Session and Committee. The need lay mainly in the sphere of pastoral visitation, and eventually the services of a Lay Assistant were secured in the person of Mr. J. Howard, previously of Magherafelt, Co. Derry, whose interest lay in this particular type of service. His dedication to the office of Lay Agent for the congregation took place on 14th April, 1957, under the auspices of the Presbytery of Ards. From that time until his resignation on 31st December, 1969, Mr. Howard gave invaluable assistance in the continuing work of the congregation.

Throughout this narrative, there have been a number of references to the congregation's outreach to the needy, evident in a variety of ways. Another aspect of this attitude took shape on 12th May, 1958, when two members of the congregation purchased a tape recorder with a view to making the services of the sanctuary available to members of the congregation, unable to attend for reasons of age or infirmity. Organised on a voluntary basis, this work deserves high commendation, for by the year 1966, at least 1,000 visits had been made. So far as is known Greenwell Street congregation is one of the first in Northern Ireland to undertake this work.

MATERIAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROSPECTS

THE PROVISION OF A MANSE

ONE OF THE first tasks which confronted Mr. Johnston and the congregation at the beginning of his ministry was the provision of a manse. On 7th July, 1948, he suggested to a meeting of the congregational committee that consideration should be given to "*the possibility of providing a permanent manse.*" This question had not arisen in the past, for his predecessors had resided at the family home in Conway Square, Newtownards. During the vacancy, steps had been taken towards the acquisition of temporary premises, and at a meeting of committee on 17th August, 1947, Mr. A. Russell, who had taken a large part in the negotiations concerned, was able to report the purchase of a residence for the minister, situated at No. 78 Church Street. It was recognised at the time that such would only be a provisional arrangement, and by 23rd May, 1949, a site for the future manse had been obtained on the Banger Road, on property which was part of the Londonderry Estate. Subsequently a lease was taken from the Londonderry Estate, and is dated 30th June, 1953. Here the manse was built by Messrs. John Boyd and Sons, Dundonald for the sum of £4,135, and with its command of an attractive view of Strangford Lough and surrounding district, provides a fitting home for the minister of Greenwell Street congregation.

THE NEW HALL

HOWEVER, the building programme of the congregation was far from complete. On account of the marked increase of organisational activities in an already large congregation, existing accommodation for some time had proved inadequate for this need. Such had been realised by Mr. McIlwrath during his lifetime, and after his retirement intimated a desire to see the erection of such accommodation. This became possible after his death, when it was discovered that he had given the greater part of his estate to the congregation, and this formed the basis of a fund for the building of a hall, "*or some substantial addition to the church property.*"

At the beginning of the year 1955, the committee formally agreed to the allocation of this part of Mr. McIlwrath's estate for the particular purpose which he seemed to have had in mind. Two years later, a special meeting of the committee made a definite decision on the matter of building a hall, and

at a congregational meeting in the same year, agreement was given to purchase ground for the erection of the proposed building. Already, about £7,000 was available and to obtain the full amount, it was decided that members of committee should be responsible for taking a monthly collection throughout the congregation.

These arrangements soon met with considerable success. On account of his mother's association with the congregation, much help was given by Mr. Samuel Taggart, at one time co-convenor of the General Assembly's Church Extension Committee. To Mr. Taggart whose interest in this project was further indicated by his supervision of its building, the congregation is deeply indebted. On 6th April, 1959, it was decided to name the building, "Rev. Thomas McIlwrath Memorial Hall." Out of all the tenders received for the contract, that of Mr. Samuel Morrison, a member of the congregation was accepted. In January, 1960, the foundation stone was laid by Mr. A. Russell, Sen., and the following October, the hall was opened by Mr. Taggart. That no debt lay on the building at the date of its opening, is a marked tribute to the generosity and enthusiasm with which the congregation discharged the cost of its construction. The hall is a permanent recognition of the work of Rev. Thomas McIlwrath and since 1960, has proved a suitable asset to the great variety of church organisations by which it is constantly used.

THE BUILDING OF A NEW CHURCH

FOR SOME TIME, the question of a new place of worship had been in the mind of the Congregational Committee. The original building which had been constructed in 1868 and extended both in 1877 and 1899, was found to be in need of thorough renovations. Over the years, the Committee had cared for the building and faithfully saw to the execution of necessary minor repairs, but the following extract from the report of the Presbytery's Property Inspector on the occasion of the otherwise favourable Presbytery Visitation of 1949, impelled consideration of plans for the future :

"There is possibly a great amount of sentiment about the church, and one is loath to alter more than is essential. We would however, consider, that to carry out the required renovations to put all back into a state of good repair, would involve considerable expense in the near future, which could run into several thousands of pounds, and at best would only be the repair of an old structure."

However, it would be some time before any practical consideration could be given to this observation, for the construction of the new manse, and Rev. Thomas McIlwrath Memorial Hall had yet to be realised. Within a short time of the latter's completion, Mr. Johnston brought the attention of Session and Committee to the question of a new building for worship, and after much discussion and thought over a period of time, a congregational meeting of 27th February, 1964, took place during the congregational social, when permission was given for the building of a new church. The financial responsibilities thus entailed, were placed before the congregation and a considerable amount of money was soon collected. Mr. Norman McMorran was appointed to organise the fund. At the time of writing, plans for the new building—which is of traditional design—are considerably advanced and already it has been agreed between Newtownards Borough Council and the congregational trustees that *“the portion of the land between the present church building on the one side and the car park and Memorial Hall and Mission Hall on the other side will be conveyed for a nominal consideration to the trustees of the church.”* Moreover, the congregation has agreed to sell numbers 51 to 59 Movilla Street to the Borough Council, which on their part is a useful acquisition of property not required by the congregation.

While the projected sanctuary will afford a worthy centre for the worship of Almighty God to the present and oncoming generations, the historic associations of the old building will provide the congregation with a reminder of past faithfulness, and a source of future inspiration in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, sole King and Head of His Church.

CONCLUSION

THE writing of a congregational history must of necessity, follow a selective principle. Consequently it is impossible to make personal reference to all who have served Jesus Christ with faithfulness in the various departments of the congregation, with regard to the work within its bounds, or its contribution of money and manpower to the service of the church at home and overseas. Greenwell Street has been fortunate in that it has been served over the years by devoted Clerks of Session, Congregational Secretaries, Treasurers, Sabbath School Superintendents, Sabbath School Teachers, Precentors, Sextons and various leaders of organisations. The records of the congregation testify to the fidelity of their service and serve as a reminder that a congregation does not only consist of Minister and Session. Rather, it includes a whole company of faithful people who count it but joy to give themselves to the work

of Christ and thus find fulfilment. It is inevitable that this congregation, which under the guidance of its various ministers, has been inspired to missionary endeavour, can recall to its credit a fine record of service by its sons and daughters in the home and foreign fields of the church of Jesus Christ. In addition to those already mentioned, it is appropriate that we note the names of Rev. C. McK. Eadie, B.A., previously a minister of the Irish Presbyterian Church and subsequently in the full-time service of the Canadian Church and the Rev. Kenneth Finlay, a minister of the Congregational Church in Ireland. Another member of the congregation, Mr. Robert Lockhart, B.A., at the time of writing, was a student for the Irish Presbyterian Ministry. Mr. David Wallace and Mr. James Clarke felt called to full time service with the Faith Mission. At the date of publication, Mr. Clarke was a student for the Christian ministry in Scotland.

With its fine suite of halls, the congregation enjoys a healthy organisational life including such activities as the recently formed Young Wives' Fellowship and the Men's Bowling Club and others like the Women's Meeting and Christian Endeavour, which have given useful service for many years. Some organisations, which catered for the various needs of the congregation in a former day, are no longer in existence. In this respect, mention may be made of the Boys' Club with its record of valuable work prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, during which it ceased to function. This and other such organisations will be remembered by the many friends of the congregation at home and abroad, for the useful purposes they have served.

The course of a century has passed since the formal organisation of the people of Greenwell Street as a congregation of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. As its record of witness is constantly in the making and as contemporary congregational events provide the material of history, the story must conclude on a note of incompleteness. Yet a survey of some of "the days of old and the years of ancient times" must never be an end in itself. Rather, let it give way to praise to the Almighty, whose people in this place have done great things under the guidance of faithful ministers to the advancement of His cause and the honour of His name.

If we agree with one historian that "history is the record of what one age finds worthy in another, "then let the prayer for the future ask that the present minister and congregation may, with the inspiration of the past, be led to attempt even greater things for the furtherance of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in their day and generation. Thus will a future age read of their attainments as worthy of the description of faithful Christian witness. History

beckons a look to the future, therefore, may the following be an expression of Greenwell Street's confidence in the Lord of history :

" Faith is the grasping of Almighty power
The hand of man laid on the arm of God,
The grand and blessed hour.
In which the things impossible to me,
Become the possible, O Lord, through Thee."

ADDENDUM

Names of Ministers, Assistant Ministers, Deaconesses and Students for the ministry are noted in the course of the narrative. Amongst others who have served the congregation in various offices, are:—

CLERKS OF KIRK SESSION

Rev. M. McAULEY	Mr. S. J. McDOWELL
Mr. W. H. WILLIS	Mr. S. E. WRIGHT
Rev. J. A. F. YOUNG, B.A.	Mr. J. C. TATE
Mr. T. J. McCREADY	Mr. F. CROMIE
Mr. W. SHAW	Mr. L. SCOTT, A.C.A.

CONGREGATIONAL SECRETARIES

Mr. T. WALLACE	Mr. G. R. WOODS, also convenor of
Mr. H. WHITE	New Church Building Fund.
Mr. W. H. WILLIS	Mr. L. SCOTT, A.C.A.
Mr. S. RUSSELL	Mr. J. FILSON, D.F.C.
Mr. W. J. WRIGHT	Mr. JAMES WRIGHT
Mr. J. W. RUSSELL, LL.B.	

PRECENTORS

Mr. I. SHAW	Mr. H. R. HILL
Mr. J. MAWHINNEY	Mr. R. MORRISON
Mr. W. MAWHINNEY	Mr. 'H. J. KELSO

CONGREGATIONAL TREASURERS

Mrs. E. McILWRATH	}	Both acted in a temporary capacity.
Miss R. J. A. McILWRATH	}	
Mr. J. MAGILTON		Mr. J. O. BAILIE
Mr. W. H. WILLIS		Mr. A. RUSSELL, B.A., F.A.I.
Mr. S. RUSSELL		Mr. G. L. STEWART
Mr. T. J. McCREADY		

CHURCH OFFICERS

Mr. R. RUSSELL	Mr. S. McBRATNEY
Mr. W. REID	
Mr. J. D. REID / Miss M. REID	Both acted in a joint capacity for a time.
Mr. D. McKITTERICK	
Mr. S. F. MONTGOMERY	
Mr. W. GIBSON / Mrs. W. GIBSON	Both acted in a joint capacity.

