

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND IMPORTANCE OF THE 1615 IRISH ARTICLES

The Westminster Assembly of 1643 was commissioned by an Act of the English Parliament. It was designed for the political and religious benefit of the entire British Isles. Representatives were invited also from Colonial America. Delegates attended even from France.

Westminster was by far the greatest Christian Council ever held. The second greatest and one which to some extent influenced Westminster was probably the 1618-19 Synod of Dort.

Just four years before Dort, the 1615 *Irish Articles* of the famous Puritan Anglican Archbishop James Ussher had appeared. These exerted an enormous influence on the Westminster Assembly. Because of this, as regards the *Westminster Standards* we should here first of all say something about the *Irish Articles* and then, also something about the Synod and *Decrees of Dort*.

Rev. Professor Dr. Adam Loughridge represents the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Ireland's Theological Hall in Belfast. He accurately writes [i] that it was only at the Synod of Cashel in A.D. 1171, that the (Proto Protestant Culdee) Church in Ireland long in existence certainly since the days of the great British Culdee St. Patrick (*circa* 390-460 A.D.) and perhaps even from apostolic times first came under the authority of Rome.

The period from 1200 to 1500, however, saw most of the Irish churches lose their independence and have their authority transferred to the Vatican. Yet the breach with Rome at the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century heralded the beginning of a return to the Pre Cashel Culdee character of the Ancient Irish Church.

Indeed, it was right after the arrival of the Protestant Reformation in Ireland in 1537, that the last great Irish Culdee Convention took place in Armagh, in 1541. Thus, it was almost as if the very Ancient Irish Culdee Church bravely struggled on, right through and beyond the Late Middle Ages and then gladly handed over all its inheritance to Protestantism as its faithful descendant and youthful heir. For the very next year, 1542, the first presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland was established

Already in 1566, the Protestant Episcopal Church of Ireland had drawn up its *Twelve Articles*. Then, after the founding of Dublin University by her pious bishops in 1591, the Protestant Irish Church convoked a Synod in 1613.

Moved by an independent spirit, it there resolved to draw up a set of *Irish Articles* reflecting its own particular beliefs. By 1615, it had drawn up the new

articles largely under the leadership of the godly Puritan Archbishop, Rev. Dr. James Ussher. Significantly, they were approved in the name of King James by the Viceroy of Ireland himself.

Those *Irish Articles* were strongly Calvinistic. One hundred and four in number, they reflected Ussher's Calvinism and the spirit of Puritanism which then prevailed at Trinity College in Dublin. They also had a Presbyterian flavour. For they made no reference to the prelatical orders of bishop, priest and deacon.

The English Elizabethan *Articles of Religion* of the Anglican Church too, as far as they went, were by no means unappreciated by the rather more thoroughgoing Protestants of Ireland. However, as the great Swiss American Reformed Church History Professor Rev. Dr. Philip Schaff so rightly observed,^[ii] they did not fully satisfy the rigorous Calvinism which for a period came to establish itself in Ireland even more intensively than in England.

Such should be seen as essentially the re establishment of the Pre Romish Ancient Irish Church of the Proto Protestant Culdees. Indeed, both Schaff^[iii] and Warfield^[iv] rightly claimed that even the 1643f English *Westminster Confession of Faith* itself was influenced chiefly by the 1615 *Irish Articles*.

THE IRISH PURITAN ARCHBISHOP USSHER ON APOSTOLIC AGE BRITISH CHRISTIANITY

Now Dr. James Ussher was born in Dublin in 1581, and raised in a Bible believing Calvinistic environment. He soaked himself in the Holy Scriptures without ceasing. He also read the Early Church Fathers systematically, every day, for eighteen years. After becoming Professor of Divinity at Dublin's Trinity College in 1607, he wrote the *Irish Articles* during the next decade.

Head of Ireland's foremost Theological Faculty, Ussher was internationally the greatest Anglican antiquarian and theologian of his age if not of all time. He himself was and is the vital link between Proto Puritan Culdees, Puritan Anglicans, Puritan Erastians, Puritan Nonconformists, and Puritan Presbyterians. Indeed, though himself always a Royalist, after his death in 1656 Ussher was buried in Westminster Abbey by order of the Commonwealth's Protector — Oliver Cromwell himself 5

Ussher was very emphatic that Christianity had first reached the British Isles not *via* Rome but directly from Palestine. He put the arrival date, shortly after Calvary, at around A.D. 35f and not at all at around A.D. 596f (and from the Romish Vatican). See Ussher's 1631 *Discourse of the Religion Anciently Professed by the Irish and British* and his 1639 *Antiquities of the British Churches*.

Especially the latter is highly impressive. The *Schaff Herzog Encyclopaedia*⁶ rightly describes it as a work of twenty years' labour, great research, and critical penetration.

Ussher was a pioneer in the historiography of the Early Church. He set out to prove that the Ancient Church in the British Isles was independent of the Roman Church and its later unscriptural traditions. Ussher's various views themselves derived from the remnants of Irish Culdeeism or Proto Protestantism readily found themselves into the later *Westminster Standards* based upon his own *Irish Articles*.[\[v\]](#)

Ussher was a latter day Patrick geographically in reverse! Appointed Archbishop of Patrick's old citadel of Gaelic Culdee Armagh, and Primate of Ireland in 1624, Ussher moved from Ireland to Britain in 1640. There, he became Bishop of Carlisle in Patrick's native Cumbria where he doubtless absorbed some of its ancient Brythonic Culdee heritage. His *Complete Works* run into sixteen volumes. They include his posthumously published work *The Power communicated by God to the Prince and the Obedience required by the Subject*.

There is a nexus between the pre papal Early Irish and Early Brythonic Culdee Christians and the later post reformational Protestant Puritan Presbyterians. This is affirmed even by O'Driscoll, the noteworthy Roman Catholic historian. See his *Views of Ireland* [\[vi\]](#) and *History of Ireland*.[\[vii\]](#)

Irish historian Isabel Hill Elder declares¹⁰ that O'Driscoll presents a true picture of the Early Irish Church when he says: "The Christian Church of that country as founded by [the A.D 400f Culdee or Proto Protestant Briton] St. Patrick, existed for many centuries free and unshackled. For about 700 years [thus till after A.D. 1100], this Church maintained its independence...from Rome..."

"The ancient order of the Culdees existed in Ireland [even] previous to St. Patrick... All their institutions proved that they were derived from a different origin than that of Rome... The church discipline of the Culdees...afforded the model for the modern Presbyterian establishment of Scotland." Thus the Romanist O'Driscoll.

For himself, the Irishman Ussher was convinced that "the National Church was founded in A.D. 36, a hundred and sixty years before Rome ever thought about Christianity." He presents evidence that the apostle James preached in Britain as early as A.D. 41; and perhaps even earlier in Ireland. Ussher also states that Joseph of Arimathea himself evangelized at Glastonbury in Somerset on the border between the later England and Wales.

THE DECALOGICAL AND POLITICAL CONTENTS OF THE 1615 IRISH ARTICLES

The 1615 *Irish Articles* are very important also in the development of British Common Law. They were adopted by the archbishops, bishops and the convocation of the Irish Episcopal Church. They were approved by the Irish Viceroy, representing King James of English and Welsh Britain, France, Ireland and Scotland. That occurred fully four years before the Synod of Dort.

The *Irish Articles* form the basis of the later *Westminster Confession* itself. Indeed, the amazing agreement between those two documents, is strikingly undeniable.[\[viii\]](#)

“Of the creation and government of all things,” state Ussher’s *Irish Articles*:¹² “Man being at the beginning created according to the image of God (which consisted especially in the wisdom of his mind and the true holiness of his free will), had the covenant of the law ingrafted in his heart. Thereby God did promise unto him everlasting life upon condition that he performed entire and perfect obedience unto His Commandments, according to that measure of strength wherewith he was endued in his creation and threatened death unto him if he did not perform the same.”

Elsewhere, “the civil magistrate” is dealt with. There, the *Irish Articles* declare:¹³ “The king’s majesty under God hath the sovereign and chief power within his realms and dominions over all manner of persons of what estate, either ecclesiastical or civil, soever they be... No other foreign power hath, or ought to have, any superiority over them.

“We do profess that the supreme government of all estates within the said realms and dominions doth of right appertain to the king’s highness. Neither do we give unto him the administration of the Word and Sacraments, or the power of the keys, but that prerogative only which we see to have been always given unto all godly princes in Holy Scripture God Himself; that is, that he should contain all estates and degrees committed to his charge by God...and restrain the stubborn and evil doers with the power of the civil sword.

“The pope, neither of himself nor by any authority of the Church or See of Rome, or by any other means with any other, hath any power or authority to depose the king or dispose [of] any of his kingdoms or dominions; or to authorize any other prince to invade or annoy him or his countries; or to discharge any of his subjects of their allegiance and obedience to his Majesty; or to give license or leave to any of them to bear arms, raise tumult, or to offer any violence or hurt to his royal person, state, or government, or to any of his subjects within his Majesty’s dominions.

“That princes which be excommunicated or deprived by the pope may be deposed or murdered by their subjects, or any other whatsoever, is impious doctrine. The laws of the realm may punish Christian men with death for heinous and grievous offences. It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandments of the magistrate, to bear arms and to serve in just wars.”

Further: “Of our duty towards our neighbours,” the *Irish Articles* insist¹⁴ that we are “to love them as ourselves, and to do to all men as we would they should do to us; to honour and obey our superiors; to preserve the safety of men’s persons, as also their chastity, goods, and good names;

“Of the authority of the...Bishop of Rome,” the *Irish Articles* insist¹⁵ that “the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in those things which concern matter of practice and point of ceremonies, but also in matters of faith. The power which the Bishop of Rome now challengeth [or claims] to be supreme head of the universal Church of Christ, and to be above all emperors, kings and princes, is a usurped power contrary to the Scriptures and Word of God and contrary to the example of the Primitive Church; and therefore is for most just causes taken away and abolished within the king’s Majesty’s realms and dominions.

“The Bishop of Rome is so far from being the supreme head of the universal Church of Christ, that his works and doctrine do plainly discover him to be that man of sin foretold in the Holy Scriptures whom the Lord shall consume with the Spirit of His Mouth.” Second Thessalonians 2:3 8.

“Of the state of the Old and New Testament,” the *Irish Articles* explain [ix] that “although the Law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites be abolished, and the civil precepts thereof be not of necessity to be received in any commonwealth yet, notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is freed from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.”

Ussher’s *Irish Articles* are strongly Calvinistic, and reflect the Puritanism then prevalent in Trinity College Dublin. They are presbyterian rather than prelatical, and are very strong on predestination in general and also on reprobation.

THE INFLUENCE OF ARCHBISHOP USSHER’S 1615 IRISH ARTICLES ON WESTMINSTER

The *Schaff Herzog Encyclopaedia* declared [x] that the 104 articles of the Irish Church, with their strong Calvinism, were passed by a Synod held in Dublin in 1615. As a very godly Puritan, the Anglican Archbishop Ussher was later invited to be a delegate at the Westminster Assembly itself. Indeed, it is precisely his *Irish Articles* of 1615 that form the basis of the *Westminster Confession*. Rev. Professor

Dr. Schaff describes¹⁸ the *Irish Articles* as a clear and succinct system of divinity in full harmony with Calvinism. They teach absolute predestination and perseverance; denounce the pope as Antichrist; and inculcate the Puritan view of the Sabbath.

In all these particulars, they were preparing the way for the doctrinal standards of the Westminster Assembly. They were the chief basis of the *Westminster Confession* as is evident from the latter's general order, the headings of chapters and subdivisions, and the almost literal agreement of language in the statement of several of the most important doctrines.

Dr. Warfield, was a famous Professor at Princeton University's Presbyterian Theological Seminary in the U.S.A. In his famous book *The Westminster Assembly and its Work*, he shows^[xi] that in the *Westminster Confession* all but a trace of the derived matter is taken from the *Irish Articles*.

The main source of the *Confession*, as the very learned Dr. A.F. Mitchell in his 1884 book *The Westminster Assembly* has shown, was those *Irish Articles*. No doubt can exist as to this fact. The Westminster divines made use of the *Irish Articles* both in determining the general outline of the *Confession* and, in places, even its more detailed phraseology.

As Rev. Professor Dr. John Richard De Witt has stated^[xii] in his doctoral dissertation on the Westminster Assembly, the large majority of actively religious people in the seventeenth century country of Great Britain, were thoroughly committed to the Reformed Faith. They were Puritans. James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh and Bishop of Carlisle [in Cumbria], was Primate of Ireland and a man who enjoyed a reputation for great erudition and sanctity. His *Irish Articles* exercised a considerable influence upon the preparation of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

ENDNOTES

[i] A. Loughbridge: *Culdees* (in ed. Douglas's *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1974, pp. 516f).

[ii] *Creeds of Christendom*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1983 rep., I pp. 662f. 3) *Ib.*, III p. 526.

[iii] See art. *Ussher*, in Schaff Herzog's *Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*, Funk & Wagnalls, New York, 1883, IV:2437f.

[iv] B.B. Warfield: *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, Mack, Cherry Hill N.J., 1972 ed., pp. 176f. 5) *Id.*

[v] See Warfield's *Westminster Assembly*, p. 77 n. 6f, and pp. 148, 169 & 175f. Cf. too J.R. De Witt's *Jus Divinum: the Westminster Assembly and the Divine Right of Church Government*, Kok, Kampen, 1969, pp. 22 24.

[vi] R.C. O'Driscoll: *Views of Ireland*, II, p. 84. 9) R.C. O'Driscoll: *History of Ireland*, pp. 26f.

[vii] I. Elder: *Celt, Druid and Culdee*, Covenant, London, 1986 ed., pp. 135 & 133f.

[viii] See Schaff's *Creeds*, III p. 526. 12) Art. 21. 3) Arts. 57f. 4) Arts. 63f. 15) Arts. 78f.

[ix] Art. 84.

[x] Art. *Ussher*, in Schaff Herzog's *Enc. Relig. Knowl.*, IV:2437f. 18) *Creeds of Chr.*, I:664f.

[xi] See B.B. Warfield: *Westm. Ass. And its Work*, pp. 148, 169, 175.

[xii] De Witt's *Jus Divinum*, pp. 22 24.