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INTRODUCTION

J.B. ARMOUR PAPERS

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J.B. Armour Papers (D1792)

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Summary

c.1300 documents, photographs, postcards and newspaper cuttings, 1859-1930, comprising the records of the late Rev. J.B. Armour, Presbyterian Minister and Home Ruler, Ballymoney, Co. Antrim, 1841-1928.

James Brown Armour was born into a Presbyterian farming family of Scottish ancestry in Lisboy, near Ballymoney, in January, 1841. He was educated in the early 1860s at both Queen's College, Belfast and Queen's College, Cork graduating eventually from the former in 1866 with a Master's degree in classics. He then trained to become a Presbyterian Minister at the Assembly College in Belfast and was called to Trinity Presbyterian Church, Ballymoney in July, 1869, a position he held until his retirement in September, 1925.



Home Rule

He is best remembered for the significant role he played in Ulster politics at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Professor F.S.L. Lyons, in 'Ireland since the Famine', cited Armour as 'the famous Presbyterian minister' who was 'a notable example' of those Protestants who took the Home Rule side. Yet, until the 1890s Armour was somewhat lukewarm on the issue having opposed the 1886 Home Rule Bill because it excluded Irish members from Westminster. Indeed, it was not until the 1892 election campaign that he abandoned his Liberal Unionist position and at a special meeting of the Presbyterian General Assembly in Belfast on 15 March, 1893 emerged on to the Ulster political stage as a major figure when he proposed an amendment to the official resolutions and came to be regarded as a leading Protestant champion of Home Rule. After 1896, however, he entered a political wasteland and remained largely inactive until the Home Rule crisis began to unfold after 1910. In 1912, he wrote essays and spoke out in favour of Home Rule as a force for reconciliation, undoing 'the evils of the paper union of 1800.' The outbreak of war in 1914 and its effects on the Irish situation confirmed his political retirement but up to this point he remained active in helping to push for an Irish settlement.



Education

Another significant part of Armour's life was devoted to the cause of education. In 1878, he was appointed principal, and for some years sole teacher, of Ballymoney Intermediate School. For several decades, he played an active role in the educational debates of the Presbyterian General Assembly and took a particular interest in the Irish university question. He supported the establishment of the new Queen's University of Belfast in 1908 despite general opposition from the Assembly and was cast in the role of championing Roman Catholic interests. From 1910 to 1914 he served in the Senate of the new university playing an active role on a wide range of policy matters such as matriculation standards and actively publicising the university which he saw as being threatened by the announcement in 1909 of the forging of a link between Magee College, Londonderry, and Trinity College, Dublin.



The Papers

Armour's clerical background and his prominent role in politics and education render his papers a rich source for students of Irish history for this period. On church matters, the collection contains the texts of his sermons which often reflect his hostility towards Anglicanism and its role and doctrines which he saw as part of the Tory/landlord ascendancy. There are letters to his friend John Megaw, Ballymoney, 1859-1863, in which he discusses religious issues such as the Great Revival of 1859, about which he expressed grave doubts because of some of its bizarre excesses. His leading part in the religious debates of the Presbyterian General Assembly over the decades is also documented in detail.



Political correspondence

Politically, the collection contains over 100 letters to Rev. Armour, 31 of which are from Ulster Protestant Home Rulers supporting his stance in favour of Gladstone's 2nd Home Rule Bill, 1893. Mention should be made of a letter from Gladstone himself, 12 August 1893, in which he acknowledges with pleasure the receipt of the Presbyterian Home Rule memorial and commenting on its significance. There is another group of 26 letters, 1878-1928, from Sir John B. Dougherty, Professor at Magee University College, Londonderry, and Liberal MP for Londonderry City during the First World War and Under Secretary for Ireland in the Asquith Administration. These cover a number of subjects including UVF gun-running, the political situation in Britain and the Irish Convention. However, it is Armour's own voluminous letters to his sons, particularly during the Ulster crisis, c.1912-1922, which make up the great bulk of the political papers. Something of the range of comment and fervour of these letters can be seen in the account of a meeting of Protestant Home Rulers in Ballmoney in October, 1913, when Roger Casement was one of the speakers and declarations were made against 'the lawless policy of Carson's.'



Correspondence about education

Armour's lifelong work and involvement in the field of education is also well-represented in the content of the archive. There is much correspondence about subjects such as: intermediate education in the 1880s and Armour's vigorous support for it in the educational debates of the General Assembly; the university question after 1900 and, in particular, the Irish Universities Bill of 1908 which he favoured because he believed it would satisfy the grievances of the majority, while maintaining the principle of religious equality; scholastic philosophy, matriculation standards, etc, which he was heavily involved with as a member of the Senate of Queen's University between 1910 and 1914.

