



**Public Record Office  
of Northern Ireland**

# **INTRODUCTION**

# **CONGREGATIONAL UNION OF IRELAND**

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# Congregational Union of Ireland (CR/7/1)

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## Introduction

The records of the Congregational Union of Ireland comprise 11 volumes and a small number of miscellaneous documents, dated 1829-1993. The archive overlaps to a considerable extent with the records of the [Irish Evangelical Society \(CR/7/2\)](#). The bulk of the Congregational Union of Ireland archive consists of 8 minute books of the committee of the Union which chart its inception and development during the nineteenth century.



## **Brief history of Congregationalism**

Congregationalists, or Independents as they were originally known, emerged during the English Civil War. They believed in liberty of conscience and the independence of each congregation. They first appeared in Ireland during Lisle's short lord lieutenancy in 1646-7, and returned in force with Oliver Cromwell. They survived after the restoration as a minor dissenting sect. In 1695 there were reported to be six Independent congregations in Ireland. They remained as a relatively small body until the nineteenth century during which period they enjoyed a revival. The census reveals that they grew from 162 adherents in 1861 to more than 10,000 by 1901.



## **Congregational records and the Congregational Union**

The earliest sets of Congregational records in PRONI include: Limerick, 1817-72, D/814; York Street, Dublin, 1803-1952, CR/7/3; and Carrickfergus, 1816-1969, CR/7/8. The Congregational Union of Ireland was formed in 1829, two years before its English counterpart. The records of the Congregational Union of Ireland begin in 1829 with the initial minute book describing the founding rules and regulations of the organisation in Belfast. The minutes chart the period from 1829 to 1843 and then run largely uninterrupted from 1889 to 1935. Malcolm Coles in his short history of the Union stated that the minutes were complete from 1829 to 1979 with the exception of the period 1848-60 and 1936-53. The gaps were the result of the union being defunct during the first period and that material was either destroyed or lost during WW2. The post-1953 minute books are still in the possession of the Union. However, it is unclear what has happened to the minutes from 1860 to 1888.



## Minute books of the Union

The early minutes provide an insight into the activities of the Congregational Union and its attempts to consolidate its position. The initial meetings were held at the Independent Chapel in Donegall Street in Belfast on 25th and 26th November 1829. At first some of the denominations leading ministers stood aside from the Union including Dr Urwick of York Street, Dublin, and Dr Townley of Limerick. However, by 1833 they had also been received into the organisation. The volumes give details of the progress of the various churches and mission stations under the auspices of the Union. Moreover, as much of the business of the Union was concerned with ministerial appointments it is possible to build up a picture of the men who were serving in the church during this period. The minutes reveal albeit to a much more limited extent than those of the Irish Evangelical Society (See **CR/7/2**) the strains in the relationship with the Congregational Union of England and Wales. Indeed the problems usually stemmed from concerns over who controlled the work of the Irish Evangelical Society. Thus in 1840 when the running of the Society was subsumed by the Congregational Union of England and Wales the difficulties were intensified. During the following year representatives of the two Unions met in Liverpool and an amicable agreement was eventually reached. The participants included the Rev. Dr Ralph Wardlaw, a leading Scottish Congregational divine.

Of particular interest for illustrating the wider attitudes of the Union is a copy of a letter transcribed in the minutes to the Congregational Union of Canada East in which they describe the struggle of not only confronting the challenge of Catholicism but also of the established Church of Ireland.

*... Our beloved Isle as you justly remark has been long darkened and degraded by the superstitious oppressions of a despotic priesthood ... But this is not the only antagonist we have to grapple with. The so called Protestant Establishment of our country is much opposed to our endeavours ...* dated 13 June 1843. (CR/7/1/A/1/2)

As already stated the Congregational Union of Ireland dissolved in 1848, and was reformed in 1860. However, the minutes held in PRONI do not begin again until 1889. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the volumes mainly concentrate on the internal business of the Union, especially the planning of the annual conference. However, other important topics of interest include: resolutions against home rule in 1893; and contributions concerning higher education, dated 1902 and 1907. It was during this period that much of the associated denominational apparatus appeared. The denominational magazine, *The Irish Congregational Magazine* was first issued in 1862, the Ministers' Provident Fund was established in 1867 (See CR/7/2/D), and publication of the *Irish Congregational Yearbook* commenced in 1878.



## **Irish Congregational Young People's Union and other related bodies**

The Congregational Union archive also contains a minute book of the Young People's Union highlighting the activities of the youth wing of the church from 1962 to 1986. The remaining denominational material such as the minute book of the Irish Congregational Home Mission and the minutes of the Western Congregational Association can be located in CR/7/2.

A short history of the Congregational Union of Ireland was produced in 1979 by Malcolm Coles entitled *I will build my Church: The Story of the Congregational Union of Ireland* which utilised some of the information available in the archive. The records of the Congregational Union of Ireland are an excellent source for studying the growth and development of the denomination. Moreover, they also provide details about the individual churches which comprised the union at different times throughout the period and the clergy who served in them. Thus they are not only of interest to the local historian but should also appeal to the academic.

