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INTRODUCTION

IRISH EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

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Irish Evangelical Society (CR/7/2)

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Introduction

The records of the Irish Evangelical Society and other Congregational bodies comprise 33 volumes and a small number of related correspondence, dated 1814-1951. The bulk of the archive, however, pertains to the Irish Evangelical Society and its successor the Irish Evangelical Society and Congregational Home Mission. It also closely links in with the archive of the [Congregational Union of Ireland \(CR/7/1\)](#).



Formation of the Irish Evangelical Society

During the immediate post-rebellion and post-union era it became clear that Ireland was a prime location for evangelical missionary endeavours. As a result numerous organisations were formed in England to commence work in Ireland. The Hibernian Bible Society and the Hibernian Sunday School Society were the largest and most influential of Ireland's Protestant religious agencies, but there were many others, including the London Hibernian Society (1806), the Baptist Society for Ireland (1814) and the Irish branch of the Religious Tract and Book Society (1816). The London Hibernian Society was founded with three related aims: the establishment of schools; distribution of tracts; and the ministry of the gospel. However, in 1814 it was decided that the society should concentrate on its educational mission. As a result the Irish Evangelical Society was formed.

The Society was managed by two committees in Dublin and London respectively. Although undenominational its founding members and chief supporters were principally Congregationalists. The work was met with success and many preaching stations were established and chapels built such as those at Bray, Carrickfergus, Londonderry, Newry, Wexford, Wicklow, and Youghal. The churches although obviously independent by principle were heavily reliant upon the Irish Evangelical Society for financial support. In 1829 the London committee which had gradually assumed increasing control decided to close their theological academy in Dublin and dismiss the Dublin committee of the Society.

This action resulted in the formation of the Congregational Union of Ireland within a few months (See **CR/7/1**). In 1840 the Irish Evangelical Society came under the direct control of the Congregational Union of England and Wales. This resulted in tensions with the Congregational Union of Ireland which were successfully resolved for a short period. Nevertheless, the I.E.S. remained inextricably linked with the Congregational Union of England and Wales until the late 1850s. During 1857-58 the direct connection between the Society and the Union was severed. Prior to this Irish Congregationalists had formed their own separate missionary organisation in 1853 known as the Irish Congregational Home Mission (See **CR/7/2/B**). In 1861 the Irish Evangelical Society and the Irish Congregational Home Mission merged to form the Irish Evangelical Society and Congregational Home Mission. The organisation was administered once again by two bodies: a committee in London and a committee of the Congregational Union of Ireland respectively. In 1899 the joint Society was transferred to the complete control of the Congregational Union of Ireland.



Minute books of the Irish Evangelical Society

The minute books of the Irish Evangelical Society have been sub-divided into five categories. The principal series relate to the London committee of the Society and covers the period, 1814-31 and 1861-99. The final volume in the series dates from 1902-04, by which period the organisation was directly controlled by a committee of the Congregational Union of Ireland. The gap in the sequence from 1832 to 1860 can be partly attributed to the Society being subsumed into the Congregational Union of England and Wales from 1840 to 1858. It is more difficult to account for the remaining years. Nevertheless, the surviving minutes still provide an invaluable record of the organisation during the nineteenth century.

The first minute book describes the inception of the Society in London, on 14 May 1814:

At a meeting composed of persons of various religious denominations held at the New London Tavern, Cheapside...the Rev. Matthew Wilks stated the object of the meeting and the occasion that had given rise to the present assemblage of the friends of Ireland and religion...

- 1. That this meeting attached to Ireland by every natural, moral, and religious affection, is anxious that that interesting and prosperous part of the British Empire should participate with the Christians of England, in all their religious privileges.*
- 2. That it will therefore most cheerfully unite in the formation of a Society to assist the friends of the Gospel in Ireland, in their endeavours ...*
- 3. That the Society be denominated the "Irish Evangelical Society" ...*

The early minutes describe the work of the Society in Ireland detailing the efforts of itinerant preachers, the establishment of a theological academy in Dublin and the use of Irish as a vehicle for evangelism. The minutes also contain reports of deputations sent by the Committee to survey the work being carried out in the various parts of Ireland. The reports are important for revealing the attitudes of the committee members to the work being conducted by the Society. The following quotations are taken from reports in 1829 and 1830 respectively.

...as our time would not allow us to travel thro' the whole of Ireland, we thought it of greatest importance to visit the West, and the Southern parts of the Island, as these possess far inferior means of mental and moral culture to the North ... Mr Carlisle and his friends also suggested the importance of trying at least for a time a public service on the Lords Day afternoon (when the Churches and chapels are closed) in the Irish language in Sligo. Watched as the poor Catholics are in all the large towns, by their vigilant priests, it may be doubted whether the Catholics will attend ...

The moment we put our feet on the shore of poor Ireland we were met by the most disgusting evidence of the pauperism and the superstition of its population, as our alms were solicited with those obtestations which at once betrayed the baneful tenets of the religion its inhabitants profess ...

The minutes stop in 1831 and do not resume until 1861 prior to the merger of the Irish Evangelical Society with the Irish Congregational Home Mission. The union of the two bodies is covered in considerable detail in the minutes of the Society and the Home Mission respectively (See CR/7/2B/1). The minutes also record the work in localities throughout Ireland such as Coleraine, Belfast and Lisburn. The minutes covering the last decade of the nineteenth century chart the increased tensions between the London and Irish committees culminating in the transfer of management to a committee appointed by the Congregational Union of Ireland.

The remaining minute books pertaining to the Irish Evangelical Society reflect the changing management of the organisation. Perhaps the most significant of these is a volume containing minutes of the Belfast based committee of the Irish Evangelical Society and Congregational Home Mission dating from 1884 to 1896. This minute book includes a statistical summary of the churches under the jurisdiction of the society.



Financial records of the Irish Evangelical Society

The financial records of the Irish Evangelical Society form a significant component of the archive. The most complete is a set of cash books which run from 1841-47:1861-99. There are also receipt ledgers, 1835-41: 1858-71, an agents ledger, 1869-81; and a general ledger, 1865-91. Finance was a regular topic in the minute books particularly the disparity in the levels of fund raising between England and Ireland. The minutes of 1823 record:

Resolved that the Dublin Committee be authorised to draw on the treasurer for £300...but that they be distinctly informed that the committee consider the vote unduly large ,... and do hope that by their unwearied and well conducted efforts, the resources of Ireland will be increasingly drawn forth for her own evangelization.'

The work of the Irish Evangelical Society was heavily subsidised by English supporters and this often put a strain on relationships between England and Ireland.



Prominent members of the Irish Evangelical Society, etc.

The minute books of the Irish Evangelical Society are filled with the names of the leading English and Irish Congregationalists, both clergy and laymen of the period. The records also refer to many other prominent supporters of the evangelistic work being carried out in Ireland. The following selection of individuals mainly comprise members who served on the committees of the Society and who are noted in the Dictionary of National Biography:

Rev. Dr W.L. Alexander, Rev. T.W. Aveling, W.E. Baxter MP, Rev. H.F. Burder, Rev. R. Cope, Rev. C.N. Hall, Samuel Morley MP, Rev. J.L. Porter, Sir C. Reed MP, and the Rev. Dr W. Urwick, etc.



Minute books of the Irish Congregational Home Mission

The principal minute book of the mission charts the organisation from its inception in 1853 to eventual merger with the Irish Evangelical Society in 1861. It is useful in that it covers the period during which the Congregational Union of Ireland had fallen into abeyance. The volume reveals details of the co-operation between Congregational churches and clergy in Ireland as they endeavoured to be active in the field of evangelism.



Minute book of the Western Congregational Association

Shortly after the formation of the Congregational Union of Ireland it was decided to establish various regional organisations. The minute book of the Western Congregational Association is the only surviving record of this development present in the archive. It provides a detailed journal on Congregationalism in the areas of Donegal, Sligo and Londonderry from 1835-40. The volume was later re-used as a note book for recording sermon and lecture notes by the Sligo minister, the Rev. Noble Shepperd. The sermons are often topical on subjects such as a local murder, the famine in Ireland, and the 1848 revolutions.

The records of the Irish Evangelical Society and other associated Congregational bodies provide an invaluable account of evangelicalism during the nineteenth century. They reveal fascinating details about Congregationalism at both a local and national level. As a result they are a key source for those interested in local history or broader themes such as religion and society.

