

The Rev. William Colquhoun B.A.

(1893 – 1921)



Faith in dark times

The first thing that strikes you when you explore the life and ministry of Fitzroy's third minister, the Rev. William Colquhoun, is the contrast in personality and vision between him and the first minister, The Rev. Dr. John Edgar.

John Edgar was called as minister in 1820 aged of 22; William Colquhoun arrived in Fitzroy aged 42. John Edgar was community-orientated: he travelled to England and Scotland to raise money to build our first Church; he launched the Temperance Movement against the misery-creating whiskey trade; he mobilised Christians to tackle the exploitation of young women in Belfast's brutal sex industry and established a refuge and recovery centre for them in Brunswick Street; he raised £16,000 for famine relief in Connaught and set up over 100 Irish-speaking Industrial Schools in counties Mayo and Sligo to equip young people with job skills.

William Colquhoun, in contrast, *"took little part in public life"*¹. In his first speech on 28 February 1893 he outlined his approach to ministry:

*"I have no great programme to put before you for revolutionizing the city or setting fire to Assembly's College across the way, for I have seen enough of life to learn the limitations of human power. I intend to work among you in a quiet, common-sense way."*²

For John Edgar, Alfred Place was his first Church; for William Colquhoun, Fitzroy was his third. He arrived in Fitzroy as a well-seasoned servant of Christ. He grew up in a farming community in East Donegal where his parents were connected with Donaghmore Presbyterian Church. He took on his first charge in 1881 when he was ordained in First Ahoghill. When ordained in Ahoghill, the Rev. Colquhoun heard about a farmer who was not in favour of the appointment. He sought out the farmer and asked why he opposed his appointment. The farmer declared bluntly, *"To tell you the truth, I was not in favour of you coming to our Church. I don't think that you can preach."* In reply Colquhoun said, *"I agree with you entirely, but these other people think that I can, so why should you and I hold out against them?"* That man went on to become a most loyal friend to William Colquhoun.³

During his five years of ministry he pastored up to 175 members who had come to know Christ in a deeper way through the 1859 Revival. It had broken out in his congregation 20 years earlier. He was disappointed by the fact that three-quarters of the 750 who claimed to have been 'awakened' had either 'cooled off' or 'jumped ship' from First Ahoghill to join local Brethren and Baptist churches.⁴ One imagines that his direct experience of the results of the revival would have led him to value the flame of faith burning in people over a lifetime.

¹ Obituary, General Assembly Minutes, 1934

² R. E. Alexander, "Fitzroy, Past and Present" (1949), p. 23

³ Fitzroy Courier, April 1974

⁴ Dr. Joe Thompson, conversation 27 Oct 2007



Rev. William Colquhoun



First Omagh Presbyterian Church : 1886 – 1893



In 1886 William Colquhoun moved from Ahoghill to First Omagh and served there for seven years until 1893. A major issue, which occupied much of his time, was the drawing up of plans to rebuild the church. It took a long time to achieve the dream of the congregation, but when the new building was opened in May 1897, he was invited back to preach, a mark of the congregation's appreciation of the leadership he had given. Strong bonds of affection and respect between William Colquhoun and First Omagh were forged

during those seven years. His ministry among them was never forgotten. When he died 40 years later, First Omagh invited his son, Dr. William Colquhoun of Dunmurry, to dedicate a Communion Table and Chair in his memory and the wording on the plaque captures the impact of his ministry in Omagh:

“This Communion Table and Chair were presented to the congregation in 1936 by those members who have still a fragrant memory of his ministry.”

Fitzroy Avenue Presbyterian Church : 1893 – 1922



In February 1893 William Colquhoun was installed in Fitzroy. In his first speech he explained, in well-crafted and precise Victorian English, that he came with **“the most pacific of purposes”**. Those who got to know him best in Fitzroy often commented on the deep sense of peace that he carried into daily life. He was not fully aware of it himself, but it conveyed calmness to those around him. This aspect of his character was going to be needed for the whole country was moving towards one of the darkest times in our history.

What did the leadership of William Colquhoun bring to our Church ?



Fitzroy embraced significant change



The atmosphere within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland generated over 30 years by the introduction of the organ and new hymns was bitter in the extreme. It has been aptly called 'The Organ Wars'. Those who have watched the remarkable transformation of Presbyterian worship styles since the 1970s and been part of heated discussions within congregations can glimpse a little of the emotions aroused by change in patterns of worship.

In 1861, a harmonium was introduced into Enniskillen Presbyterian Church. It was a keyboard in which air from pedal-operated bellows caused the reeds to vibrate with sound. Slowly other congregations realised how the organ could enliven the worship, improve the quality of praise and appeal to the younger generation. It touched the spirit in ways that traditional unaccompanied singing did not. Others felt that something sacred was being lost with these innovations and fierce opposition erupted in Presbytery, Synod and the General Assembly.

When the issue was debated at the Assembly in 1868 the house was divided. Dr. Henry Cooke argued that organs were alien to true Presbyterian worship whilst others argued that there was nothing in the laws of the Church to prohibit them. The battle raged between those who espoused 'the traditions of the past' and those who 'wanted the freedom to embrace changes in worship'. For thirty years hostile pamphlets flew to and fro, angry letters were written to the Press, and some ministers who espoused the changes were labelled 'apostate'. In 1873 the General Assembly banned organs, but they still kept being installed. A 'Purity Party' emerged to stamp out this pollution of organs, the growth of stained glass windows and the building of spires. (A student in Assembly's College, looking out his window as Fitzroy's huge spire was being erected in 1873, sighed in despair at what was happening to his beloved Presbyterian Church in Ireland).

In 1888, 200 ministers threatened to leave the Church if the innovations were not stopped and a 'five year truce' was agreed to. In 1891, the issue was raised again, but the General Assembly decided to '**pass from the question**'. As emotions slowly calmed, the trend towards introducing organs steadily increased until it became the norm.



In **1906** Fitzroy got its organ at the cost of £1,200 – it was made by Norman & Beard Ltd. and played by Alfred Hollins (*left* of Free St. George's Church in Edinburgh) at the inaugural service. In the hands of the first organist, Mr F J Moffett, it quickly won over the hearts of the people. At the Annual General Meeting of 1907 it was noted:

"The organ has been in use for the past few months and its sweetness, variety and power have been enjoyed by the entire congregation".



Rev. William Colquhoun



Fitzroy was not at the cutting edge of innovation; others did the heavy lifting. But it is clear that with common sense and patience William Colquhoun had cultivated a congregation that was open to embracing change.

Fitzroy experienced steady growth



The Kirk Session of Fitzroy in 1913

Front row: Hugh Aikin, Thomas McBride (Clerk of Session), Rev. William Colquhoun, John Workman, J.P., John Megaw

Back row: Andrew Campbell, John Campbell, Marcus Mitchell, Robert Crawford, Edward Bennett, William Wright

When the Rev. George Shaw retired in 1892 there were 205 families associated with the church, but when William Colquhoun retired 28 years later the number of families had doubled and there were over 500 communicants. His ministry was marked by steady growth in the numbers of people attracted to the life of the congregation. A mature, united and active Kirk Session provided wise leadership. To meet the increasing opportunities for service, a strong sense of team spirit was nurtured among the members.

Many volunteered their services generously at every level. They needed to, for Fitzroy was bursting at the seams with children from a neighbourhood of large, young families. When William Colquhoun arrived in Fitzroy, he stepped into a church with 3 Sabbath schools, 655 children and 69 Sunday school and Bible class teachers. There were 90 teenage boys in the Young Men's Christian Association, and an active 9th Boys' Brigade Company, founded in 1890. In 1908 the BB Old Boys Association Hall was opened, the first in Ireland – the hall was inspected by the founder of the Boys' Brigade, Sir William A. Smith of Glasgow, in February 1909.

Much of the growth in Fitzroy's membership was the direct result of the impact of William Colquhoun's personality, faith and inspirational preaching. Increasing numbers of students from Queen's University began to make Fitzroy their spiritual home, **“attracted by the man, his message and his spirit”**⁵. His obituary highlights the influence, depth and humanity of his Gospel preaching:

“Mr Colquhoun was a student throughout his long life. His width of reading, accuracy of observation and power of thought, combined with a happy originality of expression, made his sermons a joy and inspiration to the congregation to whom he ministered.”

⁵ Obituary, General Assembly Minutes, 1934



Rev. William Colquhoun



The growth of Fitzroy was not simply due to William Colquhoun but to a congregation suffused with a spirit of friendliness that reflected the generosity of Christ himself. It was a hands-on Church where many played a part in helping newcomers integrate into the congregation. William Colquhoun was a welcome visitor in every home. Stories abound about how children would run to him when he entered their homes, climb all over him, sit on his knee and play with his beard. He loved children and they loved him. But he was also keen to challenge the many young people growing up in Fitzroy and coming through its vibrant youth ministry. His welcome speech in 1893 cleverly and directly expresses themes that recur throughout his ministry in Fitzroy:

“Since I’ve come to Belfast people have told me that there are many young people in the city who are sorely perplexed with religious doubt. I’m really delighted to hear that, for next to an earnest believer the finest type of person you can meet is an honest doubter. The young men I grew up with 15 years ago had next to no doubts about anything, except perhaps the best brand of cigars! I’m so glad that this bunch has now been succeeded by a more serious generation, anxious to know the truth and to do their duty. I have the greatest sympathy for all such, for I’ve had doubts and difficulties myself long ago; and I still have some left even now. If young people would leave their doubts and difficulties for just a little while, and go and do something practical, they would probably find that very little would come out of their doubts, for the simple reason that in general there is very little in them. The best way to get more light is to walk and work up to the edge of the light you have. If anyone will do God’s will he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God.”

The years between 1893 and 1921 were years of steady growth in Fitzroy as many young people came to faith in Christ through the work of the Sunday school. Young adults were challenged to live for Christ at a time of doubt. Facilitating such a wide range of youth activities was a major team effort, but with the example and encouragement of William Colquhoun the team worked together well.

Fitzroy entered a season of deep sorrow

When William Colquhoun was born in 1851, the anger towards Britain that was always just under the surface in Ireland, and was kept down by the weight of army and police, reached boiling point. Through disease and starvation, the Great Famine of 1845 to 1849 claimed over 1 million lives out of a population of 8 million. A further 1 million emigrated from family and friends with resentment smouldering in their hearts and finding expression in their songs.

This anger found political expression in a longing for greater independence from Britain. In the Westminster Parliament, Prime Minister Gladstone introduced two Home Rule Bills in 1886 and 1893. These initiatives stirred the Unionists of Ireland, and especially of Ulster, to resist such change from the depths of their souls.



Rev. William Colquhoun

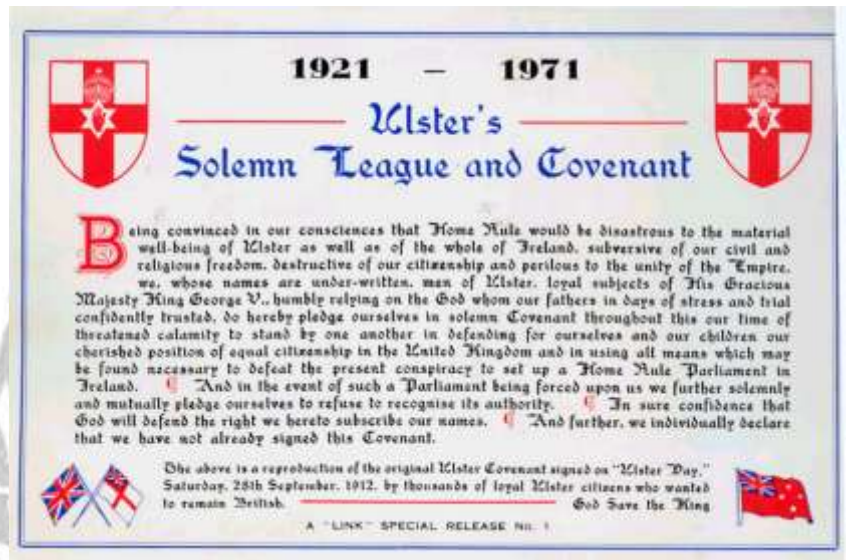


Anti-Home Rule marches and demonstrations began to be organised in order to strengthen the political links between Ireland and the UK. Crowds of young men flooded into the Orange Order and community tensions reached fever pitch and ancient divisions deepened into canyons of animosity.



Ulster Day 1912

Lord Carson signs Ulster Covenant
(which was signed by 471,414 people)



The wave of Unionist anxiety and resistance reached its peak on Ulster Day 1912, when almost half a million Unionists signed the Ulster Covenant. In 1913, at Balmoral Showgrounds, Lord Carson reviewed the Ulster Volunteers which had swelled to 100,000 men ready to take on the growing ranks of the Irish Volunteers. A gun-running campaign was launched to arm the Unionist community. In April 1914, 24,000 German and Austrian rifles were landed at Larne along with 5 million rounds of ammunition.

By June 1914, the Third Home Rule Bill had been passed and in a short time Ireland would have her independence enshrined in Law. In July 1914, a conference was held at Buckingham Palace to resolve the Ulster Problem. At first Lord Carson demanded the exclusion of Ulster from the jurisdiction of the New Irish Parliament, but finally settled for the 6 counties of Antrim, Down, Derry, Armagh, Fermanagh and Tyrone. It looked as if Ireland, north and south, was about to explode into all-out civil war. However, on the 4th of August 1914, the First World War broke out. Home Rule was postponed and the feared bloodletting in Ulster was avoided by a whisker.



Rev. William Colquhoun



Ulster Volunteers leaving Belfast for War: 1915



36th (Ulster) Division at the Battle of the Somme

Most of Carson's Ulster Volunteers went off to France to fight against Germany. They were allowed to form their own units, have their own officers and wear their own colours. In the accompanying photograph above you see them parading past the City Hall on their way to the continent. Units of Irish soldiers also left the south of Ireland to fight for King and country. Only recently has their memory been properly recognised and their sacrifice honoured. The Battle of the Somme was to claim 72,000 young lives, many of them Ulstermen and Irishmen and leave a legacy of grief throughout the Province. The heroism of the 36th Ulster Division still plays an important part in the folklore of the Unionist Community. J.H.A. Patton, a member of the congregation and, later, a long-serving Elder, served with the 15th Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles at the Battle of the Somme. In July 1966, Major J.H.A Patton, who won the Military Cross in World War 2, returned to Flanders to participate in the 50th Anniversary celebrations, and the October 1966 issue of the *Fitzroy Courier* recorded his recollections:

"We knew, of course, that it was going to be a big battle. But we expected that more trenches would be smashed by the artillery. But the enemy was so well dug in that they were able to come up again after the preliminary bombardment. I remember the frogs croaking on the marshes alongside the river Anere. They were very useful as they stopped croaking if anyone moved. You always had to shake out your boots before you put them on as the frogs would hop into them and not be able to get out again. I spent most of the day waiting on a hill near Albert with a number of other officers and NCOs who were left out of the battle, ready to reform the unit if it got smashed up. I didn't get in to the battle until the evening. By then it was a terrible mess. Nobody knew where anyone was or where to go. My battalion had lost seven out of every ten men. There was fighting for quite a few months after that."



Rev. William Colquhoun



Another member of the congregation, Dr. James A. Sinton served as a medic in Mesopotamia where he was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery under fire. In 1915, William Colquhoun visited the homes of most of the young men from Fitzroy who were volunteering for the war. He prayed with them and their anxious families. Sunday by Sunday, he led the congregation in prayer for them, remembering them in far off lands and in conditions of barbarity that few could take in. Elders and members of Fitzroy visited worried families when news of the carnage filtered back home. As those who survived made their way back to Belfast in 1919, William Colquhoun spent time with those who carried injuries in their bodies and listened as some shared with him the nightmares in their minds.



Memorial to the Missing (Thiepval)

The names of 72,000 Allied soldiers who died during the Battle of the Somme are listed.



The Ulster Tower (Thiepval)
Memorial to the 36th (Ulster) Division

Saddest of all were the memorial services held in Fitzroy to honour 16 of the young Fitzroy men who were killed in action. These were memorial services rather than funeral services, for some bodies were never recovered. Their names are recorded at the Memorial to the Missing in Thiepval. In 1921, at a moving ceremony in Fitzroy, William Colquhoun unveiled a memorial in the vestibule of Fitzroy to remember all who left home to serve in the war.

J. E.	241947	ROBSON T.	22110
R. J. W.	RAMSHAW R.	ROBSON W.	589
B. W.	RAMSHAW T.	ROBSON W.	7777
G. G.	RANDALL A. E.	RODDA J. H.	
SON T.	RATHBONE C.	RODGERS J.	SIMPSON G. F.
H. W. A.	RATHBONE W.	RODHAM J.	SIMPSON J.
IT M.	RAWNSLEY A.	RODWELL H.	SIMPSON J. E.
S. H. W.	RAWSON R.	ROGAN M.	SIMPSON J. R.
DGE E.	RAY W.	ROGERS S.	SIMPSON R. C.
SON D.	RAYHILL J.	ROGERSON H.	SIMPSON T.
SON H.	REACH W.	ROGERSON W.	SIMPSON W.
SON J. T.	READ C.	ROLLO D.	SITCH E. C.
SON T. J.	READ P.	ROPER J. G.	SKELTON C.
SON A.	READMAN W.	ROPER R. J.	SKERMER F. H.
SON C.	REAY W.	ROSS J. 762	SKIDMORE J.
SON E.	REDGRAVE S.	ROSS J. 4191	SLATER H.
SON R. B.	REDPATH G.	ROSS J. W.	SLIGHT D.
ON A.	REDPATH W.	ROSS R. W.	SMALL T. 504
ON J. W.	REED L.	ROURKE J. W.	SMALL T. 904
ON R. W.	REED O.	ROUSE S.	SMART W.
ON W. R.	REED W.	ROUTLEDGE H. R.	SMEATHAM F.
EN W. J.	REES D.	ROUTLEDGE R.	SMITH A. 1266
N J.	REGAN J.	ROUTLEDGE F. C.	SMITH A. 1063

Some of the names of The Missing



Fitzroy Avenue War Memorial



Retirement and Death

Shortly afterwards in 1921 he retired a quite exhausted man. This season of deep sorrow had taken its toll in the closing years of his ministry. His request that the sermons he had written be destroyed was honoured, but it deprived us of a clearer window into the soul of a remarkable servant of Jesus Christ. Recently one of them turned up and it is a joy for me to read it slowly and to try to recapture the moments of its powerful delivery to a packed and appreciative Sunday congregation in Fitzroy. The theme running through it is 'preparing for death' and these beautiful words of faith bring it to an end:

"The sunset has richer colours than the dawn"

On Easter Sunday 1934, William Colquhoun died, in his 84th year. At the General Assembly in June that year, this tribute was paid to him:

"As a pastor he excelled. Children loved him; the sick, the weary and the heavy-laden did not need to explain – he understood. His faith kept him dignified and serene in every crisis. He walked with God, and he was not, for God took him."

When the memorial to his ministry was unveiled in Fitzroy in 1935, his successor Dr. Woodburn spoke movingly of him in sentiments that captured well the thoughts of a congregation that loved him:

"We shall miss him very sorely in our homes. When he came to visit us he left a benediction behind. Faces grew kindlier and hearts became softer wherever he appeared. We felt he understood us, and our burdens and our sorrows, and the troubles became lighter when we shared them with him."



Rev. William Colquhoun



Conclusion

Significant change, steady growth, seasons of deep sorrow and faith in dark times; these are the features that shaped William Colquhoun's ministry over 28 influential and spiritually significant years.

The July 1963 issue of the Fitzroy Courier included an interview with Miss Christina Davison, whose family had been members of the Fitzroy Avenue Church from its early days, who remembered the Rev. Colquhoun. This is what she had to say about him:

"He was a saint on earth. He was very humble and kindly. He would just walk into the kitchen and talk to you. The children loved him too. Mr Colquhoun was very much beloved by all who knew him. I remember going to the Manse as a child, and he showed us the stars through his telescope. He was very interested in science, and he read widely."

I often stop to look up at his gently smiling face looking down on us all from his memorial beside the north transept. I wonder what he is thinking and what he would say to encourage us on our faith-journey with God on this November Sunday morning in 2007. Almost certainly the answer is found in the words of St Paul. (Philippians 1:21) that appear at the bottom of the plaque:



His goal is still ours.