

Rev. James Nixon Porter

Minister of Cairo Street Chapel 1862 to 1872

The Rev James Nixon Porter, Minister of Cairo Street from 1862 until 1872 came from a distinguished family of Irish Presbyterian Ministers. James was born in Dublin on the 7th November 1815. His father was the Rev William M. A. Porter and Elizabeth Porter. He was a member of a large family with brothers Classon Emmett, Francis and sisters Francis and Hester later joined by siblings of his father's second marriage John Scott Porter, William and Marianne.

The Porter Family were part of an Irish Presbyterian family where Ministers stretched many clerical dynasties, sometimes stretching down across several generations and sometimes, as in this case from father and several sons.

The dynasty began with the Rev William Porter born in 1774 who died in 1843. He was educated at Glasgow and Edinburgh and was Licensed by the Presbytery of Strabane in 1797 and Ordained at Limavady by the same Presbytery as Assistant and Successor to the Rev Joseph Osborne. William served as Clerk of the General Synod of Ulster from 1816 until 1830. As a 'Non-Subscriber' he joined the Remonstrance and became the first Moderator of the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster 1830-1831 and thus, for a very brief period, was simultaneously Clerk of the General Synod and Moderator of the Remonstrant Synod. He retired, on the appointment of an Assistant and Successor in 1840 and died at his home 'Bessfield', Limavady on 7th September 1843.

William was part of a movement within Irish Presbyterianism which led to the establishing of Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church. In 1705 the Irish Presbyterian General Synod introduced a new rule that required all ministers to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith at ordination. This decision caused a fissure within the Church, one critic John Abernethy argued in his sermon for 'Religious Obedience founded on

Personal Persuasion.’ This sermon published in 1820 was to plunge Irish Presbyterianism into a struggle that was to last for seven years and end with the expulsion of the liberal wing of the church. Abernethy took his stand on the sufficiency of scripture but with it the right of private judgement and the individual’s responsibility to employ the God-given faculty of reason in their religious opinions.

Abernethy argued that it was the Christian’s duty to examine all the evidence carefully and to act it on the basis of their own conscientious conviction. He and his supporters saw themselves as following very directly in the reformation tradition by emphasizing the right of each individual believer to search the scriptures for themselves. There developed a pamphlet war and continuing arguments in the Synod and other church courts. A large number of pamphlets and books were produced on both sides of the argument but matters were eventually decided by votes in the Synod. The non-subscribers were out voted and were all placed in the newly created Presbytery of Antrim at the Synod of Dungannon held in June 1725.

The following year the non-subscribers drew up a list of propositions which they presented to the Synod as “expedients for peace”. The non-subscribers were heard but the subscribing majority was not satisfied with their suggestions and the end result was the separation of the Presbytery of Antrim from the General Synod. The first subscription controversy ended with the expulsion of the non-subscribers into the Presbytery of Antrim. Antrim Presbytery of all the Irish Presbyteries stood alone in defence of the sufficiency of Scripture and the supremacy of the teaching of Jesus Christ on all questions of Faith and Duty.

In 1829 there was a second controversy over the principle of non-subscription within the Synod of Ulster. It brought to the forefront two men of outstanding character and ability, Dr. Henry Cooke commanded the support of the subscribers and Dr. Henry Montgomery was the champion

of those who espoused the non-subscribing principle. These two men propounded and defended their respective conservative and liberal principles. Dr. Henry Montgomery the Minister of Dunmurry, led three presbyteries those of Armagh, Bangor and Templepatrick, representing seventeen congregations out of the Synod of Ulster and in 1830 formed the Remonstrant Synod. It was into the Non-Subscribing Church of Ireland that James and his brothers Rev John Scott Porter and the Rev Classon Emmet Porter were to become Ministers.

The Rev John Scott Porter born 1801 at Newton, Limivady, County Londonderry on the 31st of December 1801. After schooling at Dirlagh and Derry, he became a student for the ministry under the care of Strabane presbytery. From 1817 to 1819 he studied an arts course at Belfast Academical Institution. Whilst studying for the ministry he undertook tutoring positions. He was licensed as a minister by the Presbytery of Bangor in 1824 and was Minister of Carter Lane congregation, London from 1826 until 1831. On the 2nd of February 1832 he was installed by the Presbytery of Antrim in the First Belfast Church as successor to Dr William Bruce and as a Colleague to his son, the Rev William Bruce. John Scott Porter was a noted scholar, especially in biblical languages. He served as Professor of Theology to the Association of Irish Non-Subscribing Presbyterians from 1838. He was the sole minister of First Belfast, after the death of William Bruce in 1868, until his own death in 1880.

The Rev Classon Emmet Porter born in 1813 who died in 1885 was the third son of the Rev William Porter. He was educated for the ministry at Belfast Academical Institution and at Manchester New College York. On the 2nd July 1834 he was ordained and installed as minister of Larne by the Presbytery of Antrim. He was a notable historian and specialised in Ulster history, he supported the use of the Gaelic language and catholic emancipation. He published many articles and papers. Retired in 1875 and died at his home, Ballygally Castle in 1885.

Their sister Marianne married Francis Dalzell Finlay, he was the owner, publisher and sometime editor of the Northern Whig. Founded in 1832 by Francis Finley it was published twice weekly on a Monday and Thursday until 1849 when it increased publication to three times a week.

The religion, interests and politics of the family appear to be liberal, progressive and tolerant and it is not a surprise that Andrew the son of the Rev John Scott Porter and nephew of James was a member of Ewart Gladstone's Liberal government. He sat as MP for County Londonderry from 1881 to 1884 and was Solicitor General for Ireland from 1881 to 1888. From 1882 to 1883 he was Attorney General Ireland. In 1902 he was created Baronet of Merrion Square in the city and county of Dublin.

The Rev James Nixon Porter was born on the 7th of November 1815 in Dublin. He was educated for the ministry at Manchester College York. On the 4th of October 1838 he was ordained as minister at Carrickfergus by the Remonstrant Presbytery of Templepatrick. Carrickfergus was the town where the first Irish Presbytery in Ulster was established in 1642. There is a poem written in the 19th century about the establishment of the first Presbytery in Carrickfergus on 10 June 1642:

Two hundred years ago there came from Scotland's storied land

To Carrick's old and fortified town a Presbyterian band!

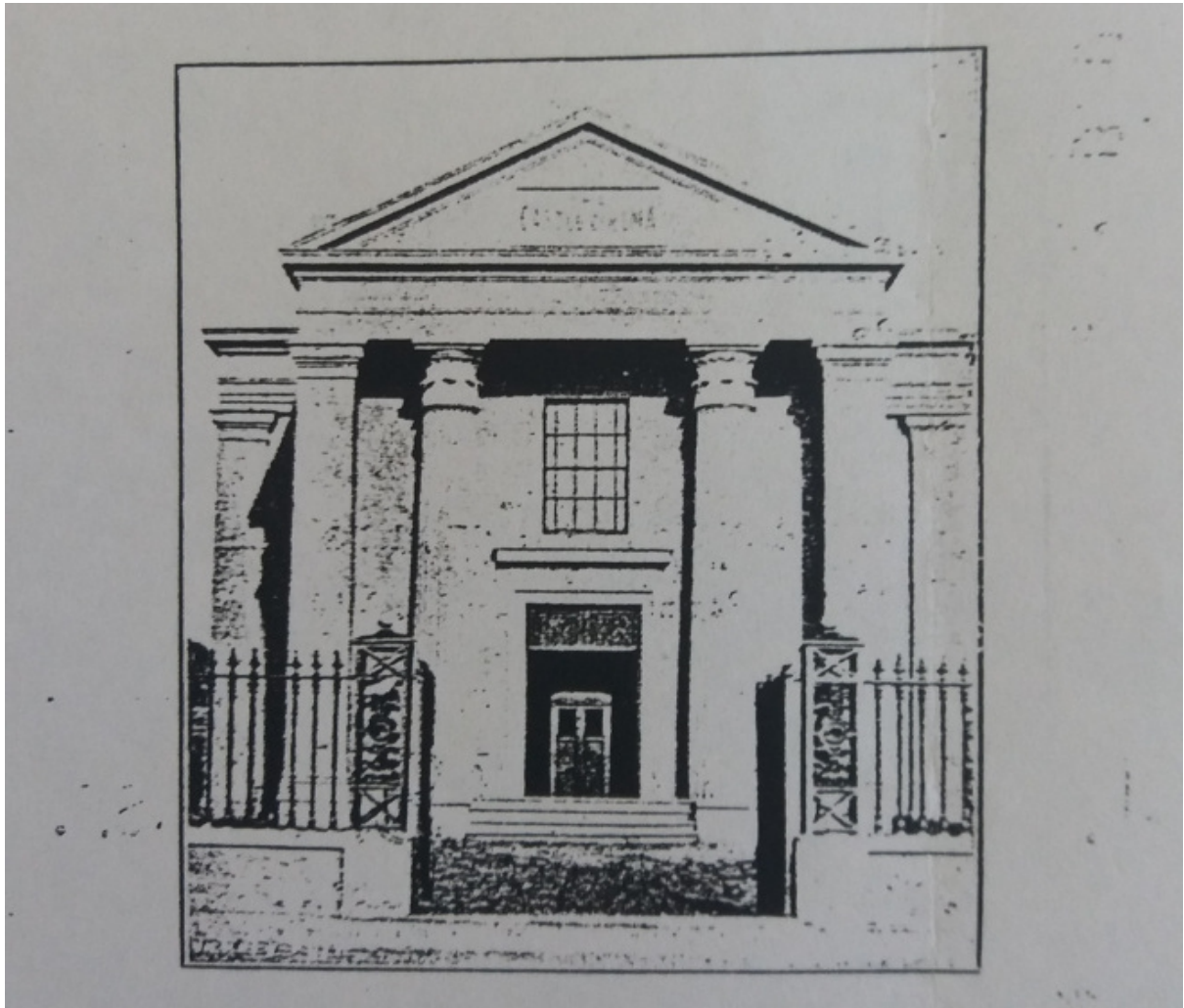
They planted on the castle wall the banner of the blue

And worshipped God in simple form as Presbyterians do.

O hallowed be their memory who in our land did sow

The goodly seed of Gospel truth two hundred years ago.

Carrickfergus Non subscribing Church Built 1837



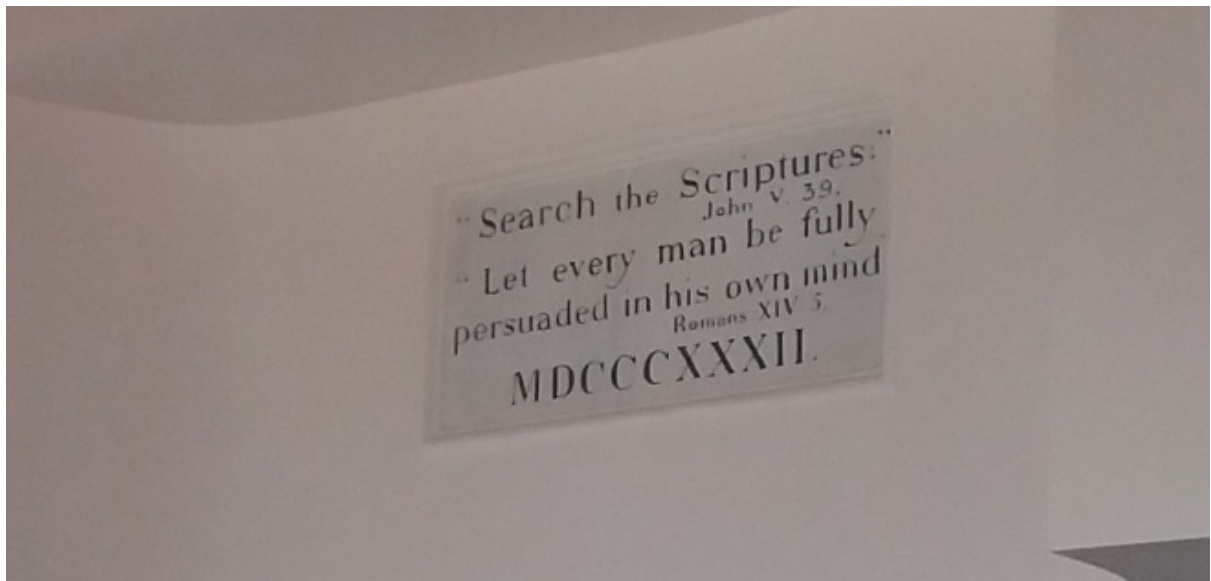
This meeting house was opened for worship in 1837. A congregation was founded by the missionary strategy of local churches it flourished under the ministry of the Rev James Nixon Porter minister from 1837 to 1862. He led a successful ministry before he took up the appointment of Cairo Street Chapel Unfortunately in the later years of the nineteenth century the church saw a period of decline. It eventually closed in 1918 and was later used as a cinema and by the local technical school. A fire in 1962 brought about its demolition.

James Nixon Porter resigned as Minister of Cairo Street in 1872 at the age of 57 years. This may have been due to ill health as died on the 28th of July 1875 at Great Malvern Worcestershire. A son of the manse and three of his brothers became ministers, a family of the manse.

John Scott Porter (1801–1880) brother of Rev James Nixon Porter (1815-1875).was an Irish biblical scholar and Unitarian minister.



John Scott Porter, portrait c.1845





Another brother of Rev James Nixon Porter was William referred to as ‘the father of Cape Liberalism’ William was born in Arlikelly Limavady on the 15th of September 1805. He was an advocate in Belfast until 1839 when he became Attorney General of Cape Colony until 1864. In 1869 he became a member of the Cape Colony Legislative Assembly. Cape Colony was racially complex, Dutch until 1815 and until recently slave-owning, and still in process of being integrated into the British empire. Porter's was primarily a legal post, but as legal adviser to the governor and a member of the executive and legislative councils he was also involved in political issues.

William Porter on more than one occasion declared himself to be a liberal born and bred. In the legal sphere William worked consistently for absolute equality before the law for all, regardless of class or race. The same principle of equality of treatment was basic to the constitution he drafted when representative government was established in the colony. By fixing a low property qualification and giving the franchise to all men regardless of race he excluded, as he said, nothing but vagrancy and crime. In 1873 after the death of his friend Hugh Lynar he returned to Ireland and lived with his brother Rev. John Scott Porter in Belfast until his death in 1880. His will reflected his devotion to the Cape in the large donations he made to public institutions there. After bequests to several Cape Town

charities and to every public library in the colony, he donated £20,000 for the establishment of a reformatory for boys. If parliament decided against a reformatory, he directed that part of the bequest should be used to promote the education of women at university level.

Whilst not a great deal is known about the ministry of James Nixon Porter during his time at Cairo Street there is no doubt that he was from a dynastic family of influential ministers. Both his sister Marianne and his brother William testify throughout their lives to holding liberal and progressive values which James his father and his brothers held.

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