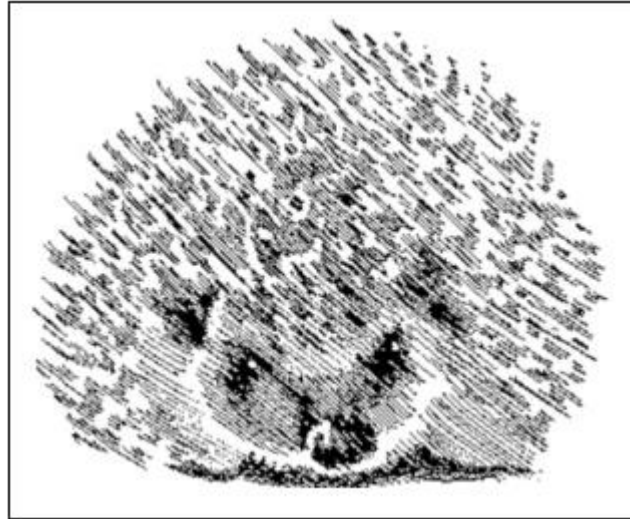


**A Level History**  
**Unit 15:**  
**Daniel O’Connell’s Visit to Belfast**



## **The Repealer Repulsed? Daniel O’Connell’s Visit to Belfast in 1841**

### **Overview and Rationale**

#### **Unit Content and Subject Specifications – current and new specifications**

This Unit is offered to support the teaching of History at A2 in relation to Assessment Unit 3 (A2:1): Change over Time: Unionism and Nationalism 1800-1900 in the current specification. It is also highly relevant to AS 2 Option 3: Ireland 1823-1874 in the new specification, intended for first teaching in September 2016. The unit covers the visit of Daniel O’Connell to Belfast in 1841 during his campaign for the repeal of the Act of Union, and demonstrates how Ulster Unionists led by Reverend Henry Cooke mounted and expressed their opposition to the Repeal movement during and after O’Connell’s Belfast meetings. For sources, the unit draws on discussions by leading contemporary historians, and on *The Repealer Repulsed*, a key text for Ulster Unionism, written and compiled by the Ulster-Scots writer and bookseller William McComb shortly after O’Connell’s visit.

The Unit demonstrates how some of the central northern Unionist arguments against Repeal and Home Rule were already being articulated in this period, and is also designed to develop understanding of O’Connell’s Repeal campaign and its reception in the north of Ireland.

### **The Repealer Repulsed?**

#### **The Context**

In the 1798 Rebellion, United Irishmen (Protestants, Catholics and Dissenters) had fought unsuccessfully to establish an independent, democratic republic in Ireland. The 1801 Act of Union dissolved the Protestant Ascendancy-dominated Parliament in Dublin, and incorporated Ireland into the United Kingdom with England, Wales and Scotland, but Catholics were not permitted to sit in the Parliament at Westminster even though representatives from Ireland were elected to it. Daniel O’Connell successfully led a campaign, supported by Catholics of all classes, for Catholic Emancipation – the right of Catholics to sit in Parliament, which was achieved in 1829. His tactics were extremely effective. They included his own clever and fiery oratory (he was a trained barrister), and the mobilisation of huge numbers of the population who attended his ‘monster’ meetings throughout the country. These were accompanied by colourful processions and pageantry portraying Ireland’s history. O’Connell abhorred violence (he had opposed the United Irishmen in 1798 for that reason) and wished to agitate and campaign within the limits of the law and constitution, and with the support of the Catholic clergy in the localities he visited. When the British government granted Emancipation in 1829 he was affectionately known as ‘The Liberator’ throughout Ireland. His campaign and its success attracted admiration throughout Europe and the USA.

He began speaking about Repeal shortly after taking his seat in the House of Commons, but following a period in the 1830s of attempting to gain the support of the British Whig party in achieving reforms that would bring greater fairness and justice for Irish Catholics, in 1840 O’Connell changed his strategy and began to campaign for a repeal of the Act of Union and a

restored Parliament in Dublin in which Catholics might sit and for which they would also vote. He founded the Loyal National Repeal Association – as the name indicates he wanted to retain Ireland’s position within the British Empire, linked to the monarchy but as a self-governing nation. He was an expert in employing publicity (through the newspaper the *Pilot*); propaganda; symbolism linked to Gaelic history and mythology, memorabilia (repeal uniforms and buttons); and fund raising (Repeal Rent and O’Connell Tribute). His own formidable persona and reputation were also effectively utilised to further his campaign, for example when he rode in an open carriage among the attendees present at his monster meetings, which could attract between 300,000 – 800,000 people.

The historian Christine Kinealy credits him with the following achievements:

- ‘the creation of an efficient national organisation in a predominantly rural, illiterate society’
- A ‘pioneering’ tactic of ‘politically empowering deprived peoples’
- Making ‘the disparate social groups’ (among Irish Catholics) ‘and their demands appear to be unified’.<sup>1</sup>

While O’Connell was constitutional and law abiding in his nationalist strategy he also identified Irish independence strongly with Catholicism. He told his Repeal campaign managers to ‘be sure to have the approval of the Catholic clergy in every place you move to’, he employed Catholic clergy as local organisers, and used Catholic churches as his campaign centres. He stated in 1840 that ‘The Catholic Church is a national church, and if the people rally with me, they will have a nation for their church’ and he also remarked confidentially to a correspondent that ‘Protestantism would not survive the Repeal ten years’.<sup>2</sup> Such tactics and views made Protestants nervous about his intentions. He was accused of wishing to establish a Catholic Ascendancy which would enjoy special privileges over other sects. In the Province of Ulster, where Protestants constituted a large, powerful and highly articulate majority, opposition to O’Connell gathered force.

### **O’Connell’s Visit to the North**

The immediate, local context for O’Connell’s visit to Ulster in January 1841 was the forthcoming election to the Belfast Corporation. The *Vindicator*, a Belfast newspaper which had a largely Catholic readership, argued that two Catholics might be nominated as aldermen and eight as councillors. Some Belfast members of the Repeal Association invited O’Connell to speak in Belfast to support this attempt to gain Catholic representation in the city. Belfast was at the time a prosperous industrial centre where ship-building and the linen industry were flourishing.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Repeal and Revolution: 1848 in Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-4.

## The Characters

**Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847)** – A barrister from Co Kerry and the highly successful leader of the campaign for Catholic Emancipation. Kinealy, however, argues that he diminished his achievements through his ‘arrogance, political misjudgements and personal opportunism’.<sup>3</sup>

**Dr Henry Cooke (1788-1868)** – Son of a small farmer near Maghera. Like O’Connell he was hostile to the United Irishmen and their espousal of violent tactics. He had seen the British redcoats burning Presbyterian villages when he was a boy in 1798 and in later life became determined that this must never happen again. The question often asked, in relation to the Presbyterians who had rebelled in 1798, is why they became unionists, apparently abandoning the principles they had once held as members of the United Irishmen. One possible answer is that what Presbyterians were seeking in 1798 was the establishment of a liberal parliamentary democracy – and that Britain was in the process of providing just that in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with Catholic Emancipation in 1829, and the Great Reform Act of 1832.

Cooke believed there was a natural alliance between Presbyterians and the Church of Ireland as both were Protestant denominations, and he set about promoting their co-operation. Cooke was politically, socially and theologically conservative. He had studied for the Presbyterian ministry at Glasgow University and was ordained in 1808. His opponents thought him arrogant. The historian Patrick Maume comments that he can appear ‘self-righteous and self dramatising’, and that he was certainly ‘eloquent and very determined.’<sup>4</sup>

**William McComb (1793-1873)** – McComb, a Belfast Presbyterian, was first a schoolmaster. He became a bookseller and publisher and released *The Repealer Repulsed* following O’Connell’s visit to Belfast. With Cooke he had edited the *Orthodox Presbyterian*, and attacked the politically liberal Belfast newspaper the *Northern Whig*. He wrote a moving ballad about Betsy Gray, the murdered County Down Presbyterian heroine of the 1798 Rebellion. In the poem he deplures what he considers the foolishness of the ’98 insurgents and stresses the advantages of Union. McComb greatly admired Cooke. Maume suggests he saw him as a modern John Knox – the formidable founder of the Presbyterian church in Scotland. The sense of connectedness to the Scottish church and its traditions of spirited resistance to what it considered oppressive state policies is evident from Cooke’s support of the Scottish Free Church – he addressed its first general assembly – and from verses McComb wrote, celebrating the struggle of the Scottish Covenanters. These were Presbyterians who opposed the policy of the Stuart monarchs towards the Scottish church in the seventeenth century.

**Charles Gavan Duffy (1816-1903)** – A Catholic journalist from Co Monaghan who owned and managed the *Vindicator*, a bi-weekly Catholic newspaper produced in Belfast. Duffy became a leader in the anti-sectarian Young Ireland radical and revolutionary movement

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> McComb, W., *The Repealer Repulsed*, ed. by P. Maume (Dublin: UCD Press, 2003), Introduction, p.i. Full text of 19<sup>th</sup> century edition is available via Google Books.

alongside Thomas Davis (a Protestant) and John Dillon. At the time of O'Connell's visit, Duffy hoped Belfast Catholics of all social backgrounds could be encouraged to mobilise as part of O'Connell's nationwide nationalist movement.

### **The Course of Events**

The Repeal Association in Ulster did include some Protestants, such as the influential **William Sharman Crawford (1781-1861)** a landowner in Co Down. On 2 January 1841 O'Connell accepted the invitation of the Loyal National Repeal Association in Belfast to speak. He appears to have been reluctant as he knew Ulster was where he would find most opposition, but Duffy and his circle believed it was important to garner support for Repeal from all sections of Irish society including Protestants.

### **The Challenge**

Henry Cooke immediately challenged O'Connell to a public debate on the issue of Repeal. O'Connell refused, but offered to debate the issue with Cooke in Dublin instead.

### **O'Connell comes North**

O'Connell had originally planned a procession into Ulster but, fearing trouble, dropped the idea. Protestant residents of towns on the Ulster provincial border claimed they would be justified in turning out in opposition as the large procession O'Connell intended would have looked like an invasion. The government sent canon and detachments from two regiments into Ulster (over 2000 extra troops), plus reinforcements to mounted and foot police in order to deal with potential unrest. Crowds in Dromore, Hillsborough and Lisburn prepared to demonstrate their resistance to Repeal and burned effigies of the Repeal leader, but O'Connell slipped into Belfast secretly and under a false name on Saturday 16 Jan 1841. The visit had the following schedule:

**18 January** – a repeal dinner was held at the Victoria Theatre in Chichester Street. It was mainly attended by Catholic supporters and some politically liberal Protestants.

**19 January** – O'Connell spoke to the public from the balcony of Kern's hotel. The crowd was very noisy with both supporters and opponents

**19 January (evening)** – O'Connell attended a soiree in the May Street Music Hall while opposing crowds engaged in a stone throwing battle outside.

**20 January** – Accompanied by a large police escort O'Connell left Belfast for Donaghadee. There he boarded the boat for Portpatrick in Scotland.

### **Cooke's Riposte to O'Connell**

**22 and 23 January** – Immediately in the wake of O'Connell's departure Dr Henry Cooke addressed two 'Grand Conservative Demonstrations' (pro-Union meetings) in Belfast and made one of his most rousing speeches, which openly linked Belfast's prosperity to the Union and to Protestantism. The demonstrations included a dinner and a public meeting, thus

copying the format of O’Connell’s visit, but visibly establishing that it was the pro-Union lobby who controlled Belfast’s public space, not the Repealer and convenor of ‘monster meetings’.

### **The Written Riposte**

McComb then published *The Repealer Repulsed* which includes his highly partisan account of O’Connell’s visit, Cooke’s challenge to O’Connell to public debate, the texts of Cooke’s addresses to the pro-Union demonstrations and the speeches of some other delegates. It concludes with a selection of satirical ballads and prose pieces prompted by O’Connell’s visit and by the issue of Repeal. It has been described as a ‘foundation text of Ulster Unionism’. Several pieces employ Scots language or references to Ulster’s Scottish links. Later in the century northern opponents of Home Rule would directly reference the importance of the close Ulster-Scotland connection as they campaigned to maintain the Union.

The next section of this unit reproduces some extracts from McComb’s text for classroom discussion.

### **Contemporary Material from *The Repealer Repulsed* for discussion and evaluation.**

Note the style and tone of the extracts. They are vigorous and bruising, similar to Prime Minister’s Question Time in the House of Commons. McComb and Cooke employ stereotyping and bias deliberately. There was no legally supported ‘equality agenda’ in this period, so the approach is different in style and content from many political speeches in our own day. In addition, public speaking was a form of entertainment, and political satire both then and now employs extreme devices – see, for example, the contemporary journal *Private Eye*. In his introduction to *The Repealer Repulsed* Patrick Maume comments: ‘Cooke and McComb gesture towards an Ulster particularism which presents the Northern province as a Protestant promised land of peace and prosperity amidst Irish violence and chaos ... Cooke ... saw Ulster not as a separate unit but as the ‘anchor’ binding Ireland to Britain.’<sup>5</sup>

Try to answer the following question in relation to the source extracts:

**How useful are these sources as evidence for an historian studying the reasons for the rejection of Daniel O’Connell’s Repeal campaign by a significant section of the population of the north of Ireland during the 1840s?**

### **Guidance for Source Analysis**

See the CCEA booklets *Planning for Success-Examination Advice* (for AS and for A2 level candidates) for detailed guidance on responding to questions of this type. In brief remember to:

- Make a judgement giving reasons for your conclusion
- Deal with the key features of the sources, including content, tone and language. Remember DAMMACTO – date, author, motive, mode (i.e. speech, poster etc), audience, content, tone and omissions
- Deal with the sources as fully as you can
- Look at the **weaknesses** of the sources – discuss limitations which affect their value, in particular, **omissions**

---

<sup>5</sup> Maume, Introduction to *The Repealer Repulsed*, p.xvii.

- Look carefully at the dates of the sources and include contextual knowledge in your evaluation
- Pay attention to any information included with the sources about authorship, genre, publication details.

Three extracts from *The Repealer Repulsed*, published very shortly after O’Connell’s visit to Belfast in January 1841, and after the Grand Conservative Demonstrations addressed by Henry Cooke. (Full text digitised and available from Google Books.)

A. Frontispiece: Illustration depicting Cooke’s Challenge to O’Connell within the context of the Union.



B. Parts of McComb's introduction to *The Repealer Repulsed*, which he calls a narrative of 'The Repeal Invasion'. In these passages he is identifying what he believes are the implications of the Repeal campaign, and of O'Connell's visit to Belfast:

That Repeal is essentially a Roman Catholic interest, no one can doubt – its object and intended effect are to give Irish Roman Catholics an ascendant preponderance in the councils of the state; and, of course, to depress Protestants in a civil point of view, to the level of their numbers, as compared with the bulk of the general population. ...

Too much has sometimes been made of the intolerant character of the Romish system, but taking the lowest possible ground that even scepticism can indicate, namely – that all ascendant sects are naturally prone to exclusiveness, still an unanswerable argument is furnished against the adoption of a measure, which, in the nature of things, *must* have the effect of establishing in this country a Roman Catholic ascendancy ...

The plan was, first, to insult us and our religion, without distinction of sect or party; secondly, to attempt the putting of our necks under the feet of the Roman Catholics, even when the latter are in a local minority; and, lastly, to call upon us, in no very humble tone, to join them in the promotion of a scheme for exalting them to the dignity of a permanent national ascendancy!<sup>6</sup>

C. Part of Cooke's anti-Repeal address to the Grand Conservative Demonstration in Belfast:

And with barely one argument shall I support my motion – look at the town of Belfast. When I was myself a youth I remember it almost a village. But what a glorious sight does it now present – the masted groves within our harbour – (cheers) – our mighty warehouses teeming with the wealth of every climate – (cheers) – our giant manufactories lifting themselves on every side – (cheers) – our streets marching on, as it were with such rapidity, that an absence of a few weeks makes us strangers in the outskirts of our own town. (Cheers). And all this we owe to the Union. (Loud cheers) No, not all – for throned above our fair town, and looking serenely from out mountain's brow, I behold the genii of Protestantism and Liberty, sitting inseparable in their power, while the genius of Industry which nightly reclines at their feet, starts with every morning in renovated might ... Yes, Mr O'Connell, we will guard the Union as we will guard our liberties, and advance and secure the prosperity of our country. Were you to succeed in effecting Repeal, we know our liberties were strangled forever. (Tremendous cheers) ... Look at Belfast and be a Repealer – if you can.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Repealer Repulsed*, (Belfast: McComb, 1841), p. 4, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.