

An Account of some Notable Books Printed in Belfast.¹

IT has been well said that the ballads of a people give a fair index to their national character and morals. In a somewhat similar degree the titles of the books first printed in a town afford a striking insight into the mental characteristics and tone of its inhabitants. As Belfast has the unique privilege in Ireland of possessing a catalogue of its early printed books, which it owes to the painstaking zeal and acumen of Mr. John Anderson, J.P., the esteemed hon. secretary of the Linen Hall Library, the task of describing some of its literary productions during the interesting period of the eighteenth century which marks the limit of this paper, is rendered comparatively simple. It may be mentioned in this connection, that the valuable collection of Belfast printed books in the Linen Hall Library have just been collated and arranged by Mr. Andrew Gibson, who has already done much to elucidate the early history of our local press, and as it is to be hoped that at an early date his researches into its origin will see the light, the present paper will only give a few words on this vexed subject.

George Benn, in his well-known *History of Belfast*, published in 1877, devotes a chapter to early printers in Belfast, compiled principally from material collected by the erudite W. Pinkerton, F.S.A. It was the latter's opinion that the first printing press set up in the vicinity of Belfast was brought over in 1690 for use on King William's progress to the Boyne. I have endeavoured to obtain evidence of any proclamation such as Benn cites as printed here, being still extant, but hitherto the search has been fruitless.

In *Historical Collections Relative to the Town of Belfast*, 1817, under the year 1696 is noted, "The art of printing was intro-

¹ Read before the Annual Meeting of the Library Association, Belfast, September, 1894.

duced into Belfast this year, by James Blow and his father-in-law, Patrick Neill, who came from Glasgow by invitation from Mr. Crawford, then sovereign of Belfast, who entered into partnership with them. After the death of Neill, the business was continued by Blow, who about the year 1704, printed the first edition of the Bible in Ireland, and many succeeding editions." This statement of Henry Joy's is the only evidence forthcoming as to the introduction of printers in Belfast, and would seem to contain one manifest error, William Crafford—as his signature is given in the town book of Belfast—was sovereign in 1693-4. It is possible, however, that Joy, as *quondam* editor of the *Belfast Newsletter*, had access to MSS. now destroyed, which would reconcile this discrepancy.

In the list of Patrick Neill's books, secular works seem to have been eschewed; they consist of reprints of such divines as Bunyan, Fox, Alleyne and Guthrie, with several local sermons and controversial tracts.

One curious exception to the foregoing rule occurs in my collection bound up as a fly-leaf of a shabby duodecimo, entitled, *Mr. John Flavell's Remains; being two Sermons composed by that Reverend and Learned Divine, with a Brief Account of the Life and Death of the Reverend Author.* Belfast: Printed by Patrick Neill and Company, and sold at his shop, 1700.

On this fly sheet, evidently the end leaf of an octavo, is printed the following closing lines of a ballad—

. . . did bear her to the ground
The bells did ring in solemn sort
And made a doleful sound.

17 In earth they laid her then
For hungry Worms a Prey;
So shall the fairest face alive
At length be brought to Clay.

(BELFA)ST: Printed and Sold by Patrick Neill, 1700.

Perhaps the worthy old printer doffed his company manners with the Company, and as plain Patrick Neill thought it no harm to print chap books and garlands of ballads like his brethren in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

The best specimen of Neill's press is the beautiful copy of the *Psalms of David in Meter*, 32mo, presented to the first Presbyterian congregation by David Smith in 1705. It is bound in solid tortoise-shell with silver back, hinges, corner and centre

ornaments neatly engraved. As there were local silversmiths at the time, it may have been bound here, but it must be confessed that such binding was usually executed in Holland, between which country and Belfast there was considerable intercourse. Dutch blue and white ware, bricks, and even Bibles were imported.

On the death of Neill in 1705, James Blow was left as the sole printer till 1713, when Robert Gardner's imprint appears on a neat duodecimo, *The Immortality of the Soul*, by John Mitchel, son of a Belfast merchant. The little work is beautifully printed and altogether remarkable. Blow's finest production was his famous quarto Bible of 1751, a splendid specimen of provincial printing which is fully described in the appendix of Mr. Anderson's catalogue.

Down to the death of James Blow in 1759, the tendency of the reading public in the North of Ireland was distinctly to controversial and theological books. Of nearly 300 works printed in the first fifty years, only about one-fifth were secular.

The first two books printed in our town were the *Covenant* and the *Shorter Catechism*. Archbishop King, himself an Ulsterman, says of these being printed in Belfast: "There are few books for which they have a greater vent."

As during the early years of the century penal laws were enacted by the Irish Parliament against all Nonconformists, and controversial tracts were frequently printed with considerable risk to author and publisher, many of the works written by Scottish and Irish Presbyterians were issued anonymously or with the name of place and printer omitted; Kirkpatrick's bulky volume of 574 pages 4to, entitled *An Historical Essay upon the Loyalty of Presbyterians in Great Britain and Ireland from the Reformation to the Present Year 1713*, has neither author, printer, nor place indicated. It is interesting as containing the first reference to the Town Book of Belfast which Kirkpatrick appeals to as *The Public Town Book of Belfast*.

Another treatise of this kind is Robert Craghead's *Answer to the Bishop of Derry's Second Admonition*, which was printed in 1697, and is the first book printed in Belfast of which a copy is known to exist; it is a thin quarto, and was probably issued by Patrick Neill.

In the same and following year two pamphlets were brought out for Rev. John M'Bride, whose portrait, pierced by the sword of a local sovereign, still exists.

A Presbyterian Loyal Address to George I. appeared with the imprint of J. Blow in 1714, followed by a sermon in 1716 to the Belfast Independent Volunteers on King George's birthday, in which the preacher, Rev. R. M'Bride, praises the conduct of some of his hearers at the battle of Dunblane.

In 1720 was issued the first of an extensive series of controversial pamphlets on the question of submission or not to the Confession of Faith, &c.

Amongst them may be mentioned *Personal Persuasion no Foundation for Religious Obedience*, by John Malcolm, M.A., Belfast, printed by Robert Gardner, 1720, followed by *The Good Old Way* by the Belfast Society, Belfast, printed by James Blow, 1720.

These were precursors of many others, no doubt eagerly devoured at the time, such as *Defence of Seasonable Advice, Plea against Rupture of Communion among Presbyterians, Sermon on Divisions, Duty of Christians to live together in Religious Communion, Reasons for Moderation, et hoc genus omne*.

The year 1714 marked an important epoch in the literary history of Belfast, for in that year James Blow printed the first secular work originally published in Belfast by a local author. This was the remarkable book *The Experienced Huntsman*, written by Arthur Stringer, huntsman to Lord Conway of Killultagh, at his seat of Portmore on the shore of Lough Neagh between Lurgan and Crumlin.

As this book is of excessive rarity and its contents entirely the author's own composition, and really of much merit from the quaint manner in which the experienced huntsman unearths his lore, some extracts are subjoined.

The full title of the work, of which a second edition appeared in 1717, is *The Experienced Huntsman, or a Collection of Observations upon the Nature and Chase of the Stag, Buck, Hare, Fox, Marten and Otter, with some particular directions concerning the breeding and entering of Hounds. Also the qualifications and conduct of a Huntsman and Instructions to a Park keeper. All gathered from the experience of thirty years' practice by Arthur Stringer*. Belfast, printed by James Blow, 1714.

Stringer explains that Turbervile, Markham, Cox, and Blome have written on the subject without enough practical experience, and that these authors seem to make stags, bucks, hares and other game capable of more knowledge than they really have.

The first chapter on breeding hounds, &c., is dedicated to the Earl of Mount Alexander, whose great example in breeding both

hounds and horses, "most excellent in both kinds," is extolled. His dedication to the Right. Hon. Randal, Earl of Antrim, is as follows :—

"My Lord,—That elevated generosity and true nobleness of spirit which all the world so justly admires in your lordship, in nothing more appears than in that exalted passion you have for hunting the stag, a creature so lofty, so bold, so swift, so every way fitted for the object of manly pleasure that the chase of him has ever been esteemed the most gay, the most daring, and the most generous of all chases; methinks I see your lordship in all the heroick, pleasant airs of that diversion standing erect in your saddle, hollowing to your hounds, your wig wafted by the winds, your eyes sparkling with gladsome joy and your whole man expanded, as it were, opened out, thrown abroad to the exulting ecstasy! Pardon, my lord, these unguarded expressions in shewing your lordship to the world in all your loose of pleasure; I do it, my lord, because there is a greatness in it that little, narrow, contracted souls are not capable of, and I hope to see your lordship often on your own mountains at the charming diversion, where you have the noblest herd of stags now in this kingdom, and many of them too great to fall before any but your lordship. The following essay on the subject, is as justly your lordship's as is, my lord, your lordship's most devoted and obedient servant,

"ARTHUR STRINGER."

The original kennels, near Dunluce, used by Lord Antrim, now serve for the Route Hunt.

He relates that he had six couple of hounds with which he continually hunted in my Lord Conway's parks at Portmore, which contained before they were disparked three thousand acres of land, with a thousand brace of red and fallow deer therein.

In his dedication of Hare Hunting to Lord Howth, it will be seen he is at his best: "My Lord,—Although there be a great heroic gallantry in the chase of the stag, buck and fox, yet, my lord, I think there is a mellow sweetness and kind friendly cheerfulness peculiar to the chase of an hare, that nothing can equal. In the pursuit of the stag, &c., we may observe the hounds hunt with a kind of rage and rapacious fury, their hair rises upon their backs, and the very accents of their mouths are fierce and revengeful. But in the chase of the hare, we hear a

more melodious harmony, they flourish over the scent, double their voices, and never was discovered a more generous pleasure. Hence it is, my lord, I venture to take the boldness to affix your name to this essay on Hare Hunting, and like a hare at squat in a bush, skulk under your lordship's protection, to save me from the rudest of all huntsmen (the critics) that are in chase of me to run me down."

His description of hunting martens is interesting. He relates that an Irishman told him that "after the war 1641 there were some Irishmen with a couple of beagles and a greyhound did hunt them, and that their custom was, when they treed a marten to build a fire near the tree root, and sit and watch the marten till day, and then beat him down, and never killed above three or four a week," but he adds, "I rarely stayed out above two or three hours a night and commonly brought two or three martens."

He gives an elaborate glossary of the various terms used in hunting, such as to unharbour a stag, rouse a buck, start a hare, unkennel a fox, unboyle an otter, untree a marten. He concludes his volume of 304 pp., 8vo, with a dialogue between Mr. Townley and Mr. Worthy. In this the virtues of hunting are extolled by Mr. Worthy, who ultimately prevails on his town acquaintance to become a sportsman.

Advancing from 1714, no local secular work of any importance is reached till the date of the establishment of the *Belfast Newsletter* on September 1st, 1737, by Francis Joy, one of a family long and honourably connected with Belfast. Amyas Griffith gives a curious mention of this remarkable man at a later period, referring to the *Newsletter*, as follows: "It was first set on foot and established by a tailor in this town, who, by mere dint of genius, made the types, the ink, the paper, and the press. He has retired upon an easy fortune, and has resigned the business to his son. A tailor and literature! But this is a keen air, which perhaps may sharpen wit as well as appetite. There are two well wrote parallels in it. Our stupid *Leinster Journal* broke at 8s. a year subscription; and this man has made a fortune at 4s. But indeed they read more in the north than in the south." The only file of the *Newsletter* at all approaching completion is preserved in the Linen Hall Library under the particular care of its zealous librarian, Mr. George Smith, to whom I am indebted for a careful examination of the early numbers. Unhappily the first copy only dates from

February 16th, 1738, No. 152, vol ii. It is a quaint two page sheet, small folio, and with its scanty news, given twice weekly, affords a striking contrast to its lineal descendant, so ably conducted by the worthy chairman of the Free Library Committee, a great grandson of Alexander Mackay, who came from Edinburgh in the last century and assumed control of the paper.

At the end of 1745 a rival appeared to the *Newsletter* called the *Belfast Courant*. It was printed by James Magee on paper manufactured by James Blow, anticipating in this respect its opponent, which was not issued on paper made by F. Joy till 1746, when he established a paper mill at Randalstown and afterwards at Belfast. I shall give a few particulars of this very scarce journal from a copy dated 22nd April, 1746, in my possession. It contains twelve columns, of which three are filled with advertisements, upwards of seven with extracts from the *London Gazette* and other English and Scotch papers, one with Dublin news, nearly a column is headed Belfast, but curiously enough what follows is simply a letter from Inverary giving an account of the rebels' retreat from Stirling. All the local news is given in the following pregnant lines. "We hear from Donaghadee that on Tuesday last, the Custom House barge had brought in there, after a cruise of seven days, 150 anchors of brandy, which she had seized on board three wherries off the Mull of Galloway. On Saturday there was a considerable seizure of brandy made at Grey point. On Friday last a fire broke out in a smith's forge on the old key, which burnt down the same, but by the timely assistance of our two engines, was prevented from doing further mischief." In spite of the *Courant's* motto "'Tis not in mortals to command success; but we'll do more, Sempronius, we'll deserve it," the copy just cited seems to have been the last.

In the year 1753, the *Ulster Miscellany* was published without printer's name or place, but no doubt in Belfast. It justifies to some extent Swift's aversion to this form of literature,

"When they have joined their pericranies
Out skips a book of miscellanies,"

as most of its contents are simply reprints of books produced elsewhere. Its title is

The Ulster Miscellany,
containing:—

I.—A Voyage to O'Brazeel, a Sub-marine Island, Lying West off the Coast of Ireland.

II.—Advice to a Son in the Exemplary way of Stories, Fables, &c.

III.—The Brute Philosophers; In Six Dialogues.

IV.—The Ladies' Monitor; or, the Way of the Army, a Farce.

V.—Poems on Religious Subjects.

VI.—Thoughts on Various Subjects.

VII.—Poems on Humorous Subjects, consisting of Tales, Epistles, Songs, Epigrams, &c.

“ Ego apis Matinæ
 more modoque
 Grata carpentis thyma per laborem
 Plurimum” Hor.
 “Designed to please all palates at a time.” Gay.
 Printed in the year MDCCLIII.

The dedication is “to the very worthy the gentlemen of the north of Ireland,” and is signed “The Publisher.” Space will only permit of one extract from a poem entitled “The Gartan Courtship,” in the Scotch dialect:—

“The night is pleasant, lown and clear,
 Ye'll see the muntains far and near;
 Ald Doowish wi' his lowtin back,
 And Mukkish like a lang peet stack;
 Proud Argill wi' his tow'ring height,
 Sets off the beauty of the night;
 White-wash'd short sine, yon glebe house wa',
 By meen light shines like driven sna',
 A' things luick charming to the view,
 But nought sae charming luicks as you.”

Few original poems or plays were printed in Belfast till after 1800 (*Marriott's Fables*, dated 1771, being the most noteworthy), but many reprints occur, especially of comedies and farces by Farquhar, Dodsley, Fielding, Gay, &c. Allan Ramsay's works are advertised as far back as 1731, and the first edition of *Burns' Poems* printed out of Scotland was issued here by James Magee in 1787. He again printed an edition in 1789, followed in 1790 by another published by W. Magee, his son, who brought out a fresh issue consisting of two volumes, in 1793.

Miss Brooke, who had published a fine volume of translations from the Irish, in Dublin, 1789, brought out in 1795, *Bolg an Tsolair*, a Gaelic magazine containing translations of Irish poems, with an abridged Irish grammar prefixed.

This very scarce little work was printed at the *Northern Star* office. The following extract from an elegy on the death of Carolan, the famous harper, by his friend, M'Cabe, will show the style of translation :—

"I came with friendship's face to glad my heart,
But sad and sorrowful my steps depart ;
In my friend's stead—a spot of earth was shown,
And on his grave my woe-struck eyes were thrown !
No more to their distracted sight remain'd,
But the cold clay that all they lov'd contain'd,
And there his last and narrow bed was made,
And the drear tombstone for its covering laid."

Only one number of this interesting periodical was issued.

Another magazine containing much original matter was *The Microscope or Minute Observer*, printed by Joseph Smyth in 1799. It appeared monthly with a copperplate illustration. The Irish patriot, Dr. Drennan, contributed to its columns, which were varied with a series of valuable local contributions of which the authors were concealed under initials.

The oldest almanac of Belfast origin is one preserved in Mr. Lavens M. Ewart's remarkable collection of early printed books, maps, drawings and other objects which can elucidate in any way the history of his native town. It is entitled *The Belfast Almanac for the year of our Lord 1761*, and consists of seven leaves containing the usual calendar, with list of fairs held in Ulster, and a curious linen weaver's sleaing table, as it is termed, giving amount of yarn required in warp and woof, &c. Several works are advertised by the printer, James Magee, such as a *Pocket Companion for Freemasons*, whilst readers of fiction could have *The Reformed Coquette, or Memoirs of Amaranda, a surprising novel by Mrs. Davys*, price 6d.

Belfast almanacs were so popular in Scotland that till recent years, almanacs purporting to be such were hawked about the Border as far east as Berwick. They contained nothing about Belfast but the title.

A popular legal compendium entitled *The Young Clerk's Vade-Mecum*, was frequently reprinted by H. and R. Joy, from 1746 onwards. Two medical works only were issued, both reprints, in 1739 and 1766 respectively. James Blow printed in 1728, *Rules for Raising Flax* by Robert McDougal, which was followed ten years later by a *Statement regarding Linen Threads and Tapes*. Nicholas Grimshaw's *Remarks on Bleaching*, 1762, treat of an

important process in our staple industry in whose interests several other works appeared.

About the middle of the century some pamphlets were published on the establishment of a local bank. One plea adduced against such an institution in Belfast was that it would tend to bring highwaymen from as far as Hounslow Heath. In 1771, *The Charter Party of the Bachelors' Annuity Co., Belfast*, was printed, and as each copy contains several signatures of contemporary leading merchants, it has much local interest.

The space at my disposal forbids descanting on several other interesting aspects of the subject, such as the literature caused by the famous Irish Volunteer Movement originated in Belfast, and followed by the United Irishmen. A history of the books and pamphlets produced at this stirring period would require a volume to itself. It was then that the *Northern Star*, with all its associations of such names as Wolfe Tone, Neilson, Porter, Sampson, Russell and McCracken ran its chequered career from January, 1792, till May, 1797, when the Monaghan Militia sacked its printing office and flung presses and type into the street. As connecting the past and present I may mention, that three years ago an old lady, then aged 105, gave me a vivid account of this occurrence, of which she was an eye witness, and presented me with one of the types she had picked up at the time in High Street.

In conclusion, I would fain hope that sufficient evidence has been given in the above paper to justify the assumption that Belfast holds no unworthy place in connection with the introduction into Ireland of that wonderful boon to modern humanity, the printing press.

ROBERT M. YOUNG.

