

From Scotland's storied land: William McComb and Scots-Irish Presbyterian identity

PATRICK MAUME

The Belfast schoolteacher turned bookseller William McComb (1793–1873) was regarded as 'the laureate of Presbyterianism'.¹ Through such publications as *McComb's Presbyterian Almanac* (1840–89) he sought to disseminate to an Ulster Presbyterian audience a sense that they were part of a worldwide Evangelical culture at its purest in the tradition deriving from the Scottish Reformation and destined to find definitive expression in a world dominated by an united Presbyterian Church.

This paper, based on a survey of the *Almanac* and on McComb's 1864 *Poetical Works*, is mainly focused on McComb's later career, when he and Henry Cooke diverged in terms of politics – though not religion. It examines his literary models, his verses on the links between Scottish and Irish Presbyterianism, and how the writings of the early-eighteenth-century Presbyterian millennialist Robert Fleming contributed to McComb's move from expecting imminent apocalypse in the 1840s to a vision of universal Presbyterian triumph in the mid-Victorian era.

McComb was born in Coleraine in 1793, the son of a draper. While serving his apprenticeship in Belfast he joined a friend in founding a Sunday school in Smithfield to counteract an establishment described as having been founded to disseminate the doctrines of Thomas Paine. (The United Irish activist James Hope was then living in Brown Square, a nearby weaving district at the top of the Shankill.)² McComb received the assistance of the predominantly Anglican Sunday School Society for Ireland and soon thereafter abandoned drapery for school-

1 Robert Jeffrey, *The Indian mission of the Irish Presbyterian church* (London, 1890), p. 63.

2 Cathal O'Byrne, *As I roved out* (Belfast, 1946), pp 79–82. 3 Irene Whelan, *The Bible war in Ireland: the 'second reformation' and the polarization of Protestant-Catholic relations, 1800–1840* (Dublin, 2005) p.109. My belief that McComb is the anonymous Belfast correspondent whose letter is reproduced by Whelan from William Urwick, *Biographical sketches of the late James Digges La Touche, Esquire* (Dublin, 1868) is based on the similarity between the writer's account of his activities and that in McComb's 1873 *Belfast Newsletter* obituary. For the Anglican La Touche's willingness to co-operate with Nonconformists to further the Evangelical cause, see Whelan, *Bible war in Ireland*, p. 62; for his friendship with McComb see Norman Vance, *Irish literature: a social history* (London, 1990), p. 141.

teaching.³ Thus began a lifelong career of charitable work and evangelical activity which brought him into touch with such figures as Henry Cooke and the earl of Roden, and into conflict with Catholic ecclesiastical authorities. (In 1822–4 the parish priest of Belfast, William Crolly, ordered Catholic children withdrawn from McComb's school in Brown Square on the grounds that the school authorities were trying to convert them to Protestantism.)⁴ In 1828 he became a bookseller, publishing the pro-Cooke journal, *the Orthodox Presbyterian* (1829–40), and many other religious titles; the Belfast Linenhall Library has over 120 titles (a few non-religious) published by him, and by 1859 McComb had printed 50,000 copies of Sidney Hamilton Rowan's school edition of *The Assembly's Shorter Catechism*.⁵ In 1841 he compiled *The Repealer Repulsed*, a satirical account of Daniel O'Connell's January 1841 visit to Belfast and evasion of Cooke's challenge to debate civil and religious liberty.⁶

McComb had begun writing verse by 1815 when he celebrated the battle of Waterloo ('Waterloo – Wellington – Erin go bragh').⁷ His first collection, in 1817, was dominated by a long poem mourning the dead harper Denis O'Neill. This incorporates an antiquarian account of Irish minstrelsy beginning with Noah's flood, garnished with antiquarian footnotes,⁸ and including a lament over the battle of Clontarf (though discreetly omitting the Norman Invasion as it skips from 1014 to the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792). In Augustan couplets, McComb hails O'Neill as an Ossianic figure:

Seek ye the bard's empassion'd fire,
As erst he swept the trembling wire?
Enshrined with Ossian's hallowed throng,
There see the hoary son of song!
Enwraught in CAROLAN'S embrace,
O'NEILL, the last of minstrel race,
Encircled with a druid band,
Receives the crown from ULLIN'S hand:

4 Ambrose Macaulay, *William Crolly, archbishop of Armagh 1835–49* (Dublin, 1994), pp 22–8.

5 John A. McIvor, *Popular education in the Irish Presbyterian church* (Dublin, 1969), p. 93.

6 The 2003 UCD Press reprint of *The repealer repulsed* (ed. Patrick Maume) provides a brief outline of McComb's career (pp vii–xi). Andrew Holmes notes that the FJ. Biggar catalogue in Belfast Central Library and a copy of *The repealer repulsed* in Assembly's College name the journalist and tenant-right activist James McKnight (1801–76), then editor of the *Belfast Newsletter* as a contributor if not the principal compiler. An assessment of this claim, and of the relations between the two men, must await further research on McKnight, but it should be noted that McComb's name is on the (otherwise anonymous) text as publisher, that much of the text consists of Cooke's reported speeches and McComb was Cooke's semi-official publisher, and that the pamphlet's use of parody and mock-heroic resembles McComb's 'Grey Seer' columns in the *Presbyterian Almanac*. 7 Reprinted in William McComb, *Poetical works* (London/Edinburgh/Belfast, 1864), pp 166–7. Hereafter cited as *PW*. 8 *PW*, pp 23–30

Lives there a bard, that would not die
To join the sainted revelry!⁹

As this suggests, the Ossianic bard – simultaneously Scottish and Irish – was to be one of the models for McComb's self-presentation, though often with a certain self-deflation. (The poem closes with a Moore-style apology for daring to handle 'Ultonia's harp').¹⁰ McComb's attraction to the Ossianic figure derives from a variety of sources, including literary fashion, contact with O'Neill (who taught classes for the Belfast Harp Society in 1808–13; a footnote mentions that McComb heard O'Neill 'play the beautiful air of Kitty Tyrrell'),¹¹ and – oddly for such a pronounced Evangelical – a hint that druidic 'natural religion' might have been more pleasing to God, as well as more Irish, than Catholicism. (McComb even quotes and apparently endorses John Toland's insinuation that the replacement of druids by monks at Derry was a change for the worse).¹² The poem's celebration of Brian Boru also allows McComb to assert his Irish patriotism without denying his Unionism.¹³ This balance sometimes wavered; in the 1866 *Presbyterian Almanac*, when denouncing Fenianism, McComb contrasts the rule of Victoria with that of Brian, who never enjoyed a newspaper, slated house, glass window, or cup of tea.¹⁴

McComb's literary models were Scott and Campbell at their most declamatory,¹⁵ the English Nonconformist Isaac Watts¹⁶ (whose simple quatrains underlie McComb's most effective pieces – such as his verses on the 1798 heroine Betsy Gray, intended by McComb as an exercise in pathos rather than politics though his audience may not all have seen it in that light),¹⁷ the hymn-writer James Montgomery (1771–1854),¹⁸ perhaps Cowper (in simpler pieces such as McComb's humorous tribute to his cat Lily)¹⁹ and Thomas Moore. He had some contact with the Burns family – his *Poetic Works* contain 'Burns' Seal, on receiving from his Granddaughter an Impression of the Poet's Seal',²⁰ and 'To Robert Burns Esq., Eldest Son of the Poet, on the occasion of his Visit to Belfast, Sept. 4, 1844'.²¹

However, there is very little Burnsian influence on McComb's verse; he almost never uses dialect (except for satiric effect in a few ephemeral contexts such as *The Repealer Repulsed*, part of whose attraction is that McComb speaks with greater vigour from behind a satirical mask than in his official publications). His Burns is the sentimental moralist beloved of the late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century Burns Society respectabilities whose outraged response to Catherine Carswell's

9 *PW*, pp 8–9. 10 *PW*, p. 22; McComb echoes Moore's 'Dear Harp of my country' (1815).
11 *PW*, p. 7n. 12 *PW*, p. 28. 13 *PW*, pp 17–20. 14 *P[resbyterian] A[lmanac]*, (1866), 1.
15 'Campbell and Kosciusko', *PW*, pp 294–5. 16 For Watts and his extensive influence see Donald Davie, *A gathered church: the literature of the English dissenting interest, 1700–1930* (Oxford, 1978) 17 'Bessie Grey', *PW*, pp 357–8; *PA* (1860), 78–9. Compare 'Edmund and Ella', *PW*, pp 157–64, as an exercise in pathos. 18 'To James Montgomery, Esq., on his Visiting Belfast in 1842', *PW*, pp 202–3. 19 'Lily', *PA* (1857), 86; *PW*, pp 342–3; see also 'The Carpet', *PW*, pp 256–8 for an explicit invocation of Cowper as model. 20 'Burns' Seal', *PW*, pp 242–4. 21 'To Robert Burns, Esq.', *PW*, pp 290–2.

Burns biography is criticized by Edwin Muir;²² like them McComb emphasized the poet's sentimental moralism while treating Burns' daemonic side as a personal failing quite separate from his poetic inspiration, playing it down to such an extent that it is virtually though not formally denied.²³

McComb's Presbyterian Almanac first appeared in its mature form in 1841 (there had been a smaller precursor in 1840). Its cover was Presbyterian blue, and bore a portrait of John Knox. It was a self-consciously respectable and religious rival to such precursors as *Old Moore*, combining useful information and agricultural advice culled from other publications with news of Presbyterian activities worldwide and commentary on current events. Each edition was prefaced by a standard verse with adaptations commenting on the previous year's events. (Early editions also had a verse beneath each year in the calendar, commenting on anniversaries or on a series of linked themes.) The 1844 edition summarizes its contents as follows (year-specific items in plain type, recurring elements in italics):

I give in likeness true this year,
 The father of our Zion dear – [Rev. James Elder of Finvoy]
 A patriarch whose hoary head
 Now slumbers with the ransomed dead.
 A faithful history I render
 Of Derry Walls and 'No Surrender'.
 I name each precious stone and gem
 That garnish New Jerusalem;
 And *tell of years of olden date,*
Of men who braved the martyr's fate,
Of fields where first our sires did plant
The banner of the Covenant.
Each Minister is noted down,
His congregation and post town,
That he who runs may read and see
The list of our Assembly.
Its Foreign, Home and Jewish Mission
I give with accurate precision
 I hail the Church of Scotland – Free,
 Her dawn of Christian Liberty!
 Opposed to Puseyite succession,
 I trace the sires of our Confession, –
 The followers of Him, whose name,
 From Judah, not from Levi, came.
Of Churches then my pen narrates,
Moravian – Wesleyan – Welsh – the States,

*Knox, Calvin, Melville, Blair and others,
 I rank as Presbyterian brothers.
 I tell of Sun, and Moon, and Tides,
 Eclipses, Fairs, Post-Office guides;
 The penny-Postage and the Mails,
 The Queen and the young Prince of Wales;
 With skill Municipal declare
 The Council, Aldermen, and Mayor.
 Enigma, clear – obscure – sublime,
 For Bards to solve in flowing rhyme;
 And many strange and wondrous cracks,
 Not found in other Almanacks.²⁴*

The opening years of the *Presbyterian Almanac* were overshadowed by the patronage dispute in the Church of Scotland, as Evangelicals led by Thomas Chalmers sought to secure that ministers should be elected by the congregation rather than nominated by a patron. Although Peel's Conservatives used figures like Cooke and Chalmers in rebuilding their party during the 1830s, they were unwilling to give the church so much power over its own affairs.²⁵ McComb lamented that they were 'opposed and persecuted by those very politicians under whose banners they had ranged themselves'.²⁶ The Evangelical view of the dispute was backed up in the *Almanac* between 1841 and 1850 in a serialized history of the Church of Scotland summarized from a work by the evangelical Revd A.M. Hetherington of Torphichen.²⁷ In the first *Almanac* McComb rallied his readers with an article on the 'Present Position of the Church of Scotland'; McComb clearly expected that some readers would not know of the dispute, or even of the existence of the patronage system in Scotland. He denounced the 'Moderate' supporters of patronage as crypto-episcopalians, descendants of those who crept into the Church of Scotland after 1688 through 'the too great liberality of Presbyterians', which McComb also blamed for the paucity of Presbyterian MPs:

Whilst the emissaries of infidelity and debauchery [Owenites – *McComb's footnote*] and Popery may roam at large over the whole of broad Scotland, her Presbyterian ministers, because of their fidelity to Christ the King, and faithfulness of his people, are threatened, prosecuted, and prohibited, on pain of incarceration, from preaching even in the open air ...

²⁴ *PA* (1844), 1. 'Puseyite succession' refers to the Catholic, Orthodox and High Anglican view that ministerial/priestly orders are conferred through ordination by a bishop in succession from the apostles, upheld by followers of the Anglo-Catholic leader of the remnant Oxford Movement, E.B. Pusey. When the ex-Presbyterian Archibald Tait became archbishop of Canterbury, McComb mockingly enquired whether Puseyites believed his Presbyterian baptism invalidated his orders (*PA* (1869), 63). ²⁵ Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the godly commonwealth* (Oxford, 1982). ²⁶ 'Present position of the Church of Scotland', *PA* (1841), 59–62. ²⁷ E.g. *PA* (1850), 62–4.

Now we ask the Presbyterians of Ulster, and of Ireland generally, will they sit coolly still while such things are doing? Will they suffer their brethren in Scotland, to be deprived of their liberties, have their ministers imprisoned, and their families reduced to beggary before their very eyes? ... if the Patronage triumphs there, it may soon be riveted upon us here ... Prove by your exertions for the Church of Scotland, that the cause of the martyrs is still dear to you, and that the blood of the Covenant still flows within your veins. Tell the British Parliament ... that your Presbyterianism is dearer to you than your life ... Tell those Members of Parliament who should represent you. . that they should advocate your cause and that of Scotland before the British Senate, or else, you will look out for those who will. Tell your landlords that conscience requires you, henceforth, to act independently as freeholders, and that you will support no candidate who will not support your principles and struggle for the Church of your forefathers.²⁸

This call on Presbyterian tenants to defy their landlords is noteworthy from a supporter of Cooke, whose calls for a pan-Protestant alliance involved suspicion of tenant-right agitators and considerable laudation (sometimes echoed by McComb) for Church of Ireland Tory aristocrats.²⁹ McComb's most celebrated verses (whose opening, metre and language he redeployed in verses celebrating the tercentenaries of the Church of Scotland and the death of John Knox) were written after the 10 June 1842 bicentenary commemorations of the first Ulster Presbytery in Carrickfergus (modelled on the 1838 bicentenary celebrations of the Presbytery of Glasgow):³⁰

Two hundred years ago, there came from Scotland's storied land,
To Carrick's old and fortress town a Presbyterian band;
They planted on the Castle wall the Banner of the Blue,
And worshipped God in simple form, as Presbyterians do.
Oh, hallowed be their memory who in our land did sow
The goodly seed of Gospel Truth, two hundred years ago!

After contrasting the tiny founding presbytery with the expanding church of his own day, recalling the Sixmilewater revival and celebrating the newly-begun missionary activities of Irish Presbyterianism, McComb equated the looming patronage issue with the persecution of Covenanters under the later Stuarts:

Two hundred years ago was seen the proud and mitred brow
Frowning on Scotland's envied kirk, as it is frowning now;

²⁸ 'Present position of the Church of Scotland', *PA* (1841), 59–62. ²⁹ *Repealer repulsed*, pp ix–x, 193–4; 'The funeral of the late marquis of Downshire at Hillsborough, April 24, 1845', *PW*, pp 276–9; 'Lines on the laying of the foundation stone of the testimonial to the late marquis of Downshire, October 23, 1848', *ibid.*, pp 280–1. ³⁰ *PA* (1843), 60–1.

But enemies in church and state may threaten stern decree;
 Her Ministers are men of prayer – her people still are free:
 Nor threat, nor interdict, nor wile of Legislative show
 Shall change the men whose fathers bled, two hundred years ago.

Two hundred years ago, o'er graves the bluebell drooped its head,
 The purple heather sadly waved above the honoured dead;
 The mist lay heavy on the hill – the lav'rock ceased to soar,
 And Scotland mourned her martyr'd sons on mountain and on moor;
 And still hers is a mourning Church; but He who made her so
 Is nigh to aid her as he was two hundred years ago.

McComb finally contrasts peaceful Presbyterian Ulster with the rest of Ireland, where 'Popery is the same it was two hundred years ago'.³¹ When the 'Disruption' took place in 1843 – with the secession of Chalmers and his followers, comprising almost half the ministers and more than half the laity, to form the Free Church of Scotland – McComb hailed Scotland's third reformation,³² and wrote impassioned verses comparing it to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.³³ The Irish Presbyterian church entered communion with the Free Church, breaking with the remnant established Church of Scotland. For some years McComb publicized cases where Free Church congregations worshipped in the open air, like seventeenth-century Covenanters, because Highland landlords refused to allow them to build a church.³⁴ The principal aristocratic supporter of the Free Church was John Campbell, second marquis of Breadalbane; McComb regaled readers of the *Presbyterian Almanac* with a description of his mansion, Taymouth Castle.³⁵ A large and elaborate Berlin wool carpet woven by Belfast Presbyterian women was presented to Breadalbane on 23 October 1843, accompanied by a speech from Chalmers and some verses by McComb:

Look on the splendid centre-group, and see
 The harp of Erin's ancient minstrelsy-
 Hibernia sits, as if enthroned in song,
 Sweeping, with rapid hand, the chords along.
 'Midst wreath of Scottish thistle, lo! I see
 Breadalbane's arms in blazoned heraldry –
 Breadalbane's honour'd name, his country's boast,
 To Scotland's free-born Church a mighty host ...

McComb visualized Breadalbane explaining the significance of the carpet to Queen Victoria on her next visit to Taymouth (clumsily putting exuberant praise of the Marquis into that worthy's own mouth):

31 *PA* (1843), 61–2; 'Two hundred years ago', *PW*, pp 210–12. 32 *PA* (1844), 32. The first Reformation was led by John Knox; the second by the seventeenth-century Covenanters. 33 *PA* (1844); 'The Free Church of Scotland – the disruption', *PW*, pp 212–14. 34 *PA* (1848), (Duthil), 122; (1849), (Wanlockhead), 120. 35 *PA* (1844), 71–2.

This Carpet, wrought in curious needle art,
 Is the free offering of the Irish heart:
 Erin's fair daughters, who the needle plied,
 To Scotland's church by sacred ties allied,
 Felt deeply for her wrongs, and mourned to see
 The hand that helped the slave assault the free.
 They heard how great Breadalbane, wise and good,
 Before the Senate and his country stood ...
 When high-born nobles from the combat fled,
 With dauntless step he to the rescue sped ...
 And in this splendid trophy here you see
 How Erin's daughters love the brave and free.³⁶

In the 1840s McComb saw Ulster Presbyterians engaged in a worldwide struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism prefiguring the final apocalypse. The Oxford Movement, with its revival of Catholic-related sacramentalism within the Church of England, appeared a sinister portent; when noting the anniversary of the death of the American Presbyterian Andrew McLeod, McComb declared: 'M'LEOD, some thirty years ago, Foretold of Britain's night of woe; Of Puseyism's crafty reign, When the two witnesses are slain.'³⁷ (The two witnesses are Enoch and Elijah, expected to return to preach against Antichrist; their death at his hands opens the final tribulation.) McComb presents the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in the same terms:

The Free Church has already presented a new centre of attraction to other churches, and it may, we think, be confidently expected, that through her instrumentality the true churches of the Reformation will be united more and more. The aspect of the times would seem to warrant the expectation, that a great struggle is approaching in which the Presbyterian Church will bear a distinguished part. The state of the Church of England now overrun with deadly and anti-Protestant error, fatally insensible to danger, together with the growing confidence and high-rated anticipations of the man of sin [i.e. the Pope] give warning of coming judgment; and who can tell, but that by the whole train of circumstances which has led the Free Church to her present elevated position, the Lord may have been preparing the way for a combined effort of his people against the common foe ...³⁸

This is a neglected element in the alliance of evangelical Anglicans and Presbyterians, often seen simply as manipulation of the Presbyterians by Church of Ireland aristocrats; the blurring of denominational boundaries caused by shared evangelical

³⁶ *PA* (1844), 70; 'The Carpet', *PW*, pp 256-8. ³⁷ *PA* (1844), 16 ('Rev. Alexander McLeod died at New York 1833 act. 59'). ³⁸ *PA* (1844), 62-4.

commitment and the periodic defection of individual evangelical Anglicans to Nonconformist denominations led some Presbyterians to expect the eventual conversion of their allies to Presbyterianism;³⁹ we shall see how in later years McComb predicted eventual Presbyterian world dominance. The obituary for Chalmers in the 1848 *Almanac* laments that like Moses God called him away when the battle looms, and urges new Joshuas to fight against Antichrist.⁴⁰

McComb's narrative poem, *1848: The Story of a Year*, argues that the revolutions of 1848 vindicate the interpretation of the apocalypse put forward in *Apocalyptical Key: An Extraordinary Discourse on the Rise and Fall of Papacy* (1701) by the early-eighteenth-century Scotch Presbyterian commentator Robert Fleming (c.1660–1716), who attracted renewed attention after the French revolution was seen as fulfilling his prediction that a great chastisement of the papacy would begin with the downfall of the French monarchy in 1794, culminating with another great blow in 1848. Fleming did not expect this to bring the complete destruction of the papacy, but predicted another great chastisement in 1866. The downfall of the papacy would be followed by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit gathering of the nations to the Gospel light.⁴¹

In the 1850s and 1860s McComb moved away from his earlier quasi-premillennialist view (premillennialists interpret the Book of the Apocalypse as foretelling general apostasy culminating in the appearance of Antichrist, after which Jesus will return) to a more optimistic postmillennialist view based on Fleming's prediction of the Parousia. (Postmillennialists interpret the Apocalypse's reference to a thousand-year reign of Christ as meaning the diffusion of the Church throughout the world will produce a thousand-year period of peace, piety, and prosperity before the appearance of Antichrist and the Final Judgment.)⁴² This shift from pessimism to optimism derived from several sources. There had been widespread expectation of

39 Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant secessions from the Via Media 1800–1850* (Oxford, 2001) discusses this phenomenon. Note also McComb's view of the Lutheran Church of Sweden as illustrating the evils of Protestant Episcopalianism and his hopes for its conversion to Presbyterianism (*PA* (1855), 59). 40 *PA* (1848), 63; 'Tribute to the memory of the Rev. Dr. Chalmers', *PW*, pp 281–5. 41 *Oxford DNB* article 'Robert Fleming' by M.J. Mercer; <http://www.ao.net/~fmoeller/fleming.htm> (accessed 21 June 2006) by a present-day exponent of Fleming's system. 42 For a discussion of premillennialism, including the relevant biblical texts, see Paul Boyer, *When time shall be no more: prophecy belief in modern American culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1992). In the discussion following the original presentation of this paper in Derry in 2006, Andrew Holmes criticized the description of McComb as premillennialist in the pre-Famine period, stating that postmillennialism was overwhelmingly dominant among nineteenth-century Ulster Presbyterians; however, the identification of Puseyism with Antichrist is clearly premillennialist, though the suggestion that the Free Church of Scotland will defeat the forces of darkness and usher in a golden age suggests postmillennialism. McComb may have been influenced by his contacts with Anglican Evangelicals (such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna – see her *Irish recollections* (Dublin, 2004 with preface by Patrick Maume) among whom premillennialism was extremely widespread, without definitively embracing it himself. Cf., tribute to Tonna, *PA* (1866), 100–1.

conflict between the France of Louis Philippe and Britain; although the role of perceived Catholic–continental threat was taken over to some extent by Napoleon III, the fact that Britain, almost uniquely, did not experience a major revolt in 1848 is presented in *The Story of a Year* as a sign of divine blessing (with Ulster's loyalty and supposed tranquillity attributed to Bible teaching – 'Heaven's bow of Gospel light effulgent shone, Stretching from Ulster's vales to loved VICTORIA's throne').⁴³ These fears were further dispelled by the alliance of France and Britain against Russia in the Crimea,⁴⁴ and the subsequent clash between France and the other major Catholic power, Austria, in northern Italy in 1859.⁴⁵ McComb noted that both powers seemed to regard the pope as 'a species of political nuisance'; he remarked in 1863 that Napoleon III and Victor Emmanuel would be greatly relieved if the pope emigrated to California or went to Ballinasloe to assist 'his faithful helper, [Archbishop] John [MacHale] of Tuam, to curse and to bluster'.⁴⁶

The Oxford Movement within the Church of England abated after the secession of Newman to Rome (though the remnant centred around Pusey continued to arouse evangelical suspicion they never held the same strength and prestige),⁴⁷ and the flow of converts to Catholicism tailed off in the 1850s.⁴⁸ McComb welcomed the Ecclesiastical Titles Act (forbidding Catholic bishops to bear United Kingdom territorial titles, formally enacted July 1851) as a blow against Roman aggression and a sign that Whig appeasement of Catholicism was being abandoned.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Lord Palmerston's ecclesiastical policy favoured the evangelical wing of the Church of England, promoting what McComb called 'excellent Calvinist bishops'.⁵⁰ (In the 1850s and 1860s McComb appears to have been a Palmerstonian Whig rather than a Derbyite Conservative like Cooke, although McComb is not known to have criticized Cooke and continued to praise him as a second John Knox; McComb even supported Disestablishment – which Cooke opposed to the last – as preferable to the alternative policy of concurrently endowing Romanism,⁵¹ predicting that a disestablished Church of Ireland – a title which he disliked – would become Presbyterian in all but name.)⁵² Palmerston could also be seen as a Protestant champion through his support for the Italian nationalist movement.⁵³ The *Presbyterian Almanac* in the late

43 *PW*, pp 142–4. 44 *PA* (1855), 3; (1856), 3–4. 45 *PA* (1860), 3–4, 61, 64. 46 *PA* (1863), 1. 47 Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian church part one: 1829–1859* (1970, London, 1987), pp 195–212. 48 Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian church part two: 1860–1901* (1970, London, 1987), p. 401. 'The Roman Catholics never regained the extraordinary sense of confidence and hope which the years, and the statistics, of 1844–54 bred in them'; see also pp 409–10. McComb notes the decline in *PA* (1866), 'Report on Popery', 59. 49 *PA* (1852), 4. 50 *PA* (1858), 62. 51 *PA* (1868), 2–3. Cf. also his 1869 profile of the leading Ulster Presbyterian Liberal MP Sir Thomas McClure (72) which devotes more space to Presbyterian ministers among McClure's ancestors than to McClure himself. McComb's comments on the damaging effect of Erastianism on the Prussian Church (e.g. *PA* (1854), 60–1; (1870), 70–1) can be seen as pointing in the same direction, though they are not necessarily incompatible with belief in the principle of establishment (McComb hoped the Prussian Church might yet become Presbyterianism – *PA* (1866), 67). 52 *PA* (1867), 75–6, (1869), 3; (1870), 1; (1871), 6. 53 For a hostile Irish Derbyite view of Palmerston's image

1850s and 1860s exalted over the crumbling power of Pius IX;⁵⁴ Garibaldi was eulogized and Irish volunteers for the Papal Brigade mocked as chiefly effective in fighting each other,⁵⁵ and learning from experience how much better off they were under Queen Victoria than as temporal subjects of the pope.⁵⁶ Fleming's prophecy of papal setbacks in 1866 was presented as foretelling the defeat of Catholic Austria by Protestant Prussia,⁵⁷ and a prophecy that the First Vatican Council would be engulfed by an earthquake was retrospectively seen as fulfilled by the Italian occupation of Rome.⁵⁸ Although McComb calculated the papacy would not finally disappear until 2015,⁵⁹ he anticipated massive conversions to Protestantism on the continent, and a general move by continental Protestant churches towards orthodox Calvinism and Presbyterian church government.⁶⁰

Reporting the 1860 tricentenary of the Scottish Reformation, McComb announced:

Whilst time is proving that other systems are behind the age, and becoming unfit for effective exertion, Presbyterianism has yet scarcely reached manhood, and is evidently girding herself for something greater than she has ever yet attempted. The days of ecclesiastical despotism are numbered, but Presbyterianism, which secures liberty without licentiousness, and unity without sameness, is the system which must eventually prevail all over Christendom. Steam has done much to prepare the way for its general establishment.⁶¹

The belief in Victorian technological developments as both fruits of the Reformation and divinely-ordained means for the expansion of Presbyterianism is characteristic of McComb, as is his cannibalization of his 1842 'Carrickfergus Bicentenary Ode for Reformation Tercentenary' verses emphasizing Presbyterian Ulster's debt to Knox and the Scots Covenanters, implicitly equated with Old Testament Israel as a chosen people:

Three hundred years ago there dwelt, on mountain and in glen,
In Scotland's chosen land a race of brave and stalwart men:
From sire to son they handed down a heritage and name,
Unsullied as Ben Lomond's snow, and spotless as the same.
Oh, for the muse of Israel's bard! – oh, for a harp of gold!

as a Protestant champion see Alexander Charles Ewald, *The life of Sir Joseph Napier, Bart., ex-lord chancellor of Ireland, from his private correspondence* (London, 1887). **54** *PA* (1861), 4 (hopes the pope will use the leisure attained by shrinkage of his dominions to study the New Testament and the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism to learn about 'the Presbyterians, before whom he is doomed to fall'). **55** *PA* (1861), 93. **56** *PA* (1861), 4; (1862), 63. **57** *PA* (1867), 97–8. **58** *PA* (1870), 1–2; (1871), 71–2. **59** *PA* (1856), 61 – i.e. 1260 years after the creation of the Papal States in 755. **60** *PA* (1852), 63–4; (1859), 68. **61** *PA* (1861), 62–3.

To sing of all our fathers did in glorious times of old:
 Their witness-bearing for the truth – their bold front to the foe –
 Their faith, and hope, and holy love, THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO ...

Three hundred years ago was owned, the standard of our faith
 By Scottish Parliament, and freed from Antichristian scaith;
 And Presbyterian worship hailed with national array,
 Establishing its simple forms from thenceforth and for aye:
 No other Church, of any land, in Reformation days,
 Did e'er on Freedom's pedestal such high memorial raise:
 In all its long contendings – in weal-time and in woe –
 It nailed its banner to the Cross, THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO ...

TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, there came to Ulster's fertile shore
 A goodly race of faithful men, our birthright to restore;
 We hailed them from the fatherland of mountain and of flood-
 The sons of sires who fought the fight, resisting unto blood.
 Hence Ireland's Presbyterian Church sends greeting on the day
 When Scotland's Presbyterian Church holds Tri-Centenary.
 The bulwark of our liberty to Scotland's sons we owe,
 And to our martyred ancestors, THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO.⁶²

McComb had always been interested in technological progress:⁶³ now he declared it divinely ordained to spread Presbyterianism:

During the past year, the electric telegraph has been extending its influence. In a short time we expect to be able to convey messages in a few minutes to the United States. As a matter of convenience, all the Supreme Courts of the Presbyterian Church throughout the world may soon find it expedient to meet simultaneously. Then our Assembly, met in Belfast, Dublin, or Galway, may be receiving telegraphic messages from other Assemblies sitting in Edinburgh, London, New York, Paris, La Tour, Jerusalem, and Melbourne. All the Presbyterian Churches may thus be enabled to agree upon the same line of action, and may exhibit a specimen of ecclesiastical unity which will astonish the Romanists ...⁶⁴

62 *PA* (1861), 9; 'Tri-centenary of the Reformation in Scotland', in *PW*, 353–5. 63 Cf. the calendar verses in *PA* (1847) which describe the wonders of the nineteenth century – railways, the electric telegraph, daguerreotype portraits, balloons, steam, penny postage, the atmospheric railway, the diving bell, Lord Rosse's telescope, the steam press and the Thames Tunnel – ending grimly with potato blight (p. 36). 64 *PA* (1857), 4. Cf. also 'The Atlantic telegraph cable' in *PW*, pp 337–8 and the Grey Seer's Ossianic raptures on the same subject in *PA* (1867), 97.

The *Presbyterian Almanac's* reports on developments in the reformed Churches of the globe encouraged readers to see themselves as part of a worldwide movement. McComb was always eager for signs that the Presbyterians of the British Dominions – or even the whole world – might coalesce into one body,⁶⁵ and hailed the resurgence of orthodox High Calvinism against 'neology' (that is, theological Modernism) in continental Protestant churches.⁶⁶ Moral progress was also embodied in the destruction of American slavery by 'President Lincoln, a good old Presbyterian, a patron of Sabbath-schools, and a lover of liberty',⁶⁷ for whom McComb penned an impassioned elegy ('Sound the loud trumpet! O'er land and o'er sea Jehovah hath triumphed – the Negro is free').⁶⁸ McComb liked to quote Jonathan Edwards' prediction that the final gospel revival would spread westwards from America,⁶⁹ and when gloating over the discomfiture of Irish Catholic nationalists who hoped the seizure of Confederate envoys from the British ship *Trent* would lead to war, remarked that as the two greatest Protestant powers Britain and America should never quarrel.⁷⁰ 'Presbyterians stand at the head of all American denominations in intellectual culture.'⁷¹

The election of Presbyterian presidents in the United States, like the activities of Presbyterian imperial heroes such as the missionary David Livingstone and Sir Colin Campbell, reliever of Lucknow in the 'Indian Mutiny', were cited as disproving 'the threadbare calumny that Presbyterianism is not a religion for a gentleman',⁷² and supporting calls for Irish Presbyterians 'one-half of churchgoing Irish protestants' to receive their fair share of government posts and social recognition.⁷³ McComb highlighted the performance of Presbyterians as magistrates and civic officers and official recognition or favour shown to Presbyterians by the queen or the lord lieutenant.⁷⁴ The *Almanac* regularly covered the erection of new Presbyterian churches and institutions such as Magee College.⁷⁵

McComb's optimism was encouraged by developments in Catholic and Nationalist Ireland. In the 1830s and 1840s O'Connell seemed an ever-present menace; *The Repealer Repulsed* links his Belfast visit to a papally-directed conspiracy against Protestant Ulster and equates his influence over the Whig governments of the

65 *PA* (1864), 1–2. 66 E.g. – Holland: *PA* (1853), 62; (1855), 59; (1867), 67; (1869), 67; (1870), 70–1; Geneva (where McComb emphasized the Reformation historian Merle D'Aubigne as champion of orthodoxy), (1851), 64; (1853), 64; (1854), 58–9; (1869), 68; Prussia: (1855), 59–60; France (1850), 66–8; (1851), 64; (1854), 60. 67 *PA* (1861), 4. Lincoln had Calvinistic Baptist parents and sometimes attended Presbyterian services but was never a formal member of any church. 68 *PA* (1861), 11. McComb's abolitionism is expressed in *PA* (1862), 1; (1865), 1 and in 'To Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe – On Her Arrival in Britain', *PW*, pp 319–20. 69 *PA* (1853), 64–65. 70 *PA* (1862), 1. 71 *PA* (1870), 2. 72 *PA* (1858), 3–4. McComb notes the Presbyterianism of American President Buchanan (cf. also *PA* (1859), 57) and takes credit for General Havelock, another leading figure in the Indian repression of 1857, as 'a Calvinistic Baptist, nourished by the milk of Presbyterian preaching'. He noted the 'fiendish joy' of some Irish Catholic papers (probably A.M. Sullivan's *Nation*) at the prospect that the Sepoys might prevail, *PA* (1858), 4. 73 *PA* (1866), 71. 74 See *PA* (1851), 4; (1864), 2. 75 *PA* (1866), 1.

1830s with persecution of Protestants in the 1640s, under James II and in the 1798 Rebellion.⁷⁶ With O'Connell's death and the collapse of the Repeal movement, the enemy seemed deprived of coherent leadership; no threat of equal stature appeared in McComb's lifetime. Although the *Presbyterian Almanac* noted the growing Romanization of the Catholic Church in Ireland under Cardinal Cullen, and the Fenian movement,⁷⁷ both are ridiculed as effective only in proving 'papist' malevolence;⁷⁸ the nascent home rule movement is dismissed as the work of windbags who do not realize that without the Union Ireland would be torn apart by factions.⁷⁹

McComb lauded the Revd John Edgar's policy of Irish-language evangelization in Connacht and Munster. He argued that Scottish Highlanders and Gaelic Irish were the same people, pointing out that the seventeenth-century Scottish General Assembly referred to Scots Gaelic as 'Irish' and even to Gaelic-speaking areas as 'Irish parishes'; the current religious difference between the two he attributed to Irish Episcopalian negligence:

The Scottish Highlanders are now a race as civilised and moral as any in Europe, and why? The "Ard-Eaglais na h-Alba"... treated them as rational beings, afforded them religious instruction in its own language, and ... the Highlanders are, for the most part, devoted Protestants.⁸⁰

He saw the Famine as a heaven-sent opportunity for evangelization; the peasantry would see that where priests were powerless to help them the generosity of Ulster and Scotland would bring relief.⁸¹ (McComb's support for voluntary relief efforts – he wrote poems proclaiming 'Come to the Rescue' and supporting a 'Bazaar for the Famishing Poor in Connaught'⁸² – was accompanied by complaints that the rate-in-aid subsidized thriftless papist Connaught at the expense of hardworking Presbyterian Ulster.)⁸³

Although McComb published technical advice on potato blight (suggesting it might be overcome by planting potatoes in winter instead of spring,⁸⁴ or advocating dry ashes as manure and docks as pig-feed),⁸⁵ he emphasized that it was the will of God, to be met with submission and prayer.⁸⁶ After prematurely hailing the 1847 harvest as divine interposition to save the people,⁸⁷ he decided the blight would last

⁷⁶ *Repealer repulsed*, pp 168–85. ⁷⁷ *PA* (1867), 68; *PA* (1866) 3; (1867), 3. ⁷⁸ *PA* (1868), 2–3; (1870), 2. When Cardinal Wiseman toured Ireland McComb commented that a Cardinal in full canonicals helped one to visualize the Scarlet Beast of the Apocalypse (*PA* (1859), 3–4). ⁷⁹ *PA* (1873), 6. ⁸⁰ *PA* (1841), 75. ⁸¹ *PA* (1848), 56. ⁸² *Collected poems*, pp 194–6; 'Call to prayer', pp 196–7 endorses the general Fast Day of 24 March 1847, while 'Harvest hymn', pp 197–8 prematurely proclaimed that the harvest of 1847 showed God's wrath had been turned away. ⁸³ *PA* (1850), 4. ⁸⁴ *PA* (1847), 10–11. ⁸⁵ *PA* (1849), 79–80. ⁸⁶ *PA* (1846), 28; see also 'Come to the rescue', *PW*, pp 194–5; 'Bazaar – for the famishing poor in Connaught', *PW*, pp 195–6; 'Call to prayer – suggested by a proclamation from the queen for a general fast, on the 24th March, 1847', *PW*, pp 196–7. ⁸⁷ *PA* (1848), 8–11; see also 'Harvest hymn – call to praise and prayer', *PW*, pp 197–8

a Biblical seven years,⁸⁸ looking back at the end of that period, McComb declared it had wrought as great a change as if the pope turned 'Mahommedan' or the Council of the Tenant League were elected to parliament.⁸⁹ He offered a harshly punitive explanation (though it should be borne in mind that supporters of the view that the Famine represented divine punishment did not necessarily believe it wrong to relieve the starving):

Our opinion is that if Sabbath breaking and Romanism were banished out of the land, there would be nothing to prevent the growth of our favourite vegetable. When we see it announced in the newspapers that five hundred priests in Connaught and Munster have renounced their errors, and applied for admission into the General Assembly, we shall have as fine crops of seedlings and flat reds as ever gladdened the heart of an Irish farmer.⁹⁰

In the subsequent decade McComb saw the Famine as preparing Ireland's economic regeneration. He hailed William Dargan's 1853 Dublin International Exhibition as a daystar of hope,⁹¹ and excerpted newspaper comments about growing prosperity and rising wages.⁹² In 1861 McComb reprinted an article by Edgar pointing to the purchase of Irish land by Scots farmers and landlords under the Encumbered Estates Act and the activities of Presbyterian missionaries in the three southern provinces as proof that 'Ireland owes Presbyterians much in her soil and her people. In both they are making her as the garden of the Lord'.⁹³ Converts from Catholicism during the 1859 Ulster Revival (which McComb noted coincided with the Scottish Reformation tercentenary),⁹⁴ were hailed as 'first fruits of a glorious harvest all over St Patrick's land ... What Presbyterians make Ulster, they will make Munster and Connaught; revived Ulster will break forth on the right hand and on the left, and all Erin shall yet see the salvation of God'.⁹⁵

McComb's writings were not all so sombre. A popular feature of the *Almanac* was 'The Old Grey Seer of the Bracken Tower'.⁹⁶ This persona was based on the legendary seventeenth- (or sixteenth-) century Highland prophet Coinneach Adhair, the 'Brahan Seer'⁹⁷ (from Brahan in Wester Ross; McComb's version is first called 'brechan', which he takes as meaning 'bracken', before changing it to the standard English word).⁹⁸ The Seer commented in pseudo-Ossianic style on his age and

(written Cultra, 23 Aug. 1847). ⁸⁸ *PA* (1850), 3. ⁸⁹ *PA* (1851), 4. ⁹⁰ *PA* (1849), 6. ⁹¹ *PA* (1854), 3. ⁹² *PA* (1857), 86–7. ⁹³ McComb gives particular praise to Allan Pollock, whose 1854–7 attempts to clear his newly-purchased Connemara estate provoked vigorous and successful resistance by his tenants: see Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity 1789–2006* (Oxford, 2007), p. 242. ⁹⁴ *PA* (1860), 4, 69–71. ⁹⁵ *PA* (1861), 70–3; see also 1853. ⁹⁶ McComb attempted to discontinue this feature in 1860 but it was brought back by popular demand. ⁹⁷ Alexander Mackenzie, *The prophecies of the Brahan Seer* (1877) available online at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/8287/brahan.html> (accessed 21 June 2005); see also the BBC profile at http://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/myths_legends/scotland/western/index.shtml (accessed 21 June 2005). ⁹⁸ *PA* (1846), 90–1; the change to

waning vitality, described annual Hallowe'en visits to his tower and its bracken-filled surroundings, whose inutility fitly represented the realms of fantasy, communed with the 'spirits' of his correspondents, and reviewed the previous year in pseudo-bardic style (with occasional prophecies of such auspicious events as the reconquest of Rome)⁹⁹ before unveiling the annual 'Enigma' (a verse riddle, to be answered in a verse composition on the same theme). Some early columns present the Seer as a mildly Faustian figure like Michael Scott, whose enigmas are presented as challenges by malign spirits who will destroy him unless readers solve the mystery.¹ In later Almanacks he becomes the vehicle for McComb's musings on death, faith and revisiting his native Causeway Coast.²

McComb sold his business in 1864 when he published his *Poetical Works*, though he continued writing for the *Presbyterian Almanac* (now published by James Cleeland of Arthur Street). He lived to welcome the prospect of the 1870 Land Act,³ compose an elegy for Cooke (compared to David as a shepherd boy raised to kingship)⁴ and call for the 1872 tercentenary of John Knox's death to be celebrated with a Belfast memorial column (presumably modelled on that in the Glasgow Necropolis):

Three hundred years ago! 'tis true three cycles thus have run;
 And sure 'tis well in thought to dwell on what the Lord has done
 In freeing conscience from the grasp of bigotry and wrong;
 And making by the Word of God the feeble flock grow strong.
 And shall this anniversary unnoted pass away?
 No, sons of true men let us all commemorate the day;
 And let us raise a column fair in future times to show
 Honour to Knox and his compeers three hundred years ago.⁵

In his last appearance as the Grey Seer (1872) McComb invoked Ossian to celebrate the meeting of Stanley and Livingstone.⁶ His last known verses 'On the Death of Rev. James Morgan, my dear Pastor' were written on 8 August 1873,⁷ just over a month before McComb's own death on 13 September.

McComb saw himself as living at the beginning of a Presbyterian golden age, but he embodied many of the trends which, as David Miller shows, transformed Ulster Presbyterianism from a cross-class community religion to one dominated by a cerebral and decorous middle-class piety, while the lower classes became unchurched or turned to revivalism.⁸ He saw himself as the heir of Ossian, celebrating a divinely-driven epic of Presbyterian revival and evangelization, when in fact the self-deflating irony which accompanies the proclamations of the Old Seer prefigured the self-

'bracken' comes in (1851), 80. The 'lone tower' first features in *PA*, (1844), 98-9. ⁹⁹ *PA* (1862), 91-2. ¹ *PA* (1847), 83-4; (1848), 82-4. ² *PA* (1867), 97-9, (1870), 95-9. ³ *PA* (1870), 2. ⁴ *PA* (1869), 1-4; on p. 3 Cooke is called the most distinguished minister ever produced by the Presbytery of Ulster. ⁵ *PA* (1873), 6. ⁶ *PA* (1873), 7. ⁷ *PA* (1873), 10. ⁸ David W. Miller, 'Did Ulster Presbyterians have a devotional revolution?', in James H. Murphy (ed.), *Evangelicals and Catholics in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), pp 38-54.

conscious provincialism of later Ulster kailyard writers. For later Presbyterian church-affiliated literati as late as the mid-twentieth century McComb remained an honoured name even though his works were increasingly neglected (in his work on the rhyming weavers John Hewitt still thought it necessary to make a brief and dismissive reference to 'that sanctimonious bookseller'),⁹ but his social, political and religious hopes of a converted Ireland and a worldwide Presbyterian modernity, increasingly far-fetched by the time of his death, were driven from public memory with the collapse of the mid-Victorian order. The sardonic Belfast journalist Frankfort Moore escaped from an evangelical (Brethren) upbringing into polished agnostic derision and a cult of the eighteenth century; looking for an emblem of the provincial pretentiousness of mid-Victorian Belfast, he seized on

Mr M'Comb's highly-decorated volume of poems – an ornament to the parlour centre table of the period, harmonising with the Berlin wool mats [Breadalbane's carpet!] and in no way clashing with the vivid green of the red curtains or the horsehair upholstery of the parlour ... the verse of a thoughtful, pious and educated man – a man of many sympathies and much good sense.¹⁰

⁹ John Hewitt, *Rhyming weavers* (Belfast, reprinted 2004) p. 103. ¹⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 Mar. 1924, 5; see also Patrick Maume (ed.), Frank Frankfort Moore, *In Belfast by the sea* (Dublin, 2007), pp 93-4 & n. 76, p. 93.