'New light' Ulster Presbyterianism and the nationalist rhetoric of John Mitchel

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In the pantheon of Irish nationalism John Mitchel occupies a most awkward eminence. Not that he was in the least ambivalent about being identified as Irish – as was Jonathan Swift, for example – nor of course because he was a Protestant. What complicates his position is rather his earnestly avowed sympathy with the Confederacy in the American civil war, which extended even to defending slavery as a local institution. The proponents of Irish nationalism, certainly those in twentieth-century republican movements, have generally preferred to focus upon its underpinnings in the Enlightenment, its first expression in 1798, and its evolution since as consonant with that of democracy. Mitchel, on the other hand, though a revolutionary, was no democrat, as Emile Montegut, reviewing the *Jail Journal* for the *Revue des deux Mondes*, perceived in 1855:

> Revolutions seem to him to be desirable because they will produce in the long run the new political forms which shall remake the world, and not because they will assert the doctrine of the rights of man and force humanity to a common level ... Mitchel has revolutionary instincts; he has no democratic instincts.[1]

To be sure, Mitchel, who had a strong following in his own lifetime, has had his defenders among twentieth-century nationalists, drawn to him by his rhetorical forthrightness, his willingness to argue his corner without hesitancy or, perhaps, even prudence. Arthur Griffith, for instance, introduced the *Jail Journal* in 1913 with an encomium of Mitchel as an utterly independent thinker, and castigated those who found his pro-slavery stance embarrassing or at best eccentric: 'even his views on negro-slavery have been deprecatingly excused, as if excuse were needed for an Irish Nationalist declining to hold the negro his peer in right'. For, Griffith went on

> The right of the Irish to political independence never was, is not, and never can be dependent upon the admission of equal right in all other peoples. It

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is based on no theory of, and dependable in no wise for its existence or justification on the 'Rights of Man', it is independent of theories of government and doctrines of philanthropy and Universalism. He who holds Ireland a nation and all means lawful to restore her to the full and free exercise of national liberties thereby no more commits himself to the theory that black equals white . . . than he commits himself to the belief that sunshine is extractable from cucumbers. Against all effort to limit the liberty of the Irish Nationalist to think for himself . . . John Mitchel is the superb protest.[2]

There may be an element of special pleading here, for Griffith was himself a notorious anti-Semite, but the independence of thought identified as characteristic of Mitchel informs a rhetoric that stands as Mitchel's enduring achievement, however uncomfortable his defence of slavery has made most other Irish nationalists since his death. This was a rhetoric of resistance, most often to British imperialism but to imperial thought and action in other respects as well (hence in America he regarded the industrialised north as attempting to impose a prohibition of slavery on the agrarian south). In Irish terms his rhetoric, if not democratic, nonetheless reflected his understanding of the will of the majority despite his own Protestant background, promoting the political and economic rights of Irish Catholics, yet avoiding sectarian overtones. In particular, Mitchel's nationalist rhetoric shared none of the trimming characteristics of Daniel O'Connell's. In both his Emancipation and Repeal campaigns, O'Connell often appealed to Catholics in a fairly transparent code by citing such ancient grievances as the establishment of the Church of Ireland and the displacement of Gaelic landowners. Whether to his friends or to his Irish Protestant opponents, this 'could not have seemed other than sectarian', but it was tempered with overt expressions of respect for the tradition and faith of Protestants and reverence for the British crown.[3] Mitchel, who eschewed such coding, had no like reverence; he was unambiguously hostile to British government in Ireland. In British imperialism, indeed, Mitchel recognised an aggressive and opportunistic system for subordinating Ireland to English hegemony and imperial homogeneity, with a rhetoric of salutary purpose and divine sanction masking its fundamental hostility to Irish cultural, political and economic rights. Thomas Davis had a similar perception, but following Davis' death in 1845 Mitchel was hired by the *Nation*, which enabled him to elaborate this position more comprehensively, sharpening the paper's break with O'Connellite constitutionalism. Modern historians are often hesitant to regard the British imperium as so comprehensively systematic as did Mitchel; they often ascribe to inattentiveness, outright neglect or bumbling incompetence many features of that hegemony

2 Arthur Griffith, 'Preface' to Mitchel's *Jail Journal* (Dublin, 1915), pp. xiii–xv.   **3** Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, 'Gaelic Ireland, Popular Politics and Daniel O'Connell', *Galway Archaeological and Historical Society Journal*, 34 (1974–5), p. 31.

which Mitchel, and generations of nationalists following him, would attribute suspiciously instead to an imperial plan of oppression. Mitchel's conviction that the potato blight of the 1840s gave the British government the opportunity for a final subjugation of the Irish is clear from his account of those years, 'An Apology for the British Government in Ireland', serialised in the *Nation* in 1858 and extensively revised in 1860 as *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*. His personal witness to the devastation wrought by the Famine resonates eloquently throughout this work, but was hardly his first experience of oppressive imperialism. For, in his youth, the non-dogmatic tradition within Ulster Presbyterianism into which he was born was effectively cut off by proponents of Presbyterian dogmatism for reasons that came to appear political.

II

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the Presbyterian Church in the north of Ireland, tightly organised in congregations but more loosely as the Synod of Ulster, was not in practice uniformly bound by the Westminster Confession of Faith. This had been drawn up in 1643, once the Long Parliament had abolished episcopacy in the Church of England, by the Westminster Assembly of Divines. The Assembly was intended to formulate a statement of common doctrine for Protestants throughout Great Britain, in effect reforming the Church of England according to the Calvinist model of the Church of Scotland; but that statement, the Westminster Confession, went largely unheeded in England and became instead the governing document for the Scottish Church alone, whose ministers were required to subscribe to it. The Church of Scotland was the mother-church of the Synod of Ulster, which also formally required subscription of its ministers, but actually left this and a number of other aspects of church discipline to the discretion of individual congregations.[4] Lacking the benefits of national establishment enjoyed by their Scottish counterparts, Ulster Presbyterians made a virtue of their Irish non-established status at least in tolerating non-subscription, even though their ministers were nearly all trained in Scottish universities. Their tolerance of such diversity was typical of a 'religious system in which division itself played a functional role', though the stumbling block that the Westminster Confession posed for many non-subscribers, its credal insistence upon the doctrine of the Trinity, would appear absolutely basic.[5] Yet while Trinitarianism was indeed a feature of their belief for most Presbyterians, until the 1820s they generally did not insist upon it as a fundamental mark of their faith. In practice, it was more important that Presbyterians shared a common understanding of church government,

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4 For an account of the practice of tolerating non-subscription in the Ulster Synod before the 1820s, see J.S. Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*. New Edition (Belfast, 1867), vol. 3, pp. 440-1.

definitely at congregational level, than a uniform acceptance of the triune God. Various ministers had certainly been accused of Arianism in the eighteenth century, but for the most part these accusations had been dismissed; and a susceptibility to what was later to become understood as unitarianism was actually characteristic of 'New Light' Presbyterianism in Ulster. This was a faith certainly as scriptural as that of the 'Old Light' majority of Presbyterians, but more attentive to individual interpretation of scripture, more attuned to the libertarian ideas of the Continental (and indeed the Scottish) Enlightenment, and consequently less bound to the scripturally ambiguous doctrine of the Trinity.

The practical tolerance that generally prevailed among eighteenth-century Ulster Presbyterians extended to politics as well. It has become a truism among modern Irish nationalists that Presbyterians were prominent among their eighteenth-century political forebears. As early as 1759, the 'New Light Presbyterians' were taken as 'totally republican and averse to English government' by the duke of Bedford, lord lieutenant at the time.[6] Their potential for rebellion, of course, lay in their presumed desire to extend the democratic ethos of their faith's principles and practice of church government to the secular polity. This potential was realised in the 1798 rising in Ulster, dominated by Presbyterians, whose traditional distrust of Catholics as blindly following their clergy had been softened by their understanding of the French Revolution as a movement, on the part of a population as Catholic in tradition as Ireland's majority, against both monarchism and clericalism. Nor was Presbyterian participation in the United Irish movement confined to 'New Light' elements: as David Miller has determined, ministers implicated as rebels at the time were about evenly split among 'Old Lights' and 'New Lights,' and Peter Brooke more recently has shown that some of the government's strongest supporters were themselves 'New Lights'.[7] Hence Irish republicanism indeed has Presbyterian roots. But a quarter-century after the rising, when the campaign for Catholic Emancipation was the prevailing issue in Irish politics, politically conservative Ulster Presbyterians were prone to fear that Emancipation would open the way to a Catholic ascendancy. It served the interests of the 'Old Light', theologically orthodox Revd Henry Cooke to harness that old fear of Catholic dominance to his campaign against the 'New Lights' within the Presbyterian Synod of Ulster. Cooke was Moderator of the Synod in 1825-6, when he testified before a parliamentary commission that while he was personally complaisant at the prospect of Catholic Emancipation, a large number of Presbyterians were strongly opposed to it: one effect of this was to draw criticism from Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Association, and likewise from the 'New Light' Presbyterian leader, the Revd

5 David W. Miller, 'Presbyterianism and "Modernization" in Ulster', *Past and Present*, 80 (August 1978), p. 69.   **6** Quoted by Seán Murphy, 'The Dublin Anti-Union Riot of 3 December 1759', in Gerard O'Brien (ed.), *Parliament, Politics and People: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Irish History* (Dublin, 1989), p. 59.   **7** Miller, 'Presbyterianism and "Modernization" in Ulster', pp. 77-80; Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism* (Dublin, 1987), p. 130.

Henry Montgomery. Such consonance between Montgomery and O'Connell suited Cooke's efforts to foster an opposing coalition of conservative politics and orthodox theology. His own antipathy to Catholicism aside, Cooke was also concerned to effect a stronger central direction for Ulster Presbyterianism, in common with trends within both the Church of Ireland and Catholicism that produced a gradual organisational revolution in Irish religions between the 1820s and 1850s.

As against the long-tolerant practice of the Synod of Ulster, which had for years not interfered with doctrinal heterodoxy, largely because of its traditional attachment to congregational government, Cooke's campaign to strengthen the Synod promoted the Westminster Confession and ultimately insisted that Presbyterian ministers subscribe to it, and thereby embrace the doctrine of the Trinity. Those who resisted subscription had thought themselves secure when the Synod adopted a disciplinary code in 1824 which seemed to enshrine the right of individual judgement in matters of faith. But the 'New Lights' found themselves within a few years quietly outflanked by Cooke's campaign to clarify, to their detriment, the issue of subscription to the Westminster Confession.[8] By 1829, they considered that they had no recourse but to secede from the Synod and form the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster. The sticking point, the fulcrum of the controversy, was the Synod's absolute insistence upon the doctrine of the Trinity, which was debated within the Synod in 1825-9 and continued to be aired publicly in pamphlets to the mid 1830s. The rhetoric of resentment among non-subscribing Presbyterians was as much impelled by the imperiously impositional tactics of Cooke's campaign, by the idea that the church should be subjected to greater central control – which of course meant human control – as by unease with the doctrine of the Trinity itself. That doctrine was nonetheless a craw in the throats of non-subscribers, many of whom at length accepted the name Unitarians. They held that Christ's redemptive sacrifice is utterly clear from scripture and hence central to Christian doctrine, while the concept of the Trinity was a scripturally ambiguous, unnecessary and thus confusing complication to faith, an impediment to the simplicity of Christ's work of redemption and a minister's engrossing work of conversion and encouragement.

A sermon of 1823 by the Revd John Mitchel, minister of the Presbyterian Church in Newry and father of the nationalist, speaks to that singleness of purpose, implicitly cautioning against doctrinal distractions, even before the Trinitarian controversy broke in the mid 1820s. Preaching at Armagh to the General Synod of Ulster, the Revd Mitchel noted that

> he who seriously considers the weighty trust reposed in him as a minister
> of the New Testament, he who habitually regards himself as called by
> Providence to beseech fallen, sinful men 'in Christ's stead, to be reconciled

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8 Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, pp. 441-62, describes the progress of Cooke's campaign in laudatory terms.

unto God', will not readily suffer any minor interest or pursuit to mar his prime object, or interfere with the sacred vocation with which he is called.[9]

And that prime object, he remarked later in the same sermon, was 'preaching the doctrine of Christ crucified, according to the plainness and simplicity of the gospel'.[10] Years later, recalling the conflict within the Synod of Ulster, the Revd Mitchel noted that he had been 'one of those who endeavoured, even although in vain, to stem the tide of intolerance' accelerated in the Synod by Henry Cooke's Trinitarianism campaign, 'that system of spiritual coercion which . . . at least has repressed into a shameful silence, if it has not utterly extinguished, the spirit of religious freedom in that body'.[11] As far as the Revd Mitchel was concerned, Cooke's determination to impose subscription upon the Synod of Ulster was 'an unnatural test of faith . . . [a] most objectionable introduction of human authority into the Kingdom of Christ'. To his eyes, and those ultimately of the minority in the Synod, what Cooke had really expelled from the Presbyterian Church was liberty of conscience, displacing it with a 'virtual pretension to infallibility among uninspired men'.[12]

Such rhetoric suggests that the Revd Mitchel could be impassioned about the doctrine and tactics that caused the Remonstrants' rupture with the Synod of Ulster, yet his Church of Ireland counterpart in Newry, the Revd Daniel Bagot, observed that Mitchel's arguments were marked by an avoidance of personal attacks and a greater 'spirit of mildness and candour' than characterised 'any other publication which has hitherto emanated from the system with which he stands connected', that is, the Remonstrant Synod.[13] Bagot responded to Mitchel in similarly gentlemanly terms, confining himself to the doctrinal question without reference to the nature of Cooke's campaign, the significance of which to the Church of Ireland was of course as yet unclear. Mitchel's own congregation at Newry, which had joined him in the Remonstrant Synod, remained loyal to him, even as he and other Remonstrant clergy were fiercely attacked for their Arianism, heresy in general, and – most telling – supposed pro-Catholic sentiments. To this fusillade, Mitchel made a calm response in two sermons of 1835, very soon published as *The Sect 'Everywhere Spoken Against'*, remarking that it was indeed ironic to be accused of sympathy for Popery. For the Remonstrants were steadfast adherents to 'the most consistently Protestant' of beliefs – liberty of conscience – while the intolerance of those who considered them sympathetic to Catholicism

9 Rev. John Mitchel, 'The Motives, Means and End of the Gospel Ministry', in *The Scripture Doctrine of the Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ and Other Subjects Connected Therewith. In a Series of Sermons* (Newry, 1828), p. 238. **10** Ibid., p. 256. **11** Rev. John Mitchel, 'Preface', *The Scripture Doctrine of the Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .*, 2nd edition, (Newry, 1830), p. iv. **12** Rev. John Mitchel, 'The True Principles of Christian Liberty', *Scripture Doctrine . . .*, pp. 244-6. **13** Rev. Daniel Bagot, *A Synopsis of the Scripture Proofs of the Trinity, with a Reply to the Objections against that Doctrine, Contained in Sermons lately Published by the Rev. John Mitchel, of Newry* (Dublin, 1831), p. v.

breathed 'the spirit of Popery' itself, in that they would yoke individual conscience and the authority of scripture to a 'virtual claim of infallibility'.[14] The Revd Mitchel himself thought the Catholic Church delusive, but he refused to vilify it further, even though he recognised that the Remonstrants' restraint in this respect had fuelled the accusation of pro–Popery against them. It is unclear whether such an accusation had been prompted by the tone of other Remonstrants' sermons or pamphlets in the course of the doctrinal dispute between these two Presbyterian groups, or was instead an unprovoked tactic in the controversy on the part of the majority element within the Synod of Ulster, who favoured Cooke. But anti-Catholicism was essential to Cooke's grand strategy, as became obvious – certainly to the Remonstrants- in 1834 when Cooke fostered a plan of political co-operation between Anglicans and Presbyterians, a united front against the political power of the newly emancipated Catholics. The Revd Mitchel refrained from drawing inferences from Cooke's proceedings, but not all of his allies were so mannerly: one in particular, styling himself 'John Knox, Junior', issued *The First and Second Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Union of Presbytery and Prelacy* in 1835. Recalling the Presbyterian colonialisation of the north of Ireland, 'Knox' asserted that

> *We* are the original Protestant Church of Ireland; and had not the strong hand of power extinguished right and justice, as, until lately, has always been the case in this unhappy land, we might if properly countenanced and aided, have subdued the ignorance of our kind-hearted, generous and gallant countrymen.[15]

The pamphleteer scorned Cooke's proposed political alliance between the Church of Ireland and the newly-purged Presbyterian Synod of Ulster as a betrayal 'of the camp of Israel', forswearing the Presbyterian tradition of individual and congregational liberty so as to combine with the prelatical established church, 'compromising the principle of their church's polity with her avowed and inveterate enemies'. Would true Presbyterians indeed be willing to sacrifice freedom of conscience for the sake of an anti-Catholic political alliance with the Church of Ireland, 'to become the awkward squad of the Establishment, where recruits are to be trained for an unnatural warfare on Presbyterian principles'?[16]

III

After 1835 the controversy, at least as recorded in the pamphlet literature, wound down, though the Revd John Mitchel remained a leading figure in the

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14 Rev. John Mitchel, *The Sect 'Everywhere Spoken Against'* (Newry, 1835), pp. 28–9.
15 'John Knox, Junior', *The First and Second Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Union of Presbytery and Prelacy* (Belfast, 1835), p. 8.   **16** Ibid., pp. 10–11.

Remonstrant Synod, by a resolution of which he was enjoined to assemble a collection of prayers by various hands, *Helps to Christian Doctrine*, published in 1836.[17] But the dispute gave the Revd Mitchel's son profound experience of a religious form of imperialism within the Presbyterian Synod of Ulster in the 1820s, and the youth would have been aware in the 1830s that this was perceived by his father's camp, the Remonstrants, to have been adopted to effect an alliance with the more ancient imperialism of the Established Church. The younger Mitchel's biographer, William Dillon, notes that the boy in the 1820s, intended by his father for the Presbyterian ministry, was enlisted as a domestic assistant in the latter's unavailing battle within the Synod.[18] His exposure to the heated rhetoric of that dispute in his youth would certainly have had an influence upon the development of John Mitchel's own rhetoric. For the younger Mitchel's nationalism was consistently defensive, a matter of resisting the claims, tactics and seduction of British imperialism. No less than the Unitarian pamphleteer of 1835, 'John Knox, Junior', did he see 'the strong hand of power' as having 'extinguished right and justice as . . . has always been the case in this unhappy land'; to Mitchel, indeed, the suppression of right and justice was consistent British strategy, a matter of design worked out to conquer the will of the Irish people, the coercion of those in a minority (in the context of the United Kingdom) by those who could command – by whatever means – a majority. The analogy to the struggle of the late 1820s within the Synod of Ulster was obvious. Mitchel's familial closeness to the losing side in that struggle, moreover, inevitably underpinned his later argument to the Protestants of Ulster that the British imperial system was devised not only to coerce and oppress Irish Catholics, but also to dupe Irish Protestants into seeing their interests as allied with England's.[19] For, while Henry Cooke had forced a conflict within the Ulster Synod, with the ostensible goal of confirming the orthodox purity of Irish Presbyterianism, in retrospect he appeared to the Remonstrants to have had an ulterior motive. Allowing heterodox elements to remain within the Synod would have frustrated Cooke's plan of a common political front with the Church of Ireland to oppose Catholic political advances; it was necessary for the Synod to purge itself of those unwilling to subscribe to the Westminster Confession, since Anglicans could hardly ally themselves with a church that tolerated dissent from credal Trinitarianism.

John Mitchel was very like his father in viewing such an imposition of the majority will upon a minority as ultimately an attack on individual liberty. But unlike his father, the younger Mitchel tended to take this kind of attack as a personal affront. In 1857, writing from Knoxville, Tennessee to his Irish friend of the 1840s, Fr John Kenyon, Mitchel noted that

17 Rev. John Mitchel (ed.), *Helps to Christian Doctrine, A Collection of Prayers for General Use, Sanctioned by the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster* (Newry, 1836). **18** William Dillon, *Life of John Mitchel* (London, 1888), vol. 1, pp. 14–15. **19** 'Letters to the Protestant Farmers, Labourers, and Artisans of the North of Ireland', *United Irishman*, 22–9 April, 13–20 May, 1848.

Whatever it was that made me act and write as I did in Ireland, I have found
that there was perhaps less of love in it than of hate – less of filial affection
to my country than of scornful impatience at the thought that I had the
misfortune, I and my children, to be born in a country which suffered itself
to be oppressed and humiliated by another; less devotion to truth and
justice than raging wrath against cant and insolence.[20]

But, as Steven Knowlton has suggested, 'to assert boldly that Mitchel's governing
passion was hatred of the British is . . . incomplete . . . there was an even more ele-
mental drive: a total commitment to individual freedom'.[21] That commitment was
rooted in an unshakeable faith in himself, even when opposing the will of a major-
ity; this was the basis also of Mitchel's rhetorical power, and for the development
of such (and so often contrarious) self-assurance, the salience of his youthful expo-
sure to the Trinitarian controversy in the Synod of Ulster, as his father's assistant,
should not be overlooked. This faith in himself was, of course, confirmed by his
seeing at first hand, when reporting on the Galway election for the *Nation* in 1847,
the devastation of the Famine. For his understanding, already formed, of the impe-
rial system as designed to depopulate Ireland, demoralise her people and subdue
their fractious nationalism was validated by his witnessing that horror personally.

Its impact upon him did shift his response to that system from the hope that
Irish landlords could be inspired to withstand the British design, to the decision
that Ireland's tenant farmers should be emboldened to resist it, at first by asserting
their rights against eviction and clearance – a version of Fintan Lalor's agrarian rad-
icalism – and ultimately by outright revolution. Charles Gavan Duffy, Mitchel's
erstwhile, more cautious colleague on the *Nation*, reflected in his own later years
upon this evolution in Mitchel's thinking as all but irresponsible rabble-rousing.
Mitchel had left the *Nation* when Duffy could no longer tolerate his rhetoric of
agrarian resistance in its pages, and founded his own paper, the *United Irishman*;
here he advocated revolution even as France, in early 1848, was undergoing a suc-
cessful and almost bloodless form of it, and his popularity had become prodigious.
To the confiding multitude, that opportune

transaction [the French Revolution of 1848] seemed in some way to be his
individual work. The boldness with which he threatened and assailed the
Government in the *United Irishman* delighted the people; and his reputation
grew with a rapidity only known in revolutions, and was swollen by the
most amazing myths. His newly-found policy was represented . . . as long-
cherished convictions which he had not been at liberty to expound in the
Nation. His wayward opinions as fast as they were emitted became the creed
of a considerable following – the most extravagant paradoxes as readily as

20 Dillon, *Life of Mitchel*, vol. 2, p. 104.   21 Steven R. Knowlton, 'The Politics of John
Mitchel: A Reappraisal', *Eire-Ireland*, 22/2 (Summer 1987), p. 55.

reasonable suggestions, for a cloud of railway smoke casts as heavy a shadow as Slievenamon. His latest profession on any subject was set up as a sort of eternal standard of right, from which any deviation was shameful. Not to agree with him was a sin which needed no further description. The effect of this intoxicating popular incense on Mitchel's character was very injurious – from being modest and taciturn, he became dogmatic and arrogant.[22]

To Mitchel, however, his rhetorical insistence was simply informed by singleness of purpose. Looking back, in the letter of 1857 to Fr Kenyon, at the events of 1848 which led to his exile, his case seemed that of one 'absorbed and engrossed and possessed by a great cause, whose whole life and energy and passion conveyed themselves to one focus, and were then dissipated into the general atmosphere, who dashed himself one good time against the hard world, and was smashed to smithereens'.[23] It is a description that recalls his father's equally earnest, if much calmer, recommendation of singleness of purpose to Christian ministers: and Mitchel's father, too, had lost the good fight for liberty, albeit for religious liberty.

In accounting for the intensity of Mitchel's rhetoric, his personal experience in the Trinitarian controversy and his witness to the Famine should not be underestimated, nor their effects upon one so disposed to see the exertion of imperial power as at once frustrating Irish national aspirations and insidiously undermining his own liberty. Among these effects, after all, was his trial and conviction for 'treason-felony' in 1848 and the long exile from Ireland that ensued. In his later writing that intensity is subtler than in his journalism in Ireland. In the *Jail Journal*, proceeding beyond his father, he personalised the cause of Irish freedom with a poignancy that his own and later generations of Irish nationalists felt and admired. His confinement and exile enabled him, albeit with a tone of ironic good humour, to construct himself as a martyr – a construction to which the intra-Presbyterian conflict during his youth lent some foundation, and which gave him deep appeal to Catholics, well-attuned to the paradigm of sacrifice. Mitchel's journalism on Irish affairs after the *Jail Journal*, written in America and France, more typically combines sardonic quotation from hostile sources, especially government reports and parliamentary speeches, with statistics; as Thomas Flanagan, the most acute analyst of Mitchel's rhetoric, notes of *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, this ironic style effectively 'subverts by indirection those alternatives which it leaves unnamed'.[24] But the subtler ironies of Mitchel's later writing, as compared to the often histrionic rhetoric of his journalism in Ireland, still reveal what Flanagan has termed 'some central law of his being' leading him 'to measure himself against the social embodiments of force, and most essentially against those embodiments which sought to deny the nature of their essence'.[25] Such, of course, was the

22 Charles Gavan Duffy, *Four Years of Irish History, 1845-1849* (London, 1883), pp. 548-9. 23 Dillon, *Life of Mitchel*, vol. 2, p. 104. 24 Thomas Flanagan, 'Critical Introduction', to John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin, 1982), p. xxxi. 25 Ibid., p. xxxiv.

British imperial system in Ireland, but such also had been the tactics and force of the orthodox victory in the Trinitarian controversy when Mitchel was a youth, a form of religious imperialism that Remonstrants like 'John Knox, Junior' perceived as an assault upon liberty of conscience with a political ulterior motive.