**THE BELFAST NEWS LETTER, 1737-: AN OUTLINE HISTORY**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Even among the major towns and cities of the island of Ireland, Belfast is not the oldest: Dublin, Cork and Limerick are all more ancient. But Belfast can boast one distinction; she has the oldest Irish newspaper: "The Belfast News-Letter", founded 275 years ago in 1737, over sixty years before the Act of Union and over 180 before the foundation of Northern Ireland. Only a few newspapers in the British Isles are older than the one you are reading. But "The News-Letter" (as the paper is now named) is the oldest daily publication - it has appeared each day of the week, Saturday excepted, since 1855 ; it is the most venerable with a continuity of title (give or take a few words); and, unlike "The London Gazette", the oldest publication to survive, this newspaper still prints news in the way that term is commonly understood; the older title in the capital is now confined to official pronouncements and appointments. Older Irish newspapers have failed to survive; but this one has lasted through nearly three centuries of turbulence. Some, such as "The Irish Intelligencer" of 1663 and "The Cork Idler" of 1716 lasted for only a few issues; others, like "Faulkner's Journal", founded in Dublin in 1725, had longer lives but failed nevertheless to survive. Today they are known only to the specialist historian.

The newspaper has also been for most of its history not a local publication but a regional one. As the first newspaper in the province of Ulster, "The Belfast News-Letter" established a dominant position early on. By the last decades of the eighteenth century the paper was being read across most of Ulster and postal subscribers received it in other parts of Ireland and Great Britain. But the newspaper's achievement in surviving and thriving was one that it is unlikely that Francis Joy could have foreseen when in September 1737 "The Belfast News-Letter and General Advertiser" first appeared under his proprietorship and editorship. In his "The English Press in the Eighteenth Century" Jeremy Black quotes an author of the period as stating that "the life of a paper is as uncertain as his who gives life to it". Across Ireland and Great Britain newspapers appeared and disappeared. Francis Joy proved to be a long-lived man but his publication has long outlived even him.

When he started to print his new paper Francis Joy was already a mature man; in an age of low life expectancy he had reached forty. Joy was born in 1697, during the reign of William III, to Richard Joy of Killead, Antrim, and his wife Jane (born Ellis). The Joys were of Huguenot or French Protestant ancestry; by religious conviction they were Presbyterians. At 24 Francis Joy married Margaret, daughter of George Martin, the Sovereign (or Mayor) of Belfast. Joy set up in the town as a lawyer, a conveyancer and notary.

According to Mary McNeill's biography of Joy's granddaughter Mary Ann McCracken, he moved into the printing trade as the result of acquiring a press in payment for a bad debt. As is so often the case in history, minor accidents have larger consequences. So it was to be with Joy's chance acquisition of a printing press. The first edition of "The Belfast News-Letter" came out in September 1737. It has generally been believed that the paper appeared on the first day of the month. Such was the belief of Henry Joy (the grandson of Francis and his eventual successor as owner and editor) when he published his "Historical Collections relative to the town of Belfast" eighty one years later. The same belief held when the paper marked its centenary but no copy of the first number survives. No earlier copy is known to exist than number 113 of October 3 [Old style], 1738. The opinion that the paper originally appeared on the first day of September, 1737 has held sway until the present. But in recent weeks Ben Lowry of this newspaper has argued plausibly that this date does not fit; he maintains that the original date of publication must have been September 6, 1738.

The earliest copies of the newspaper, running, considerable gaps apart, from October 1738 onwards, can be found in the Linen Hall Library, to which institution they were presented in 1838 by Henry Joy of Dublin (not to be confused with his cousin the editor). This Henry Joy was a lawyer; since 1831 he had been chief Baron of the Exchequer, having previously held the positions of Solicitor-General and Attorney-General for Ireland. He gave the run of "The Belfast News-Letter" on condition that they were kept in the library and lent out only with his permission and that of the Linen Hall's committee. Such permission has been given only twice and not since 1887.

For much of the rest of the eighteenth century gaps appear even in this collection of the paper, especially for the first half of the 1740s. Newspapers are ephemeral and discardable items even today. Francis Joy himself may well have been careless with the earliest copies of his title. Since the donation to the Linen Hall came from a family member it is likely that at some point Francis Joy or his sons must have decided that the newspaper's chances of survival in the long term justified the retention of copies.

The very earliest copy is dated October 3, 1738. Some writers, among them the nineteenth century historian of Belfast George Benn and Hugh Shearman, the writer of the booklet for this paper's last anniversary in 1987, have made the mistake of supposing that earlier copies survive. Both believed that the first copy was dated March 6, 1738; Shearman and Benn had failed to notice that until 1752 the paper appeared under the Julian calendar, by then eleven full days behind the Gregorian one which had been introduced by the Papacy in 1582. Under the Julian calendar the New Year did not start until March 25 so March 6, 1738 was, in our terms, really 1739. When the Gregorian calendar was introduced to the British Isles in 1752 the gap of eleven full days meant that September 1 (the last day under the old system) was followed the next day by September 13. Gaps in copies of "the Belfast News-Letter" mean that it is uncertain when precisely the paper moved to the New Style of dating but it is clear that it had done so by the end of 1752: the last edition of that year is December 28; the first of 1753 is January 3.

The newspaper appeared only twice a week, as indeed it was to do until 1855. At first it was only a single sheet in size. It was not until February 16 1738/39 that four pages were first used. Again the length of four pages lasted until well into the next century (with variations in the page size and the number of words on each one.

**THE FIRST YEARS**

To those who are unfamiliar with newspapers of the 18th and early 19th centuries, "The Belfast News-Letter" of 275 or 250 or 200 years ago would appear an odd publication, very different from a paper of today or even a century or half-century since. The first obvious difference would be the relative smallness of the 18th century newspaper. Four pages was a typical length for a publication of this time. Another obvious dissimilarity is the absence of illustrations except in advertising. Again this feature persisted until the middle of the next century. Other differences are less obvious though just as crucial. Newspapers generally tended to take much of their news from other publications, domestic or foreign. As a port Belfast was a convenient place to obtain publications from elsewhere in the British Isles or abroad. Correspondents were literally just that: individuals whose letters from elsewhere were addressed to the paper's editor or were obtained by him. A paper such as "The Belfast News-Letter" was not to have reporters for many years to come.

The appearance and style of British papers was to alter little during the 18th century. As Jeremy Black has written about the press late in the century, readers tended to be "given more of the same. The news was predominantly political, the reports derivative, anonymous and impersonal". Until 1814 all papers were printed by hand; a hand press could produce 250 sheets (each of four pages). The steam press introduced in 1814 could print 11000. The Applegarth machine of 1827 could produce 4000 sheets an hour printed on both sides.

As its original title implied (" and General Advertiser"), advertising mattered to the paper. The English newspaper "Fog's Weekly Journal" (quoted by Black) observed that advertisements could be regarded "as pieces of domestic intelligence, much more interesting than those paragraphs which our daily historians give us, under the title of home news....."

By the last three decades of the eighteenth century "The Belfast News-Letter" had advertising which covered half (sometimes more) of its four sheets. By then advertising was important for revenue. When he came to sell the paper in November 1794-95, Henry Joy (Francis's grandson) reported that in 1789 the profit from advertising had been £1168 (perhaps £65,000 today); by 1794, thanks to war with France, the figure had dropped to £850 (approximately £ 47,000 now), a substantial part nevertheless of the profit for the year of £1222 (at least 68, 000 now).

The advertisements and paid notices were the only illustrated features of the paper. The woodcuts which appeared were sophisticated neither in execution nor in conception. Shipping advertisements were illustrated by ships; hardware advertising was accompanied by pictures of a saw; notices regarding theft were illustrated by a picture of the devil riding behind a man or horseback. The advertisements themselves testify to the flourishing nature of Belfast's commerce: regular shipping notices from North America, except when war with the colonies intervened; goods came from the Baltic; wine from France; "Englysh bottled Cyder" could be bought instead of wine. Travelling dentists advertised as did James Magee, Belfast's main bookseller. Advertisements came from Dungannon and Fermanagh and even Workington in Cumberland. A regular advertiser was Waddell Cunningham, perhaps the leading Belfast merchant of his time.

The news carried was (in Black's term) derivative. Readers during the first forty or more years of the paper's existence would have been better informed about events in London or the continent or (during the American revolution) in the transatlantic colonies than at home. This altered during the last two decades of the century. The Volunteer movement of the late 1770s and 1780s was often well-reported and, once the Dublin Parliament obtained legislative independence in 1782, parliamentary affairs as well began to receive greater coverage.

Correspondents sometimes wrote to give news from various parts of Ulster. J.R.R. Adams cites reports of a Protestant Linen Weavers’ parade from the paper of August 1 (New Style). He also items such as a report of a dispute over a cock fight at Randalstown on March 13 (New Style). As Adams noted many aspects of Ulster folk life at this time can be illustrated from the paper of the time.

The report of events after a wedding near Dunluce in the paper for April 20, 1739, read like an extract from a novel by Henry Fielding, the author of "Tom Jones". The account deserves quotation at length.

"....the bride unfortunately happened to fall very drunk; who immediately after the priest had ended the ceremony, called out with a loud voice, go to Bed, go to Bed, and was heard at a Considerable Distance off, to the great shame of the Bridegroom, who to prevent her Cries, and make her quiet, went to bed with her, but as she was going she fell down stairs and broke her Nose; with much ado she got to Bed, still crying, go to Bed, and the bridegroom having laid her down, went back to his company. An arch wag then in the House then took the opportunity of lying down with the bride in the Bridegroom's Absence, who, unhappily going to see his agreeable Bride, found the honest fellow in bed with her in a very loving Manner, which sight caused the Bridegroom to fall into a swoon, while the arch fellow got off; the bride also got up and ran after him still crying go to Bed, who fell a second time downstairs and was thereby much hurt, having lost much of her blood. Her husband is in great Trouble for the harm his spouse so innocently met with."

Francis Joy's direct connection with the paper he had founded did not last for long after the report of the "comical marriage" at Dunluce. By the late 1730s Joy had begun to acquire an interest in paper-making as well as in printing and journalism. According to C.J. Woods, French paper having become harder to obtain (war with France occupied Britain for much of the century) Francis Joy and two other Belfast printers took over a paper mill at Ballymoney, acquiring two more the next year at Ballygroobey.

Around 1745 Joy moved to Randalstown. According to Mary McNeill he was given a government grant for his paper-making concerns. As C.J. Woods notes in 1747 and 1749 he asked the Irish Parliament for further aid for his mills at Ballymena and Randalstown. He also owned a flax mill and a bleaching mill and green. By 1778 (again according to Woods) he had been joined in the paper business by a son-in-law. Twenty-five years after his death at least one of the paper mills was still in business when it was advertised to be sold or let. After Francis Joy died "The Dublin Journal" stated that he was "one of the first who brought to any perfection in Ireland the manufacture of printing and writing papers....."

Francis Joy died on 10 June 1790, the brief notice of his death in the paper he had established on June 8 to 11 being greatly exceeded in length by an obituary of Benjamin Franklin. Three weeks before he died he walked from Randalstown to Antrim to vote for the independent candidates in the general election. Asked by a grandson why he was there he responded (according to McNeill) "The good of my country".

After Francis Joy's departure from Belfast, his notary's office was taken over by his older son from his first marriage, Henry (born about 1720); with his younger brother Robert (born 1722) Henry also assumed responsibility for "The Belfast News-Letter" and the printing business. As their father had done before them the brothers published books, mainly (though not exclusively) religious works. In 1767 they acquired a site at Cromac (then still outside the town) where they set up another paper mill. Both brothers belonged to the Charitable Society which in the 1770s set a Poorhouse which survives as a home for the elderly in the form of Clifton House. Robert Joy (with help from the architect Thomas Cooley) designed the building. He also placed in the building machinery to teach children to spin and weave.

After Robert Joy's death in 1788, J.J. Bryson, minister of the Second Belfast congregation, wrote of him that: "His character was uniformly marked with sterling characteristics of unaffected Piety, and extreme goodness." Henry Joy was deputy Town Clerk of Belfast from 1759 to 1772; he became a Burgess (a member of the Corporation) in 1781. Two years later he helped to found the Chamber of Commerce. When he died in 1789, an obituarist (quoted by McNeill) stated that "he lived the wise, the kind, the invaluable friend of all, and dies without the enmity of any."

**THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

The period of ownership by Henry and Robert Joy saw the American Revolution or War of Independence (1775-1783), up that point the greatest political convulsion in eighteenth century Britain. It also saw (if we believe the old story) the newspaper's greatest scoop, the publication for the first time in Europe of the Declaration of Independence in the issue for August 23 to 27, 1776. Alas, the story, though often repeated is entirely without foundation. Two London papers, The St. James’s Chronicle and "The General Evening Post" had already printed the Declaration on August 15, well over a week before it was printed in Belfast.

It has often been supposed that that "The Belfast News-Letter" was pro-American during the War of Independence". Dr. C.J. Woods has written that when the Americans rebelled "the Joys's newspaper supported them". Writing his valedictory leader in 1795, Henry Joy jnr wrote that "from the moment the management of the paper devolved on him, the resistance of America was applauded....." ("The Belfast News-Letter", May 11 to May 15, 1795).Yet the view of unqualified support from the paper for the colonists needs to be examined and questioned. To understand the paper's treatment of events in America we need to know what sort of publication it was in political terms at this time.

By the 1770s "The Belfast News-Letter" was established as the leading paper in Ulster, its only rivals being publications in Newry and Londonderry. There was no rival in Belfast: "The Belfast Courant" had lasted for only a few years in the 1740s. There is some reason to believe that the appearance of the paper in the mid-eighteenth century had a considerable impact on the outlook of its readers, if we are to regard as sufficient evidence the reminiscences of John Caldwell, a Ballymoney man whose words are cited by Nancy Curtin.

"I have often heard of the electrical effect of this first newspaper [that is, "The Belfast News-Letter"]. It raised the curiosity of the people, set them reading and from reading to thinking, and from thinking to acting and exerting their energies and their rights in sending from the counties men of their choice well qualified to represent them in parliament. This was the first fruits of newspaper knowledge disseminated among a people......."

This would seem to suggest that "The Belfast News-Letter" had a radicalising effect on its readership. For some it may well have had such an effect but was any radicalising influence direct or indirect and was it intended by the Joys? That the Joys were Whig (supporters of the Glorious Revolution and parliamentary government under the crown) and reform-minded in opinion is unquestionable. A.T.Q. Stewart termed them "a public-spirited family of Whiggish outlook". As dissenters in religion and reformers in politics, as businessmen and philanthropists, the Joys are comparable to such English families as the Wedgwoods.

It would not be surprising therefore if the Joys were pro-American. And support for America was strong in Ulster. As Stewart has written Presbyterian ministers especially were "among the most ardent supporters of the American cause" Dr Ian McBride has suggested that whereas Ulster Presbyterians had been loyal to the crown under William III and the first two Hanoverian sovereigns, "the effect of the American war was to delegitimize the Imperial monarchy of George III". Ulster had also strong intimate links with the American colonies: in the first three quarters of the 18th century about 200,000 Ulster people (most of them Presbyterians) left for North America. This draining of the population disquieted some as in a comment in the paper in 1773. Small wonder then that Sir John O'Neill called Belfast "the Boston of this country".

So how far was local sympathy for the rebels reflected in "The Belfast News-Letter"? The answer is that it was not related - certainly not directly to any great extent. Indeed much of the comment published during the period of the war and just before was not sympathetic to the American cause. "Moderatus", writing in the paper for 3 January to 6 January -just months before hostilities started in Massachusetts-stated that it was not England's interest to "oppress and enslave America". However, he added, it was not America's interest "to shake off her allegiance and erect the standard of rebellion” Taxes raised in America, he continued, "hardly pay a hundredth part of the expense of their protection". In the same issue "Brittanicus" wrote that "The Americans pretend to be able to pay their share and yet the principles on which they refuse to be taxed are big with ruin to Great Britain". He urged the seizure of American ships to pay debts owed to Britain.

As the situation in America worsened the paper carried regular reports of events across the Atlantic. Interest in America was met by other sources besides: in the issue for March 17 to March 21, 1775, James Magee advertised along with Robert Stevenson, a Newry bookseller, various works on the American question, covering both sides of the argument.

Another letter hostile to the Americans appeared in the issue for April 18 to April 21. The author criticised those who encouraged rebellion in America. "If blood be spilt, impartial men will readily see on whom the guilt of it will fall”. It was not until June 23 to June 27, 1775 that the paper reprinted from a London publication a piece in favour of the Americans. Lord Hillsborough (later the first Marquess of Downshire), one of the great Ulster magnates, had been hostile to the colonists as Secretary for the Colonies. Were the anti-American letters written by him or his supporters? The question cannot be answered perhaps but it is not impossible that the pieces printed came from his circle.

The news that the paper published regarding America came from a variety of sources. News of the engagement at Lexington in April 1775 which stated the war was reprinted from a paper in Salem, Massachusetts, "The Essex Gazette", appearing in the issue for June 2 to June 6. That for July 28 to August 1 contained General Gage's account of Bunker Hill, which presented the battle as a British victory. Underneath the text of the Declaration of Independence (August 23 to August 27, 1776) appeared a letter from a British officer describing operations against Washington at New York. (The American general was referred to, pointedly, as Mr Washington). As the war persisted the paper continued to cater for both sides of opinion on America. The issue for January 10 to January 14, 1777 advertised for sale a picture of the American General Lee; the same number had an advertisement for a print depicting the American defeat at Lake Champlain by General Carleton (a native of Strabane).

The province was involved directly in the war in ways apart from Carleton's generalship. Recruiting advertisements appeared. Advertisements were printed for privateers armed against enemy shipping such as one to sail against the Dutch (they having entered the war on the American side) which was printed on January 9 to January 12, 1778. The same issue had a decidedly pro-British New Year's Ode:

The Dark clouds gather and the tempests blow,

With folded arms, at ease reclin'd

Does Europe sit? Or, more unkind

Why fraudulently aid the insidious plan?

The foes of Britain are the foes of man.

Whatever views the Joys themselves may have taken about the American revolution, it cannot be claimed that their newspaper was consistently supportive of the cause of the colonialists. It most certainly did not display the sort of opposition to government policy demonstrated by some London papers at this time (as Dr Lutnick has shown) or indeed some Dublin papers (which have been studied by Dr Morley in his book on the American Revolution and Irish public opinion). At most the paper reflected both sides of the dispute. As will be seen, during the last years of their ownership of "The Belfast News-Letter" an approach of balancing various sides was to be maintained regardless of the personal convictions of members of the Joy family involved in the paper's management. This was perhaps not so much a principled effort to provide space for a variety of political allegiances as a commercial decision. "The Belfast News-Letter" of this period was (as advertisements and evidence regarding subscribers demonstrates) a paper read across Ulster and further afield. It had therefore to have some appeal to subscribers and advertisers who were not Presbyterians or Whigs of the more advanced sort. In other words the newspaper was directed by motives that were financial as well as ideological. On 2 July 1791 Sam McTier wrote to his brother-in-law William Drennan, a doctor and future United Irish man. Henry Joy (he wrote) "would not in my opinion risk the circulation of his paper for any political scheme whatsoever. He is one of your prudent patriots". Drennan, his sister and her husband were hostile to the Joys but here at least Sam McTier was right.

**HENRY JOY AND REFORM**

Nevertheless Henry Joy junior's own moderately reformist views are unquestionable. He became closely involved with the Volunteer movement which emerged late in the 1770s, initially as a defence force against the threat of French invasion but later as a movement for political reform; the Volunteers contributed to the securing of legislative independence by the Irish Parliament in 1782. Robert Joy helped to recruit for the Volunteers while his son Henry became secretary of the committee of correspondence of the Volunteers in Ulster.

This enthusiasm for the Volunteers is reflected in the pages of "The Belfast News-Letter". The paper for March 16 to March 20, 1781 printed a notice concerning a Volunteer review to be held in Belfast in July of that year. A notice published in the number for May 18 to May 22 outlined the arrangements for the review. Henry Joy junior was the secretary of the committee which prepared for the event. The review, attended by the Volunteer leader Lord Charlemont, was described in the paper for July 20 to 24 as "the most glorious display of arms the country ever beheld". Further signs of support of reform on Henry Joy's part can be detected in an article by "Lucas" - probably his pen name and almost certainly a reference to the mid-18th century Dublin patriot politician, Charles Lucas - in the paper in August 1783 (cited by Dr McBride); among other matters, "Lucas" called for annual parliaments.

Events in France from 1789 onwards came to dominate the paper just as America had done some years before. The issue for March 12 to March 16, 1790 noted that the first meeting of the Northern Whig Club toasts were drunk to the King, his heir and the memory of William III and also to "a speedy and happy establishment of Gallic liberty". Poland also attracted attention along with France as it fought against Russia's efforts (following previous partitions) to assume control of what remained of the country. At a meeting in Belfast in 1792 (so the paper noted on May 1 to May 4) to king Stanislaus Augustus but also to "success to the arms of France in the war which the King of the French has declared against the King of Hungary and Bohemia". As Poland faced defeat over two years later "The Belfast News-Letter" for September 26 to 29 regretted that England had not been "an armed arbitress between the Poles attempting to establish a United Monarchy and certain Despotic Princes endeavouring to prevent it......"

Against such expressions of support for reformist movements abroad must be set indications that Henry Joy junior was prepared to accommodate anti-reformist views at home. During the County Down election of 1790- the one in which the young Robert Stewart, later Lord Castlereagh, stood against Lord Hillsborough, later the Marquess of Downshire (the son of the former Colonial Secretary). As an advanced Whig, Joy might have been expected to support Stewart and his fellow candidate against Hillsborough. But no: everything that the paper printed on this subject came from an anonymous supporter of Hillsborough. Thus the government candidate, not Stewart, was described as "the man of the country and the Friend of the People" ("The Belfast News-Letter, June 22 to June 25, 1790), On July 23 to July 27 "Observator" wrote to the paper: "His Lordship at a vast expense and trouble has second time placed himself between us and the restless grasping hand which was raised with so much confidence against our peace, our liberties, and our independence." "A vast expense" may well have been true: some accounts of the election claim that as much as £ 30,000 (at least £ 1.68 million today) was spent by Stewart's father (the future first Earl and Marquess of Londonderry) alone. On October 15 to October 18, 1793 the paper published "A Monody on the death of Wills, the Marquis of Downshire", that is, the father of the electoral candidate of 1790.

Where Joy made his own views known at greatest length in his paper was in the essays on the British constitution he wrote with William Bruce, the "New Light" (and anti-Trinitarian) Presbyterian minister-his charge was the church in Rosemary Street; these were later published as "Belfast Politics" having first appeared in the paper in 1792-1793. Together Bruce and Joy have been described by John Bew, the editor of the most recent edition of the essays as "arguably the leading cultural and political heavyweights in Georgian Belfast". Bew believes that Bruce, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, was the main influence in writing the work but that Joy probably compiled the work and composed the preface.

The authors of "Belfast Politics" were not radicals like the United Irishmen, who were starting to emerge when the essays appeared, but moderately advanced Whigs. They deplored universal suffrage but wanted "a rational improvement in the representative branch of our legislature". They admired the Whig philosopher John Locke but were wary of democracy -which, they believed, had led to dictatorship in ancient Rome. They supported a constitutional or "limited" monarchy.

They hailed "the beauty and wisdom of our constitution. The advantages of republican, aristocratical and monarchical government are happily blended and many of their defects excluded". Neither Joy nor Bruce was a unionist when they wrote "Belfast Politics"; both, however, became unionists and the logic of their essays, supportive of the glorious Revolution settlement in England, pointed in the direction of the post 1800 union.

Bruce and Joy took a gradualist attitude to Catholic Emancipation. At a town meeting in January 1792 they found themselves in a minority, In the paper for January 31 to February 3, 1792 the position of the minority at the gathering was defended, a position which admitted "the right of elective suffrage, which they only wish to see limited by principles merely political; governed by a due attention to the present state of knowledge among the Catholics independently of all religious considerations; and by their comparative numbers with those of the rest of the kingdom". In the issue for February 10 to February 14 1792 Bruce's speech at the meeting was printed, an address in which he stated that "a gradual and progressive change is the most desirable".

The gradualism of Bruce and Joy offended the radicals. Wolfe Tone, during his brief period in Belfast between 1791 and 1792, wrote of the former as "an intolerant high priest" and the latter as "a cur". Tone's fellow-member of the United Irishmen, the radical movement which eventually came to espouse republican separatism and alliance with revolutionary France, William Drennan, a Belfast-born but Dublin-based physician, thought almost as little of Joy as Tone did; his sister, Martha McTier held him in still lower regard. Their correspondence (edited by Jean Agnew) has many disparaging remarks about Joy.

Although Drennan wrote in 1791 that Joy had "always used me civilly", two years later he called him "a literary shop boy". In 1794 his sister told him that he owed Joy "nothing but contempt". "The Strictures on the Oath of the United Irishmen" directed against Drennan which "The Belfast News-Letter" printed in 1791 was attributed first to Bruce and then by Martha McTier to Joy. Enmity continued even after Joy sold the paper. In 1805 Drennan discerned in his old adversary "a certain meanness of manner between diffidence and curious insignificance and original want of education". He even came to believe that Bruce and Joy "have been employed by higher powers, to serve the interests of the English secret cabinet....". Martha McTier demonstrated still greater contempt when in a letter also of 1805 she asserted that Francis Joy "was a tailor who learned the printing trade in jail...."-a claim which lacks all foundation.

**A RIVAL NEWSPAPER, NEW OWNERS AND REBELLION**

The spite of Tone, Drennan and the McTiers, privately expressed in diaries and letters cannot have bothered Joy. A far greater threat to him came from a rival newspaper. By the early 1790s "The Belfast News-Letter" had been Belfast's sole paper and the principal one in Ulster for most of the preceding half-century or more; its position had been challenged only twice, first by "The Belfast Courant" in the 1740s and then by "The Belfast Mercury" in the mid 1780s; neither publication had lasted for more than a few years. The emergence of "The Northern Star" in 1792 proved to be a more worrying challenge.

As the historian of the United Irishmen, Nancy Curtin, has observed, the origins of "The Northern Star" lay in a meeting of 136 Belfast citizens in September 1791. In the following month a prospectus for a new paper was distributed throughout much of Ulster. One future United Irishman, Thomas Ledlie Bruce, thought that there was no need for a new paper as Joy wished well to the cause of liberty but others were more sympathetic. The paper started in January 1792 and by June 1792 it had, as John Gray has noted in an essay on the rivalry between the new paper and the old, capital of £2000 (at least £112, 000 today).The new paper soon acquired a larger circulation than its rival (though the latter's sales also rose after the outbreak of war with France).In September 1793, the future rebel, saw a young girl "in quite a wild part" close to Ballynahinch reading "The Northern Star". Russell believed that in the area the new paper was read "with avidity".

The combination of the rise of "The Northern Star" and the worsening political situation may well have played a large part in Joy's decision late in 1794 to sell the paper. The sale was predicted by the reliably tart pen of Martha McTier who wrote that "I think that as an editor his heart is broke, that his wife's friends are much mortified, and that J. Holmes [Joy's banker father-in-law] will get him into some other line".

"The Belfast News-Letter" was indeed advertised for sale in November 1794. In the issue for December 29, 1794 to January 2, 1795 it was noted that any purchaser would not assume control until March 25 1795. Papers printed for January 3, 1794 were claimed to be 2975, for July 4, 1794 3225. It was also stated that for each paper there were six readers so that at most it was seen by 19,3000 individuals in "the most populous and opulent parts of this kingdom-with respect to Advertisements, the number of these stand very high".

At this point the paper was pleased with many aspects of political life in Ireland. Since the start of the current session of the Irish Parliament the issue of February 27 to March 2, 1795 declared, frequent occasion had arisen to "commend the spirit by which the administration of this country appear to be actuated". but the recall of the reforming Lord Lieutenant, the Earl Fitzwilliam, may have worried Joy. Therefore there is something in John Gray's suggestion that Joy may have decided to sell "in political anticipation that the possibilities of maintaining a "moderate" or Whig position of the growing polarisation of political opinion in Ulster were rapidly evaporating".

A decrease in advertising revenue may also have motivated Joy in his decision to sell as well as competition from "The Northern Star". The average number of advertisements per issue had dropped from 96 in 1790 (a post tax revenue of £1354-about £75,000 today) to 65 in 1794 (post tax £850-at least £47,000 today). There had been (though Joy did not mention this) a particular fall in the number of shipping advertisements. Joy was clearly determined to get out of the business. When Robert Allan, an owner of "The Caledonian Mercury" and eventual part-purchaser of "The Belfast News-Letter" offered him a partnership in his paper rather than outright purchase, Joy responded that "None of us [here he must include the family members who owned half the publication with him ] wish to continue in the business but to sell the copyright entire". It was long believed that the price paid to Joy and the other family members was by Allan and his business partner John Robertson was £3000 (about £168,000 today). However, John Gray has discovered that the two Scotsmen paid a much lower sum: only £1650 (about £ 92,000 in today's values).They appointed as editor one George Gordon, a fellow Scot, who received a salary as well as a percentage of the profits. Henry Joy retained other business interests in property and paper making; he continued to write and lived until 1835. In keeping with his moderate Whig politics he was loyal to the crown during the rebellion of 1798 (during which he joined a supplementary corps of yeomanry). His cousin Henry Joy McCracken was executed in July 1798 for his leading role in the rising in Antrim. His fate was dealt with in a few lines in Henry Joy's "Historical Collections".

In the issue for May 11 to May 15,1795 Joy published a valedictory editorial. He claimed that he had striven "to hold up the principle of the constitution as admirable in themselves, and to deplore every infringement of them in its administration". He added that to be obtained freedom "must be temperately pursued". At first the new editor seemed content to follow Joy's moderate politics. Gordon's letter to his readers is the same issue as Joy's final editorial said that "the Publisher meand to pursue a middle course. He will neither be the hireling of any Ministry nor the servile tool of a faction". On May 15 to 18, 1798 the paper pronounced that if only Great Britain had not entered the war with France: "Her trade would have gone on unmolested, and she would have held the balance of Europe". A similar point was made in the issue of October 17 to October 21 1796 where the positions of Charles James Fox (opposed to the war) and Henry Grattan (who supported it) were contrasted to the former's advantage.

But the deteriorating poetical circumstances in Ulster in the last two years before rebellion of 1798 helped to create what may have been something of a crisis for the paper. An increasingly hard-line approach on the part of the government went in tandem with a number of serious attacks on or murders of supporters of the crown. An attempted murder was carried out on the Reverend Philip Johnston in Moira and William McBride was murdered in Belfast ("The Belfast News-Letter, October 24 to 28, 1796). An attempt was made on the life of the Reverend John Cleland in Newtownards (see the October 28 to 31, 1796 issue). In November John Kingsbury, a Belfast butcher, who was believed to be an opponent of the United Irishmen, was murdered near Drumbridge.

After Kingsbury's murder Colonel Barber, a senior officer in the Belfast garrison visited Gordon and ordered the insertion of an advertisement which claimed that the murder had been committed by "a set of Belfast ruffians from Belfast....apparently for his principles, which he had that day expressed to be hostile to United Irishmen" ("The Belfast News -Letter", November 14 to November 18, 1796). The notice also named five men in custody for the killing.

Clearly the publication of the advertisement caused difficulty for Gordon. In the next issue (November 18 to November 21, 1796) he wrote that it had given a good deal of offence to many of his readers". Gordon claimed he had agreed to publish the notice without having read it first,; on reading the document he found it "worded so as to give offence". He told Colonel Barber he could not publish without altering the wording but added that the officer gave the notice his authority and that of another (unnamed) individual. Thus it was published as submitted. The inquest jury wrote to the paper to say that Kingsbury had been murdered by person or persons unknown" (November 25 to November 28, 1796). In the next number (November 28 to December 2, 1796) the men who had been arrested, having been released, wrote to protest against their being named in the advertisement.

The main consequence of the Kingsbury affair was that "The Belfast News-Letter" sought support from Dublin Castle, an episode in the paper's history which has been written about at length by the late Arthur Aspinall wrote at length. On 25 November, 1796 Gordon wrote to Edward Cooke, the Under-Secretary in Dublin, to say that the loyalty that he had expressed in the paper had "long been rather obnoxious to the spirit of republicanism which too generally obtains in these parts". He asked for "the immediate and effectual support of administration". In January 1797 he wrote to claim that he had been threatened, a claim that Robert Allan repeated in a letter to Dublin Castle. In March 1797 the proprietors wrote to ask for indemnification for their support of government. They referred to the drop in advertising revenue-something of which they had been aware before purchasing the paper. They claimed that circulation had dropped to 2,000 in 1796 from 2742 copies in March 1795, a decrease of nearly 27 per cent. They added that a paper such as theirs "can be of more real use to government than 2,000 regular troops." (In the previous year Lord Downshire wrote to Dublin to point the advantages of supporting "The Belfast News-Letter").

They were granted an allowance of £200 (£11,000 or more today) backdated to March 25, 1796. As Aspinall observed the allowance was "paid regularly though belatedly". The first instalment was not paid until over a year after it was due. In 1802 Allan was told that the allowance would cease. Robertson protested and asked for it to be continued along with commissions for the publication of government publications. The allowance continued. In April 1802 Robertson wrote to senior Post Office official to warn him of the imminent publication of a new Belfast paper whose partners (so he claimed) included some associated with the by then defunct "Northern Star" and others who supported the French or opposed the Union. The appearance of the paper was prevented. "The Belfast News-Letter" continued to be paid until 1829 (the year the paper broke with the government over Catholic Emancipation). The full sum of £ 200 was not always paid; sometimes it was rather lower.

 The original claim for compensation may well have been exaggerated. The government had considered support for the paper before Gordon wrote in November, 1796. In August of that year John Lees of the Post Office suggested an allowance and praised Gordon. Gordon's loyalty was exaggerated. Before Kingsbury's murder the paper had still been a moderate Whig publication rather than one which was unfailingly loyalist; it has already been seen that Gordon made anti-war noises. Gordon wrote to Cooke in September 1796 to say that he was sometimes obliged "to veil my loyalty under the cloud of republican detail".

The number of advertisements did decline after Kingsbury's murder but not drastically so. Before the murder the average space of advertising in the four page newspaper was about a page and a half; after the killing it ranged between a page and a page and a half. The continuing economic problems caused by war with France may have done as much damage as the controversy over the murder.

The subscription book of "The Belfast News-Letter" for 1796 to 1797 which is in the Linen Hall Library lists over 2,000 subscribers; some quit after the Kingsbury advertisement but others ceased subscribing before it was printed. The book lists subscribers from all over Ulster except for Cavan and Donegal. Some received their papers from carriers, others by post, others still directly from the Belfast office. Irish postal subscribers came from as far away as Dublin, Carlow, Galway and Westport. Those in Great Britain included residents of London, Bath, Harrogate, Portsmouth, Carnarvon, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Lord Donegall (Belfast's main landlord) read the paper in London as did a War Office official. But, as John Gray has suggested on the basis of an analysis of earlier notices regarding carriers and subscribers, the paper was much stronger in areas where Church of Ireland members were numerous than in those where Presbyterianism was dominant. Did the paper's owners apply for government support not so much on the grounds of necessity as because they decided to exploit a system of allowances from which a number of Dublin papers were already benefitting? This seems likely; if the financial position of the paper was as bad as it was represented to be in 1796-1797, then an annual allowance of £ 200 would have made relatively little difference especially as it was not paid in regular instalments.

But there were still threats to the circulation of the paper. Carriers were being stopped and the papers destroyed-their assailants being, almost certainly, United Irishmen supporters ("The Belfast News-Letter", February 13 to February 17, 1797). On June 23, 1797 the paper noted complaints from subscribers of irregular delivery; papers were still being taken from carriers. But by that time "The Northern Star", the main threat to the position of "The Belfast News-Letter, had already ceased publication. Its offices were sacked in May 1798 by the men of the Monaghan militia. Not until 1824 was the paper another serious challenge in the form of "The Northern Whig". By then Belfast's population had expanded and the town and the province were better able to support two major papers.

Before Kingsbury's death the paper was not an overtly pro-government publication. After his murder, however, it took onan increasingly loyalist character. The paper showed no sympathy with the rebels of Antrim and Down in 1798. Gordon left before the rebellion, being replaced by Ebenezer Black. On June 12, 1798 the paper reported of the Battle of Saintfield: "Too Mch praise cannot be given to the Newtownards and Comber yeomanry Cavalry and Infantry..." On June 15, 1798 it reported that "In every town and village throughout County Down, the people are coming in and delivering up their arms, heartily sorry for their late conduct, and promising every amendment in future." Loyal advertisements and letters were published.

**THE UNION - A CONSTANT ALLEGIANCE: NEW OWNERS.**

Over the following two years the paper was in effect pro-Union as legislation to unite Great Britain and Ireland went through the parliaments in London and Dublin. Pro-Union addresses were published regularly in the summer and autumn of 1799 such as those from the Catholics of Waterford (August 23) and the noblemen, freemen and freeholders of Londonderry (September 24 and September 27); the same issue had a pro-union petition from the Catholics of Kildare and King's County. Some of these notices covered a full page or more. On September 24, 1799 the paper observed that the Union "seems daily to be acquiring the support and approbation of the respectable and enlightened part of the people of Ireland".

In the following year a pro-Union poem was published in the issue of October 24, 1800. On January 2, 1801, the day after the union took effect, the paper wrote that "however inimical some of the people may have heretofore been to the adoption of that certainly awful [ that is, inspiring awe ] and most important measure, a LEGISLATIVE UNION, it is now become the INTEREST as well as the DUTY of the WHOLE to bury, if possible FOREVER, all political Differences-all religious animosities-all local prejudices; to consider the Empire, not as distinct political Bodies but as containing ONE PEOPLE".

For the next two centuries right up to the present "The Belfast News-Letter" (now "The News Letter" has maintained, with occasional variations of approach, emphasis and tone, its commitment to the union. While the broad political allegiance of the paper has remained fairly constant, its ownership has changed more than once. However, the circumstance that the paper remained in the hands of one family for most of the 19th and 20th centuries must have contributed greatly to the consistency of its political outlook. Ebenezer Black, Gordon's successor as editor, died in 1801 and was followed by James Blair until July 1804. He was succeeded by Alexander Mackay who also eventually became the owner also. Mackay, his daughter-in -law, her husband and their descendants stayed in control until 1989.

Although he became proprietor of the paper, maintaining control until his death in 1844, Mackay vacated the editorship in 1821 to James Stuart. He was followed as editor about 1830 by James McKnight. When Mackay died in 1844, at which point his son's widow consulted James Henderson of "The Newry Telegraph" about what she should do with her inheritance. Henderson dispatched to Belfast his son James Alexander, then only 21, In April the following year Henderson became editor; in December he married Agnes, the granddaughter of Alexander Mackay. It was their line that stayed in control of the paper until the penultimate decade of the 20th century.

 Alexander was a Tory. Under his proprietorship the newspaper which had taken a gradualist approach in support of Catholic Emancipation under Henry Joy turned instead to vehement opposition to the measure. Mackay was a Presbyterian as well as a Tory-an unusual combination in early 19th century Ulster in the days before the rise of Henry Cooke. The paper supported the repeal of the Test Acts which had excluded Dissenters from political and civic office. On March 4, 1828 "The Belfast News-Letter" declared that it had "always regarded the sacramental Tests as a gross profanation of a sacred ordinance, calculated to exclude from power the honest conscientious Christian....The arguments which militate against the political exaltation of Roman Catholics, have no weight whatever in the case of Protestant Dissenters."

The approach of the paper to Catholic Emancipation was entirely different. The Clare election of 1828 which brought the question to point of crisis when the Catholic Daniel O'Connell was elected to parliament but refused his seat would, the paper declared on July 4 1828 "open the eyes of the Protestant public to see the consequences that must inevitably result from the influence of priestly domination". William Vesey Fitzgerald, the defeated Tory candidate got no sympathy. "He is an emancipator, and he is now testing the sweets of Popish gratitude" (July 8, 1828). The editorial continued "Let the landlords of Ireland look to Clare and see in the conduct of the priest -ridden peasantry towards men who had been their best benefactors in times of distress." The newspaper reported at length, on occasion in special supplements, on Protestant meetings against Emancipation across Ireland.

The opposition of "The Belfast News-Letter" to any proposals for reform remained undimmed. On January 6, 1829 it told the Duke of Wellington, the then Prime Minister, that if he wished to save Ireland "he will never accomplish it by half measures, or official neutrality." Robert Peel, then Home Secretary and once a leading opponent of emancipation ("Orange Peel" had been his nickname), altered his convictions and turned to support the measure. The paper wrote that Peel believed "that the best possible terms must be made for the constitution in order to avert consequences of an awful kind. Of what these consequences are we confess ourselves ignorant, and what is more, we will venture to predict that if the new bill provide anything that deserves the name of a Protestant security for the Protestant interest, Mr Peel will find, that it will actually make matters worse....." Peel was criticised even more than the Duke, perhaps because his previous opposition to Emancipation had been far more pronounced. On February 17, 1829 the editorial quoted George III's words when he vetoed Pitt's plans for Catholic Emancipation. The editorial commented on what the late King had said: "This is a noble declaration that should be deeply fixed in the recollection of every British and Irish Protestant at the present momentous era". The paper went on to attack Peel again, this time for his having said that he that he had consented "to break in upon the constitutional settlement of 1688." This to say the least, is strong language from a man whose sole title to power is founded upon the basis of that settlement".

The opponents of Emancipation were frustrated. Despite the personal opposition of George IV to the bill, Royal assent was given to the bill in April 1829. On April 18217?? the editorial stated after the bill had been enacted. "Submission is our duty, though our conviction regarding it has remained. The grounds of our opposition to the measure are laid in the essential character of the Romish system itself and we have seen nothing to affect the justness of our conclusions”. The paper continued to hold O'Connell in contempt. When the Liberator (as his admirers knew him) announced his intention of visiting Belfast early in 1841, the paper printed on 8 January, 1841 a mocking editorial listing six excuses it would not accept if O'Connell refused to come to Belfast and eight more if would not allow if he failed to debate with the Reverend Henry Cooke, the leading Presbyterian minister and champion of the Union.

O'Connell died six years later and the editorial published on news of his death (May 28, 1847) was a little more measured than the unsubtle mockery and scorn accorded him in previous years. "We acknowledge the fluency of his oratory, and his extraordinary power of swaying the emotions of a particular kind of auditory to whom it was clearly addressed.....But here our admiration ceases. All this talent, energy, eloquence and tact, were used but as the instruments of supporting a bad cause in public and selfish ends in private." The leader writer went on to claim that emancipation would have been achieved earlier and on better terms without O'Connell.

The paper also opposed Jewish emancipation. On August 6 1833 it wrote after a bill on the matter had been proposed (and defeated in the Lords: "... are not enamoured of the money-loving race, and besides, we do verily believe, that they are not themselves anxious for the privilege of sharing in the making of our laws". Just over ten years later on January 2, 1844 The Belfast News-Letter published another, rather more philo-semitic, editorial in response to an edict of Tsar Nicholas I which expelled Jews resident on the western frontier of the Russian empire to the interior: "This is really monstrous. The alleged charge is, that some of the Russian Jews been engaged in smuggling; but how many native Russians have themselves participated in a similar offence against the Customs and Excise of their country?" Like The Skibbereen Eagle some years later, The Belfast News-Letter had its eyes on the Tsar of Russia.

 Both the anti- Jewish editorial of 1833 and the one condemning persecution of the Jews over ten years later, were written during the editorship of James McKnight. McKnight held that position from about 1830 to 1846, when he was replaced by James Alexander Henderson. McKnight was, as Desmond McCabe has written, an individual who wedded his opposition to O'Connell "with an ardent scholarly interest in Irish language and literature". McKnight was a supporter of the moderate unionist James Emerson Tennent, as John Bew has noted in his study of the Belfast political milieu of this period, The Glory of Being Britons. In Dr Bew's words, Emerson Tennent and McKnight "sought through The Belfast News Letter to weave the specific concerns of Ulster into the fabric of British politics". McKnight lost the editorship to Henderson in 1846 and went on to edit The Londonderry Standard. He also became an advocate of tenant right and cooperated with the nationalist Charles Gavan Duffy.

One of McKnight's opponents on the question of tenant right was Henry Cooke, the leading Presbyterian minister, a man who was orthodox in religion and conservative in politics. Although The Belfast News-Letter was occasionally critical of Cooke, it praised him both at the outset of his career and at its end. On December 20, 1814 the paper (quoted by Finlay Holmes, Cooke's modern biographer) referred to the young minister's "excellent discourse". On September 5, 1857 during the sectarian riots in the town, he was hailed as "this great apostle of truth". When Cooke died 11 years later the paper of December 14, 1868 lamented that "A Prince of the Church has fallen".

 Cooke's opposition to tenant right (just like his fervent unionism) was shared by The Belfast News-Letter. On August 25, 1851 the paper denounced "the fraternity between the Presbyterian ministers of the north and the surpliced agitators of the south" - in other words, cooperation between Catholics and Presbyterians on land reform. As Professor Brian Walker has observed, The Belfast News-Letter of the mid to late 19th century was "the chief conservative newspaper in Belfast and throughout the province". Although the Hendersons were themselves Presbyterians, their paper was "pro- Church of Ireland, although frequently it made appeal to Protestants in general". It could be said that The Belfast News-Letter was a harbinger of the generally united unionism which emerged in the decades after the first Home Rule crisis in 1886; the paper did not try to unite the Liberal and Conservative strands of unionism but it did bring together Anglican and Presbyterian supporters of the Union. Suspicion of Catholicism still played a part in achieving that union of Protestants. On February 5, 1874 the paper observed that "Home Rule is simple Rome Rule, and if Rome rule were accomplished tomorrow, before that that day week Rome Rule would be evident".

That unionist allegiance is evident in the paper's treatment of the two greatest nationalist leaders of the half century after O'Connell's death, both of them Protestants: Isaac Butt and Charles Stewart Parnell. Writing of Butt after his death the paper of May 5 5, 1879, observed that he "was certainly a great man, endowed with high intellectual capacity, a distinguished scholar, an eminent lawyer, whose early life gave him much promise but whose recent career found him yielding to a faction those talents which might have been much more properly employed in his own advancement and in the promotion of the interests of one common country" The leader writer then added: "Of all the absurd notions which ever entered the heads of Irishmen, that of self-government stands out as the most glaring."

The paper was to deal less kindly still with Parnell during his last months twelve years later. The Parnell meeting in the Ulster Hall in 1891 was as the paper observed on May 23 1891 "of the most orderly type" but it "in no way concerned the Loyalist population". There was no chance of "his [Parnell] gaining a single member of the Loyal party to his side". Although Parnell had praised Ulster's prosperity, the paper was unimpressed: the nationalist leader had "studiously avoided the logical conclusion to be derived from contrasting the prosperity of Ulster with the decadence of the other provinces-namely that only loyalty to the Union can bring about the well-being of Ireland."

When Parnell died suddenly some months later, he was accorded no more sympathy. In the paper on October 8, 1891 he was described as being more "unscrupulous than General Boulanger, the French conspirator, "He was deserted and dishonoured, not by the nation whom he opposed, but by those whose "cause" he espoused....". The leader went on. "Such is the fate of the Irish "patriot" who trusts in the sincerity or the gratitude of Irish priests. "One section of the editorial would, however, have gained the assent of many non-unionists: "His death is the greatest blow that Irish Nationalism has yet received".

Not only was The Belfast News-Letter a unionist paper but also it also was the case that the men involved with its production were committed to the cause in practical as well as philosophical terms. Sir Frederick Falkiner, later the Recorder of Dublin, was a leader writer for the paper during part of the 1850s. As Patrick Geoghegan has written, he was a conservative and held "strongly imperialist views". His career was stained by two accusations of anti-semitism made against him for remarks he made from the bench when trying cases in 1892 and 1902. Richard Lilburn, the old Portoran editor from 1867 to 1897, was a keen Orangeman who was a regular speaker at Twelfth demonstrations in Belfast. His successor, William Geddes Anderson, in office from 1898 to 1928, was described by Lord Craigavon in 1932, when he wrote to the late editor's widow on her husband's death, as "A watchdog of loyalist interests and a prince among journalists".

The Hendersons, the proprietors since the mid-nineteenth century, also demonstrated their commitment to unionism. James Henderson, the son of James Alexander Henderson, took over on his father's death in 1883. He brought in new technology to the paper (which had already moved to Donegall Street in the 1860, offices which it was to occupy for well over a century). Henderson was offered the Conservative candidacy for Newry in 1885 and 1886. He was Lord Mayor of Belfast in 1898-1899; during his year of office Lord Cadogan, then Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, came to Belfast to lay the foundation stone of the new City Hall. Henderson was also a benefactor of the new (now the Central) Library in Belfast. James Henderson's grandson William ("Bill") Henderson continued the family tradition of involvement in unionist politics by involvement by serving as M.P. for Belfast Victoria from 1953 to 1958; he was later Chairman of Century Newspapers, the firm in which ownership of the paper was vested in 1965, and he held that office when the business was sold in 1989-thus bringing to a close the family's connection with the paper.

The Third Home Rule crisis from 1912 to 1914 lasted longer than the two previous crises in 1886 and 1892-1893. On this occasion The Belfast News-Letter was yet again one of the leading champions of the Unionist cause. Sir James Henderson was a member of the committee which made preparations for Ulster Day. The newspaper's coverage of the period leading up to the signing of the Covenant was unequivocally unionist but by the second decade of the twentieth century the its commitment to the cause was more reasoned and measured than it had been at times in previous decades. The vehement anti-Catholicism which the paper had displayed in its opposition to Emancipation in the 1820s had disappeared.

 The commitment of The Belfast New-Letter to unionism continued throughout the First World War and the Irish Troubles which followed that conflict; it remained constant too as Northern Ireland was established; the new devolved government of the region had the support of the journalists in Donegall Street. Although the Hendersons remained in charge at one stage, as one family member "Brum" recorded in his memoirs, they had to buy back a substantial shareholding from a distant relative, Sir Christopher Musgrave; he had been left the shares by another family member, Florence Henderson. Despite the paper's broad commitment to Unionism, it was, "Brum" Henderson claimed, "often critical of the Stormont government and never in its pocket". He added that only one cabinet minister, the late Dame Dehra Parker, had tried to interfere in the paper's coverage of politics.