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978-0-521-26173-9 - Energy and Empire: A Biographical Study of Lord Kelvin

Crosbie Smith and M. Norton Wise

Excerpt

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# I

## The making of the natural philosopher

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## 1

*From the ashes of revolution*

After a walk of about a mile and a half, a considerable part of which lay in the grounds of Lord Moira, we entered the camp of that body of men who were to sever Ireland from the dominion of Britain and to give her a separate existence, and a name among the nations – who were to give liberty and equality to their countrymen – to abolish tithes and taxes – in a word, to make Ireland, at least, as happy as the United States and the French Republic were considered, in the ardent conceptions of the republicans of the day. *James Thomson, 'The Battle of Ballynahinch [1798]'*<sup>1</sup>

Lord Kelvin, revered and respected statesman of science in the golden age of late nineteenth-century British Imperialism, began life not in Great Britain, but in Ireland. Addressing a Birmingham audience in 1883, he spoke humorously of the Irishman's seventh sense as common sense, believing 'that the possession of that virtue by my countrymen – I speak as an Irishman – . . . will do more to alleviate the woes of Ireland, than even the removal of the "melancholy ocean" which surrounds its shores'.<sup>2</sup> Less than a decade later, Sir William Thomson's elevation to the peerage as Baron Kelvin of Largs symbolized the social summit of a remarkable life lived in the context of Victorian Britain. Yet that ultimate acclaim did not flow from scientific and technical achievement alone, but also from his direct involvement in the political cause of Liberal Unionism during the 1880s. That involvement derived from the Irish context into which he had been born, a context of cultural and social liberalism upon which his enduring personal values were founded. It is thus that in beginning our story we turn to an age and a country radically different from that of late Victorian Britain, to an age which shaped the resolute and resourceful character of Lord Kelvin's father, James Thomson (1786–1849).

No definitive study of Lord Kelvin can ignore the profound significance of James Thomson for his son's social values and cultural beliefs. James Thomson, by the power of his convictions and strength of his character, played the major role in the making of the young natural philosopher. This chapter is therefore

<sup>1</sup> [James Thomson], 'Recollections of the Battle of Ballynahinch', *Belfast Mag.*, 1 (1825), p. 57. Eighteenth-century writers refer to Ballinahinch or Ballinehinch; nineteenth- and twentieth-century spelling holds to Ballynahinch. <sup>2</sup> PL, 1, 254–5.

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devoted to an analysis of the sources and development of James Thomson's beliefs and values from the momentous historical events of the 1798 rebellion (which, in the North of Ireland, explicitly embodied liberal presbyterian values) to his removal to the Glasgow College chair of mathematics as a widower with young family in the cholera year of 1832. By so doing, we provide a study of the deepest roots of Lord Kelvin's own convictions which were to permeate his scientific, religious, and public life alike.

Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, Ireland and her social, cultural, and economic problems seemed forever set to threaten the stability of Britain and the Empire. No other single problem, by the magnitude and range of its implications, dominated for so long British political life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Home Rule battles – which ended with the partition of Ireland in 1920 – represented only the latest of a succession of political crises extending from the failure of revolution in 1798 through the tragic famines of the 1840s. In this period, then, liberal presbyterians no longer aimed to protect their values of civil and religious liberty by the separation of Ireland from the dominion of Britain as in 1798, but by the development of a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland as a guarantee of those values against the nationalistic, Catholic values of many of their fellow Irishmen.

*Ireland in rebellion: 1798*

In the time of the French Revolution, and for many years before, Ballynahinch had little more distinction than any other Irish market town. Lying land-locked at the very centre of the County of Down, it was the meeting place for roads leading from market towns in the west, and from Belfast in the north, to ancient Downpatrick, and from there to the eastern coasts of Down. For the most part, these coasts, like those of neighbouring Antrim, faced the south-west shores of Scotland across twenty or so miles of turbulent sea. The waters of the North Channel and the Irish Sea, with their tidal streams flowing swiftly to and from the Atlantic Ocean and with their frequent winter gales, formed a natural barrier, which, however, was never enough to sever the strong ties of trade, culture, and religion for so long existing between the North of Ireland, or Ulster, and Scotland.

Ballynahinch was physically far removed from the centres of European civilization and of early British industrialization. Eighteenth-century travellers complained of the broken and narrow causeways which were the roads leading to it through rough and untamed countryside, and it obtained on this account the name of Magheredroll, or the field of difficulties. Yet in 1744 one observant visitor wrote that 'the Vallies and Sides of the Hills produce Oats and Flax in plenty, and the morass Grounds seldom fail of yielding a full Crop of Rye . . .

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The staple Commodity . . . is linen yarn, which is sold at little Fairs here . . .<sup>3</sup> And so, unlike much of Ireland, it possessed economic prosperity of a modest kind. A temperate climate, combined with reasonable soils, had been exploited to the full by the seventeenth-century settlers, who for the most part had come from south-western Scotland. One such settler near Ballynahinch around 1641 was John Thomson.

Apart from the harsh slopes of Slieve Croob to the south-west of the town, the landscape comprised innumerable small hills, low whale-backed ridges of glacial boulder clay with their long axis parallel to the direction of ice movement. The southern slopes of these drumlins made them attractive for pasture and cultivation, and so they became the well-drained sites of relatively prosperous farmhouses. In 1786, at a farmhouse on the slopes of a hill known as Annaghmore, about two miles to the south of Ballynahinch, John Thomson's great-great-grandson James Thomson was born. This area had rather more distinction than Ballynahinch itself, being in possession, as our eighteenth-century traveller expressed it, of an 'excellent chalybeo-sulphureous Spa' to which many troubled pilgrims came to benefit from 'a very clear Water, and Withal very cold, of very disagreeable Taste and Smell . . . The Quantity of this Water commonly taken is from three Pints to three Quarts; some it vomits, others it purges . . .'<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite unpleasant waters, the Spa was a fashionable meeting place for worthy citizens of the North of Ireland and being at the foot of Annaghmore may indeed have provided James Thomson with an early knowledge of the world beyond the confines of the farm. While we may marvel at the way in which a farm labourer – the youngest by some ten years of three sons – taught himself mathematics and eventually became a distinguished professor at Glasgow College, we need more especially to understand his attitudes to education, politics and religion, views which remained as major guiding principles throughout his life and the lives of all his children.

The complex problems which beset Ireland in the eighteenth century may be summarized in terms of three distinct religious denominations, each representing powerful social interests. The Irish Church, the state-established equivalent to the Church of England, was frequently associated with the Anglo-Irish and English landowners of Ireland. In theory, its members alone had full political rights and privileges. By contrast, the Irish Roman Catholics consisted of the great mass of native Irish, the vast numbers of peasants surviving as tenants in a subsistence economy throughout the island. In numbers only had the Catholics power and superiority: most other rights had been removed by the penal laws of

<sup>3</sup> [Walter Harris], *The antient and present state of the County of Down* (Dublin, 1744), pp. 76–8. Harris's classic account was written 'to counter misrepresentations' that 'the People are uncivilized, rude, barbarous . . .', that 'they count it no Infamy to commit Robberies, and that Violence and Murder are, in their Opinions, no way displeasing to God . . .' and that 'Wolves still abound too much in this country . . .'. <sup>4</sup> Harris, p. 176.

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the late seventeenth century. The third group was that of the protestant dissenters who, unlike their English counterparts, were not thinly distributed over the land, but were a powerful and cohesive political force, organized through the well-defined structure of presbyterianism. Concentrated in the North of Ireland, the presbyterians looked to Scotland as the source of their culture and church. During troubled times, fear of Catholicism made them the natural allies of the established Irish Church, yet in more normal times the Irish Church felt threatened by the power of these dissenters and refused to grant them legal toleration. For their part, the presbyterians were probably powerful enough in practice not to need the toleration. Though essentially tenants, Ulster's yeomen farmers differed from the Catholic peasantry in so far as by custom (rather than by law) they were deemed to possess a saleable interest in their holdings, a feature which provided them with comparative prosperity and security.<sup>5</sup>

Emigration of dissenters to North America had begun on a small scale as early as 1717. In the mid-1770s, however, some 30 000 protestants left the North of Ireland in the space of two or three years. Many of them claimed that they emigrated to escape persecution by the established Church. But economic conditions – restrictions on Irish trade, high rents, and poor harvests – almost certainly prompted the first large-scale emigrations from Ulster. Thereafter the image of a land free from religious intolerance must have been a strong attraction for the dissenters, even if intolerance in Ireland and toleration in the New World were not as great in reality as in the minds of the presbyterian emigrants.<sup>6</sup>

The American War of Independence of 1776 helped to focus the issues still further. The Ulster presbyterians were identified, in the Irish government's eyes, with the rebellious element in America. Some presbyterians, moreover, were known to possess dangerously republican principles. By 1778, the presbyterians strongly supported volunteer companies, ostensibly against the threat of invasion. Demand for full toleration now had the backing of force, although the primary interest was free trade for Ireland. Religious toleration, so long existing in practice, became a legal right by 1780, and alongside it went the claims of a largely presbyterian mercantile class which found expression through the volunteer movement. The danger to the established interests of church and state was far from over by the 1780s, however, for, added to the inspiration of the American War of Independence, came the French Revolution in 1789. The movement for reform in Ireland began thereafter to threaten a political and social revolution.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> J.C. Beckett, *Protestant dissent in Ireland, 1687–1780* (London, 1948), esp. pp. 13–19; *The making of modern Ireland, 1603–1923* (London, 1966), pp. 179–81.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88–90; see also R.J. Dickson, *Ulster emigration to Colonial America, 1718–1775* (London, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Beckett, *Modern Ireland*, esp. pp. 246–67, provides an excellent account of this period in Irish history.

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Enthusiasm for the French Revolution was strong in Ulster. In 1792, many Ulstermen subscribed to assist the French in repelling invasion, and Belfast Volunteers celebrated the end of the monarchy and the establishment of a French Republic. The volunteer movement progressively slipped from the control of the landed gentry and became more and more radical. In 1791 the Society of United Irishmen had been founded to bring together Irishmen of all creeds, to establish complete religious equality, and to demand radical reform of parliament. Among those in the forefront of such activities were the famous Theobald Wolfe Tone, who was to lead attempted French invasions of Ireland in 1796 and 1798, and William Drennan, a medical doctor and the author of the Society's test – with strong echoes of French revolutionary principles – who later became an influential friend of James Thomson. Although Drennan ended his connection with the United Irishmen in 1794 after being tried and acquitted for 'wicked and seditious libel', he retained to the end of his life a firm belief in those principles which the United Irishmen failed to achieve for their country when they took up arms against the Irish government in 1798.<sup>8</sup>

James Thomson was twelve years old when the 'rebellion' or 'revolution' broke out in the North of Ireland. He was witness to the most traumatic event ever to take place in his town – the so-called Battle of Ballynahinch. In his vivid account, written in 1825 for the *Belfast Magazine*, he recollected the arrival of the rebel army on a hill to one side of the town and the visit of his family to supply provisions for the insurgents' needs. The visitors were shown the primitive weapons – mostly pikes – and the symbols of liberty and freedom, before fleeing for safety to an adjoining hill. During the evening two bodies of the King's forces – one from Downpatrick and the other from Belfast – approached, burning farmhouses indiscriminately to induce terror. Plagued by desertions, internal divisions, and inadequate training and weapons, the insurgents were easily routed by the following morning, but not before the King's forces had set fire to Ballynahinch and 'in a short time, a great proportion of the best houses in it were enveloped in flames, and hastening to inevitable destruction'.<sup>9</sup> Of a hundred houses in the town before the battle, sixty-three had been gutted by fire at the end, and most of the remainder were wrecked and looted. A prosperous market town had been transformed overnight into one of ruin, poverty and decay.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout Ireland in 1798 the defeat of the United Irishmen followed a similar pattern, and, in the aftermath, the Act of Union between Great Britain

<sup>8</sup> See William Drennan, *The Drennan letters being a selection from the correspondence which passed between William Drennan M.D. and his brother-in-law and sister Samuel and Martha McTier during the years 1776–1819*, D.A. Chart (ed.), (Belfast, 1931), p. viii. For a popular account of the United Irishmen, see Thomas Pakenham, *The year of liberty. The story of the great Irish rebellion of 1798* (London, 1969). For an interesting parallel to James Thomson, see T.L. Hankins, *Sir William Rowan Hamilton* (Baltimore and London, 1980), pp. 3–19.

<sup>9</sup> James Thomson, 'Recollections', pp. 56–64, esp. p. 62. See also Pakenham, pp. 246–64.

<sup>10</sup> S. McCullough, *Ballynahinch: centre of Down* (Belfast, 1968), p. 83.

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and Ireland was drawn up, to take effect from 1st January, 1801. The scene was thereby set for Anglo–Irish relations throughout the entire nineteenth century. Never again would the presbyterians of Ulster take up arms on behalf of a United Ireland. Immense social and economic changes occurred during the time – up to 1920 – that the political scene was concentrated in London. The North of Ireland became, in the nineteenth century, almost a twin sister of Scotland's Clydeside – one of the great workshops of the British Empire<sup>11</sup> – while the remainder of the island continued in a state of commercial and industrial backwardness.

James Thomson's account of the battle emphasized the futility of the rebellion, while at the same time expressing an implicit sympathy with the ideals of the rebels – the ideals of liberty, equality, and freedom from sectarian dogmatism – and an explicit hatred of the repression and atrocities perpetrated by the establishment forces. Again and again we find these themes appearing in his life, themes which undoubtedly had their origins in the European and American movements for 'enlightenment' in the eighteenth century, and which were focussed upon his very doorstep by the Battle of Ballynahinch. A minor skirmish though the battle was, it was an expression of many of the tensions which had for long been developing in Ireland.

James Thomson's formal education began around the year 1800, at which time the Rev Samuel Edgar purchased a house and farm at nearby Ballykine for the purpose of preparing young men for the ministry and other professions. Edgar (later professor of theology at the Belfast Academical Institution) was minister of the secession church in Ballynahinch, a breakaway from the main presbyterian church in Ulster. At Edgar's school James Thomson studied mathematics and classics and eventually began to assist with the teaching.<sup>12</sup> Around the age of twenty-one 'I was teaching eight hours a day at Dr Edgar's, and during the extra hours – often fagged and comparatively listless – I was reading Greek and Latin to prepare me for entering College, which I did not do till nearly two years after'.<sup>13</sup>

Thomson, having entered Glasgow College in 1810, continued to act as assistant teacher to Edgar during the six month summer vacation, earning enough to see him through each college session from November to May, until he graduated a Master of Arts in 1812. Two more sessions of study at Glasgow College followed in which he took both medical and theological courses with the intention of becoming a presbyterian minister.<sup>14</sup> For an intelligent younger son, unlikely to inherit any property, such a profession was an obvious choice.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Beckett, *Modern Ireland*, pp. 268–83; J.C. Beckett and R.E. Glasscock (eds.), *Belfast. The origin and growth of an industrial city* (London, 1967), esp. pp. 67–131; D.J. Owen, *History of Belfast* (Belfast, 1921), pp. 296–305.

<sup>12</sup> SPT, 1, 3; Elizabeth King, *Lord Kelvin's early home* (London, 1909), pp. 7–11; James Thomson, *Papers*, p. xv; McCullough, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Dr James Thomson to William Thomson, 1st July, 1845, T315, ULC.

<sup>14</sup> King, *Early home*, p. 10; James Thomson, *Papers* p. xv.

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However, his original aims were redirected by the emergence of a remarkable new educational establishment in the dynamic town of Belfast – the Belfast Academical Institution, in which Thomson taught mathematics for eighteen years.

*The Belfast Academical Institution: 1814–32*

Between 1780 and 1800, Belfast had been transformed from a market centre for a domestic linen industry into a major commercial town through the introduction of a cotton industry on the factory system. A tough realism in business went hand in hand with the political ideals of tolerance and enlightenment, for Belfast was perhaps the main centre of Irish radicalism in the late eighteenth century. The town not only celebrated in 1791 the anniversary of the Fall of the Bastille and produced an openly radical newspaper, the *Northern Star* (until the militia destroyed the printing press in 1797), but also expressed its desire for ‘enlightenment’ and ‘improvement’ through the more restrained channels of an active philosophical society.<sup>15</sup> What Belfast lacked, however, was an educational establishment which could give expression to its liberalism, not to say its radicalism. By 1806, a public meeting sought to create such an institution.<sup>16</sup>

By the following year, the promoters had launched a scheme for a combined school and college, and the very considerable sum of £16 000 was raised by public subscription. Government support was weak, as presbyterians (and Belfast was still dominated by presbyterians of one kind or another) continued to be associated with unsound and often republican principles. Had the new Institution been founded as a sectarian one, the government might have had less to fear, but the Institution was radically non-sectarian, as the Secretary, Joseph Stevenson, stated: ‘the Institution is not connected with any religious persuasion . . . The subscribers to the Institution are composed of all religious persuasions’.<sup>17</sup> One of the most active and enthusiastic supporters was the former United Irishman, William Drennan. Drennan belonged to the radical tradition, although he had left the United Irishmen before the 1798 rebellion. An ardent supporter of Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform, he was convinced of the need for union among Irishmen and the abandonment of sectarianism. As he once wrote in characteristic vein:

His Lordship [Lord Redesdale] complains of the Catholics’ want of Christian charity and their excluding the Protestants from Heaven. In return, however, the Protestants exclude the Catholics from the good things of earth . . . Indeed, every established church becomes necessarily intolerant and exclusive in doctrine as well as in practice . . .<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Beckett and Glasscock (eds.), *Belfast*, pp. 55–87.

<sup>16</sup> John Jamieson, *The history of the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, 1810–1960* (Belfast, 1959), pp. 1–2; T.W. Moody and J.C. Beckett, *Queen’s Belfast 1845–1949* (2 vols., London, 1959), 1, pp. xli–liii. <sup>17</sup> Jamieson, pp. 11–12.

<sup>18</sup> Drennan, *Letters*, p. 335.



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In his opening address in 1814, Drennan defined the aims of the Institution: to diffuse the benefits of education ‘both useful and liberal’ in Ulster, to provide for the education of children at home rather than Scotland, and to remove religious tests.<sup>19</sup> A full range of teaching was available, for the Institution had appointed specialist masters for the school departments, among them James Thomson, who had in 1812 proposed himself ‘as a candidate for the department of teaching of Mathematicks or Natural Philosophy, or both, if they should be taught by the same person’.<sup>20</sup>

James Thomson shared the educational and religious goals of the new Institution. Anti-tory and anti-establishment in politics, Thomson sought the reform and advancement of the human condition through the diffusion of education to the common man. Latitudinarian in religion, he opposed all religious tests. As a professional mathematician, he aimed to advance his subject in a manner free from denominational or dogmatic constraints. And to achieve that end, he emphasized the practical, rather than the ‘theoretical’ or ‘metaphysical’, dimensions of his profession. Thus he later wrote in the preface to his *Algebra* of 1844:

Throughout the work, the Author has carefully kept clear of every thing of a metaphysical or disputed character. With regard to all the practically useful applications and interpretations of algebra, there is no difference of opinion among men of sound science and judgement; and it is only with such matters that the mere learner should have any concern.<sup>21</sup>

A ‘practical’ approach led to fruit and advancement, while a ‘metaphysical’ one led to barren controversy.

On the 8th January, 1814, James Thomson accepted the post in the mathematical and arithmetical department in the Belfast Academical Institution.<sup>22</sup> He soon began a characteristic expansion and advancement of his modest empire. He wrote to the Assistant Secretary stating that ‘additional desks & forms are immediately necessary in my schoolroom. I also very much need globes & maps [for the teaching of geography]. The globes with which I am at present furnished are unfit for performing except a very few problems’. Early in the following year, 1815, he wrote again to the Board to say that his classroom had become too small. At times he had almost a hundred pupils in a room built for less than half that number. He stressed that he had ‘the largest classes & the smallest room’, with the consequence that the heat and general discomfort were rapidly becoming intolerable. The quiet, unassuming farmer’s son from

<sup>19</sup> Moody and Beckett, *Queen’s Belfast*, 1, pp. xlvi–xlvii.

<sup>20</sup> James Thomson to Joseph Stevenson, SCH 524/3C/1, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

<sup>21</sup> James Thomson, *An elementary treatise on algebra, theoretical and practical* (London, 1844), p. vi.

<sup>22</sup> James Thomson to Joseph Stevenson, SCH 524/7B/8/1, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. He also asked in a postscript to the same letter whether the teaching of geography belonged to his department.

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Ballynahinch was proving to be a firm and determined strategist intent on expanding his empire, as well as a competent, thorough, and successful teacher: '... It may be asked what remedy I would propose. I know of none but to take seven or eight feet in length from Mr Spence's room [the master of the writing school] . . .'.<sup>23</sup>

Appointed professor of mathematics in the collegiate department – essentially a Scottish university on a small scale – of the Belfast Academical Institution in 1815, Thomson consolidated his position, increased his property both materially and intellectually, and retained both posts until his move to Glasgow in 1832. His college classes in mathematics were frequently the largest of any subject in the Belfast Institution, numbering in 1829 a hundred pupils in the junior mathematics and twenty-six in the senior.<sup>24</sup> He insisted too on full recognition of the equality of his school department with the English and classics schools, and he protested strongly against an attempt by the English master to encroach on the territory of arithmetic and geography.<sup>25</sup>

While in the first quarter of the nineteenth century the North of Ireland did not suffer from the kind of warfare which it had endured in 1798, it was not surprising that the Institution, given its roots, should often have been the subject of political tensions. The initial government grant of £1500 per annum had enabled some professorial salaries to be as high as £150 – to which could be added student fees. However, largely because several masters attended a St Patrick's day banquet in 1816 during which radical toasts were allegedly drunk, the Irish Chief Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, required that the Institution must surrender its independence or lose the grant. The Institution sacrificed the grant, and struggled to remain solvent. So great was his loyalty to the independence and principles of the Institution that Thomson gave up his professorial salary of £50 during a severe financial crisis in 1823, and until affairs improved. The grant was, however, restored by Peel in 1828, and such was the change in relations that the word 'Royal' was added to the title of the Institution in 1831.<sup>26</sup>

The other major tension was with the powerful evangelical wing of the Irish Presbyterian Church, dominated during the 1820s by the fiery Rev Henry Cooke. The dispute was ultimately one of a sectarian versus a non-sectarian education, and illustrates why the Thomsons, during the 1840s, were such enthusiastic supporters of the abolition of Scottish university tests. Irish Presbyterianism had fragmented in the middle and late eighteenth century into an

<sup>23</sup> James Thomson to Robert Simms, 19th August, 1814, SCH 524/7B/8/20; 7th February, 1815, SCH/7B/9/15, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. Robert Simms had been a founding member of the Society of United Irishmen in 1791, and was Assistant Secretary of the Academical Institution from 1812 to 1843. See Jamieson, p. 210.

<sup>24</sup> Return of students from the Faculty, December 1829, SCH 524/7B/23/46, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. <sup>25</sup> Jamieson, pp. 15–16, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Moody and Beckett, *Queen's Belfast*, 1, pp. xlviii–xlix; Jamieson, pp. 16, 23–47. The addition of the word 'Royal' may have been a shrewd move by Peel to ensure the permanent loyalty of an institution whose allegiances had hitherto been suspect.