

JOHN HALL OF BALLYGORMAN

'The Presbyterian Bishop of New York'

BY RACHEL MAGOWAN



Rev John Hall
1829-1898

According to Thomas Hall in the biography of his father, published in 1901, *'John Hall, Pastor and Preacher'*, John Hall, the eldest son of William and Rachel Hall (née McGowan) was born at Ballygorman, Co Armagh, on 31 July 1829. In 1867 John became Minister of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church (FAPC), in New York, USA. By the time he died, aged 69, on 17 September 1898, John's congregation numbered over 2,600 people – by far the largest Presbyterian congregation of its time.

The congregation of 'FAPC', as it is now known, rapidly outgrew its 1860s building on 19th Street, and a much larger church, which is still in use today, was constructed on a new site at the junction of 5th Avenue and 55th Street. John was instrumental in selecting the shape of the auditorium - elliptical, so that the members of the congregation could all see each other - and in ensuring that the bank loans were paid off promptly, so that future generations would not be burdened with the debt of the construction.

Much of what follows is based on his son's biography. Thus the man who, as a shy 19 year-old had preached his first sermon in the tiny Ballygorman 'Sabbath schoolhouse', and had been advised by an elder that he would 'get more help looking into the eyes of those he was speaking to than by trying to bore a hole in the roof with his eye', spent the second half of his life regularly addressing groups of over 2,000 people. In his obituary in the *New York Times* he was described his as 'The Presbyterian Bishop of New York', an acknowledgement of the role he had played both in assisting other ministers in their work and in public life in New York generally.

Ballygorman, Co Armagh

Ballygorman, where the Halls lived, is a townland of 390 acres in the parish of Loughgilly, to the east of mid-Armagh. In the 1840s it consisted of around 30 holdings rented by tenant farmers from the Cope family of Loughgall, Co Armagh.

Around 1865 the names of the occupants in Co Armagh, and the size of their holdings, were recorded in the *Griffiths Valuation*. The Halls' farm consisted of 13 fields totalling approximately 18 acres – roughly average size for the area.

John's father William Hall, a farmer, was an elder in the Presbyterian Church at Mountnorris, about three miles away. His mother Rachel was a cousin of the minister, Rev William McGowan. John was baptised at Mountnorris on 13 October 1829.

In Thomas's 1901 biography he describes the 'simple home' at Ballygorman where his father grew up – a 'long, low' whitewashed cottage with a thatched roof, surrounded by sycamore trees and a 'little orchard', at the end of a long narrow lane with hawthorn hedges. William Hall planted crops of oats, reciting poetry and recounting stories from the Greek and Roman classics (*'gathered from well-used translations'*) to his son, as they walked together behind the plough. Cows provided milk, from which butter was made.



Mountnorris Presbyterian Church

The main room inside the cottage was the kitchen, with a turf fire on which the family's food was cooked. Thomas describes the self-sufficient, mainly vegetarian, diet of his father's childhood – essentially home-produced porridge, oatcakes and milk.

Clothing, like food, was generally made at home, and 'constructed with a view to endurance rather than to fashion'. One person who made an impression on the young John Hall was 'the family tailor', who visited their home about once a month. A door would be taken off its hinges and laid across chairs for him to work on. He was 'a great man for stories', some of which later found their way into John Hall's sermons.



Mountnorris Church Session House - 1993

On Sundays the Halls attended the service at the Presbyterian ‘meeting-house’ in Mountnorris. At this time the church, which had been built in 1734, was a simple structure on bare earth, with neither flooring nor ceiling. The Halls sat in a double pew at the end of one aisle, from where John, as a boy, could observe the minister in the pulpit, and the ‘precentor’ next to him.

Throughout his life John recollected the very moving, palpable devotion with which communion was taken in this building:

‘I can well remember the Communion Sabbath – the long tables, covered with the white linen, stretching all the length of the aisles, and the people, psalm-books in hand, slowly and with the most devout bearing, moving out of their pews to their places.’

‘I have seen stately processions in historic cathedrals, and still more moving spectacles of thousands starting to their feet under one impulse, but never anything more like reverent acknowledgement of the divine than then appeared in the old meeting-house.’

Schooldays in Co Armagh

When John was about five years old he began to attend a ‘neighbourhood school’ at Loughgilly, run by Mr William Whitten, ‘a true teacher, and a gentleman’, who later became ‘a good clergyman in Canada’. Throughout his life John acknowledged his debt to Mr Whitten, from whom he received a sound basic education, including spelling, grammar and arithmetic. In the evenings John shared his new-found knowledge with his siblings and the other children in the neighbourhood.



Mountnorris Church Session House in 1993

After he finished at Loughgilly, John attended a ‘classical school’ about three miles from Ballygorman, which had been established by ‘a man of good parts’, from whom he learned Latin.

Student days in Belfast

According to the Reverend A.C. Anderson in his 1965 publication ‘*The Story of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*’, in 1841, John, aged twelve, became a student at the ‘*Belfast Academical Institution*’, which provided university education in Belfast in the days before the ‘mellow, red-brick building’ of Queen’s College, Belfast, was opened in 1849. In November 1845 he was awarded a degree signed by Dr Edgar, the moderator, and a group of professors in Natural Philosophy, History, Sacred Literature, Mathematics and Latin.

John then entered the theological college and began the formal courses (including Hebrew and Church History) undertaken as preparation for the ministry. He became a lifelong friend of some of his teachers – including Dr John Edgar, Professor of Divinity, and Dr Killen, Professor of History.

The social issues with which John and his fellow students of the late 1840s were mainly concerned were the anti-slavery movement in the USA, and the famine in Ireland. They attended meetings denouncing slavery and supporting the operations of the ‘underground railroad’ in America. Following the publication of ***A Cry from Connaught***, a letter by Dr John Edgar pleading for immediate relief for the starving people in the west of Ireland, John and a group of about a dozen ‘earnest friends’ at the College formed the Students Missionary Association, to support missionary work in the Connaught area.

Home Mission, Connaught

Newly graduated, John began working in Connaught as a school inspector for the Association, on 6 June 1849.

The Association’s schools were cross-denominational: money was contributed by Methodists, Quakers, and supporters of the ‘Low Church’ (evangelical) wing of the Church of Ireland; the organisational and administrative work was generally undertaken by Presbyterian ministers; teachers, who were employed on merit, were mainly local and Roman Catholic.

Although new to preaching, John already had considerable experience in teaching. Much of his work in Connaught was carried out in Irish, fluency in which Dr Edgar considered essential.

John was ordained while he was in Connaught, and became engaged to Mrs Emily Irwin, a widow with three young sons. Emily, who lived in Camlin, supported the aims of the Association and wished to donate a site for a school. She had already initiated a project to provide girls with employment in ‘sewed muslin work’, a type of embroidery worked on materials supplied by firms in Scotland.



Rev Dr John Edgar, 1798-a
Artist: Samuel Hawksett

First Presbyterian Church, Armagh

In 1852 John received a unanimous ‘call’ to become the pastor of Armagh First Presbyterian Church.

The congregation at First Armagh included townspeople from Armagh city as well as farming families from the surrounding areas. Thomas Hall explains the impact on both the content and the form of his father’s sermons: the ‘substance’ had to be ‘such as would edify the... thoughtful and highly educated people’, while the style and manner had to be ‘simple enough for the thought to be grasped by busy farmers and their tired wives’.

According to ‘*The New York Times*’ of 16/01/1874, from his pulpit in New York, John referred to Armagh as ‘the little peddling town in the north of Ireland’ where he was first settled, and where the working men ‘made perambulators for babies’ in their leisure moments, and played draughts.

John and Emily were married in Dublin on 15 June 1852. Over the next few years their four sons (Robert, Bolton, Richard and Thomas) were born at Armagh.

Scots Church (‘Findlater’s Church’), Dublin

In 1858 John received a ‘call’ to assist Dr William B Kirkpatrick, the minister at Scots Church, the leading Presbyterian Church in Dublin. An ‘honoured and scholarly’ man, Dr Kirkpatrick was no longer able to do the type of external work with his congregation which John had become so well-known for in Armagh. In October 1858 John and his family moved to Dublin, where their fifth child, a girl named Emily, was born.

National Education

John believed that it was in Ireland’s best interests that children from all backgrounds should be educated together:

‘It is for the public good that the people of different kindreds and tongues peopling this fair and broad land should coalesce and become one’

Pointing out that there was no such thing as ‘an Episcopalian spelling’ or a ‘Presbyterian table of multiplication’, John became a Commissioner on the Board of National Education in 1860. He believed that ‘national’ education would be ‘secular, not godless’, in that it would enable teachers selected on merit to teach children subjects that were common to all. This basic education could then be supplemented by religious education as desired by the child’s parents:

‘Far from being godless, each denomination may make its own youth as godly as it can’.

From Dublin to New York

In 1867 John was selected as one of two delegates to attend the General Assembly meeting of the Presbyterian Church North in the USA. The purpose of this trip, which evolved into an eight-week speaking tour, was to re-establish ‘the bonds of fellowship’ which had been ruptured by the Civil War (1861-65).

John left Cork on the steamship **City of New York** on 2 May 1867, and arrived in the New World eleven days later. He kept a detailed diary of this, his first transatlantic voyage, which gives a first-hand account of the travelling conditions experienced by emigrants of the time.

According to the *Passenger List*, 47 of the 829 passengers were, like John, travelling ‘Saloon’ or ‘Cabin’. Being 6’ tall and ‘proportionately broad across the shoulders’, John found his bunk very uncomfortable. We can only guess how much more unpleasant were the conditions at sea for the remaining 782 passengers who were travelling ‘steerage’. The records show that no one actually died on this voyage; one woman, however, gave birth – the very last entry on the *Passenger List* is for Sarah Dunn, a ‘female infant’, who was ‘born at sea’, in steerage accommodation.

Approximately two thirds of the passengers came from ‘Great Britain and Ireland’; most of the rest from ‘Germany’, a category which evidently included people from Sweden and the Netherlands.

The tempestuous weather conditions on John’s first Sunday at sea meant that he was unable to hold any kind of religious service. Over the next few days the storms abated and John took to strolling round the ship, talking to his fellow passengers. On the second Sunday he was invited to hold a service on board. He particularly enjoyed the impromptu four-hour discussion that developed later with a large number of the Lutheran steerage passengers, made possible by the help of ‘a good lad’ who spoke English and interpreted for him.

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York



Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1908

On 23 June, a few days before the end of his trip, John was invited to preach at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. Shortly after his return to Ireland he received a 'Call' from the elders at Fifth Avenue, sent via the recently-laid Atlantic Cable: *'Large meeting of congregation voted you cordial and unanimous call'*.

John arrived at New York, with his family, on the S.S. *Aleppo*, on 22 October 1867. At that time the church building, where he preached to crowded congregations on Sundays, mornings and afternoons, was situated on the corner of 19th Street and Fifth Avenue. On Sunday evenings he generally preached as a guest speaker in *'some other pulpit'*. In addition, he frequently addressed outside associations, churches and colleges. He also wrote regularly for the *New York Ledger*, which was edited by his friend and supporter Robert Bonner, and for many other religious publications.

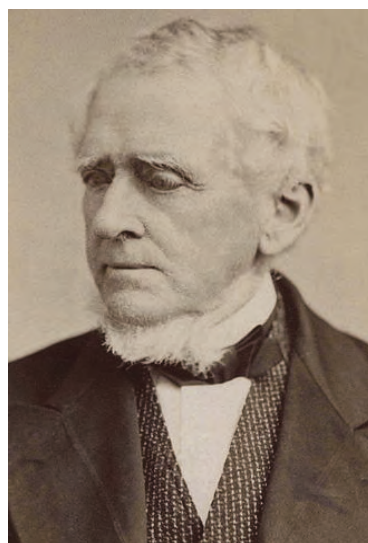
John's congregation in New York soon outgrew its building, so a new Church was constructed at the junction of Fifth Avenue and 55th Street. The cornerstone was laid in 1871, and the building was dedicated at a service held on Sunday 9 May 1875.

While in New York John retained his passionate belief in the importance of education. He became a member of the Council of the University of the City of New York in 1882, and later acted as Chancellor of the University for nine years.

Three incidents reported in the *New York Times* - the *'Dix Canard'*, the *'Funeral of Ley Teep'*, and the *'Assassination Attempt'* by John Roth - indicate the variety of experiences which John encountered during his time in New York, and resonate with issues of today.

The Dix Canard

On Sunday 11 May 1873, John was tricked into making a *'fake news'* report, later named the *'Dix Canard'*. While he was preaching at the evening service at FAPC, a member of the congregation handed him a card bearing the news that John Adams Dix, the Governor of New York State, had died of apoplexy that afternoon. John paused for a moment *'as if in some great distress'*, and then announced the death from the pulpit. He drew lessons from the *'sad event'*, mentioning the *'vanity of the world'* and the *'uncertainty of life'*, and ended by urging his listeners to *'cease vain pursuits and lay up treasures in Heaven'*.



John Adams Dix - 1798-1879

The news spread rapidly, but when it transpired that no-one at the Governor's residence had heard of the death, John began to doubt the authenticity of the report. Much later that evening a telegram was received from Albany, the town where Governor Dix lived, affirming that he was *'well as usual'*.

With all the righteous anger of a newspaper that had held its front page until it had checked its sources, the *New York Times* lambasted Dr Hall:

'Rarely has the love of sensation been more heartlessly displayed than by the manner in which currency was given last evening to the story that Gov. Dix had died suddenly during the afternoon. Upon no better authority than what was at best mere rumour, Rev Dr Hall and Rev Dr Taylor announced the fact to their congregation, this giving authority to a report that, however probable in itself, was discredited by its origin.'

'We do not doubt that these reverend

gentlemen fully credited the information that reached them by this suspicious channel, but we are sure that if they possessed more practical knowledge of affairs, they would have waited for more certain intelligence before exciting the public mind with news of such grave import.

The Funeral of Ley Teep

One of the saddest events at which John officiated in New York was the funeral of Ley Teep, a 21-year old Chinese immigrant who had joined the congregation of Thirty Third Street church.

Ley Teep had been attacked by 'a crowd of disorderly boys' after attending the church service on Sunday 24 April 1881. He received a stab wound which penetrated his lung, and died a few days later in St Vincents Hospital.

At his funeral, Rev Mr Gregg, Pastor of the Church, gave a short address about Ley Teep's life, and the circumstances of his death. Rev Dr Hall then gave a more general address, pointing out that, like himself, the majority of the population in the USA were non-natives:

'There is not a land under the sun where it would be more unreasonable to throw difficulties in the way of strangers. A majority of us are strangers, who have taken possession of this land. If we are to vindicate our reputation as a free country, we must make it safe for all newcomers, and give them the same security that we expect ourselves.'

Assassination Attempt

John narrowly escaped an attempt on his life on Sunday 29 November 1891. After finishing the morning service at FAPC, he was climbing the steps to his front door when his attacker, a man named John G Roth, fired three shots at him.

Fortunately, Roth missed his target. One bullet bounced off the railings; the second one went through a frosted glass window in the vestibule; the third bounced off the stonework round the doorway.

Roth, a 47-year old real estate broker who had been living on apples for weeks, was found to be suffering from a series of delusions, one of which was that Dr Hall was involved in a conspiracy to prevent him from acquiring a large sum of money, as well as to ruin his character and his life.

In court Roth was found insane, and sent to the State Asylum for Insane Criminals.

Last Days

By 1898 John was clearly suffering from heart trouble, and his doctor advised him to rest. He sailed to England with Emily, and spent some time recuperating at Buxton, a spa

town in the Peak District.

After notifying the elders of FAPC that he intended to resign his position, John travelled to Bangor, Co Down, to visit his widowed sister Mrs Elizabeth Magowan. He died at her home on 17 September 1898. His body was brought back to New York, where he was buried at Woodlawn after a funeral service at Fifth Avenue Church.

John had brought his deck chair, which had his initials carved into the frame, with him on his voyage across the Atlantic. It remained in Ireland in the possession of the Magowan family at Mountnorris, and was eventually donated to the Findlater Church in Dublin, where John had served in the 1860s.

Memorial Chapel and Association House

The John Hall Memorial Chapel and Association House, which were opened in New York in 1904, aimed to provide a place where activities were provided for the development of 'body, mind and spirit'.

By 1908 the House provided facilities for three demographic groups: a Men's Club, with 'comfortable rooms' for 'reading, music, bowling and other amusements'; a Boy's Club, with sub-groups for a variety of interests, such as 'debating, amateur theatricals, astronomy, government, geography, printing, basket-ball etc', and a Girl's Club, offering 'cooking, dressmaking, millinery and literary classes'. Henry Jessup in his 'Historical Sketch... of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church of New York City 1808-1908' added the 'ample gymnasium with bathing facilities' had become a constant attraction.

Gujing Church, Guangdong, China

John Hall had opened a Chinese Sunday School, with 85 Chinese students, 22 teachers, and 'many visitors', in the Lecture Room of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church on Sunday evening, March 22, 1885. At its later, permanent home (223-225 East Thirty First Street), 'The Chinese Mission House of New York' became known as 'The Home of the Chu family', as most of the Chinese attendees, who came from 'Sun Ui, Canton province', belonged to 'the royal clan of Ha Lo'.

By 1908 around 14 of the communicants had returned to China, where, together with other Chinese Christians, they taught and preached at a new 'commodious self-supporting church' in their market town, Goo Jeng (believed to be the present day town of 'Gujing', (22° 23' 25" N, 113° 7' 30" E), in Xinhui, a district of Guangdong province. Henry Jessup reported that the cornerstone of the Church, commemorating 'the beautiful name of our beloved Dr John Hall', was soon to be laid in the village of Ha Lo.