

But in the campaign of 1859 the deep-seated opposition to his liberal views became clear. He was accused of supporting measures injurious to Ireland, of renouncing liberalism, of subjugating his principles to personal ambition; and Kirk decided to stand down, whether motivated by disgust at the depths to which the opposition sank, or the pragmatism that convinced him that he was unlikely to win.

In 1865 he entered the arena as a candidate for Armagh, but he failed to win the seat, perhaps because the conservative influence was still uppermost, or because he had lost the support of some of his co-religionists. His final appearance on the political stage was in 1868, when, returning to Newry, he successfully contested his old seat. By then entering upon his twilight years and a period of failing health, he continued to attend parliament, and stubbornly maintained his support for a just settlement of the land question, as well as continuing to work for the advancement of the town of Newry.

William Kirk died at his home on December 20th 1870 after a long illness. According to an observer, *'from the surrounding towns, representatives of the worth, wealth, and intelligence of Ulster came to assist at the sad ceremonial'*. By the time the cortège had reached Second Presbyterian Church in Keady, the end of the procession was still leaving the gates of Annvale House, a mile or so away. Family members, public figures, clergy of all denominations, tenants, workers, and a motley crew of poor people, came to mourn *'an indulgent landlord, a kind employer, and a generous benefactor'*; to witness the cessation of business in Keady for the day, and to listen to the funeral oration by the Rev. George Steen, who praised Kirk's honesty and integrity; his warmth and generosity; his *'spirit of charity towards all denominations'*; and his unflinching support for his own church.

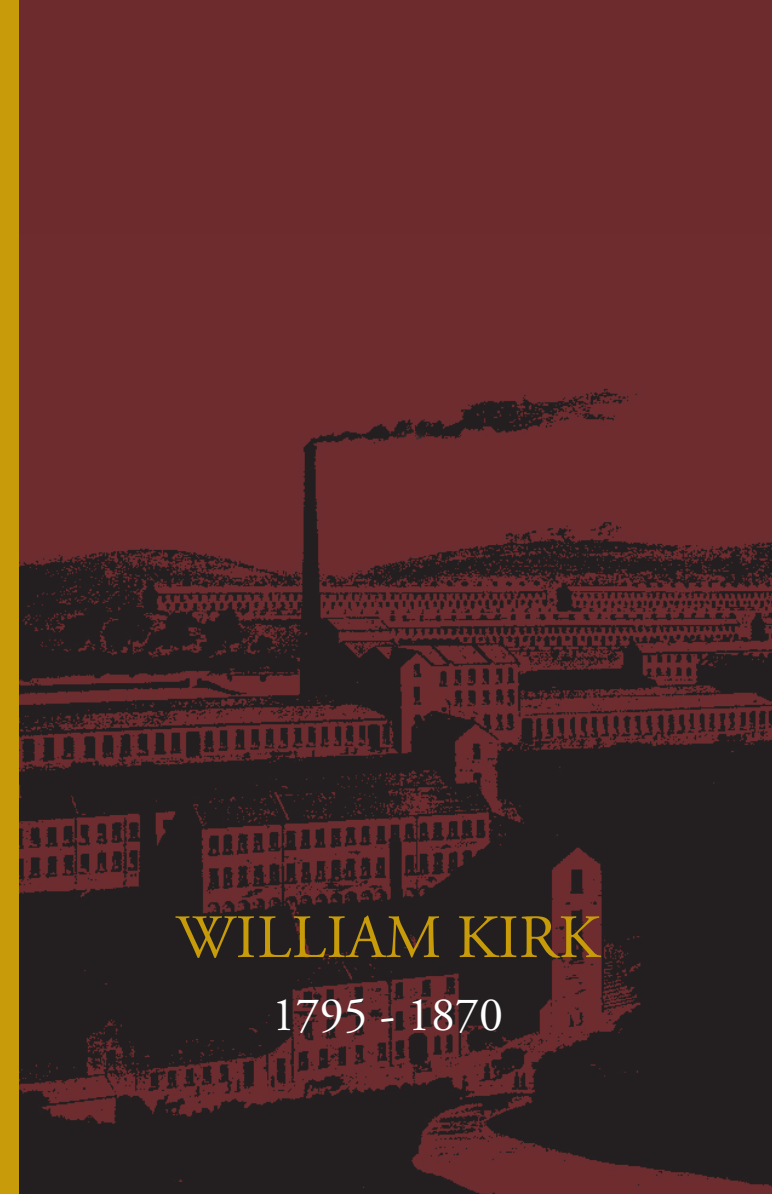
A man of enormous energy, he found time to get involved as chair of the Bible and Colportage Society of Ireland, helped to found the Presbyterian Orphan Society, and was a trustee of the General Assembly's College in Belfast. *'His religion,'* the Rev. Steen emphasizes, *'was not confined, as that of too many, to a dying hour... He carried his religion into all the relationships and engagements of life.'*

The citizens of Keady clearly agreed, and a public meeting *'to take into consideration the propriety of raising in this town a memorial'* was held as early as January 2nd 1871. A subscription list was opened, and soon a fitting monument arose, a fine Gothic structure with a base of Newry granite and a superstructure of rubbed Dungannon freestone. There is a panel of polished pink granite on every side, each one bearing an inscription. Originally there was a drinking fountain and a granite basin on one side, two lamps, and a metal vane and finials to top it off. It rapidly became the hub of social intercourse in the town, and when it was refurbished in 1992 some seats were added, to allow those with leisure to do so to sit and reflect on how the vision of one man had shaped the development of south Armagh, while his influence at Westminster contributed to the prosperity of Newry. No wonder one of his friends was moved to exclaim:

*'If the termination of such a life be an irreparable loss to Ulster, its memory is one of her most precious legacies.'*

There is an old saying that we should strive to leave our names on hearts, not on marble. William Kirk, for a while at least, managed to do both.

A full case study compiled by Aideen D'Arcy on William Kirk can be downloaded from our website: [www.sagp.org](http://www.sagp.org)



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William Kirk, entrepreneur, landlord, magistrate, and MP, is remembered chiefly for his association with linen. The picturesque valleys of south Armagh, with their plentiful water supply and moist climate perfect for the growing of flax, provided an ideal setting for its production, and when a man of Kirk's ability took up residence there, prosperity and expansion were a foregone conclusion. He was not a native of the place, only moving here around 1820, but he made it his home until he died, and his name is commemorated on a fine monument in Keady, and enshrined in the long folk memory of the people.

William was born to Mr. Hugh Kirk and the former Miss Eliza Miller in Larne, in 1795, and followed his father into business: the manufacture of linen. In 1820 he married Ann McKean, of Darkley House, whose father, James, was also involved with linen; perhaps the two young people met through their fathers' business connections. The manufacture of linen was already well-established in the area but Kirk harnessed the rich natural resources and the skills and manpower that were already there from the days when it was no more than a cottage industry, subsidiary to agriculture, presiding over the transition from farmhouse to factory, and under his guidance the most dramatic expansion took place. He bought over the Annvale factory in 1837, when it was mainly concerned with the finishing processes, but by the 1840s the complex was weaving as well as bleaching and dyeing. At the height of production, every ounce of water-power was utilised, the end-race for one mill providing the head-race for another.

The village of Darkley owes its existence and former prosperity entirely to William Kirk, who took over the spinning mill after the death of his brother-in-law, Henry McKean, in 1845. The Darkley works expanded to cover 137 acres, boasting 200 power looms, and 8,000 spindles, manned by 700 persons. The mill was operated by the second largest, if not the largest, water wheel in Europe. Kirk was very interested in the technical side of the industry, and by 1848 had designed and installed the first water turbine in one of his own beetling mills near Keady. It was this innovative approach that ensured success for the Annvale-Darkley operation; eventually his empire would expand to include a magnificent warehouse in Belfast, and branches or agencies in London, Manchester, New York and Paris.

The houses that shaped the profile of Darkley village as we know it today were built as a direct result of this expansion. The workers needed accommodation, and Kirk was able to secure a government grant to assist in his building schemes. By the 1860s many of the houses were home to two families, but Kirk was aware that community is more than a place to work and a place to live, so he established a shop, a dairy, and a small farm, and in 1857 founded a school, later providing evening classes for adults, along with a reading room. He personified the ideal of the Victorian gentleman: hard-working family man; philanthropist and businessman; an upright citizen, building for the future.

It was natural Kirk should consider entering the political arena. An acknowledged spokesman for the linen trade, he took a lively interest in what was happening on the world stage. He enjoyed reading, was involved in Church affairs, acted as a magistrate and

sat on local boards and committees; and possessed a remarkable gift for oratory. Encouraged by his friends, he offered himself as a parliamentary candidate, but refused to align himself with any party, saying he would *'join no party which will not be a party to serve the people'*, and declaring himself ready to *'support the government or the opposition, or an independent member who will propose and strive to carry out measures to benefit this neglected country'*. It was not until 1865 that he declared his support for the liberals, but he had the best interests of his constituents at heart, trying to promote measures which he believed would significantly improve their lives, rather than shackling himself to vote along party lines.

When he took his seat in the House of Commons it was as member for Newry, because Armagh was held by staunch conservatives who had the landed interest as their power base. Kirk's support for tenant right, and his pleas for religious toleration, gave him credibility with both Catholics and Presbyterians; the fact that much of his business was carried on via the port of Newry guaranteed him support from its citizens; and he carried the seat in 1852 and again in 1857. He took part in debates in the House when he felt he had something of value to say; and was noted for his grasp of mercantile and financial matters, as well as his knowledge of Irish affairs.

His main interests lay in the areas of free trade, religious equality, national education, and tenant right. He outlined a scheme to introduce cotton manufacture to Newry, arguing that Ulster was importing a fabric which it had the skills to make, and promoted initiatives to create jobs for women. He supported the move towards a secret ballot; he was instrumental in getting the railway system from Newry extended and improving the harbour; and he spoke out for equality for all whatever their background, while remaining an active and devout Presbyterian:

*'I am now, as I ever have been, the advocate of Civil and Religious Liberty. What I claim for myself I concede to others, as I cannot but feel that if my neighbour's liberty is infringed, my own is in danger.'*