The spread of Arminianism in England and Ireland is usually identified with the growth of Methodism under the leadership of John Wesley from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Nevertheless, Arminian ideas had reached those countries far earlier than that and had a significant impact within the established Church of England in the preceding century. However, of great importance, although frequently overlooked, was the impact of Arminianism on the Protestant Dissenters in both England and Ireland from the start of the eighteenth century. This paper will look at the influence of Arminianism within Protestant Dissent in the early eighteenth century, particularly in relation to the largest part of Dissent, the Presbyterians.

Presbyterianism in Scotland, England and Ireland

The bulk of Protestant Dissent was created in both England and Ireland following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. In Ireland the vast majority of the dissenters was organised in a Presbyterian body. In England, whilst the Presbyterian group was initially the largest, there was a larger amount of diversity of churchmanship within the dissenting community. Independents (Congregationalists) were also largely formed by the ejections from the established church that followed from 1660 while other groups such as the Baptists and Quakers represented a separatist tradition.

In both countries Presbyterianism originally developed during the upheavals of the mid-seventeenth century. In this they were aided by developments in Scotland. Presbyterianism—which basically means the rule of the church through elders or presbyters—had emerged in Scotland during the Reformation and although not finally established until 1690 had proved its durability through decades of struggle with the Crown against the imposition of bishops. Resistance to royal interference
in ecclesiastical affairs resulted in the National Covenant of 1638, subscription to which was made compulsory by parliament in 1640. When the Scottish Parliament abolished Episcopacy in 1689, and the following year established Presbyterianism as the system of church government, it used as its model the Act of Parliament of 1592 for the “Ratification of the Liberty of the Trew Kirk” which had first defined the Presbyterian character of the Church of Scotland. This Act allowed for government of the Church by General Assembly, Synods, Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions and drew on the Second Book of Discipline of 1578. This provided the basis for the generally accepted definition of Presbyterianism not only in Scotland and the British Isles but for the whole of the English-speaking world. The outbreak of rebellion in Ireland in 1641 and civil war in England in 1642 gave the opportunity of spreading Presbyterianism to both kingdoms. The Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 was a military alliance that also provided for the extension of Presbyterianism to the national churches of England and Ireland and one of the first fruits of this was the Westminster Assembly of Divines which provided a Confession of Faith as well as doctrinal and liturgical standards for the Presbyterian system. Presbyterianism, in its most basic terms, is nothing more than a system of ecclesiastical government, but now in the midst of a world turned upside down, it became linked to an ordered, Calvinist theology that would set the limits of right belief and provide the spearhead for further possible advance.

In England the interregnum and the aftermath of the Solemn League and Covenant saw the reform of the Church of England along Presbyterian lines in 1645–1646. On 7 July 1645 the Westminster Assembly presented to Parliament a completed draft entitled “The humble advice concerning Church government.” This initial draft went through a process of revision and was returned to the Assembly which delayed the introduction of the Presbyterian system of government until the passing of the second Parliamentary ordinance for the erecting of Presbyterian government on 14 March 1646. The ordinance established the Presbytery as the basic unit of Church government. However, unlike Scotland and Ireland, this did not refer to a tier of church government based on a group

2 William A. Shaw, A History of the English Church during the Civil Wars and under the Commonwealth, 1640–1660, 2 vols. (London, 1900), 1, 196–204.