Peter Gray has produced a vivid and comprehensive portrait of William Sharman Crawford (1780-1861) a most unusual nineteenth century radical Ulster Protestant. There was no shortage of radical figures in eighteenth-century Ulster. William Steele Dickson, Samuel Neilson, Jemmy Hope, Henry Joy McCracken, William Drennan, and Archibald Hamilton Rowan are amongst the best known. Although Drennan lived until 1820 and Hamilton Rowan until 1834 their radicalism is usually associated with their activities within the United Irish movement in the run up to the rebellion of 1798. Until recent times the idea that Protestant radicalism collapsed in the wake of the failed rebellion persisted in the popular mind if not amongst those who have studied the subject in depth.

This reviewer has challenged the alleged post rebellion demise of Protestant radicalism in biographies of William Drennan and Hamilton Rowan. For instance, William Drennan returned to his native Belfast in 1807 and was at the centre of a group of middle-class radicals, mostly former United Irishmen. He and his associates produced the Belfast Monthly Magazine which for the six years of its existence followed much of their United Irish agenda. Catholic Emancipation, support for the franchise reform, a free press, abolition of tithes obliging non-Anglicans to fund the Established Church and denunciation of slavery were constant themes of the BBM.

Johnathan Jeffery Wright in his The Natural leaders and Their World explored how this ‘close knit group of radical reformers sought to promote the cause of reform and engage with British and European events’. William Sharman Crawford’s background as an Anglican landowner, with vast estates in counties Down and Meath makes him an unlikely heir to this middle-class Presbyterian radicalism. Yet one of Crawfords early interventions in politics was when he stood unsuccessfully for a Belfast seat in the Parliamentary contest of 1832. The ‘Natural Leaders’ invited him to stand as a late replacement for former United Irishman William Tennant who had fallen victim to the cholera epidemic in July of
that year. Wright identifies the defeat suffered by Crawford in the 1832 elections as the ‘destruction of the “Naturals” suggesting that this was the eclipse of Presbyterian radicalism.

Yet Crawford was only beginning and throughout his long career he worked for equal rights for Catholics, supported and participated in the Chartist movement in Britain, demanded an end to tithes and the introduction of a progressive poor law system. Although a very substantial landlord he emerged as the foremost agrarian reformer of his era. He was neither a revolutionary nor a nationalist but had a strong commitment to democratic reform and social justice.

Crawford was at first impressed by how Daniel O’Connell had achieved Catholic Emancipation through peaceful mobilisation of the people outside of Parliament in 1829. O’Connell provided Crawford with a safe parliamentary seat for Dundalk in 1835 but relations between them eventually soured. Crawford was strongly in favour of the abolition of tithes and the redirection of those resources into the creation of a progressive poor law. O’Connell ‘was personally antagonistic’ since in his view all poor laws are enemies to Christian charity. He regarded the abolition of tithes as an unobtainable objective. However, Crawford saw O’Connell’s conservatism on these issues as being bound up with his deference to the Whig government. This and what Crawford saw as O’Connell’s dictatorial style led to an open war between them, and Crawford was deselected from his Dundalk seat in 1837.

The United Irishmen had declared in favour of universal male suffrage and had fostered links with British reformers such as Joseph Priestley, Thomas Paine, Francis Burdett, and the London Correspondence society. By the late 1830’s the Chartists emerged as the working-class champions of franchise reform. O’Connell had accepted the disfranchisement of the 40s Freeholders as part of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. This led to very many poorer voters Catholic and Protestant alike losing their vote. O’Connell was no friend of Chartism and he and his followers
were not prepared to make common cause with the Chartists as Crawford had advocated.

Crawford was invited by the Chartists to fight for a parliamentary seat of Rochdale in 1841, he was elected and held the seat until 1852. While he was very active on behalf of his constituents, he continually raised issues on behalf of workers throughout the United Kingdom and tenant rights and agrarian reform in Ireland.

Since the destruction of the United Irish society no one other than Crawford had succeeded in uniting the lower-class Protestants and Catholics in a campaign for social progress. He commenced his tenant's rights campaign in the mid 1830’s which grew into a mass movement during the Great Famine with Catholic and Presbyterian clergy working together. This was a major achievement at a time when O'Connell and Reverend Henry Cooke the nemesis of radical Presbyterianism, led their followers their separate ways in mutual animosity.

The recent Northern troubles lasted thirty years, followed by the peace process which is ongoing now for a quarter of a century. There is no sign of any reduction in the sectarian animosity which has bedevilled Ulster for more than 200 years. Oh! for a Sharman Crawford who could remind us that democracy, social justice, and material wellbeing of people should take precedence over our religious identity, flags or emblems. This is a large volume, but Gray's diligent scholarship is highly readable helped by the clarity of Crawford's own copious prose and O'Connell's acerbic wit.

This reviewer has long believed that the well from which Presbyterian radicalism sprung was the influence of Unitarianism stressing as it does religious liberty, human freedom, and non-sectarianism. However, Sharman Crawford was a lifelong Anglican who moved to Unitarianism only towards the end of his long life. His record of non-sectarianism his dogged pursuit of democracy and social justice suggests to me that William Sharman Crawford was a Unitarian long before he knew he was.