

The Early Society of Friends and their History in Kilkenny

BY PATRICK COMERFORD

“The Lord hath a seed in Ireland — Keep your meetings in fear of the Lord, and you will see the Lord amongst you and His presence refreshing your hearts.” — Edward Burrough, the earliest Quaker preacher to visit Kilkenny.

Dating back to 1650 the term “Quaker” was first applied to the followers of George Fox by a Justice Bennett when Fox appeared before him at a Leicestershire court charged with blasphemy. Fox told the judge he ought “tremble at the word of the Lord”, who in turn dubbed the preacher and his associates “Quakers”.

Founded in 1652, about the time George Fox met Margaret Fell of Swartmoor Hall, Lancashire, The Society of Friends (often known in early times as “The Children of Light”, “Friends of Truth”, or, as now, simply “Friends”) came to Ireland within two years, and it was in the Lurgan home of William Edmundson that the first settled Meeting for Worship was held in 1654.¹ Edmundson had come to Dublin the previous year with his brother John² but moved north soon after. In 1655 my direct ancestor, Francis Comberford of Bradley, Staffordshire, a Justice of the Peace³ and Cromwellian Colonel, was converted with his wife and family to the Society of Friends. Though he himself had no Kilkenny connections, his wife Margaret Skrimshire could show a descent from the Ormond Butlers through her maternal grandmother. Francis and Margaret had been converted by Francis Howgill and his companion, Edward Burrough, who at the age of 17, had become a Quaker Minister, thus being disowned by his family.⁴

After such similar work in England, Howgill and Burrough left for Ireland, where they preached throughout

Leinster and Munster, and in that same year, 1655, Edward Burrough, then aged only 20 years, visited Kilkenny where he preached "and several were convinced and a meeting was settled there and kept up for several years." Burrough and Howgill were later unable to complete their mission in Ireland, for whilst in Cork, they were expelled by Henry Cromwell, and were imprisoned in England soon after their return.

The first members of the meeting settled in Kilkenny were George Danson, William Mitchel, their wives, and Esther Beaver. In 1659 John Burnyeat, a Quaker preacher from Cumberland, being an "eminent and faithful servant of the Lord" landed in Ulster, and travelling on foot throughout that province, converted many. From thence he continued through Dublin, other parts of Leinster, and Munster, so that before returning to Lurgan, he had visited Kilkenny "preaching the true faith of Jesus".

Possibly the Kilkenny meeting may have been in existence when George Fox visited Ireland in 1669, the same year as he had married the then widowed Elizabeth Fell. However, if it was, it was certainly discontinued soon after for "William Mitchel and his wife fell into some wild imaginations, and George Danson and his wife into quarrelling" though "Esther Beaver continued faithful to her dying day, who received Friends that came to visit the said place, and meetings were many times kept there afterwards".

In 1713, James, Duke of Ormonde, later to be attained, leased Stritches or Stretches Island in Clonmel to Joseph Comerford, no relation of mine, being a Tipperaryman of Kilkenny descent. Comerford in turn sub-leased this and other property in Clonmel to Thomas Lackey, a Quaker, whose grandson, John Lackey, described himself in his will dated 1780 as "of Kilkenny". His widow, Mary (née Chadwick) later sold the property to Joseph Grubb.

The Grubb family moved to Ireland from England, as 17th century planters, first settling in County Kilkenny, and later becoming one of the leading Tipperary Quaker families. The Joseph Grubb concerned with the cited

Clonmel property was a nephew of Samuel Grubb of Annaghs, County Kilkenny, who married Rebecca, daughter of William Trasher, and died in 1696 leaving four sons, two of whom emigrated to America." In later years Samuel Thomas Grubb was Justice of the Peace for County Kilkenny," whilst the late Isabel Grubb was a prominent Quaker historian.

By the time the Duke of Ormonde had granted the 1713 lease, Kilkenny must surely have lost its settled meeting, and in 1717, for what would appear to have been the first time in almost half a century, the city was visited by a prominent Friend and preacher.

Thomas Story from Pennsylvania, an American minister, landed in Ireland in 1715, and held "several meetings, not only among Friends, but strangers, and for the most part without interruption, except at Kilkenny, where much opposition was given". According to Thomas Story's own diary, previous to his visit the people of Kilkenny had "exercised their violence and disturbance" on Friends holding meetings — firstly Elizabeth Jacob and later on both Margaret Hoare and Abigail Craven "which Friends had bore for peace sake without any complaint to the government".

On February 27, 1717, Thomas Story convened a Meeting for Worship in Kilkenny attended also by Edward Cowper, Henry Ridgway of Mountmellick," John Harris of Mountrath, John Bates of Woodhouse, Tipperary, husband of Abigail Craven," previously attacked in Kilkenny, John Lackey, already mentioned, Samuel Watson of Kilconnor, Co. Carlow, later to marry Abigail Craven after John Bole died," Thomas Pim of County Laois, John Pim, jnr. and other Friends.

About two o'clock in the afternoon as Thomas Story stood up to give testimony Arthur Webb, of the Webbsborough family who seems to have been unrelated to the Quaker family of that same name, forced entry with a companion named Robert Shervington, bidding Story be quiet, commanding the meeting disperse, and threatening fellow Anglicans with the Bishop's Court, and excommunications. At this some of the attenders left, but the

majority remained, until Joseph Worley, one of the Mayor's Serjeants-at-Mace, and a constable entered with a warrant drawn up by Robert Connell, J.P., the Bishop's Registrar. Story, Cowper, Ridgway and Harris were arrested, brought before the Mayor, and charged with riotous and unlawful assembly, though the remaining Friends continued the meeting, despite a warrant being drawn up that day for the constables to disperse the Quakers. This warrant was signed by Ebenezer Warren, M.P., Justice of the Peace for both the city and county of Kilkenny.

That night many of them lodged at "The Swan" owned by one Thomas Dale. The following morning, the 28th, a meeting was arranged for the same place at 9 o'clock. By 10.30 Thomas Story had been giving ministry for almost half-an-hour when the same churchwardens, Webb and Shervington, again entered and were causing a disturbance when two of the Mayor's Serjeants-at-Mace and some constables attempted to disperse the crowd. Thomas Story alone was arrested, and without warrant. The Mayor, John Birch, and Robert Connell signed a mittimus committing him to the next assizes.

However, not all the civic officers felt impartially towards the Friends, for Anthony Blunt, Sheriff of the city, "a very civil young man and loyal to King George" allowed Thomas Story stay that night in his house, and on Sunday, March 3, 1717, a Meeting for Worship was held there attended not only by Friends who had come to visit Thomas Story the previous Friday and Saturday, but also by the Sheriff's wife. Giving testimony, Story denounced the ministers of Anti-Christ, no doubt in reference to the officers who had put him under arrest due to episcopal demands. In his diary Thomas records a pleasant walk he had in the grounds of Kilkenny Castle the following morning, though the Duke of Ormonde was under attainer, and whilst walking he entered into a theological discussion with some Huguenots, and "an Irish Papist who seemed friendly". During the conversation they were joined by Ebenezer Warren, Alderman Haddock, and a man named Clark who was collector of the King's customs, along with others, despite the arguments (quite unfounded)

of Birch and Connell that the Toleration Act, 1689, did not extend to Ireland.

By Tuesday the Mayor who “was much cooler”, being Deputy-Clerk of the Crown had to meet the Judges at Wexford and sent word to Anthony Blunt that Story was at liberty to go where he pleased. He explained that originally he had been motivated by the clergy but now “for his own part he did not care what meetings we had”.

On Saturday, March 9th, many Friends from neighbouring places came to visit Thomas Story and a meeting was planned for the same place as before, notice being given to Alderman Connell, then Deputy-Mayor and the Justices of the Peace. Seemingly still as determined Connell again threatened dispersion and before Story stood to speak a churchwarden and some of the serjeants forced entry and made the same threats as before. Story was then arrested, along with a Dublin Quaker, William Brookfield, who, it is interesting to note owned property in Eustace Street, Dublin, in 1712” almost a century before the Friends Meeting House was built there.

Thomas Story was in prison a short time when he was brought to the Sheriff’s house, and his case was dismissed soon after when Connell heard he had not addressed the Meeting.

It was therefore possible for a meeting to be organised that Sunday afternoon about three o’clock. On hearing this the Bishop of Ossory, Sir Thomas Vessey, sent constables and serjeants from the Tholsel, and they arrested Story to cries of “Shame”. They then took him to Anthony Blunt’s house where he spent the night, and the meeting continued uninterrupted, William Brookfield giving testimony before it concluded.

On Monday morning Thomas Story left Kilkenny with some Friends and spent the next week preaching and holding meetings throughout County Carlow. On Saturday, March 16th, he was joined at the home of Edward Cowper by four Dublin Friends, Patrick Henderson, Samuel Braithwait, Edward Fawcet and Paul Johnston. With these he set out from Carlow to appear before the Kilkenny Assizes that day. In his journal Story described how on

the road they met a Roman Catholic who entered into conversation with them, and describes in minute detail the very points of their discussion."

On arriving in Kilkenny he presented himself before assizes, and though Amos Strettell and other Dublin Friends were ready to provide him with legal advisers, as the mittimus had not been returned Story's case had to be postponed.

The following morning as Patrick Henderson knelt to prayer at the meeting, the Mayor's serjeant entered the room. Henderson finished, and Story stood to speak, when the serjeants announced a command from the Mayor to disperse in the King's name, but qualified this by saying they were unwilling to use force. The meeting concluded with a verbal attack on both Bishop and clergy, and finally ended in peace.

On being sent for a serjeant and churchwarden informed Vessey, the Bishop, that he had been included in a prayer at the meeting for all those in authority. However, he was determined to have Story arrested under the Uniformity Act 1674, and attempted to issue a warrant to commit him to jail for three months without either bail or mainprize.

That afternoon Thomas Story visited Blunt the Sheriff, and Mayor John Birch issued a Warrant and mittimus on behalf of the Bishop. By the next morning however Birch had changed his mind, granted a "liberate" to the Quaker preacher and allowed him or any other member of the Society of Friends to hold meetings in Kilkenny.

At about 3 p.m. on March 18, 1717, Thomas Story left Kilkenny having completed his mission — to set Friends at freedom in Kilkenny. He moved on to Ballinakill and Mountrath, and finally left Dublin, arriving in Chester on April 5."

In 1724 Benjamin Holme, an outstanding English Quaker came to Ireland and for over two years he held meetings and preached, mainly in Cork and other parts of Munster although he is said to have visited "several places in the County of Kilkenny". After the National Meeting of Friends in Ireland in 1727 Holme returned to England."

Since then no outstanding incident has occurred in Kilkenny relating to the Quakers. No wonder, considering the persecutions undergone by Elizabeth Jacob, Thomas Story and others. Despite the fact that William Penn spent the night of December 2, 1669 in Foulkstown, having passed through Castlecomer and Kilkenny on his way from Dublin to Cork, and also the night of May 28, 1670 in Bennett's Bridge travelling from Cork to Dublin," few Quakers now live in the county. The nearest Meeting is in Waterford, where the old Meeting House, built in 1766, was recently sold. Has the history of the Society of Friends in Kilkenny been completed or has it yet to start ?

NOTES :

- (1) "Introducing Quakers", George H. Gorman, Friends Home Service Committee, London, 1971, P.8.
- (2) "Encyclopaedia Americana," International Edition, Americana Corporation, New York, 1966, Vol XI, pp. 563, 564, Vol XII, p. 106.
- (3) "Christian Experience", 5th Edition, Religious Society of Friends, Dublin, 1962, p. 11 and "A History of the Quakers in Ireland, 1653-1760", 2nd Edition, Thomas Wright, London, 1800, p. 77.
- (4) Thomas Wright, p. 73.
- (5) "The Moat House and the Comberford Family", D. P. Adams, M.A., Tamworth, 1967, p. 12.
- (6) "Dictionary of National Biography", Smith and Elder, London, 1908 Vol III, p. 443.
- (7) Thomas Wright, p. 87.
- (8) "Irish and Scotch-Irish Ancestral Research", Margaret Dickson Fally, B.S., private publication, Evanston, Illinois, 1962, p. 414.
- (9) Thomas Wright, p. 154.
- (10) *ibid*, p. 106.
- (11) "Dictionary of National Biography". vol VII, p. 560.
- (12) Thomas Wright, p. 87.
- (13) "Burke's Peerage", 105th Edition, Burke's Peerage Ltd., London, 1970 p. 2049.
- (14) "Guide to Irish Quaker Records 1654-1860". Olive C. Goodbody, Irish Manuscripts Commission, Dublin 1967, p. 166.
- (15) *ibid*, p. 145.
- (16) *ibid*, pp. 166-167.
- (17) *ibid*, p. 83.
- (18) "Burkes Landed Gentry of Ireland", 4th Edition, Burkes Peerage Ltd., London, 1958, p. 335.
- (19) *ibid*, p. 337.
- (20) Thomas Wright p. 220.
- (21) Thomas Story, quoted by Thomas Wright, p. 220.
- (22) *ibid*, p. 222.
- (23) Olive Goodbody, p. 167.
- (24) *ibid*, p. 117.
- (25) Thomas Story, quoted by Thomas Wright, p. 245.
- (26) *ibid*, p. 246.

- (27) *ibid*, p. 251.
 (28) *do*.
 (29) Olive Goodbody, p. 163.
 (30) Thomas Story, quoted by Thomas Wright, pp. 257-264.
 (31) Thomas Wright gives a full account of Thomas Story's visit to Kilkenny in pp. 220-272.
 (32) Thomas Wright, pp. 308-309.
 (33) *ibid*, p. 311.
 (34) "My Irish Journal, 1669-1670". William Penn, (edited by Isabel Grubb), Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1952, p. 27.
 (35) *ibid*, p. 55.
-

MUSEUM REPORT 1972

In common with other historic houses in Ireland Rothe House suffered a sharp decline in attendances for 1972. The figure for November '71 — October '72 was 8,826 as compared with about 11,000 for 1970 — '71.

Rothe House was hit simultaneously by three calamities :

- (1) the virtual cessation of English visitors due to strained Anglo-Irish relations;
- (2) a decline in American and continental visitors due to the excellent press coverage of Northern violence during the year;
- (3) the ending of the Car Ferry service from Le Havre.

Of those foreigners who did come, American and French names seemed to predominate in the visitors' book. Fortunately large numbers of parties of young people from all over Ireland shielded us from a disastrous year.

Donations and loans to the Museum numbered 35. Included in these are some beautiful pieces of furniture. Two antique oak chairs were presented by Mr. George Mealy of Castlecomer and a magnificent loan of eight pieces of period furniture come from Mr. Niccolo Caracciolo. This is the second endowment of Roth House by the Caracciolo family and the appearance of the house is greatly enhanced by the addition of these valuable pieces.

Our outgoing Hon. Treasurer, Mr. Leo McAdams, generously presented to the Society his collection of photographs of Kilkenny, fruit of a lifetime of photography.

The Society is grateful also to the many donors of small but interesting items.