

THE QUAKERS IN LIMERICK, 1657-1707

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Foundation

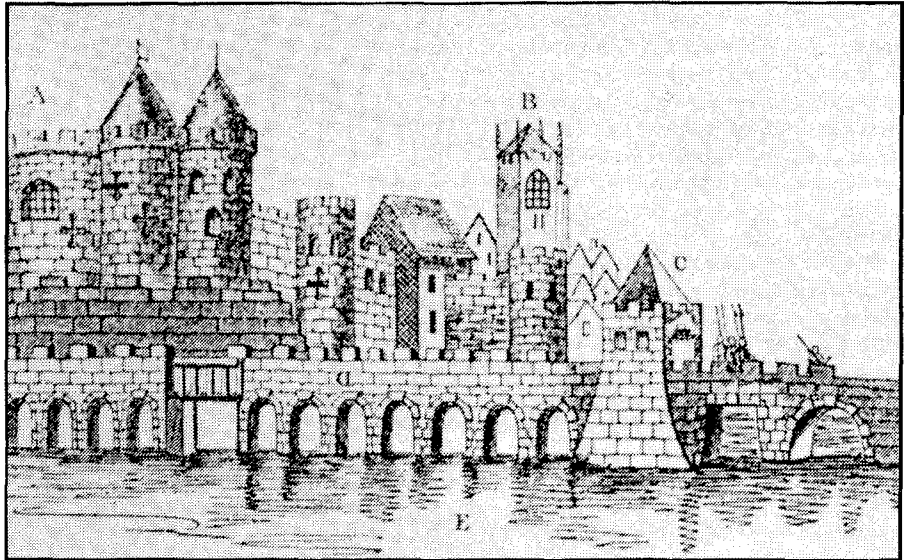
In the seventeenth century, England was torn politically between the Stuart kings and the Cromwellian parliamentarians. There were also religious differences among High Church Protestants, Roman Catholics and the Puritans. A young shoemaker, George Fox, searching for spiritual satisfaction, gradually came to the belief that each individual can have direct experience of the Holy Spirit without the intermediacy of a professional priest. He travelled about England on horseback, wearing leather breeches, and soon had a following of groups of men and women who had been seeking a similar path. They named themselves the Society of Friends, but were called "Quakers", in scorn at first. Some of them came to Ireland as settlers in the Cromwellian and Williamite settlements. Their testimony that all war is contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ, and their insistence in speaking the truth without the taking of oaths, presented problems for the civil and religious authorities.

Beginnings in Limerick

Many able men and women were inspired by George Fox and some travelled to Ireland to spread his message of the "inner light", as it was called. One, William Edmundson, came to Lurgan and opened a shop there. Here the first Quaker meeting in Ireland was "settled" in 1654. He made contact with other missionary Friends who came from England, and meetings grew up around the country. Two who came to Limerick were turned out of the city, but preached from horseback, as they went along the streets and also to a great crowd outside the gates.⁽¹⁾

Thomas Phelps and Richard Pearce, an apothecary, became the leading Friends and a meeting was held in Richard Pearce's house.⁽²⁾ At first, they did not find the value of silent worship but these Limerick Friends remained faithful, although publicly boycotted and their businesses brought to a standstill.⁽³⁾

Sometimes, self interest reinforced the law in its objection to Quakers. It is recorded that John Brown was collecting a personal debt in Limerick when he was taken up and no crime alleged but that



King John's Castle, St. Mary's Cathedral and old Thomond Bridge, by Thomas Dineley, 1680.

he was a Quaker. Richard Pearce had his shop closed by a combination of "Surgeons, Barbers, Distillers and others", who managed to have him turned out of the city for refusing to take an oath. Friends had a difficult time in Limerick and were removed from the city. But the persecution was general and meetings were broken up almost everywhere the Friends met.⁽⁴⁾

At first, Friends met in the homes of their members. The reference to a Meeting House is in 1683, when forms were seized for tithes from a residence in Creagh Lane, beside where the Limerick School of Art and Design is at present located. This building was used until 1809, when the large meeting house at 36 Cecil Street was built. Many of the Friends were farmers and millers who lived in the country and they travelled into the city for meetings.

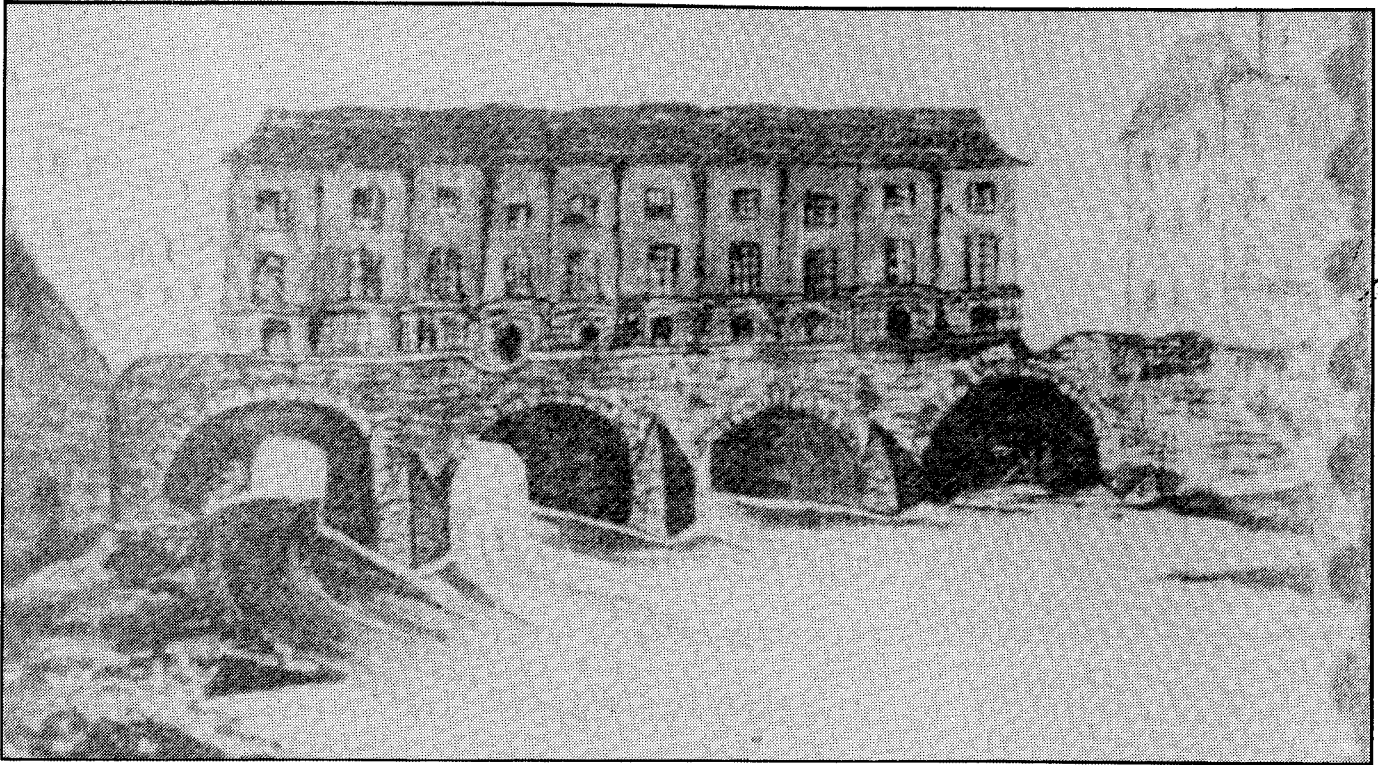
The first recorded burial ground was in Pump Lane, now in the grounds of St. Mary's Convent, and was in use until 1860, even after the one at Ballinacurra Bowman was opened about 1830.

In 1655, meetings were held in Killaloe in the homes of Richard Pearce and his son, Thomas, but there were no official records kept then, only letters and journals.

Organisation

George Fox saw the need for some system to keep these scattered groups in existence, particularly when persecutions and other troubles arose and it was necessary to keep in touch with other Friends. He did this by settling the groups into monthly meetings, and a number of these formed a quarterly meeting. In Ireland, there were three quarterly meetings, in Ulster, Leinster and Munster, but no meetings were recorded in Connaught. These three formed a general or yearly meeting, at which all meetings were represented. In Ireland they usually met in Dublin, and in England, Scotland and Wales they met in London. The monthly meetings appointed elders and overseers, with a special duty of caring for the meeting, for worship and for the members.

A "six weeks' meeting" was also held to meet the members from other meetings in the region. It is surprising how well they attended these gatherings, in spite of the dangers and difficulties of travelling, usually on horseback. Experiences were recounted and problems discussed, and there must have been many arising from persecutions, tithe gatherings and the unsettled state of the country. When a member moved



Old Baal's Bridge in the eighteenth century.

from one monthly meeting to another, a "certificate of removal" was sent. Sometimes members got into financial difficulties and sought assistance. In one such recorded case a Limerick meeting documents the sum of £15.12.0, advanced to John Phillips and family, and informs the Cork meeting that "we have stopped any further supply until their further orders".

Marriages were important events, after couples had first obtained "clearances". In 1750 Isaac Unthank and Deborah Richardson came before a meeting to declare their intention of taking each other in marriage, having previously appeared before the women's meeting. The weddings were attended by an overseer to see that everything was orderly.

In 1782, advice is given to a woman to dissuade her from marrying a man of another religious persuasion.

Travelling Friends

Quakerism was kept alive in these hard times by travelling Friends, filled with a burning desire to keep the message alive. In Ireland, England and America, they went through all sorts of hardship, some even dying on their travels.

Thomas Story kept a large journal of all his travels. In 1698, he visited Ireland with William Penn, whom people flocked to hear. At New Ross, their horses were seized under the pretence of the law which forbade Catholics to own horses worth more than five guineas. Between Youghal and Clonmel rapparees lay in wait but did not attack them. The ruinous state of Limerick after the siege especially interested Thomas Story. One

of his brothers had been killed in the Williamite wars in Ireland and another, George, who was chaplain to a regiment, wrote the history of the wars and was made Dean of Limerick.

In 1716 and 1717, Thomas Story stayed with this brother, who invited two Limerick Friends to his house. Thomas Story writes: "This was an uncommon mixture but no occasion of offence was taken on any hand but all free and friendly".

These travelling Friends from England and America were continually journeying through Ireland. The host meeting would provide hospitality, a horse, clothes and a guide to the next meeting. Here is a record from Limerick in 1718:

Our Friends, Hannah Berington and Sarah Stephenson from England, who are on a Religious visit to this nation, favoured us with their company here and laying their concern before us of their having a desire to visit families of Friends and desire our concurrence with them.

The appointment of a guide to their next meeting and the cost of a horse are often mentioned.

Persecutions from the Book of Sufferings

James Sicklemund and John Perrott, being peaceably in Thomas Holmes's house in Limerick, were seized on by a guard of soldiers, committed to Prison and banished the city by the order of Colonel Inglesby. James Perrott being at Robert Wilkins house in Limerick was sent for by the same Colonel Inglesby and by a guard of soldiers haled throughout and committed to prison, and through questions tried but nothing of fact, crime

of breach of any kind of law was proved against him. Yet did the said Colonel Inglesby send him from thence (with a guard) which was about eighty miles, and in the way or upon the road one Captain Benjamin Lucas (who had the charge of guarding him) cause unmanlike beat the said James Perrott. And another time the said James Perrott in a peaceable meeting in Limerick, was haled throughout by soldiers carried to the mainguard and afterwards violently expelled the City by the said Colonel Inglesby.

Thomas Phelps, Stephen Warner, William Donsell(?) and other Friends had their meeting broken into and now(?) haled out by a guard of soldiers and committed to prison by Colonel Inglesby's orders.

1660, Thomas Phelps, John Barnes and several other friends being peaceably met together to worship God in their usual place in Limerick were forcibly taken away, their meeting broken and turned forcibly out of this town, to depart by a day with their wives, families, and all for meeting together to wait upon the Lord.

1660 about 3rd of 2nd month - committed eight Friends to prison and there kept about three weeks for meeting about 15 of 2 month three Friends committed to prison and kept eleven days said mayor did imprison Edward Palmer.

About the 16 of eight month had Thomas Phelps, Randall Cogens and Benjamin Moore because for conscious sake they could not swear, and kept two of them in bonds eleven days and the same night following that Thomas Phelps was committed he had his shop broken up and lost about £20 worth of goods. Notwithstanding the wife of the said Thomas Phelps told the mayor that when her husband was absent that some such

hurt might be done, their servant being sick, and he in prison. And these evil dealings of the English towards friends hath been a bad example ...

Thomas Phelps passing into the country about his lawful occasions, was taken up by the ... who put a rope about his neck and almost hanged him. Then in cittyes and towns friends are abused and imprisoned and in the countrie robbing and danger of life attend them.

Barbara Blagdon passing quietly in the streets of Limerick was seized and imprisoned and after sent away out of the city, another time imprisoned and thrown out of the city. And another time taken out of a friends house and committed to prison for several weeks where she was very ill used and hardly dealt withall and afterwards banished by order of Col. Inglesby aforesaid.

1663. James for not taking oath of supremacy, house where in he had lived five years and improved to the value of £50 taken over his head by Lieut. Bonman who has caused the said James in 4 years to pay him £30 more than he himself paid for the rent of the said house. He would have turned him and his family out of doors.

Richard Pearce, Thomas Phelps and Randall Cozins, taken from them by ... who exacted unreasonably for some years and that almost doubled what they themselves paid.

John Barnes, his house taken and afterwards turned out of town into the country where he was robbed of almost all that he had to the value of £20 and he himself dangerously wounded.

Humphrey Morton, Edward Cooke and William Shaw being peaceably in their lodging at Limerick had a guard of soldiers set upon them their friends not suffered to visit them.

John Lusse for speaking to Col. Inglesby about a friend that had been causally imprisoned and offering the friend in restraint might be examined before he was sent away, banished, was for the same beaten and kicked by the same Col. Inglesby, who being then at bowls and so without any more examination (which a magistrate ought to do) banished the friend.

1839. We are favoured to hold our meetings peaceably and no extreme suffering has attended us.

The Sieges of Limerick

In the 1690 and 1691 sieges we learn that "the Irish garrison imprisoned Friends there for a short time" these Friends also were "ready to relieve English soldiers often brought in prisoners by the Irish".

Friends would get leave of the chief officers of the Jacobite forces to carry victuals to keep them from starving to death ... "and by this means Friends had opportunity to supply the Williamite prisoners with meat, clothes, suitable for their conditions there".⁽¹⁾

After the Treaty of Limerick, came a period of greater toleration which

allowed Friends to meet for worship without fear of molestation, and later followed the special form of affirmation which they allowed take instead of an oath.⁽²⁾ When peace was restored, many who had fled from their homes did not return but settled in less isolated places. This resulted in fewer larger meetings.⁽³⁾

Tithes

There is a large volume in the Historic Library at Swanbrook, Dublin, of all the sufferings of Friends in Ireland, including those endured by the Limerick Quakers. It was not only what was demanded but what was taken in excess of it and the damage done by the visiting tithe-monger. In England a special "Meeting for Sufferings" was formed to help members and to compensate for their losses but in Ireland there was no such compensation.

- 1659: A widow had taken from her one large Pewter haggon, a bell metal skillet, a brass candle stick, a frying pan, for eleven shillings and nine pence.
- 1670: Richard Birt - taken from him one large pewter dish, one chafing dish, one brass candle stick, by church warden for maintenance of priest. 65/- shillings.
- 1668: Money taken for repairs to the public house of Worship called St. John. Edward Palmer, for refusing to pay four ... demanded for tithes had goods taken from him worth two shillings.
- 1673: Thomas Phelps taken from him about eighteen yards of serge, worth about 33/-.
- 1674: Henry Bludwick - one iron pot, 19 bundles of linen cloth.
- 1675: James Craven - 55 yards of linen cloth.
- 1675: Thomas Phelps - 2 reams of white paper.
- 1679: Thomas Phelps - yards of canvas.
- 1680: Nicholas Gribble - 32 stone and 8 pounds tallow.
- 1681: Thomas Phelps - piece of linsey Woolsey about 18/-, 4 sugar loaves, his shop book of accounts.
- 1681: John Matthews - 5 1/2 dozen wooden heels.
- 1682: Out of Meeting House - 3 forms.
- 1682: Warner - case of knives, pair of money scales about 5/6.
- 1683: Out of Meeting House - 3 forms worth 20/-.
- Out of Meeting House - 4 forms.
- 1684: Out of meeting house - 4 long forms worth 10/- for 4/- demand.
- 1684: Richard Pearce - money out of shop box.
- 1687: Richard Pearce - money out of shop box.
- 1692: James Slater - 3 3/4 yards of apron stuffe, a box full of money.
- 1765: John Lee - two pounds of candles value 1/-, - pence worth of greaves.
- Wm. McAllister - remnant of cloth value 5/5.
- 1707: Wm. McAllister - fustian and trimmings.

1707: Taken by surprise from Samuel Alexander a cheese value rate of 5/-.

1707: From a servant of Thomas Taverner, 2 pr. stockings 5/5, six sheets of pins 2/3, one brass candle stick 2/2, one silver spoon 10/-.

Women's Meeting

Men and women held separate monthly meetings. In some old meeting houses one room was known as the Women's Monthly Meeting Room. Both kept in touch and consulted each other about problems. The first minute book of the Women's Meeting for the year 1700 is in the Historic Library but the Men's book is missing.

Each meeting had a clerk, who acted as the chairman and wrote the minutes and there was also an assistant clerk at the table. They looked after poor Friends and passed, in conjunction with the Men's Meeting, clearances for marriage, wrote epistles to other meetings, and read similar messages received. They held quarterly meetings, and so kept in touch with other Quaker women. The separate meetings of men and women were gradually phased out.

The General Christian Counsel

The General Christian Counsel is a guide to daily living and is read annually at each meeting. Here is an extract:

Follow peace with all men, desiring the true happiness of all; be kind and liberal to the poor and endeavour to promote the temporal, moral and spiritual well-being of your fellow-men.

There are also queries for serious consideration to be read and considered:

Do you cherish an understanding and forgiving spirit? Are you careful of the reputation of others, and do you avoid tale-bearing and detraction?

Do you seek to live continually in that life and power which takes away the occasion of all wars?

Minute Books

It is in the monthly meetings that most of the current business of the Society was, and still is, carried out and the current needs of the members and their problems considered. In the minutes spanning three hundred years there is, not unexpectedly, much repetition. For some periods the minutes are beautifully written; for others they are almost indecipherable, with the ink fading. All are bound in fine leather-covered, large heavy volumes. As well as their religious importance these records are a repository of local and social history. Their pages tell the eventful story of the Limerick Quakers.

REFERENCES

1. *Quakers in Ireland, 1654-1900* by Isabel Grubb, the Swarthmore Press, 1927.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *The Irish Quakers: A Short History of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland* by Maurice J. Whigham, 1992.