

JOHN WESLEY IN IRELAND

With particular reference to North Munster

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John Wesley's deep involvement with Ireland and especially with County Limerick is discussed in the context of his life and mission. Of particular interest is the role of Elizabeth Bennis of Limerick, Wesley's most influential Irish correspondent. The author is a former Methodist minister at Adare / Ballingrane.

It was a pleasant summer morning as the packet from Holyhead made its way up the Liffey into Dublin port on Sunday, 9 August in the year of grace 1747. The crossing of the Irish Sea had been free of storm, and had taken just over twenty-five hours thanks to a light favouring gale. One passenger noticed that this wind was very localised, as a ship about a mile away appeared to be totally becalmed. The journey, even more fortunately, had been free of danger. For several days a French privateer had been harrying shipping in the vicinity, and only that morning it had been captured and brought into Dublin Bay.¹ At a little before ten o'clock the ship tied up at George's Quay, and the passengers began to disembark. Among the first to come ashore were two or three men soberly dressed in black. There is some dispute about the exact number. That they were among the first to disembark we need not doubt, as their leader was always impatient of wasted time. He advised his followers, 'Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed.'²

He was a small man, not quite five foot six inches in height, but well proportioned, lean and muscular. The most striking features of his fresh-complexioned face were a prominent pointed nose, and piercing blue eyes. Unfashionably, he did not wear a wig, which he regarded as an unnecessary extravagance; nor did he powder his hair. Descriptions of its colour vary from black to auburn; it was probably dark brown with somewhat lighter highlights. It was luxuriant, and he wore it long. He was dressed, as always, with fastidious neatness, in a suit of plain black cloth, the breeches fastened at the knees without buckles. The black of his costume was relieved only by the snowy white bands at his throat, which fell from the short upright collar of his coat, marking him as a priest of the Church of England. For all his lack of height he had a commanding presence, and was not a man to be easily overlooked. He was then forty-four years old.³

This was the reverend John Wesley, Master of Arts, Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, and leader of the Methodist societies in England. He was arriving in Ireland for the first of twenty-one visits he would make to this country over a period of forty-three years. John Wesley's father was the rector of Epworth, an isolated parish in the fenlands of north Lincolnshire. In his early years his religious formation owed much to his devout mother, Susanna. Educated first at home, and then at Charterhouse, Wesley graduated from Christ Church College in Oxford, was ordained in 1725 and

¹ Wesley's *Works* The Bicentennial Edition, volume 20, pp 186-7.

² Minutes of the Methodist Conference "The Large Minutes" 1789

³ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, London 1989, p.183; Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley*, London 1979, p.312

shortly afterwards elected a Fellow of Lincoln College. He and his younger brother, Charles, who had followed him as an undergraduate in Christ Church, were in the habit of meeting with some friends in each other's rooms, to study the Bible and other Christian literature. They began carefully to observe the rules of the Established Church in regard to feasts and fasts, and to practice works of charity, including prison visitation. For their methodical approach to these matters unsympathetic students nicknamed them "Methodists". A name, applied in derision, Wesley and his followers later adopted with some pride.

An unsuccessful attempt to develop an ideal Christian society in the new American colony of Georgia brought Wesley back to England at the beginning of 1738 with a sense of total failure. However the journey across the Atlantic had introduced him to a group of Moravians, and in the May of 1738 he was persuaded to attend a Moravian meeting in London. At that, which was held in Nettleton Court off Aldersgate Street, he experienced what is generally called his "conversion". The word may be disputed, but the fact remains that Wesley's faith was reinvigorated. In the following year he began the extensive tours that were to establish Methodist societies throughout England, Wales and Ireland, and some parts of Scotland.

It was never Wesley's intention to establish a new Christian denomination. The Church of England in many parts of the country had become very formal. To counteract this, religious societies were being formed in quite a number of places. Some of these had specific purposes, such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), or the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), to name two which still survive as church auxiliaries. The majority, more ephemeral, was made up of those who by study and mutual self-examination hoped to develop their own spiritual commitment and discipline. Wesley's intention was that his societies should be more like this latter sort, though given a greater permanence through their connection with him. To the private objective of mutual spiritual encouragement, he added a dimension that the similar societies lacked; a missionary imperative. Indeed, in Wesley's thinking the missionary imperative came first.

There were in England a great many people, and the first Wesley encountered were the miners near Bristol, who were completely unchurched, and as during Wesley's lifetime the agricultural and industrial revolutions changed the face of England, the number of these people increased. They had no decent clothes to wear for going to church, and felt, not unreasonably, that the church had little interest in them. If they would not come to church, Wesley and his followers would go to them, and this was the reason for their preaching in fields, barns, market places, streets, and wherever a crowd might be gathered. It scandalised polite society, but Wesley and those who worked with him cared little for the opinion of polite society. His is a classic example of a gentleman, with some aristocratic connections, never losing the manners of his own class, but devoting himself entirely to the wellbeing of the working classes.

And it was, in England, the working classes which responded to his preaching. With its religious message, however, Methodism carried a social ethic that commended hard work, sobriety, and thrift, so that in the course of time its members tended to rise into the middle classes. Nevertheless it was originally a working class movement, and those English nobility and gentry who supported his work were few and far between. Most gentlemen and ladies disliked being told that they were sinners in a tone which implied reality.

In coming to Ireland Wesley was not engaging in what modern salesmen would term "a cold canvass". A Methodist society already existed in Dublin, the pioneer having been a junior officer of one of the English regiments, which had been sent to Dublin as part of the garrison. The name of that

pioneer, unhappily, has not been remembered. Wesley's first visit lasted for only two weeks, and was confined to the city of Dublin, but in the following year he returned, and travelled into the midlands. Each year his itinerary grew longer, until by the late 1750's he was visiting every county in Ireland except Kerry and Roscommon. He may, in fact, have entered Roscommon, but there is no record of his having preached there.

He found in this country a totally different social structure, and this makes it a little surprising that Methodism met with as great a measure of success here as it did. Ireland never experienced an industrial revolution equivalent to that in England. The nearest approach it had to the mill towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire were the linen towns of Ulster; it did not have a Black Country. Ireland too missed the radical changes in agriculture that occurred in 18th century England. The land was owned by a semi-alien aristocracy and gentry, some of whom had acquired their estates barely fifty or a hundred years before in the Williamite or Cromwellian settlements. It was their sense of insecurity that imposed the penal laws and necessitated the substantial garrison. It also tended to make them suspicious of anything new, which helps to explain the hostile attitude of so many magistrates, including clergy, to the early Methodist preachers.

Within days of Wesley's arrival he was aware of official hostility, though let it be said he was familiar enough with the objections of English bishops to his methods not to expect much else in Ireland. His first host in Dublin was William Lunell, a Huguenot woollen merchant and banker of Francis Street in the Earl of Meath's Liberties. It was probably Lunell who gave him an introduction to the Rev. Moses Roquier, also a Huguenot, who was the curate of St. Mary's parish in the city. Roquier invited Wesley to preach in St. Mary's on the afternoon of his arrival, and this Wesley did. Roquier was friendly enough, but the Archbishop of Dublin, Charles Cobbe, was not.⁴ Cobbe had originally come to Ireland in 1717 as chaplain to an incoming Lord Lieutenant, often the path to preferment. He had moved smoothly in little more than twenty-five years through two deaneries and three bishoprics to the Primatial dignity of Dublin in 1743. He was in 1747 building for himself Newbridge House at Donabate, and thither on the Tuesday Wesley wended his way. In a two or three hour interview he failed to persuade the Archbishop to withdraw his disapproval. Cobbe was not going to welcome field preachers.⁵ By the time of Wesley's last visit to Ireland in 1789 four of Cobbe's successors had occupied the see of Dublin, but Wesley never again was permitted to preach from a Church of Ireland pulpit in the archdiocese. On the other hand, Cobbe did not persuade Wesley to go away!

As we have noted he returned again and again, his tours extending throughout the country. However, he did no pioneering work himself. This was done in three ways, two of them fortuitous. Quite a number of the junior officers in the British regiments were drawn from the classes in which Methodism found its main support in England, and when the regiments in which these Methodists served were posted to Ireland the men wanted to continue their Methodist practice. If there was no Methodist society in the town where they were billeted, they started one. In all probability they had no deliberate intention of spreading Methodism for its own sake, simply wanting the support the society would give to their own spirituality, but the effect was the same. In places where there were weak societies the encouragement of these officers was an invaluable source of strength. This sort of thing happened in places as widely scattered through the country as Galway, Newry, Belturbet, Nenagh, Limerick, Carrickfergus, Arklow, Cashel, Cahir, Mullingar, Charlemont, Carlow and

⁴ Wesley's *Journal*, 9 August 1747

⁵ *Ibid.*

Kilkenny. The second way in which Methodism spread was through the movement of Methodist families from Britain to Ireland and within Ireland itself.

The most important pioneering factor, however, was the activity of the Methodist preachers. They were required not only to supervise the Methodist societies, but also to preach wherever they could attract a crowd willing to listen. That they were able to do this so successfully was almost certainly due to two factors. One was that it was a more religious age; even people who did not go near to any church believed in God, and in heaven and hell. The other was the sheer novelty of open air preaching and the emotional effects that it sometimes produced.

The earliest surviving account of a journey on one of the fly boats plying on the Grand Canal is to be found in Wesley's *Journal*. On Wednesday, 29 June 1785, accompanied by twelve or fourteen friends, he went by canal from Dublin to Prosperous. He thought it a most elegant way of travelling, though his manuscript diary tells us that he could not complete the whole of the outward journey sitting quietly in the boat. The party left Dublin at seven in the morning, and at eleven Wesley got out of the boat and walked on the towpath until noon before again getting on board for the rest of the journey. They reached Prosperous at a quarter past two. On that journey Wesley estimated that there were between fifty and sixty passengers, and on the return journey, next day, even more. When they discovered his presence among them, members of both groups invited him to give them a sermon, which he did, and was heard appreciatively.⁶ He was, of course, then eighty-two years old and widely respected. Incidentally, the distance from Dublin to Prosperous is about thirty miles. That the journey was accomplished in seven and quarter hours gives an average speed of just over four miles an hour, a normal walking pace. Taking into account the delays at locks, the travelling speed of the boat must have been even higher. That at eighty-two he was capable of keeping pace with the boat for an hour says something about the stamina of John Wesley.

In the very early years it was necessary for Wesley to bring English preachers to Ireland, but very quickly he began to recruit Irishmen. Initially he made no distinction between his English and Irish preachers, and they were appointed in either country as Wesley saw their particular gifts likely to be best used. Thomas Walsh, William Thompson, Adam Clarke, Henry Moore and other Irishmen served with distinction for longer or shorter periods in England. Eventually, however, the cost of travel across the Irish Sea discouraged this practice, and preachers stayed in their own countries. Thus the separation of the British and Irish Methodist Conferences was not arranged; it evolved.

Unfortunately few records survive of the membership of early Methodist societies in Ireland. Those that do, together with references to the occupations of some leaders, suggest that in the cities and towns most were tradespeople and craftsmen, and in the rural areas farmers with moderately sized holdings. David Hempton and Myrtle Hill have shown that it was in the Linen Triangle of Ulster and the Lough Erne Rectangle that Methodism found its greatest strength and deepest penetration.⁷ That membership here continued to include some of the poorest people in the community is witnessed by the fact that both Wesleyans and Primitive Wesleyans suffered their severest losses during the Great Irish Famine in or about county Fermanagh.⁸

⁶ Wesley's *Journal*, 29/30 July 1785

⁷ David Hempton & Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740-1890*, London 1992.

⁸ D.A. Levistone Cooney, Methodists in the Great Irish Famine, in *Bulletin of the Wesley Historical Society (Irish Branch)*, Autumn, 1996.

Leadership in Dublin was certainly in the hands of upwardly mobile tradesmen. Bennett Dugdale, who began his business career by opening a printing and bookselling establishment in Capel Street, was soon able to move to the more fashionable Dame Street, where he became the city's largest bookseller. While his business remained in Dame Street until his death, Dugdale later moved his residence to an even more fashionable address just off Mountjoy Square, and his memorial in St. George's church gives him the courtesy of *Esq.*⁹ James Martin, a hatter in Little Ship Street, was so successful in his trade that he was able to buy property at various locations in the city and elsewhere in the country. He himself resided eventually in the fashionable Charlemont Street, then just outside the city boundary. The inheritance of Martin's property enabled his son-in-law, Arthur Keene, to pass his business as a goldsmith to his younger brother and live the life of a gentleman in the same Charlemont Street house. Arthur's son, Martin Keene had a town house in Leeson Street, and a country residence in Ballinteer.¹⁰ On one or another occasion Wesley was the guest of Dugdale, Martin and the elder Keene.

In the rural areas active leadership was likely to be provided by the local schoolmaster, or the most successful shopkeeper or craftsman. Some of the county families were happy to encourage Methodist work. Such were the Handys of Coolalough in Ardnurcher, the Wades of Aughrim in county Galway, the Tighes of Rosanna in county Wicklow, and the Boyles of Kirlish Lodge in county Tyrone. The Gayers of Derriaghy, near Lisburn, not only encouraged Methodist work, but also in 1775 nursed Wesley through a serious illness from which he was not at first expected to recover. There were others who showed their approval by providing hospitality for the preachers, or by occasionally attending Methodist meetings. The nature of their support, however, must be seen in context.

The Methodism which they welcomed was a religious society within the Established Church. It held its meetings at times when there were no services in the parish churches, encouraging members to attend the parish services in general, and particularly the sacraments. They therefore saw Wesley's work as something which encouraged their tenants and neighbours to a more active churchmanship. They did not often see it as something they needed themselves. Mrs. Mary Delany, friend of Swift, for whom, when she was Mary Pendarves, Wesley had entertained some romantic leaning, did not think highly of Methodism. However, she wrote 'well, well, perhaps they did some good to the common people.'¹¹ For quite a number of the Irish gentry there was no "perhaps" about it. However, when after Wesley's death the Methodist societies separated from the Church of Ireland, these families withdrew their support, and in more than one case their present day descendants have been extremely surprised to find that their ancestors had entertained the founder of Methodism. In one case at least the family not only withdrew support, but actively discouraged Wesleyan Methodist work.

Wesley's impact on the Catholic Church in Ireland was minimal. Most of those who joined his societies had names which betrayed an English, Scottish, Welsh, French Huguenot or German origin. The reason was a cultural barrier of which Wesley may have been totally unaware. The most obvious element in that barrier was the fact that Wesley was a clergyman of the Established Church, and encouraged support of it, but there was another element. Most of the Irish Catholics whom he met spoke English, at least sufficiently to communicate with those who knew no Irish, and Wesley may have assumed that that was sufficient to give him entrée to their thinking. But their first language was

⁹ D.A. Levistone Cooney, A Pious Dublin Printer, in *Dublin Historical Record* vol. xlvi, no. 2, Autumn, 1993.

¹⁰ D.A. Levistone Cooney, A Wedding in St. Bride's in *Dublin Historical Record* vol. xlvi, no. 1, Spring, 1995.

¹¹ Letter dated December 14th 1783, quoted in Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister*, Manchester N/D p. 24

Irish and it was in Irish that they naturally thought. The oddity of an Established Church clergyman and his preachers, who were not then ordained, preaching in the open air may well have excited their curiosity. But to them these men were English, they were speaking in English, their thought was English, and they were assumed to be speaking to their own people. Very few Catholics made any positive response, or joined the Methodist societies, because, quite evidently, they did not regard the message as intended for them.

A few did join, and some even became preachers. The most notable of these was Thomas Walsh, who was born at Ballylyn near Croagh in county Limerick. Actually, he had left the Catholic Church, and joined the Church of Ireland, before he encountered the Methodists. He taught himself Hebrew and Greek in order to read the Bible in the original languages, and Wesley described him as the finest Biblical scholar he had ever met. Walsh wore himself out in his zeal. One doctor said to him, 'Mr. Walsh, I would not treat my horse the way you treat your body!' Fleeing from a mob which attacked him in Newtownards, he crossed Scrabo Hill, and lay exhausted in wet grass. This is thought to have caused the consumption from which he died, but his indifference to his own health over several years is the more likely source of the disease. He died before he was twenty-nine years old. Walsh was a native Irish speaker, and might well have broken through the culture barrier that language created, but what did Wesley do with him? He sent him to work for three years in London. It was not until 1799, eight years after Wesley's death, that the Irish Methodist Conference took the Irish language seriously.

It was from Dublin in 1749 that Wesley addressed his famous *Letter to a Roman Catholic*. In this Wesley irenically advances all those beliefs which he holds dear, and recognises that Catholics hold, and which are the essence of Christian faith. These were the doctrines of the historic Creeds and basic moral teaching. He asks to differ on other points, pleading that the difference of opinion may not be seen as barring friendship or tolerance. In recent years his argument has been hailed by at least one Catholic commentator as expressing an ecumenism two centuries ahead of its time. It is not irrelevant that this letter was written at the time of anti-Methodist riots in Cork, the severest persecution which Irish Methodists have endured, which lasted for two years, and was encouraged by the civil authorities, who were of the Church of Ireland.

In 1780 Wesley would appear to have been taking an opposite view. The Catholic Relief Act of 1778 had provoked Protestant opposition, which eventually culminated in the Gordon riots of June 1780 in London. In the January of 1780 Wesley was persuaded to write to the *Public Advertiser* citing the maxim of the Council of Constance, "No faith is to be kept with heretics", and arguing from this that none could rely on the loyalty of Catholics to a Protestant government. A Dublin Capuchin, the Rev Arthur O'Leary, who had a taste for controversy, replied, and a public correspondence ensued, not all of which was helpful to either case. Boswell reckoned that O'Leary got the better of the argument. In one sense he certainly did. Wesley was due to make another biennial visit to Ireland that summer, but his Irish friends advised him to postpone it until the dispute had been forgotten. He stayed away until 1783.

In fact, Wesley had not changed his mind. He had been brought up in the Tory high church tradition, and this remained with him throughout his life. In regarding Catholics as politically suspect he was being true to his background. What is remarkable, is that he could so far free himself from that background as to write so tolerantly in 1749. Even the controversy has an agreeable postscript. On May 12th 1787, while Wesley was in Cork, somebody invited him to have breakfast with his old antagonist, Father O'Leary. Wesley was pleasantly surprised to find that the priest was not the stiff awkward man he had expected him to be, but an amiable man of sense and learning.¹²

¹² *Wesley's Journal*, 12 May 1787.

In 1749 a detachment of the Black Watch was posted to Limerick. Prior to their move to this city they had been in Athlone, where several of them had joined the Methodist society. In their new posting they constituted the nucleus a new society, and invited one of the Methodist preachers, Robert Swindells to visit Limerick. This he did, and so Methodism was introduced here. One of the first to join the society was the Thomas Walsh to whom we have already referred. For its meetings the society obtained the use of the rebuilt St. Francis Abbey Church.

Later in the same year, on 12 May to be precise, John Wesley himself arrived for the first of fifteen visits he was to pay to the city. He stayed for seventeen days, leaving on 29 May. During the course of those days he preached on the Mardyke, worshipped in the "ancient and venerable" Cathedral, and walked around the walls, which he described, doubtless with tongue in cheek, as "very sufficient to keep out the wild Irish".¹³

He subsequently visited Limerick four times in the 1750s, on four occasions in the 1760s, four further times in the 1770s and three times in the 1780s.¹⁴ His comments trace the occasionally fluctuating fortunes of the Methodist society in the city, but generally they indicate a satisfaction with its progress. In 1785 he assisted in the administration of Holy Communion in St. Mary's Cathedral, but there is no indication of his ever preaching there. We seldom have any clue as to the identity of his hosts, but there are exceptions in 1758 and 1789. In 1758 he was the guest of a Mr. Beauchamp. Two years earlier, at Cork, Wesley had been given a detailed account of the pious death of one Ann Beauchamp, and his Limerick host may have been a connection of hers.

In 1789 he stayed with Rev. and Mrs. Jacques Ingram. Mr. Ingram was a curate at the Cathedral. Wesley described them as a "lovely family, where I wanted nothing which the kingdom could afford." The Ingrams had a daughter Rebecca, and curiously it was she who seems to have written to Wesley prior to his visit, for on 29 April he wrote to her from Waterford advising her of the date of his expected arrival in Limerick. The Methodist preacher at Ballyconnell, George Brown, had fallen in love with Becky Ingram, and apparently told her so without first speaking to her father. This may have caused a degree of misunderstanding during an otherwise very pleasant visit. In a letter written to Mrs. Ingram from Dublin on the following 28 June Wesley comments that on receiving a letter from her he feared "a fresh accusation", and was agreeably surprised that it was not so. On the same date he wrote to Becky assuring her that the rules of the Methodist societies did not allow a preacher to marry a woman without the consent of her parents. Becky eventually married a man named Morton. What Wesley may or may not have written to George Brown has not, unfortunately, survived.¹⁵

During his 1762 visit Wesley proposed to the Limerick Methodists that they ought to have a premises of their own. It was probably the difficulties he had experienced over two premises in Dublin that taught him the hazards of renting. A site was found before he left the city, and some of the money immediately subscribed. The chapel was built in the Quay Lane vicinity, not far from the Courthouse,¹⁶ and opened on May 1st 1763. The cost was £600 (in 1990's equivalent, about £30,000). When Wesley saw it in 1765 he described it as "elegant, but not gaudy".

Certainly the most historic event which took place in connection with Limerick Methodism occurred during Wesley's visit in 1752. In 1744 Wesley had summoned all the preachers working with him to meet him in London for a conference about the progress of the work. Thereafter, in one place or

¹³ *Ibid.* 12/29th May 1787.

¹⁴ His visits were in 1750, 1752, 1756, 1758, 1762, 1765, 1767, 1769, 1771, 1773, 1775, 1778, 1785, 1787 and 1789.

¹⁵ *Wesley's Letters* London, 1931, vol vii, pp. 134 & 149

¹⁶ The Old County Courthouse in Bridge St.

another he did this annually, and the Conference became the governing body of Methodism. In 1752 Wesley summoned his first Irish Methodist Conference to meet in Limerick. This it did on two days, Friday and Saturday, 14 and 15 August. Those who attended were Wesley himself and Samuel Larwood, John Haughton, Joseph Cownley, John Fisher, Thomas Walsh, Jacob Rowell, Thomas Kead, Robert Swindells, John Whitford, and James Morris. All but Morris were already preachers in Ireland; the Conference accepted Morris as such, and he joined it from then. The last business was to appoint the preachers to their work. John Fisher was to work in Limerick until Christmas, after which Robert Swindells and Thomas Walsh were to serve there until Ladyday. From Ladyday until Midsummer Limerick was to have Joseph Cownley and Jacob Rowell, and from Midsummer until Michaelmas, John Edwards. Happily Methodist ministers are now allowed to stay in one appointment for more than three months. The third Irish Conference met in Limerick in 1758, but the minutes of this do not survive. The only record we have of it is the reference to it in Wesley's *Journal*, which is rather noncommittal.

Of the first members of the Methodist society in Limerick the most interesting is the one whose name actually stands at the head of the list, Mrs. Elizabeth Bennis. She was born into a Presbyterian family by the name of Patten in 1725. Her father died when she was eighteen, and two years later she married a rising businessman by the name of Mitchell Bennis, who was of Huguenot ancestry. In some records he is named as Michael Bennis, but this is probably a misreading of manuscript. Thoughts of serious religion were awakened in her mind by the reading of Alleine's *Alarm to the Unconverted* one of the great religious classics of the 17th century. When Robert Swindells came to Limerick in 1749, he passed the Bennis house, followed by a jeering mob. His demeanour in response to this experience excited the interest of Mrs Bennis, and she went to hear him preach. Some weeks later she was one of the first to give her name as a member for the Methodist society which he formed. Within that society she became a Class Leader, being responsible for two small classes of women. These she regularly met, giving pastoral oversight to the members.

In her own spiritual life she suffered perhaps from rather too much introversion, and a readiness to be severely self-judgemental. This emerges from her correspondence with Wesley, but she wrote to him about more than her own problems. Her daughter Eleanor married a man named Jones Bull, a silversmith and went to live with him in Waterford. Again there is variation of name in different records. The marriage register of St. Mary's Cathedral in Limerick names him Jonas Bull, but in the list of Freemen of Waterford he is Jones Bull, and that is more likely to be correct. Another daughter, Elizabeth married the Rev. John Finney of Waterford who died in 1785, and Mrs. Bennis's eldest son whose name I have not discovered, was apprenticed to a business in Waterford.

Elizabeth Bennis thus acquired three connections with Waterford, and became a frequent visitor to that city. Her letters to Wesley included news and concerns about the Methodist society there as well as the one in Limerick. On more than one occasion Wesley took her advice, even to the point of changing his plans for the appointment of preachers. There were very few people to whose views Wesley deferred on that matter. Hesitant and introverted though she was on her own account she could plead forcefully for others. One request of hers Wesley did ignore. She complained that the Limerick Methodists could not afford to pay for the maintenance of a preacher's wife every year, and asked that on alternate years a bachelor preacher might be sent until such time as the Limerick circuit was free of debt. To that suggestion Wesley turned a deaf ear, or rather, as it was made in a letter, a blind eye.

By 1773 Mr. Bennis had been very successful in his business as a hardware merchant, in 1769 being Master of the Corporation of Saddlers, and the family were regarded as wealthy. Wesley was a little

concerned about the effect this might have on them. Then came disaster, the nature of which the correspondence with Wesley does not make clear, but the family lost a considerable amount of their wealth. Further research may establish the cause of the bankruptcy. It may have been the distress of this which hastened Mr. Bennis's death, but he died in 1778, and his business was declared bankrupt in the following year. They had been a devoted couple, and the double misfortune was a bitter blow to Elizabeth. It was her faith that carried her through both trials.

After her death her son Thomas published her extensive correspondence from leading Methodist preachers, which went into several editions. As has been so often the case, the son, no doubt from a sense of family loyalty, edited out some of the things we would wish to know. A letter written by John McGregor, and dated from Limerick on September 1st 1790 contains this enigmatic statement "David was scourged in his Absalom, Eli in his two sons, and my dear Sister Bennis in her E." The biblical references are familiar, and make it plain that Elizabeth Bennis suffered considerably over the wrongdoing of a son whose name began with E. Doubtless the name was written in full in the original letter, but no baptismal or other record has come to light for a son of Mitchell and Elizabeth Bennis with a name beginning with E.

After the tragedy Elizabeth Bennis gave up her home in Limerick, and moved permanently to Waterford. Probability would suggest that it was with Jones and Eleanor Bull that she settled. During one of her earlier visits to Waterford she had been instrumental in the spiritual awakening of a young man named John Stratton. Shortly afterwards he emigrated to Newfoundland, where at his own expense he built the first Methodist chapel in that province. His letters to Mrs. Bennis are an invaluable source of information about the early years of Newfoundland Methodism. After a few years in Waterford Mrs. Elizabeth Bennis emigrated with the family to America, and died at Philadelphia in 1802.¹⁷ One of her sons remained in Limerick city, where he became a Quaker and his great-grandson Ernest Henry Bennis was a noted local historian.

Outside of the city almost all of Wesley's visits to the county were to Palatine settlements. Between 1756 and 1778 he paid ten visits to Ballingrane. Less frequently he went to Adare, Killeheen, Courtmatrix, Kilfinane and Pallaskenry. This last was then known as Newmarket, a fact which has confused later historians, who have assumed that he was visiting Newmarket on Fergus, Co. Clare. To have got from Ballingrane to Newmarket on Fergus in the time indicated in the *Journal* he would have needed not a horse, but Pegasus. His introduction to the Palatines came through Thomas Walsh. Philip Guier was the master of the German School in Ballingrane, to which Walsh as a child and a native Irish speaker had gone to learn English. Visiting Limerick, Guier and Walsh had heard Swindells preaching in the street, and this led both to adopt Methodist principles. Walsh became a Methodist travelling preacher, as we have noted. The Conference of 1752 appointed Guier preacher to the Palatines, a large number of whom became Methodists. Guier was greatly loved by his people and widely respected until his death in 1778. One of the charming legends that has attached to his name has it that even a century after his death local Catholics or Protestants seeing the Methodist preacher, whoever he was, riding in the area, were apt to say, "There goes Philip Guier, who drove the devil out of Ballingrane."¹⁸

¹⁷ C.H.Crookshank, *Memorable Women of Irish Methodism*, London 1882 pp 20ff.; Bennis Papers in the Archives of the Religious Society of Friends in Dublin; Civic and Church records in Limerick, Killaloe and Waterford; *Christian Correspondence, a collection of Letters to the late Mrs. Eliza Bennis*, Philadelphia 1809, third edition Dublin 1842.

¹⁸ Editor's Note to Wesley's *Journal* 7th May 1778.

At the time Wesley first encountered them, the Palatines of Ballingrane, Killeheen and Courtmatrix were beginning to feel the financial pressure of increasing rents, and the spatial pressure of increasing families. They were beginning to move to their secondary settlements. Most of these settlements, primary and secondary, soon had their own little Methodist chapels. The exceptions were the settlements at Ballyorgan, Ballyrigger and Glenosheen. Here the Methodists met in houses and one of these meetings survived into living memory, but they worshipped on Sundays in the Church of Ireland. Chapels were built at the three primary settlements and at Adare and Pallaskenry.¹⁹ One of the carpenters who worked on the Courtmatrix chapel was Philip Embury, who also was recognised as a Methodist local preacher. However, he was one of the more enterprising members of the Palatine community, and proposed to lead a party of them to start a new life in America. Among the party, which accompanied him and his wife Margaret to New York, were his cousin Barbara (née Ruttle) and her husband Paul Heck. It was Barbara Heck who urged Embury to start Methodist work in New York, and out of the society which he established the United Methodist Church has grown in America, and elsewhere. After the American War of Independence, Barbara Heck was among a group of Irish Palatines who moved to Canada, thus becoming a pioneer in two countries. She is buried at Prescott, Ontario.

Wesley's English friends objected to the amount of time he spent in Ireland. Over forty-three years in twenty-one visits he spent a total of about five and a half years in this country. His reply to the objectors was, "Be patient with Ireland and Ireland will repay you!" Irish Methodists would like to believe that the last two hundred and fifty years have vindicated his faith in this country. Undoubtedly Wesley himself saw some of that repayment in the activity in the New World of a small group of emigrants from county Limerick, as well as in achievements in other parts of the country.

¹⁹ D.A. Levistone Cooney, *This Plain, Artless, Serious People*, A history of the Methodists in County Limerick is due to be published in 2001.