

A PURITAN MINISTER IN LIMERICK.

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To the previous number of the Journal I contributed two letters relative to the advent of Quakerism in Limerick City, in one of which allusions were made to the "minister" of that place. The object of this present paper is to give some account of that person—Claudius Gilbert by name—and of the books which he wrote during his stay in Limerick.

It is necessary, at the outset, to say something with respect to the historical changes which necessitated his coming thither. After the surrender of Dublin to the English Parliament in 1647, the Commonwealth Party came into power and changed the whole principle of ecclesiastical organisation in Ireland. Episcopacy, the use of the surplice, and of the prayer book, were all frowned upon, many of the clergy of the Irish Church were ejected from their livings, while it was directed that religious life was to be carried on by a body of men, appointed and paid by the State, who were known by the title of "ministers of the gospel," and who comprised within their ranks Episcopalians, Anabaptists, Presbyterians, and Independents. At first these were appointed to churches in or near Dublin, but as the country grew more and more settled they were sent further afield, and, in accordance with this, we find that in May, 1652, Claudius Gilbert was directed to preach at Limerick, at a salary of £150 per annum, which was shortly afterwards raised to £200, while he also got lease of a garden there, rent free, for seven years. At what church he officiated is not known, for all that is recorded is, that in June, 1655, it was ordered by the Government that the "public meeting-place" (as the churches were termed) in Limerick were to be put into a state of repair. Whether Gilbert had episcopal orders or not the present writer cannot say. He was not the only minister in Limerick City during the period, for a man named James Knight was also located there. The latter was almost certainly an

Anabaptist, and if this be so, we may presume that there was very little love lost between the two. In March, 1654, a letter was sent to Oliver Cromwell from the "Church of Christ at Limerick," and signed by Gilbert and eighteen laymen. In it the signatories shewed the great need of an able gospel ministry in Ireland, where there was gross and great darkness. They had seen the benefits that accrued from the settlement of an able, godly, painful ministry, and beg Cromwell to further that design¹.

The four books written by Gilbert during his residence in this city are of considerable interest, and form for a provincial town in Ireland a unique library of Puritan ecclesiastical literature. Unfortunately they were not printed locally. Here we only purpose giving a brief account of their contents, but those who desire to pursue the subject further can consult them in the library of Trinity College; they are bound in one volume, which was formerly the property of Claudius Gilbert (son to the subject of this paper), whose autograph appears on the title-page.

The first of these is entitled *The Libertine School'd: or a Vindication of the Magistrate's Power in religious matters, being an answer to some Fallacious Quæries, scattered about the City of Limerick, by a nameless Author, about the 15th December, 1656*. It was dedicated to Henry Cromwell, dated in the preface, "From my study at Limrick, Dec. 22nd, 1656," and printed in London by Francis Tyton in 1657. It would appear that the book was occasioned by the dispersal through the city of a manuscript paper of "Quæries" (which Gilbert gives at length and answers) which were aimed against the Civil Magistrates using compulsion against men's consciences in matters of religion. As Gilbert upholds the theory that the civil power should interfere in matters ecclesiastical, a point on which the Independents held decided views, it may be presumed that he professed the opinions of that body at the time. He says that the queries were taken from *The Storming of Anti-Christ*, by Christopher Blackwood, a prominent Irish Anabaptist, so it must have been a member of that denomination who composed and handed round the queries. It would appear that the nameless author also took up the cudgels on behalf of the Quakers, on account of their

¹ Commonwealth Books (P.R.O.) A/1 ff2 69, 277; A/5 f 179; A/22 f 12a; A/57, f 193. The letter is in Thurloe's *State Papers*, II, p. 118.

treatment by Colonel Ingoldsby, for, on pp. 55-7, Gilbert holds forth against that body in language which supplements the matter given in my former article. "The crowding of Quakers into these parts, especially into this city [*marginal note*, in the beginning of December 1656] has been an occasion of these times. The forenamed Quære clandestinely sealed up and superscribed to Colonel Henry Ingoldsby, our Vigilant Governor, to dissuade him from that noble work, whereunto he found himself eminently obliged for Christ and the public in the discharge of his great trust here. Ths tumultuousness of the Quaking rant had several times disturbed both the worshippers of God and the public peace. They had ensnared many of our soldiers, infected divers of our citizers, gathered many disciples in the garrison and country, and railed most vilely at the Magistrates and Ministers of Christ. They had spread multitudes of pamphlets, libels, and papers full of their sad stuff, and by all means laboured to gather a strong party desperately engaged to that way." He adds, "I myself had spent divers hours, at divers seasons, with the chief of them, and perused their papers and their books, full of absurd and vile notions. No means attempted could do them any good." Finally, he apologises for the defects of the book, because "th multiplicious work, whereunto I am necessitated in this city, by my ministerial call, affords me not many hours of respite."

The second book is entitled *A Soverign Antidote against Sinful Errors extracted out of Divine Records for the prevention and cure of our Spirtual Distempers*. It was dedicated to Col. Ingoldsby and the inhabitants of Limerick, and was dated from his study 11 m(onth) January 23rd, 1656 (January 1657, N.S.); it was printed in London in 1658. In the Epstle Dedicatory he has some interesting remarks. "The sword, famine, and plague ranged in these parts upon God's errand at my first coming, and continued a considerable time I was thereby occasioned to contribute my utmost, by the Lord's aid, to the relief and cure of mn's souls and bodies. It was then my cordial delight and desire to pend and be spent for the good of Limerick. Our Heavenly Physicia saw it best then to diet and physick us, suiting His prescripts to our disempers. Few in this place did miss of a touch, the deeper smartings of many amongst us warned all the rest." The writer has principally in his mind the errors of the Anabaptists and Quakers. On pp. 17 and 8 he points out the need for a Gospel ministry.

Gilbert's third book, *The Blessed Peacemaker and Christian Reconciler* (London, 1658), was dated from his study March 23rd, 1656, (*i.e.* 1657, N.S. as in the preface he alludes to the two previous works). It is dedicated to Sir Hardress and Lady Waller, and was the sum of several sermons preached in Limerick. As before, he upholds the interference of the secular arm. "Christian magistrates bear relation ecclesiastical to the Church of Christ, according as they are real or nominal professors of His name therein. Their help is of very considerable use towards church-peace, whilst they observe the Lord's rule about it."

The fourth and last book, *A Pleasant Walk to Heaven through the New and Living Way, etc.* (London, 1658), was dated from his study, May 19th, 1657, and was dedicated to his uncle and aunt, Colonel Henry and Mrs. Esther Markham. It is the substance of five sermons preached in Limerick on the theme of Christians walking worthy of their vocation. Towards the end he gives some excellent advice as to how Christians should mutually help each other.

But Gilbert was not destined to remain in Limerick during the whole of the Commonwealth period. His name had been brought before the Lord Deputy and Council for appointment to the parish of St. Michael's, Dublin, so on the 24th December, 1658, he wrote to Henry Cromwell, stating that he was well pleased with the contemplated move, as he considered that it would be better for his wife's health, while he himself "will be put in a better capacity of attending Christ's work." Accordingly he was removed to Dublin, but before he actually arrived there the legal rector of St. Michael's, William Pilsworth, took advantage of the vacancy, and made a determined effort to regain that parish from which he had been ejected. He was removed, however, and Gilbert was directed to continue preaching there, by an order dated January 25th, 1659. In February he petitioned for a residence in St. Michael's lane. In April, 1660, he is described as *late* minister of St. Michael's, so he may either have resigned or been ejected for some unknown reason. After the Restoration he appears as Vicar of Belfast, and in 1685, had a dispute with Archdeacon Mathews, which led to a well-known ghost story².

²Lansdowne MSS. 823, f. 177; Commonwealth Docs, A/25, f. 207; A/91 ff. 69, 72; Seymour *Irish Witchcraft*, pp. 167-171. His successor in Limerick was to have been Faithful Teate, junior, father of Nahum Tate, the poet-aureate, but it is doubtful if the appointment was perfected. A/22, f. 12a.