

## WILLIAM EDMUNDSON: IRELAND'S FIRST QUAKER

It was with great pleasure that I received the invitation to give your 2004 Historical Lecture, as a part of Ireland Yearly Meeting's commemoration of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coming of Quakerism to Ireland. And I am especially happy to have this opportunity of sharing with you some of my thoughts on the life, work, and significance of William Edmundson, "Ireland's First Quaker." At the same time I am feeling a bit of sadness that I am now giving my last lecture here at Swanbrook House, for soon you will be moving everything to your new centre on Stocking Lane.

First of all I would like to give a little of Edmundson's pre-Quaker background. William Edmundson was born in 1627, the youngest of six children of John and Grace Edmundson. He was orphaned quite early, his mother dying when he was about four years old and his father when he was about eight. He and his brothers and sisters were left in the care of his mother's brother. The uncle made hard use of the children and seemed to have helped himself to the father's estate. Later on, when his oldest brother reached the age of 21, that brother and the husband of the oldest sister brought suit to recover the children's portion. They spent much money in this effort.<sup>1</sup>

Years ago, when I first began my studies on William Edmundson, I visited Little Musgrave (then in Westmorland) to see what his home area was like. Houses there at the time of his youth were mostly mud and wattle, so that nothing from his period seems to remain. Nearby is the much more impressive Great Musgrave, with a number of old stone houses – with some of them probably dating from the early seventeenth century. I located the local historian, a wonderful elderly man, who told me that I was the second person who had recently asked him about William Edmundson. When I told him about the family's attempt to recover the property from his uncle, the historian said "they must have been people of note" for such a suit to have taken place. After hearing that I then spent untold hours in the Public Records Office (then on Chancery Lane in London) trying to find records of his law suit but to no avail. Such cases were indexed under the name of the plaintiff or of the one bringing the suit. I was never able to discover the maiden name of Edmundson's mother (and therefore the uncle's surname). Also, I was not successful in discovering the name of the sister's husband, who probably took the initiative in bringing the suit.

William Edmundson remained with his uncle several years and was then apprenticed as a carpenter and joiner in York, where he lived for several years. During this time England was experiencing great religious, social, and political turmoil. Edmundson was beginning his own religious searching and questioning at this time. Then he entered the Parliament Army at the time of the English Civil War, and in 1650 he went into Scotland with Oliver Cromwell. During this period his religious wrestling intensified, especially after several narrow escapes from danger. Coming back into England in 1651 and 1652, he began to hear about Quakers – for he said that all sorts of people had this as their one main topic of conversation. Finally Edmundson left the army, and his brother John persuaded him to go to Ireland. When William and his wife reached Dublin, they discovered that his brother had been transferred to the north of Ireland and they were soon persuaded to go north also.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after settling in the north Edmundson sold all his goods that he had brought from England and decided, therefore, to return to England for more. At that very time George Fox and James Nayler were active in the north of England. While visiting his kinsmen, William learned that Nayler was only three miles away, so that he, his brother, Thomas, and another relative went to hear Nayler. They were all three convinced at this point (1653).<sup>3</sup> William Edmundson reports that he was fully convinced at that time, no longer swearing an oath but still unable to adopt the self-denial (the “cross of Christ”) that was demanded of him. A period of intense searching and discovery soon led him into deeper understanding and dedication. In 1654, after he had returned to Ireland, William Edmundson, his wife and his brother (who were both soon convinced) began meeting twice a week in the Edmundson house. Soon four others were drawn to join them, giving rise to the first Quaker meeting in Ireland – meeting “together to wait upon God, and to worship him in Spirit and Truth.” This earliest Irish Quaker meeting was in Lurgan, in County Armagh.<sup>4</sup>

Edmundson’s public ministry seems to have started in 1655, when he began to travel with John Tiffin, who was on the first of his visits to Ireland. The ground in that area was not fertile, with many of the people there deeply rooted in Calvinism. Frequently the two of them met with resistance and rejection – so different from the reception met by Edward Burrough and Francis Howgill in the south in that same year of 1655. Nowhere else in Quaker history have I found anything as dramatic as that episode where an army officer heard Howgill proclaim the Quaker message and was so moved that he persuaded Howgill to accompany him from army camp to army

camp and had the drums beaten, so that the soldiers would gather to hear Howgill's presentation of Quakerism.

Quakerism had a tremendous growth among the members of the Cromwellian army in Ireland, both among the officers and the regular soldiers. One clergyman in Galway wrote to Henry Cromwell that over a hundred soldiers were to be found at the Galway Quaker meeting each week. Cromwell, the Governor General of Ireland, had once feared that the Baptists might seize control of Ireland. Now the Quakers, who had convinced many of the Baptists to become Quakers, were the ones he feared, seeing them as the potential enemy. He therefore cashiered many of the officers and had many of the ordinary soldiers whipped (when they showed signs of Quaker acceptance or leanings). Edmundson did not make such a great number of early Quaker converts among soldiers as Howgill had, but his *Journal* shows some (including his brother John whom he had joined in Ireland).<sup>5</sup>

As I have read and reread Edmundson's *Journal*, I have been struck by a number of things concerning Edmundson's pioneer work in Ireland. First of all, it lasted a lifetime rather than just a brief interval – unlike the short time spans spent by Edward Burrough, Francis Howgill, and the many others who came from England bearing the Quaker message. Over the years I have been able to gather the names of more than sixty such "Publishers of Truth" (as they were later called) who visited Ireland between 1655 and 1660. Most of these spent only a brief time in Ireland before being expelled by Henry Cromwell and other officials. It is true that several of them made return visits, with John Tiffin and Thomas Loe<sup>6</sup> making half a dozen or more periods of service in Ireland. Loe, who converted William Penn, spent so much time in Ireland that he even earned the nickname "Apostle to Ireland." William Edmundson, except when he was on religious service abroad, spent the rest of his life among Irish Quakers – strengthening existing meetings, helping to start new meetings, and almost to the very end of his life going into areas of Ireland where Quakerism was unknown (such as sections of Connaught).

A second thing which impressed me deeply was Edmundson's great energy and dedication. Age, arthritis, and the "ague" might have slowed him down as the years went by, but not even being badly injured when thrown by his horse kept him from taking "meetings in course" (that is, the regular round of preparative, monthly, provincial, and Yearly meetings as they fell due). Down toward the end of his life he still found it possible to attend London Yearly Meeting and visit other English Meetings along the way. Like

the Energiser Bunny I sometimes see in TV commercials, Edmundson just kept on running.

A third thing about Edmundson's public ministry which really struck me was that he did not forsake Ireland as his main field of service. Even though he made three trips to America (the last one only to the West Indies) and also occasional religious journeys to England, the needs of Irish Friends always called him home. He differed radically from such other early Irish Quaker converts as John Perrot, John Luffe, and Robert and Mary Maylin.

John Perrot of Waterford soon left for England and then became the main figure in a group of six Friends who were drawn to the eastern end of the Mediterranean – going to Italy, Greece, and Turkey – ultimately going back to Italy, where he was imprisoned by the Inquisition in Rome. After several years of torture, inner turmoil, and various temptations, he was released and returned to England where he created great problems for English Quakers, even causing some separations.<sup>7</sup> From there he went to the West Indies and the mainland American Colonies, where he continued to create strife and separations. Edmundson's journeys to America were much more positive than Perrot's, and his work there was much more healing, especially in those areas where Perrot had done such great damage.

John Luffe (of Limerick) may have travelled to America before joining Perrot and others on their Mediterranean gambit (as is reported in one of the documents from the Inquisition). He too suffered imprisonment in Rome at the hands of the Inquisition, dying there while Perrot was still a prisoner. Perrot says that Luffe was hanged by the Inquisition, but authorities there claimed that he starved himself to death while on a fast.

The Maylins of Bandon undertook religious journeys to the West Indies. Eventually they fell under the influence of John Perrot, rejected all restraint, and died out of unity with Friends. Edward Cooke and his wife removed to England, where they remained quite serviceable among Friends.

Still a fourth thing that grabbed my attention as I read and reread Edmundson's *Journal* was Edmundson's courage – so clear and strong on many occasions – even when his liberty and his life were threatened. In 1690 the Rapparees set Edmundson's house on fire, even while he and his family were still inside. When the family emerged, Edmundson and his two sons were taken off to the woods where the Rapparees (led by members of the Dunn family) were going to hang them. The two sons were hooded before they were to be hanged, but it was decided that William Edmundson was "too stout" so that they would shoot him. As they started to put the hood

over his eyes, William told them not to do so – so that he could look them in the face, telling them that he was not afraid to die.<sup>8</sup> On other occasions he did not shrink from suffering or imprisonment. This same courage led him to tackle various officials – either in debate, dialogue, or demands. On one occasion when Edmundson was finally released from a long and painful period in the stocks, he demanded that the person who had put him there come and lift his leg out. An interesting footnote to the story of Edmundson's sufferings is found in the minutes of London Meeting for Sufferings. When the 1690 "troubles" in Ireland were over, a number of the rebels against the king were taken prisoner to England. One of these was a member of the Dunn family, who was imprisoned at the Savoy in London. Soon he claimed that it was all a mistake – that he was not a rebel but was actually an Irish Quaker from Mountmellick. Eventually London Quakers heard of this and appointed a committee to check into his story. He knew enough Quakers terminology and Quaker names to lead the committee to believe that it should inquire more fully. Mountmellick Friends, upon receiving the query about Dunn's possible membership in their meeting, reported back that he was not only not a member but that he had been one of the great persecutors of Edmundson and other Friends in that area. When the committee returned to see Dunn and told him that they had discovered the truth about him, it was reported back to Meeting for Sufferings that "he was truly wrought"!

Still another thing which impressed me was the hardship which he so often experienced while travelling to proclaim Quakerism. In Ireland there were places where he was refused food or lodging. In America when he travelled in uninhabited places (in 1672-1673 and 1675-1676) there were times when he slept on the wet ground, felt the extreme cold, crossed wild and wide rivers, experienced great storms, and even faced angry officials.

The tragic events connected with James Nayler's "fall" touched Edmundson deeply. Edmundson had been convinced by the preaching of Nayler, that charismatic co-worker of George Fox. Nayler, who had been in prison quite a while, was finally released and was soon caught up in what Edmundson calls Nayler's "miscarriage." Nayler, falling under the influence of some of his followers such as Martha Simmonds, re-enacted Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem by allowing himself to be led on the back of an ass into Bristol – accompanied by a cheering crowd of supporters, with the women going before singing "hosanna" and celebrating his coming. Many people believe that he actually believed that the second coming of Christ was taking place in him. Others believed that this was

“really a sign and a wonder” – just like the Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah had done, believing that Nayler was acting out his message that Christ had come to teach his people. Given Nayler’s troubled state of mind at the time, we may never know just what was in his mind.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear, however, that Edmundson was deeply affected by this dramatic act. In his *Journal* he writes that the news of this episode “came very near me, and brought me under great trouble of mind, so that I said in my heart, how shall I be able to stand through so many temptations and trials which attend me daily, since such a one as he is fallen under temptations?”<sup>10</sup>

It is my belief that Edmundson’s deep spiritual wrestling with Nayler’s “fall” (which took place while Edmundson himself was suffering fourteen weeks imprisonment) seriously influenced Edmundson in several ways:

- a) He became increasingly closer to George Fox, who seemed to be a real “rock” in whom he could trust.
- b) He had to follow his own individual leading, as the Lord said unto him “Truth is Truth, though all men forsake it.”
- c) Increasingly he came to see the importance of testing one’s individual leading by the guidance of the larger body of Friends. This is, I believe, why he gave so much time and efforts to organizing Irish Friends, joining Fox who came to Ireland for that purpose in 1669.<sup>11</sup>
- d) In connection with this growing understanding of the importance of testing the individual’s leading, I believe, came hand in hand his opposition to “Separates” – those who separated from Friends and set up their own movements and leaders. William Edmundson strongly opposed the Wilkinson-Story separation which affected many meetings in the north of England.<sup>12</sup>

Toward the close of the seventeenth century Edmundson became increasingly concerned with what seemed to him to be a decided falling away from Quaker simplicity. Edmundson called upon Friends not to be drawn into seeking more elaborate clothing, houses, furniture, etc. He believed that such a path would bring about a growing weakness or failure in following God’s will – leading Friends more and more to live their lives in the eyes of their fellow men rather than in the eyes of God.

Soon he and others spearheaded a movement to revitalize the old Quaker attitudes and practices based on simplicity, so that quite a

reform movement took place – with committees set up in the various levels of Irish meetings (local, monthly, provincial) to visit Friends in their families to enquire into this. Sometimes Edmundson and his fellow reformers seem to have anticipated John Woolman when they became concerned with the pitfalls that come with great business and wealth, raising the question of whether or not your business, your occupation, and your possessions are ruling you or controlling you to such a degree that you are not free to serve the meeting, your family, etc. One of the most interesting cases I ran across was that of a farmer in County Wexford who realized that his land holdings were so large that he was really a prisoner of his own holdings – so that he gave some of his land to a poor Quaker who had none. Edmundson and the reformers felt strongly that too great a business was a possible source of trouble. How could one know the needs and problems of all his workers and deal justly with them? The reports on these visits which came back to the various meetings make very interesting reading.

Over the years I have wrestled with the question of what sort of person William Edmundson was. In the back of my mind there was always the question of his relationship with his children. Why would he name a son “Tryal” and a daughter “Hindrance”? Why were some of his children a disappointment to him, and he to them it would seem? Only three of his seven children signed the Testimony to him which is included at the front of his *Journal*.<sup>13</sup> His Will speaks of his “unhappy son” William, his “unruly son” Samuel, his “foolish and disobedient daughter” Hindrance Seale, and his “rebellious daughter” Anne Moore.<sup>14</sup> Was he too demanding and overbearing as a parent? Was his relationship with these children a reflection of a larger problem? His *Journal* speaks of the opposition he sometimes encountered from Friends, and even one of the Testimonies printed with his *Journal* hints at that situation.

The biggest question raised in my mind concerns the relationship of William Edmundson and Anthony Sharp: Sharp came to Dublin about 1669 and soon became quite prosperous, having many people work for him. With some legal training, his wealth, and his status as a recognized Friends Minister, he soon reached the position of prominence in the Dublin Meeting as well as in the broader community of the area.<sup>15</sup>

William Edmundson was Ireland’s first Quaker in length of service, the most widely travelled in Ireland and abroad, able to approach Government officials and be received with respect – as well as being a friend of George Fox. The relationship of these two is somewhat clouded. First of all, Edmundson’s *Journal* was constantly being

edited by Edmundson almost up to the time he died. Any references to difficulties which might have been there were removed. The same is not true of Anthony Sharp's *Papers*, which were edited by John Crabb. Crabb removed a lot of references to this unhappy relationship, but he removed some of the material – judging it as showing “Ye frailty of poor human beings.”<sup>16</sup>

Anthony Sharp notified Dublin Monthly Meeting and the Provincial Meeting that Edmundson had many times given forth “his personal reflections on honest Friends in publique Meetings.” Although warned to forebear, he had continued. Edmundson then brought it before the 1697 General Meeting at Dublin. Ministers and Elders heard the case and did not clear Edmundson. Some of them then called upon Edmundson to consider the effects of these “reflections” which tended not to edify the Church but only to harden Edmundson himself. It was then reported that Edmundson went out of the meeting “without showing the least desire to have any unity or reconciliation with Anthony Sharp” in spite of the fact that Anthony Sharp “forgave him in his heart and Anthony Sharp called to Friends to take notice of it.” Edmundson had opposed granting Sharp a certificate when Sharp was to travel to Holland. He also left the Provincial Meeting when Sharp stood up to speak. Also, when Sharp spoke in Mountmellick Meeting, Edmundson sought to hinder him by “standing in part and sitting in part, and now and then (saying) a word.” Edmundson was guilty of acting “contrary to the good order of Friends” which required that “Ministers of their own Meetings should give way for strangers that come to Visit them.”<sup>17</sup>

We are left to wonder what caused this rift between these two worthy and weighty Friends. Was it Sharp's wealth, great business, and large number of employees? Was it the growing simplicity in Sharp's life and house? Or Sharp's growing importance both within Quakerism and with the political powers that be? Was it Sharp's sympathy with Story and Wilkinson (whom he had known before removing to Dublin)?<sup>18</sup> Did Edmundson feel his position as “Mr. Quaker” was threatened by Sharps' rising power? Did jealousy and envy enter into it? Did it stem in part from Edmundson's approval of John Crabb's 1682 marriage to Elizabeth Hathorne over the objection of Anthony Sharp? With Edmundson's total silence on this subject and Crabb's omitting much related material as he edited Sharp's papers for possible publication (which never happened) we are left guessing at the cause/causes that led to this unfortunate blot on Edmundson's life.

I have chosen to close this talk on William Edmundson by looking at Edmundson's position on the question of Quakers and African

slavery. This is one of the many places where I would really like to have had Edmundson available for questioning – for he made one of his greatest contributions at this point. Just when did his concern for the spiritual and material welfare of enslaved Africans arise? How and why did it arise? How and where was first expressed?

As far as we can tell, Edmundson showed little or no concern for slaves during his first journey to America (1671-1673). George Fox alone, among that large contingent of Quaker missionaries to the West Indies and then to the mainland American colonies, expressed a deep interest in the spiritual welfare of the Blacks – seeing them as beings possessing souls – as people for whom Christ died. He established the practice of holding special religious services for them among the slaves on Quaker-owned plantations. Two other Friends (John Stubbs and Solomon Eccles) later helped him in this work.<sup>19</sup> Fox also called for a humane treatment of the slaves – providing proper clothing, food, etc. He even called for granting them freedom after a lengthy period of service.<sup>20</sup>

Edmundson remained in touch with Fox after their return to their homes following that 1671-1673 journey to America. When Edmundson decided to return to America in 1675, on a second period of religious service, George Fox asked him to make certain that the religious meetings among the Blacks continued to be held. As soon as he reached Barbados, Edmundson laid this concern to Friends, both at the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings. He was able to report to Fox that real progress was being made in this matter. Edmundson's *Journal* shows his own embracing of this work: "I had very good service. . . [in] Negro meetings in Families."<sup>21</sup> In that same year he wrote to Friends back in Ireland that "Many of the Blacks are convinced, and several of them confess the Truth."<sup>22</sup> As far as I know, this is the earliest reference to Black conviction, which at this time (before official membership was recorded) would have made them Friends.

Edmundson's activity among the Blacks brought him under attack, especially from a renegade priest called Ramsey who claimed that Edmundson was really a Jesuit from Ireland who pretended to be a Quaker and who, under the guise of converting Blacks to Christianity, was really making them rebels who would rise up and cut the throats of the whites on the island. Finally Edmundson faced both these charges and Ramsay, so that in an appearance before the Governor and Council he cleared himself of these charges – saying that making them Christians would keep them from rebelling and cutting throats, whereas continuing to keep them in ignorance and under oppression was bound to produce such violent results.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, from the West Indies, Edmundson travelled to the mainland American Colonies, starting in New England and then heading southward. His *Journal* sheds no further light on this matter of slavery, but we do possess copies of two of his letters to American Friends – one from Rhode Island and the other from Maryland, written during his 1675-1676 visit. In both of these he calls upon Quakers to free their slaves – the first Quaker to do so, and, I think, the first person in America to issue such a call. Thomas Drake proclaims that “Edmundson stands first in the British Empire to proclaim Negro slavery a sin.”<sup>24</sup>

Kenneth L. Carroll

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## NOTES

- 1 William Edmundson, *A Journal of the Life, Travels, Sufferings and Labour of Love in the Work of the Ministry, of that Worthy Elder and faithful Servant of Jesus Christ, William Edmundson*, Second Edition (London: Mary Hinde, 1774), pp. 1-2. I searched many parish registers (and also the International Genealogical Index) but was unable to find marriage records which would have given me the names needed.
- 2 Edmundson, *Journal*, pp. 3-7.
- 3 Edmundson, *Journal*, pp. 7-8
- 4 Edmundson, *Journal*, p. 15.
- 5 In addition to his brother John, others were convinced: a Corporal at Mullingar (p. 31), Captain William Morris (p. 35). Cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, “Quakerism and the Cromwellian Army in Ireland,” *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, LIV (1978), 135-54.
- 6 Cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, “Thomas Loe, Friend of William Penn and Apostle to Ireland,” in J. William Frost and John H. Moore (eds.) *Seeking the Light: Essays in Quaker History in Honor of Edwin B. Bronner* (Wallingford and Haverford, Pa., Pendle Hill Publications and Friends Historical Association, 1986), pp. 61-70.
- 7 Concerning John Perrot and John Luffe, cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, *John Perrot: Early Quaker Schismatic* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1970) and “Quakers in Venice, 1657-1658,” *Quaker History*, 92 (2003), pp. 22-33.
- 8 Edmundson, *Journal*, pp. 145ff.
- 9 Concerning this episode, see William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, Second Edition Prepared by Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge: The University Press, 1955) pp. 244-273, and Kenneth L. Carroll, “Martha Simmonds, Early Quaker Enigma,” *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, LIII (1972), 31-52.
- 10 Edmundson, *Journal*, p. 38.

- <sup>11</sup> Edmundson, *Journal*, pp. 44-45; George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, Revised Edition by John Nickalls (Cambridge: The University Press, 1952), pp. 536-50 deal with Fox's 1669 visit to Ireland. Organizing and setting up business meetings (Monthly, Quarterly, etc.) was also one of Fox's main concerns when he visited the West Indies and North America in 1671-1673.
- <sup>12</sup> Edmundson was one of 66 Quakers who signed a paper condemning the Wilkinson-Story separation. Cf. *A Testimony Against the 66 Judges call'd Quakers, who writ an Epistle (as some call it) against John Story and John Wilkinson*, (n.p., n.d.), p. 7. See also William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, second edition prepared by Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge: The University Press, 1961), pp. 280-323, 360-366, 468-482, and *passim*.
- <sup>13</sup> Edmundson, *Journal*, pp. xlviii-xxxi.
- <sup>14</sup> Olive C. Goodbody, *Guide to Irish Quaker Records 1654-1860* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1967), item 173.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. Richard L. Greaves, *Dublin's Merchant Quaker, Anthony Sharp and the Community of Friends, 1643-1707* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), which provides a thorough study of Sharp's life, work, and influence.
- <sup>16</sup> Anthony Sharp Papers, copied by John Crabb, found in the Friends Historical Library, Dublin. See S.2, p. 36, for this judgment.
- <sup>17</sup> Sharp Papers, S.2, pp. 28-31.
- <sup>18</sup> Sharp's father-in-law Thomas Crabb was a strong supporter of Wilkinson and Story.
- <sup>19</sup> Fox, *Journal*, pp. 601-2.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, "George Fox and Slavery," *Quaker History*, 86 (1997), pp. 16-25 for a fuller discussion of Fox's views.
- <sup>21</sup> Edmundson, *Journal*, pp. 31
- <sup>22</sup> Edmundson, *Journal*, p. 329.
- <sup>23</sup> Edmundson, *Journal*, pp. 82-87.
- <sup>24</sup> Thomas E. Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 9-10. Edmundson's September 19, 1676, letter was written at Newport in Rhode Island. His second letter was written in Maryland on January 5, 1677, and was directed to "Friends in Maryland and Virginia and other parts in America." His Maryland host was William Southeby who became an early antislavery writer after moving to Pennsylvania. Cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, "William Southeby, Early Quaker Antislavery Writer," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXXIX (1965), pp. 416-27, and "Maryland Quakers and Slavery," *Quaker History*, 72 (1983), 27-42.