

CURRENT AND FUTURE QUAKER HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN IRELAND

All history is contemporary history
or
Today's news is tomorrow's history
or
Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose

Introduction

I take it as an honour bestowed on Friends in Ireland, past and present, for me to be invited as a speaker today. The Friends Historical Society deserves to have more Irish members; they can, I believe, be counted in single figures at present. We must recruit a few more.

The FHS during its 100 years has been of value to Irish Friends chiefly through the *Journal*. This has been vehicle for topics of Irish interest but more than that, the *Journal* has given us a broad picture of the earlier writings and activities of Friends, not just in Britain and Ireland but in Europe, America and world-wide. I treasure my complete collection of the *Journals* and supplements.

For myself, I have no background in historical matters. My training and career was as a veterinary surgeon which profession claims to be an art as well as a science, an appealing combination. Having inherited my father's Quaker books, I was stimulated and inspired by the message within them. They have led me to delve into Irish Quaker history.

You may disagree with what I have to say. Certainly, some Irish Friends would not express themselves as I do. So, please be prepared to disagree with me as we engage in our study of history, our search for the truth, our search for Truth.

Irish Friends

A plane is preparing to land at Belfast International Airport. The message to passengers comes over the loudspeaker:

'Please fasten your safety belts and put back your time-pieces three hundred years'.

All over Ireland there is a tendency to live in the past, to revel in it or to revile it. Friends also have the same interest in bygones. The details of 1641, 1690, 1798, 1846, 1916 etc. are continually being analysed and re-evaluated in the public media. I doubt very much if the people of Great Britain are anything like as interested in their past.

The original Friends in Ireland were exclusively settlers, recently arrived from England or Scotland to take up opportunities in a devastated land from which the Gaelic residents had been forcibly displaced. Those early Friends in Ireland were aliens in an often hostile environment. This was a total contrast from the position in England where Friends, despite persecution, had the comfort of living in a village or town where their roots were deep. Probably, most of them had families stretching back hundreds of years in that place.

In 1903 Ireland was in the United Kingdom; King Edward VII was sovereign. Friends in Ireland looked to the Society in Britain for inspiration and guidance. Many of the wealthier Quaker families went for education to Bootham or The Mount. Literature from London Yearly Meeting influenced the thinking of Irish Friends, and though not subordinate, we were largely under the wing of London Yearly Meeting.

For most of the 20th century there has been a growing determination among Irish Friends to assert their Irishness, to define Quakerism with an Irish slant and to recall those characters and events in Irish Quaker history which exemplify that distinctiveness. The fraternal links with Friends in Britain remain strong, but parallel with self-government at a political level there has been Irish Quaker self-assertiveness, in the best sense of that word, I hope.

Recent and current research

Some areas of research which have recently been studied by visitors to the archives at Dublin or Lisburn are as follows:

- The place of women in Irish society
- Schooling and education
- Famine 1845-48
- 1798 rebellion
- Temperance movement
- Anti-slavery
- Samplers
- Business and commercial life
- Shipbuilding and railways

Milling industry

Refugees and relief in World War II

Biographical studies on many, for example, Bulmer Hobson, Thomas & Anna Maria Haslam, Mary Leadbeater

Of these subjects, Irish women's studies has been the one most frequently recurring. With the development of equal rights and opportunities for women there has been considerable interest in Friends archives and library. Women's business meetings' minute books and the writings and records on Irish Quaker women have been useful resources for students, graduate and post-graduate.

All over Ireland there are local history societies whose members, as untrained enthusiasts, piece together what facts they can about their neighbourhoods. If that locality had a one-time Quaker meeting then someone is likely to have written a magazine article, a pamphlet or even a doctoral thesis on the Quaker activities and legacy in the area. I could name men and women in at least fifteen villages or towns who, although not Friends, have used our records and writings to prepare informative articles. These are all the more telling as they are written by those on the outside looking in. May I name a couple of them?

I think of Patrick Cassidy of Cootehill, where the meeting folded up about 1900. His parents bought a farm previously occupied by the Whitfield family, members of the meeting. Young Patrick heard talk of those Quakers and determined to learn more about their ways and their impact on the district. His writings and lectures have added a new dimension to our knowledge of Cootehill Quakers.

Muriel Bell of south Co. Derry provided a home for an aunt who retired back to Ulster after a lifetime in Sheffield where she had joined Friends. Muriel, as a local historian, became interested in the long-defunct meetings of Counties Antrim and Derry. Her local knowledge along with her researches in public archives has resulted in several articles on these previously neglected areas.

If current and recent research was only being done by Friends then there would be little for me to report. But the word 'Quaker' in many parts of Ireland is like open sesame. It conjures up a picture of charitable generosity free of religious stipulations, dating from an earlier age. So, research on Quakers has an appealing ring about it. It is embarrassing to realise that we are sometimes assumed to be extinct, and that our name is unjustifiably sanctified. A better sense of proportion is found in the perceptive comments by some researchers from outside the Society, such as:

Sister Phil Kilroy who pulls no punches in her comments on Irish Quaker women ministers in the 1680-1740 period, and the tension between their calling to travel under concern and their husbands' wishes.

Heather Crawford has opened up a whole world in her study of Quaker samplers. She shows how colour and design were artistically used at a time when Friends officially discouraged these gifts as vanity.

Sister Carmel Bourke wrote inspirationally on the sweet influences of a Quaker foster-mother on young Catherine McAuley who becomes the foundress of the Order of the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin in 1831. The writer suggests that several characteristics of the Order stem from Quaker principles.

Margaret O'Hare puzzles over the rise and collapse of Quaker meetings in Kildare and Carlow in the 18th and 19th centuries. She contends that being strongly conscious of their English origins, Friends failed to shake off the shackles of that inheritance. Their demise was as a result of their failure to embrace the Irish culture.

I must, however, impress on you that there are half a dozen or so Irish Friends engaged in recent or current research. Ken Carroll from the USA has been visiting Ireland each summer for umpteen years. He is a prime researcher, writer, lecturer and happy historian. He has unearthed some lesser-known aspects of our history and his example has encouraged us in our own fields of study.

Richard Harrison has been the most prolific of writers on Irish Quaker matters in recent years. His interests have been mostly on the business and commercial activities of Friends in Cork and Dublin. His *Biographical Dictionary of Irish Quakers* (1997) gives short paragraphs on 300 men and women over three centuries. Publication of a further book on biographies by him is imminent and awaited with interest.

Research is necessary prior to any worthwhile publication, three of which I want to name. The first is the *Friendly Guide to Quakerism* (2003), written by four young Irish Friends and intended for the youth market. It is to be circulated to all secondary schools in Ireland, north and south, and entailed careful study. Secondly, the drafting of a revised book of *Christian Experience for Ireland Yearly Meeting* since 1999 has caused the committee of twelve to trawl through writings of Irish Friends, ancient and modern, to find useful quotations. A third publication is David Butler's volume on *Quaker Meeting Houses in Ireland* which is to be available in 2004. Patient work has been done in Irish Quaker archives and in public repositories by him and his local

volunteers. This will provide an authoritative text on a subject previously unaddressed.

The major use to which Irish Friends archives are put remains the last for me to name. I refer to genealogy. Surely we Friends have not kept careful records since the 1670's so that pedigrees can be constructed? Is it right that the precious time of volunteer staff be spent on the self-indulgence of a family tree? Should we direct all such enquiries to professional genealogists who work on a commercial basis? Do the members of our meetings who have no Quaker pedigree feel demeaned by our encouragement of genealogy? I do not mean to be hurtful to the Quaker Family History Society. I myself know what it is to be smitten by the urge to discover ancestors and how time-consuming it can be.

Recent practical assistance towards research

At the Historical Library in Dublin funding was found to get the index card information put on computer in 2000. This provides cross-referencing of subject headings to make searches easier. Also at the Library over the past few years all available Certificates of Removal have been put on computer. This has amounted to over 14,000 entries. Work is now proceeding on a similar database of disownments. As yet these computerised lists have not been made available to other libraries but in time they may be offered for sale as a CD-Rom. In Ulster a Friend has worked to create an index of names from the birth, marriage and burial registers of the Province. Also, by sifting through early minute books he has extracted names which have been indexed for easy reference.

THE FUTURE

Assistance for researchers

Facilities which are scheduled to become available soon or which it is hoped might be achieved:

1. A new premises in Dublin for Yearly Meeting offices and the Historical Library has been built on a site shared with the new Bloomfield hospital. It is situated six miles south of the city centre at Stocking Lane, Dublin 14, convenient to the M50 ring road. The new Library will include reading room with computer facilities for visitors, office for curator and staff, enlarged strong room for archive material and a store room. This purpose-built suite of rooms promises splendid long-term prospects for

improving facilities for visitors and enquirers. The new Library is expected to be ready by March 2005. As the staff are volunteers, the hours of opening are likely to be limited to Thursdays only.

2. A List to be made of items held at various sites other than Dublin or Lisburn Quaker archives. In Ireland, quite different from Britain, all Friends minute books and registers are held in archives owned and managed by the Society. However, much important material is held in public or private archives throughout Ireland and in Great Britain.
3. Continuation of computerisation of disownments at the Historical Library in Dublin.
4. Microfilming of minute books and registers held in the Historical Library in Dublin so that researchers do not need to visit the Library and handle fragile original manuscripts.
5. Transcription of minute books. Visitors from Britain are surprised to find that not one minute book of Irish Friends has been transcribed. This painstaking work would allow researchers to read the document without the fun and frustration of deciphering the handwriting. It would also allow an index to be provided for the minute book and would reduce the amount of handling of fragile manuscript volumes.

The suggestions by Ted Milligan of a Quaker Record Society might address the present zero position regarding Irish minute books. As a start, there is a likelihood of a Friend transcribing the first Ulster Province minute book, 1675-1693.

Future Topics

My personal ideas on what might usefully be researched by Friends and the general public are limited by subjective vision. Who knows what will be the flavour of the year in 2008?

One of the best-known characteristics of Friends is our attempt to be a peaceable people. Many of the public, while longing for peace, cannot figure out how an unarmed lifestyle can be practised consistently. So, a critical study of Irish Quakers life and witness in our disputed and ravaged land should be made.

The situations that Friends have lived through in Ireland since 1654 have more parallels in America than in Britain. The recurring

outbreaks of civil war and unrest give ample scope for investigating the penalties suffered and the compromises made by Irish Friends. It is too simplistic to quote the 1660 Declaration to Charles II and to assert that Friends in every generation since have adhered to it unswervingly. They have not. Honesty demands that the hard questions are faced.

In 1688-90 William Edmundson asked for government intervention and protection.

In 1739 after the malicious burning of Timahoe meeting-house, Friends sought redress through a government proclamation.

After the 1798 rebellion Friends listed their losses but were careful not to accept government compensation, only to rely on collections by Friends. Their position of integrity caused them to reason that, as they had not taken up arms, they could not accept government money.

However, in the recent 1969-93 troubles Friends had no compunction about calling the police when in danger or taking state money as compensation for damage to their property.

In World War I quite a few young men from prominent Quaker families joined up voluntarily, there being no conscription in Ireland. Why did they do so? Rupert Bell of Waterford, whose parents were elders in the meeting, joined the British army to the regret of his mother. As he left for the front her prayer for him was that he would not have to kill anyone. Her prayer was answered in a poignant way when he was shot on his first days in the trenches.

Other assumptions about Irish Quakers to be investigated and challenged are firstly, the myth of the philanthropic Friend who went about doing good in an altruistic way. Secondly there is the myth of the mild tolerant Quaker who would not criticize any Roman Catholic practices. George Fox and Thomas Story wrote strongly of their feelings about superstition and idolatry when visiting Ireland. Friends in Co. Wexford experienced intimidation in that undisciplined Catholic area in 1798. Until the 1960's Friends in many parts of rural Ireland had to conform to some extent within the prevailing Catholic culture. Since then overwhelming change has taken place. Maybe someone will work on the ongoing story of Friends, first living among an oppressed and down-trodden Catholic population, and then adjusting to the stage of Catholic dominance and now to the present position when secularism rules.

In 1851 a young Quaker woman was so incensed at the inner rottenness of many Irish Friends lives that she wrote a book, *Quakerism: the story of my life*. Sarah Greer was her name and her

stories are a terrible indictment of the Society of that time. Now, after 150 years, her book deserves to be critically analysed.

Were her allegations true? How true were they? How effective was the book in purifying the Society of its hypocrisy and hambug? Was it just coincidence that within 15 years of its publication the rigid reasons for disownment were being removed. New blood was joining the Society and the schools were being opened to others than Friends. Could this book be a subject for study? Has it any significance for us today?

The curator of the Historical Library in Dublin has recently told me that in the last 20 years there has scarcely been one enquirer wishing to study the spiritual basis of Quaker activities. Although some Irish Friends such as Maurice Wigham and Richard Harrison have addressed that subject in their books and pamphlets, I believe that there would be a warm welcome for someone outside the Society to critically investigate the basis of our faith over the 350 years.

At the same time I am not sure that this can be done. Here is what my headmaster and mentor, John M. Douglas said in his presidential address to the FHS in 1956:

‘whoever attempts the history of a religious group faces a perennial difficulty... The words, expressions, books, all these can be studied; also the effects of their worship upon their social and economic culture, and their relations with other religious groups, and with the state. But the essential thing in Quakerism, the group of Friends waiting humbly together in silence on the presence of the Eternal Living Christ, offers no scope for historical writing.’

Our Meetings for worship are thankfully not being recorded yet, though I have sat through one which was taped on video. We depend on the Holy Spirit, we receive a message and absorb what we can of it.

I believe that we are sustained by a continuous thread reaching back to the first Friends in the 1650s, back beyond them through the puritans, the monks of the mediaeval church, the intrepid men and women who carried the good news in their hearts and on their lips, back to Christ himself who never wrote a book.

Historians are right to revere the written word and demand a reference for every statement but if all history is contemporary, that includes what is passed on by word of mouth.

Can we acknowledge the oral tradition and affirm that anecdotal evidence has real value? What is more engaging than an old Friend

round the fire on a wintry night, relating the stories that his Granny told him when he was young, the yarns that are too personal to write down or speak into a microphone? The atmosphere must be right for those gems to be shared.

I know a man who at bedtime would tell his children stories. Often the children would ask him,

'Daddy, is that a true story?'

His reply was,

'Well, there's a lot of truth in it'.

W. Ross Chapman

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celebrate the centenary of the Friends Historical Society*