

JAMES NICHOLSON
RICHARDSON (1846 -1921)

An Ulster Friend of his time
and place

About a hundred years ago, two different sets of challenges beset Friends in what was then called the British Isles. British Friends, at the Manchester Conference 1895, came to terms with changes in scientific and religious thought. Irish Friends had an additional crisis of identity brought on by the resurgence of the Roman Catholic church and the proposals for Home Rule in Ireland. Ulster, in particular, was where Friends lived in a contested province.

The Society of Friends in Ulster flourished during much of the nineteenth century. Following the split caused by the New Light Separation,¹ travelling Friends brought new inspiration to the scattered and weakened groups of adherents, many of whom had lost their membership. Several new meeting-houses were built and old ones renovated. Despite the disownments, strict discipline and emigration, membership increased, from 694 in 1863 to 1118 in 1894. This growth in numbers and in influence may be attributed to the development of the linen industry in which several Friend families had an important role. Linked to this was the rapid commercial growth of Belfast which attracted Friends from Britain and southern Ireland. Another important growth factor was the evangelical awakening starting from the 1859 Revival which affected many parts of rural Protestant Ulster. Gradually some of the Revival's spin-offs were to be found among Friends – gospel meetings, Sunday schools, prayer meetings, Bible study, missionary activity at home and abroad, hymn singing and paid mission workers. All of this activity resulted in a surge of new attenders at meetings for worship, some of whom joined the Society. The Friends who led the evangelical activities were careful that nothing interfered with the regular meetings for worship and discipline. They saw no contradiction between the seemingly divergent ways of worship but rather that one complemented the other. Meetings for worship which formerly had been largely times of silent waiting became occasions for vocal exhortation. In this changing milieu, James N. Richardson² (hereafter

referred to as JNR) spent most of his life. He was shaped by it, and in turn, he used his inherited power and personal talents to shape the close Quaker circle and the wider spectrum.

Family Background³

JNR, born in 1846, was the first child of Helena (née Grubb) and John Grubb Richardson. Helena Grubb was one of that family renowned among Irish Friends, from Co. Tipperary. She died in 1849 at the birth of her second child. John Grubb Richardson remarried in 1853, to Jane Marion Wakefield and they had a family of one son and seven daughters, into which JNR happily integrated. JNR went to Grove House School, Tottenham, London, to be educated along with boys from other wealthy Quaker homes. At 16 he started work in the family linen business in Bessbrook, in the south of County Armagh. Here his father had masterminded a social and industrial experiment from 1845. JNR often referred to the respect and affection he had for his father and six uncles, all in branches of the burgeoning Richardson linen companies. From his father, JNR acquired considerable wealth and the skills of commercial expertise. Breadth of mind was encouraged through travel and education, while an underlying devotion to the principles of Friends and to the Society as a body ensured a tender conscience. His father may have passed on to him a strong physique, but also a tendency to nervous depression. Being deprived of his mother at a tender age, JNR had several maternal substitutes. Throughout his life he cherished the company and support of women in the family. In particular, his step-mother, Jane M. Richardson (1832-1909), provided him with literary and artistic stirrings; she was a 'rock of strength, she had neither moods nor tenses'.⁴ In an affluent household of that time, servants often had influence beyond their station as nurse, housemaid, coachman or tutor. From these domestics JNR gleaned much basic knowledge about human nature and ways of the world which his family may have been too reserved to discuss with him. He acknowledged his affection for them and his debt to them in his small book, *Concerning Servants*.⁵

Bessbrook, the model village

John Grubb Richardson and some of his brothers had bought a derelict spinning mill and nearby houses in 1845 as a site on which they could expand their linen business. He wrote:

'We were obliged to keep pace with the times and become flax spinners

and manufacturers ... I had a great aversion to be responsible for a factory population in a large town like Belfast; ... we fixed on a place near Newry ... With water power, a thick population around, and in a country district where flax was cultivated in considerable quantities. It had moreover the desirable condition in my sight, of enabling us to control our people and to do them good in every sense. From childhood I was strongly impressed with the duty we owe to God in looking after the welfare of those around us... I had long resolved that we should have a temperance population in our little colony...'⁶

JNR started to learn the linen business and he soon developed into a prince, endowed with ability, and embracing those two uneasy bed-fellows, riches⁷ and Christian faith. When 21 he married Sophia Malcolmson, of Portlaw, Co. Waterford, thus uniting two of the most enterprising Quaker families of the time. The young couple came to reside near the mill in Bessbrook, where JNR increasingly accepted responsibility due to his father's periodic bouts of nervous depression. Commercial success coupled with Christian idealism brought fame to the remote settlement and earned the title – the model village.⁸ Housing for the workers was provided in bright airy squares with green space to look out upon. Many other facilities were provided including school, dispensary, savings bank, orphanage, convalescent home, allotment gardens, gas lighting, recreation and sports facilities, places of worship and hydro-electric tramway. Alcohol was banned due to evidence that its misuse led to crime and poverty, so Bessbrook became known as the village without 3 P's; no pub, no police, no pawnshop.

Interested visitors were usually impressed and gave effusive praise but G.B. Shaw came in 1879 and made this caustic comment:

'Bessbrook is a model village where the inhabitants never swear or get drunk and look as if they would like very much to do both. This place would make Ruskin cry if he saw it, it is so excessively ugly. In the grounds of the factory is a basin of the water works. They keep a swan there which I am sure passes its time regretting that it cannot drown itself.'⁹

Disappointment and Depression

JNR moved on to a wider stage in 1880 when he became Liberal M.P. for County Armagh. He advocated reform of the Land Acts for tenant farmers, even though his father was a landlord of some 6,000 acres. At Westminster he enjoyed meeting the likes of W.E. Forster, John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain. Due to failing health he declined the

offer of the post of Lord of the Treasury and Junior Whip offered by Gladstone.¹⁰ From about this time the early promise was blighted; the smile of fortune vanished from JNR's life. The death of his two infant children and his wife's consumptive decline and death were hard blows on his private life. In the outer world, Irish Catholic resurgence, and self-confidence ushered in a new era, while Gladstone's espousal of Home Rule for Ireland was an unforeseen step. All these events caused or coincided with JNR's serious nervous depression. He withdrew from public and commercial life, finding solace and escape in travels around the world.

In 1890 his father died, pushing more responsibility on to a son whose sense of duty was strong but whose inner fibre had been sapped, temporarily. It had been characteristic of John Grubb Richardson to praise the women rather than the men of his family; with him a favourite saying was,

'Women do far more good in the world than men'.

JNR found this to be true for him too. His rehabilitation may have come through the support and friendship of his step-mother, aunts and seven half-sisters, especially Anne Wakefield Richardson,¹² vice-principal of Westfield College, University of London. JNR's second marriage, to Sara A. Bell of Lurgan, brought in a time of domestic contentment, and provided a secure base from which he conducted a robust correspondence on local and national issues.¹³

The resurgence of the Roman Catholic cause in Ireland

After centuries of repression, Catholic Ireland asserted itself initially through Daniel O'Connell's leadership in the 1820's to 1840's. A growing Catholic middle-class and the opportunity for university education brought more influence and confidence, though there remained a large peasant under-class. New cathedrals, chapels, schools and convents were visible signs of Catholic vigour.

In Bessbrook, the founder's vision of a harmonious community with encouragement for all to worship in their own ways, was sincerely held. In 1869 a lease was granted by John Grubb Richardson for ground on which to build a Catholic chapel, which was opened in 1875.¹⁴ However, the determination of the Catholic authorities to open their own school struck at something dear and vital to him.

Since 1850 there had been a school in the village giving unsectarian education under the National School system, with John Grubb

Richardson as Manager and sometimes with Catholic teaching staff. From 1874, for fifty years, the parish priest in the village was Charles Quin (1834–1925), a determined and capable man who in the words of local people, 'stood up to the Richardsons'.¹⁵ At that time of autocratic power there were said to be two popes in Bessbrook, Pope Quin and Pope Richardson! When the Sisters of Mercy from Newry came to open a school in July 1883, they were compelled to leave after one day. In 1889 they returned, by which time the Richardsons had been shorn of their veto by new legislation. The refusal of permission for the convent school to function in 1883 was seen by Catholics as 'the oppressive spirit of bigotry'.¹⁶

The benign paternal hand of John Grubb Richardson and the Liberal stance of JNR were not enough to remove the underlying suspicion and rivalry between Catholics and Protestants in the locality. On August 15th 1880 a Catholic band and parade making its way to the 5 year-old church, was stoned by a mob on the edge of the village. This caused the band to detour two miles to reach its destination. A subsequent letter to the *Newry Reporter* from a Catholic supporter asked: 'Do the Roman Catholics assemble at the gate of any of the places of worship in Bessbrook to prevent the people from going to service? Certainly not. I believe that the time is come when some of our neighbours should begin to do to us as we have always done to them.'¹⁷

Evidence of anti-Catholic employment practices in the mill surfaces from time to time. In 1849 Art MacBionaid sought work as a stone mason only to meet with 'A pitiful excuse' and 'harsh denial',¹⁸ which he attributed to bigotry and prejudice. In its hey-day, the mill gave employment to upwards of 3,000, with Catholics in slight majority, but a curate claimed that Catholics were 'the hewers of wood and the drawers of water'.¹⁹

JNR was aware of the under-representation of Catholics in the better paid positions in the work-force. As company chairman he wrote to the other Directors as follows on 22-2-1892, displaying what might be judged as reluctant patronage:

'I am desirous of bringing formally under your notice a matter which may, no doubt, have already engaged your attention; viz. that the present tendency is, and I presume the future tendency is likely to be, for Roman Catholic families to be more numerous in the houses and the employment of the Company, and that therefore it would be well to seek to induce the greater loyalty of some of them to the concern by appointing an occasional Roman Catholic foreman and disabusing their minds of any idea that the

work is conducted with favouritism to any special creed, apart from capacity.'²⁰

The 1901 Census records several Catholics in the position of foreman, while others were in skilled trades such as plumber, fitter, mason and mechanic. A sociologist's²¹ comment is:

'An analysis of the workforce in 1901 reveals that in that year Roman Catholics represented approximately 53% of the workforce... Although the population of the surrounding countryside was sharply polarized, John Grubb Richardson initiated a policy designed to create an environment in which those of different religions could co-exist satisfactorily, not an easy task, especially during the Home Rule agitation. John Grubb Richardson noted that during the forty years preceding 1886, there was 'an unmistakeable increase of friendly feeling and reciprocity between Protestants and Roman Catholic's.'²²

A letter from JNR to Lord Russell of Killowen,²³ brother of the Mother Superior of Bessbrook convent, reveals some sense of his grievance against Canon Quin:

'19th November 1894

My Lord:

I shall gladly accede to your lordship's very simple request that I should meet the Rev. Mother, your sister,.... Probably had such a meeting thus taken place between her and my father twelve years ago, much that we both regret might have been averted... It has been my special care for some years past to give the young Catholic workers an annual excursion at my expense and also to clothe from eighty to one hundred and fifty of the very old in winter ... But far from having ever received a syllable of thanks from the local representative of the Catholic Church, I am accustomed to hear myself abused and denounced by one whose ridiculous abuse is however much more palatable than his still more ridiculous praise. For many years my poor father, whom he now praises, was the recipient of his attentions. These were somewhat modified during the earliest period of my representation of the County (on the Liberal side), but nature soon re-asserted itself... I also send his latest effort at misrepresentation and I am sure you will admit that, however interesting this and the newspaper comments upon it may be to readers and writers, they only keep a countryside in a turmoil... I have occupied your Lordship's time too long and have the honour to remain...'²⁴

JNR cultivated a friendship with one of the local curates called Father McDonald, showing that the personal animosity between Canon Quin and himself did not degenerate into sour antipathy towards Roman Catholics in general.

Letter from JNR to Rev. Fr. McDonald C.C., Bessbrook

'21 January 1898

... I agree that the past should no longer be allowed to stand in the way of the educational requirements of the Catholic girls of Bessbrook and may here mention that had my later father been properly approached on the subject long ago, the deadlock of years might have been avoided. permit me in conclusion to hope that the contents of this letter may afford some personal pleasure to one whom I have learned to regard with much esteem, namely yourself,...'²⁵

Next, JNR circulated a letter to those of his family whose signatures would be required for a 999 year lease for building the new school and convent. He recommended that the lease be granted so when one of his half-sisters²⁶ refused, he wrote to her:

'26 October 1898

I take it that your letter means definitely declining to join in the long lease. Of course, it is nothing to me either way, and I cannot expect everyone to see through my glasses but what would you think of The O'Connor Don or Court Arthur Moore of Mooresfort²⁷ if they were to refuse sites for protestant schools, especially if the scholars were children of their own work people, brought there to serve them? ... The spirit which seeks to prevent those who differ from us theologically, from serving God in their own way is of the same nature as that which lighted the fires of Smithfield on both sides and which tries to prevent street preaching in the South...'²⁸

These compelling words must have gained her acquiescence as building work began soon after. On a previous occasion he had written to her in a similar vein:

'14 May 1892

... about the announcement made in the Friends meeting house, I had not as fully as since appreciated that the gathering... held in the large hall... was for the purpose of hearing Mrs Smyly lecture... You will, I trust, excuse me for saying that I think you did not show your usual good judgement in giving prominence to this subject in a mixed neighbourhood like ours, where some feel bitterly about it.

I'm sure we are agreed that it is undesirable for anything to take place in the Town Hall which should unnecessarily wound the susceptibilities of our Roman Catholic neighbours who have been induced to settle here for our benefit as well as their own, and among whom are many old faithful servants and excellent people. Yours affectionately,'²⁹

The departure of Father McDonald from Bessbrook brought forth

the following warm tribute from JNR:

'3rd November 1900

Dear Fr. McDonald:

Having just returned, I hastened to write a few lines to say how desperately sorry I was on hearing at Harrogate of your removal from Bessbrook and how lonely the place feels without your genial presence... This is the universal feeling inside your own communion and outside of it as evidenced by numbers who have spoken to me since my return. ... indeed you deservedly carry with you the respect and esteem of every right-minded person about the place, for whilst markedly attentive to your clerical and pastoral duties, ... you seemed to win everyone by your sincere and Christian kindness.

For myself, I suppose few men in Ireland have more acquaintances round the world but I do not pretend to possess many friends in the deep sense of the term, yet believe I might rank you among the number of the latter. ...

Yours very sincerely,

James N. Richardson'³⁰

By 1904 a large new Convent had been built on a hill above the village, so bitter feelings were waning.

'When, after some hesitation, (JNR) granted land for a nunnery at Bessbrook, he made the characteristic stipulation that it should never be surrounded by high walls which in so many Irish institutions shut away from the public the life inside, and shut out from those inside the beautiful country views'.³¹

His wishes remain fulfilled to this day.

The foundation stone of a new convent school was laid by Canon Quin on 18th May 1909, followed by a far-ranging speech from the exuberant priest. The local press were on hand to document him in full flight:

'He thought that the Rev. Mother would allow him to join her in tendering their thanks to the lord of the soil (Mr. James N. Richardson D.L.) for granting them a lease in order that they might erect, not only that beautiful convent, but also schools that would be in harmony with that fine institution. (Cheers) The lord of the soil and himself for a long time might not have seen matters eye to eye, but he was delighted there that day, to say that all differences had passed away, and he hoped, never, never, to return (Cheers)... He was proud to recognise the great benefits brought to them by the Richardson family,... the founders of the model village of Bessbrook, with a population of 4,000 and giving employment to 3,000 workers. If all the landlords of Ireland turned their millions to account as the Richardsons, father and son, had done in founding nurseries of employment for the Irish people, Ireland would be great and

glorious. (Cheers) Another point to which he wanted to direct their attention was that Mr James N. Richardson was one of those in the Imperial Parliament who struck the first blow, and the most violent blow, that landlordism ever received in Ireland. (Cheers) In the year 1881 Mr. Richardson was put up by Gladstone to speak on that land measure which was the charter of the rights of the farmers of Ireland, and he ventured to say, and he said it with pride, that it was the best and most practical speech made in the House of Commons on the question. ...

There was another thing he would like to say in regard to the Richardson family. Another Bill was passed in 1903 by Mr. Balfour and the Conservative Government to root out the landlords of Ireland. Subsequent to that measure becoming law, Mr. Thomas O'Hare and himself met Mr. Richardson's agent, Mr. Fowler, and while they were negotiating two years with other landlords, it only took them two hours to negotiate the sale of the Maghernahely estate... thank God Mr. Richardson and Mr. Fowler met Mr. O'Hare and himself fairly, honourably, generously and that wiped out all differences, and wiped them out, he hoped, until the day of judgement. ...³²

In a comment on Canon Quin, one of his successors wrote in 1994:

'Charles Quin was mainly extraordinarily fulsome in praise of the Richardsons, on occasion bordering on the sycophantic. His attitude to them was ambivalent; even as he worked to dislodge (JNR) from his Armagh seat and replace him, he managed to praise him.'³³

JNR had enough of the Quaker in him to be wary of sugary words. In 1911, writing about his mother, Helena Richardson, he told of her little Sunday school class in Bessbrook, in the 1840's. A priest of that time, Father Pentony, advised one little girl, 'to be sure to go to the school, for she would learn nothing but good from Mrs. Richardson'. JNR continues, 'I may be allowed to believe that no girl would learn much harm from my wife today, but it would be a stretch of the imagination to suppose Canon Quin giving similar advice to one of his flock. Who have changed, the Catholics or the Friends?'³⁴

Both had changed, methinks.

In 1896 a booklet was circulated around the Society in Ireland written somewhat anonymously by 'A Leinster Friend'. The writer observed and deplored the shift away from the earlier non-partisan position of Irish Friends, –

'within my generation Friends in Ireland have socially and politically become closely associated and identified with other protestant bodies in Ireland, and have largely acquired their distrust and aversion for the masses of the people' The writer suggested that there be a 'change of stance from Society of Friends to Friends of Society'.³⁵

It is a mistake to assume that the pervading, corrosive bigotry in Ulster ever managed to extinguish the original vision of the Children of the Light, of independence from Church and State. An observer of the Society in Ulster in recent times wrote in 1985:

'... with their sublimation of the protestant work ethic into a zealous struggle for personal and social righteousness, Quakers are for me the apt symbol of what Northern Protestants might have been like, had not their dissenters hatred of authoritarianism become squeezed and warped into a hatred of Romanism, and finally into a fear of the Irish Catholic.

A look into Quakerism is a look back... to all that Reformation and Rationalism seemed to promise by way of liberation of the human spirit from superstition and subservience, before protestantism fell sick of the very malignancies it professed to deplore. Beside Quakerism, Ulster Protestants may see the tragedy of how far they have fallen.'³⁶

Home Rule for Ireland 1886 and 1893

When Gladstone introduced the first Home Rule Bill in 1886 it was a shattering blow, as well as a turning point for JNR, for Bessbrook and for Unionism. From that time there was uncertainty as to who the future rulers would be. The dedication to the principles of a model village receded. The Richardsons started to invest in distant assets, like American railways instead of ploughing back profits into the local economy.³⁷

Most English Friends followed Gladstone and supported Home Rule, while Irish Friends (if Liberal) split from Gladstone, become Liberal Unionists. JNR felt supported that John Bright did not follow the Gladstone line.

By the time of the second Home Rule Bill in 1893, fears of many Irish Friends had risen, so an unofficial petition³⁸ was drawn up and circulated around all meetings in Ireland. This petition was addressed to fellow-members in Great Britain for their assistance in opposing Home Rule, citing veiled fears of Catholic rule as the reason. The petition had huge support and was signed by 1376 Friends throughout Ireland, estimated at over 80% of the membership. A month later, a Counter-Appeal,³⁹ signed by a mere 22 Irish Friends, expressed the wish that Government policy be supported, leading to 'a lasting treaty of peace between the two peoples'.

To show how much Unionist Friends were perturbed, a one-day conference on the Home Rule Question was held in the Cannon Street Hotel, London, on 21-4-1893, with James Hack Tuke as

chairman. Only Unionist Friends were in attendance, about 70 from England and 25 from Ireland, including JNR, his cousin Theodore Richardson and half-sister Anne W. Richardson. All three spoke strongly against Home Rule. JNR's emphasis was the likelihood of economic stagnation leading to unemployment. Some of Anne Richardson's words show her fear of Home Rule:

'It is a sad and unpleasant subject, but I could give you instance after instance of Roman Catholic intolerance in Ireland. Unless you have lived in Ireland you do not know what Irish Catholicism means.'⁴⁰

The 1893 Bill passed the House of Commons but was defeated in the Upper House, so the crisis was averted till 1912.

In 1893 Dr. R. Spence Watson, a Northumberland Friend, issued a pamphlet, *Fear or Hope – Home Rule*, to sooth the fears of Unionists in Ireland. This brought forth a 45-page *Reply* from an anonymous Irish Friend (probably Anne W. Richardson), to which Spence Watson retaliated with *Notes on a Reply to my pamphlet*. JNR could not resist entering the duel. He published a 22-page piece, *Comments on Dr. Spence Watson's two pamphlets on Fear and Hope – Home Rule*,⁴¹ dated May 1st 1894. He could always find time for writing. Thankfully many of his publications and letters survive, giving insights into the varied sides to his character.

The Third Home Rule Bill 1912

The veto of the House of Lords was reduced to a two-year delay by the Parliament Act of 1911, so the way was opened up for Home Rule. Greater than previous opposition to self-government was apparent in Ulster. Genuine alarm of impending civil war was felt by Friends along with the majority population. Ulster Quarterly Meeting, on 22-9-1913, issued a letter of advice to members which was published in newspapers:

'All around us warlike preparations are proceeding... If we are true to our principles as Friends, we shall not assist in the taking of human life, however great our desire to defend our rights as citizens of the United Kingdom... Whatever our political views, we may truly unite, at the Throne of Grace, asking that our country may be kept in peace.'

The Friends Quarterly Examiner, Volume 48 (1914), had a section on 'The political crisis in Ireland', with papers from six Irish Friends. Three of the contributors signed their names, while the editor

regrettably accepted non-de-plumes from the others.⁴² One of the latter sounds suspiciously like JNR. In the two decades since the 1893 Appeal to English Friends, support for Home Rule had increased among Friends in the south of Ireland. The voices for Unionism in the *Friends Quarterly Examiner* were all from Ulster, expressing dismay at the lack of consideration which English Friends were showing towards the Protestant community in Ulster.

In Bessbrook, JNR had to moderate his Unionist politics with his Christian convictions. Requests came to him from Unionist leaders looking for support in preparation for armed resistance to Home Rule. In November 1913 he refused to provide a hall in the village for drilling in arms, as:

'my reading of the New Testament forbids my taking human life or assisting to do so'.⁴³

So sure was he of civilian casualties that he saw it his duty to set up First Aid classes, and to equip a house in Bessbrook as a small hospital. Writing to Dr. C.C. Deane, Loughgall, he said:

'The hospital at Bessbrook is now equipped, as far as I know, down to the minutest detail as far as furniture and medical and surgical appliances are concerned. The contents of each package are written out and attached to the package, ... Also a list of the names and addresses of young women ready for volunteers in case of the commanding doctor's call. They all have First Aid Certificates. I have engaged a Sister, giving her a retaining fee so that she must come at any moment of call... it remains for you to take it over any time you like... I really think you should become acquainted with this neighbourhood because it is a peculiar and important one, as the population are so equally divided.'⁴⁴

The bandages and equipment were never used and were dumped about 1970.

JNR was one of the few motor car owners in the district, and as a known Unionist it was assumed that he would lend his car for use in gun-running from Larne Harbour. Again his Christian commitment prevented him from assisting in such belligerent activities.⁴⁵

By Spring 1914 tension had increased to a point where the directors of the Bessbrook Spinning Company and the associated Richardson Sons & Owden linen enterprise, met to consider arming some of their Protestant work people to protect the mill premises. JNR, as son of the founder of Bessbrook and a senior director in his own right, was a respected figure. The following account of his attitude in the

discussion shows some of the determination, compromise, pragmatism and ambivalence which were aspects of this formidable Friend.

'Re condition of Ulster May 1914⁴⁶

The condition of things in Ulster, and of men's minds, causes us who have been brought up in the views of 'Friends' respecting war, to find ourselves in trying positions. We sympathise entirely with the cause for which the Ulster Volunteers are arming, viz. the defeat of the Home Rule Policy of the present government and yet we cannot join in that movement. Moreoever, we lay ourselves open to the taunt frequently used – 'You Quakers sit still, let us do the fighting and you reap the benefit'; a taunt very effective, especially when addressed to the young.

In this connection I have been brought into personal difficulty as to my attitude with my co-directors of Bessbrook Co. and Richardson and Owden, as to what means shall be used for the defence of premises in case of civil war with its attendant chaos and abrogation of all usual authority.

Our directorate, formerly almost all Quaker, now stands as follows:⁴⁷

Joshua Pim and myself – Quakers

Charles H. Richardson, Thos. McGregor Greer, Walter L. Wheeler – Church

My brother, T. Wakefield Richardson, nominally a Quaker, has joined the most bellicose portion of the Unionists, viz. the Orangemen.

The subject came definitely before us the other day as to arming the Protestant work people at Bessbrook with full equipment of modern weapons in case of an emergency, on a direct motion, – and as a record, I now put down, fairly verbatim, the attitude I felt right to take, – and for ease of writing, put it down in the first person.

Gentlemen, this subject has been before us casually once or twice before, and I am afraid I have once or twice lost my temper over it and take this opportunity of apologising for any undue warmth on my part, – and should like just this once to put my feelings before my colleagues and then cease preaching any more sermons on the subject. I recognise that Mr. Pim and myself are in a minority on this question, and neither can force, or wish to force, our special views upon the majority at this serious crisis, more especially as the shareholders in most cases, whose property we have charge of, do not all share our views either, though many of them do.

Since the dawn of Christianity the Christian opinion has been divided on this subject of man-slaying. Some early Christians suffered martyrdom rather than serve in the Roman Legions, others were most trusted men in those legions. The Society of Friends has taken the former view – I am a Friend of at least 8 generations on both sides – as is my brother tho' he has not seen his way to adhere to these views – but they are so strongly bred into me that I could not either kill or aid in taking human life – whilst up to that point, I have supported and will support the Unionist cause.

I may be fairly asked, 'What would you do at the present time?' and I reply, I would do as follows: If the property belonged to me alone, I would

summon the principal workmen on both sides at Bessbrook – and would say – We have mostly known each other all our lives – and I have not pleased everybody nor tried to – but what I have tried to do all my life is show no partiality to any man because of his creed in my employment – either Church, Catholic or Quaker – we all have got to get our living out of this concern and shall all lose by any injury to it.

A civil war is upon us – cannot we here covenant and agree, we will strive to keep all commotion outside Bessbrook, and tho' often tempted, give each other no cause of offence inside Bessbrook and keep it outside the war area and get our friends to do so.

Against sporadic mob attack, like sporadic loafers from Newry out for plunder, I would not object to arm respectable men of both sides with bludgeons at the gates. Having done this I would commit myself and mine to God, who has our hairs numbered. If He choose He can protect us from any harm – and I believe would do so – if not, I should fall in trying to do my duty, as I conceive it.

I fully recognise however that my colleagues do not accept this conception of duty – several of them are the descendants of distinguished soldiers and I entirely respect their views. In anything the majority see fit to do for the protection of the property entrusted to them, I shall not thwart the course of the majority, but of course might have (tho' with great regret) to dissociate myself from that course. Again I recognise the property is only partially mine, and I cannot enforce my views on those whose faith does not lie in the direction of mine – or perhaps I had better say conception of duty.

Hitherto I have spoken as a 'Friend' – now for a moment I speak as tho' one of the majority who has no war scruples, but who goes by ordinary expediency – and would place the following ideas before the majority:

1. Just consider – you want to protect a large property? would it not be better protected by such neutrality as I suggest rather than by arming. Remember we are already paying for Insurance at Lloyds at War risks and the property is covered. For if you arm the Protestants with lethal weapons you will make the RC's hostile, whereas at present they are all very well affected towards the place and the employment, never more so. If hostile, they could get any amount of help from the Southwards.

2. If you arm the Protestants lethally – and loss of life should ensue – it will have been taken without any legal authority. Sometime, order will be re-established and whoever has taken life or given an order for it to be taken, will be liable to be had up for murder.

3. We look to carrying on this place in the future. If any fatalities should take place among the RC workpeople or their relations, it would never be forgotten or forgiven for a generation, their goodwill would pass – only the scum of them would work here – where would you get others to replace – You might send for Chinese, for the Protestants are too few to furnish workers now.

4. In case of fatalities, however peace were restored the present Managers could not manage the place. The RC's would not work under them. Mr. Scott might go; perhaps myself.

I have only one word more to say beyond thanking the Board for listening so patiently to what may be called a sermon, except that if you do decide to arm, do it thoroughly: 300–400 men fully drilled and equipped. If I thought like you, I think I should arm and drill the Glenmore⁴⁸ men and hold them ready to come to Bessbrook at a moments notice.

The board, Charles H.R. being in the chair, listened to me almost solemnly. The Chairman thanked me and said it was well for them to know exactly where 'Mr James' stood. (But with a gentle smile), it had been generally thought that Mr. James had used his stick and his fists more than most of them!⁴⁹

A committee was struck off to report – Charles, Wakefield & myself with the Managing Directors – when we met some days after, the officers had struck at the Curragh and the tension had been relieved and the prospect of civil war postponed, so they asked me did I object to long police batons being supplied to the local Volunteers corps – to protect in case of sporadic riot – I said I had no objection tho' naturally considered my own plan the best. Decided that batons were to be supplied, but so far I don't think they have been supplied yet.'

The expected Doomsday situation has threatened over and over since then but faith in Divine Providence and the innate decency of the average Ulster citizen which sustained JNR, somehow averts the worst scenario.

August 1914 saw the start of the world war and so the local conflict in Ireland was temporarily eclipsed. JNR, as the father-figure in the village of Bessbrook, bade good-bye to those who volunteered for war service. To them he presented a small Testament, a penknife and a card with his own verse, entitled, 'The Boys of Bessbrook'. He was a frequent correspondent in keeping contact with local lads at the Front, and in many cases, sympathizing with the bereaved.

At that time linen was required for aeroplane covering so the usual paradox was seen in Bessbrook as elsewhere; prosperity and financial security alongside the agony, heartbreak and grieving of the next-of-kin. Time of war regularly brought boom conditions to the fluctuating linen trade. During the American Civil War shortage of cotton from the Southern states gave linen a great boost. In 1914–1918 and later, in 1939–1945 the Bessbrook Company did not demur in providing materials for the war effort.⁵⁰ Management of the Company had decreasing Quaker influence so full employment and full order books were seen as over-riding conscientious scruples. In personal life JNR retained his principles regarding involvement in war. To a sister -in-law he wrote, 19-7-1915:

'I notice that you were 'horrified' at Kathleen⁵¹ not subscribing to the late War Loan and that you asked me did I? I am sorry to augment your horror but I did not – endeavouring as I do to make some futile endeavours after consistency – one of the most difficult things of life. I certainly can't hold an official position in the Society of Friends and subscribe to War Loans; one or other must go.'⁵²

After the world war ended in 1918, there was continuing unrest in Ireland culminating in partition of the island. *The Friends Quarterly Examiner* in 1920 again sought comment and elucidation from Irish Friends.⁵³ Under the heading 'The situation in Ireland' two quite different viewpoints were printed. As in 1914 the Editor allowed anonymity. 'Two Ulster Friends' (possibly JNR and his half-sister Anne) again contended that Home Rule would be Rome Rule, so that local self-determination within Protestant Ulster had become their preference. The case for Irish independence and an honourable settlement was courageously presented by John M. Douglas.⁵⁴ The 'Two Ulster Friends' ominously concluded with the words:

'The events of the last year or two have, in our opinion, (we say it sorrowfully but emphatically) put back for fifty years all hope of union between Ulster and the rest of Ireland.'

Their prediction of fifty years now stretches towards infinity.

In the next year JNR died, on 11-10-1921, aged 75. The funeral procession through his beloved Bessbrook included,

'Canon Quin, the aged Roman Catholic parish priest, with three curates and Father Grimes, formerly of Bessbrook'.⁵⁵

JNR was an Ulster Friend of his time and place. By inherited wealth and status he was a man of power, tempered with responsibility. In the preface to his book *Reminiscences of Friends in Ulster*, JNR reveals his personal reflections on the changes in spiritual matters which occurred during his life-time. Referring to the Society in Ulster, he wrote:

'it is on the whole a better machine, if I may so express it, for doing the work of a Christian body in the world, than when I was young. For instance, it was then - though in theory a Democracy – an oligarchy of a very pronounced type. A few wealthy and a few well concerned Friends held the discipline of their own hands; conducting it in gentle whispers, frequently inaudible to the meeting at large,...

He appealed for a more reverent type of criticism and research into the Scriptures in these words:

'It may be the pernicketiness of years, but I dislike to see a Bible carelessly handled, ... or its texts alluded to in the flippant modern style of 'John three sixteen' – reminding me of the Irish priest who remarked to a tyro that was constantly alluding to the great Apostle as Paul: 'Shure, if ye can't bring yourself to say 'Saint', say Mister'!

JNR's sense of humour and his shrews observations on human nature were admirable sides to his personality; his several books bear this out. Being rather impatient and quick-tempered, he could acknowledge his own failings. Even yet, the older generation in Bessbrook village remember JNR as a commanding figure on a horse, scattering handfuls of copper coins for grovelling barefoot children.

JNR can be described in many ways, all of them valid: business tycoon, interesting raconteur, landscape artist, political activist, faithful Friend, landed gentleman, kindly benefactor. Christian conviction, as felt by Friends, shaped many decisions in his life. He had to learn to accommodate and adjust to other local opinions. It was a new experience for him when the Catholic priest stood up to the Richardsons. He must take some credit for applying Friends' principles to contemporary problems, so that the present Catholic priest in Bessbrook could write:

'... the mill experience had a bonding influence and led to enduring friendships and good neighbourliness which continued and enabled the community to cope in exemplary fashion with the Kingsmill massacre,⁵⁶ avoiding civil strife and latterly ... to host a successful cross-community heritage week-end.'⁵⁷

There are few writings on the particular challenges which Friends in Ulster have faced over the centuries. Looking for parallel situations, they are to be found in American Quaker history,⁵⁸ rather than in the British equivalent. Bessbrook was a Pennsylvania in microcosm. For several decades the power to create new structures of society was held by Friends. Eventually, compromises with the world dimmed the initial vision. Yet the opportunity had been grasped by a few of our Society who had vision, vigour and wealth. One of them was James N. Richardson.

W. Ross Chapman

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Mollie Grubb, 'Abraham Shackleton and the Irish Separation of 1797-1803', *The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, Vol. 56. no. 4, (1993).
- 2 Properly, he was James Nicholson Richardson III. James N. Richardson I (1782-1847), of Glenmore, Lisburn, was his grandfather. James N. Richardson II (1815-1899), was an uncle.
- 3 Books giving the family background are:
JNR, *Reminiscences of Friends in Ulster*, (Gloucester, 1911).
JNR, *The Quakri at Lurgan and Grange*, (1899).
Jane M. Richardson, *Six Generations of Friends in Ireland*, (1895).
C.F. Smith, *James Nicholson Richardson of Bessbrook*, (London, 1925).
T. Adams & W.B. White, *Bessbrook*, (Belfast 1945, enlarged 1995).
- 4 *Reminiscences*, *op. cit.* p. 73.
- 5 'Concerning Servants' by an ex-M.P., (Gloucester 1911).
- 6 *Six Generations*', p. 228.
- 7 John Grubb Richardson's estate after his death in 1890 was £232,000. Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).
- 8 The Holy Experiment of William Penn was an inspiration, as also may have been the Malcolmsen cotton village of Portlaw, Co. Waterford; see Desmond G. Neill, 'Portlaw', (1992).
- 9 *Armagh, Orchard of Ireland*, p.67. (Dublin, 1962).
- 10 *JNR of Bessbrook*, *op. cit.*, Chapter VI.
- 11 *Six Generations*, *op. cit.*, p. 222.
- 12 Anne Wakefield Richardson (1859-1942); lecturer in Classics at London University; she was one of those who gave an address to the 1895 Manchester Conference.
- 13 Copy out-letter book of JNR, in PRONI, D.2956/1-2.
- 14 Thomas B. Keane, *Good Shepherd Church*, (Newry 1989).
- 15 John Bradley, 'Canon Charles Quin and the Bessborough Commission' in *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* (1994), *The Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*.
- 16 *Convent of Mercy, Bessbrook, 1889-1989*.
- 17 Oliver Murtagh, *The History of Lissummon*, Newry, 1994, p.26.
- 18 *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* (1994), *op. cit.*, p. 134.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.136.
- 20 PRONI D. 2956.
- 21 Arthur P. Williamson, in 'Planning Perspectives 7 (1992)'.
22 *Six Generations*, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
- 23 Charles Russell (1832-1900); Catholic from Newry, studied in Dublin and Lincoln's Inn; called to English Bar; Liberal M.P. for Dundalk, 1880; successfully showed that the letters published by *The Times*, implicating Parnell in murder, were forgeries; became Lord Chief Justice of England in 1895.
- 24 PRONI, D. 2956.
- 25 PRONI, D. 2956.
- 26 S. Edith Richardson (1859-1953), twin sister of Anne W. Richardson; married George Williams in 1897.
- 27 Two Catholic landowners in the south of Ireland.
- 28 PRONI D. 2956.

- 29 PRONI D. 2956.
- 30 PRONI D. 2956.
- 31 *The Friend*, 28 October 1921; JNR's obituary.
- 32 *Newry Reporter*, 20 May 1909.
- 33 *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* (1994), *op. cit.*, p. 135.
- 34 *Reminiscences op. cit.*, p.72-73.
- 35 *The Society of Friends in Ireland in 1896*, by 'A. Leinster Friend', p. 29-31. The author is assumed to be Thomas Henry Webb.
- 36 Philip Orr, 'Friendly Society' in *The Belfast Review*, September 1985.
- 37 *JNR of Bessbrook, op. cit.*, p. 57.
- 38 In Library, Friends House, London; Tract Vol. K/124-125.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 A 70-page report of the conference was printed; Library, Friends House, London, Tract Vol. 382 box 52.
- 41 Library, Friends Ho. Tract Vol. 414.
- 42 William S. Atkinson, Clerk of Belfast Preparative Meeting;
Samuel A. Bell, Lurgan; Recorded Minister;
James Green Douglas, Dublin; later Senator of Irish Free State.
'An Ulster Friend' JNR?
'Celt'
'English Settler'
- 43 Letter 3-11-1913 to T.P. Willis; PRONI D. 2956.
- 44 Letter 8-5-1914 to C.C. Deane: PRONI D. 2956.
- 45 Letter 12-2-1914 to Mrs. Harden; PRONI D. 2956.
- 46 PRONI D. 2956.
- 47 Joshua Pim; an Elder in Belfast meeting. Charles H. Richardson, son of JNR's uncle Jonathan. Thomas Wakefield Richardson of Moyallon, only son of John G. and Jane M. Richardson.
- 48 Glenmore, near Lisburn, where the original Richardson bleaching-greens were situated.
- 49 It says something for JNR that he could admit to his quick temper and physical propensities. See also *Quakri at Lurgan & Grange, op. cit.* p. 105.
- 50 'Bessbrook', *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 45, 63.
- 51 M. Kathleen Richardson, youngest daughter of John G. & Jane M. Richardson; married Samuel A. Bell of Lurgan.
- 52 PRONI D. 2956.
- 53 *FQE* Vol. 54 (1920), p. 407.
- 54 John Mitton Douglas; brother of J.G. Douglas (note 38): Headmaster of Friends School, Lisburn 1929-1952.
- 55 *The Friend* 28 October 1921.
- 56 Ten Protestant men from Bessbrook were shot dead as a reprisal on their way home from work on 5 January 1976.
- 57 *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* (1994), *op.cit.*, p. 137.
- 58 Peter Brock, *Pioneers of the Peaceable Kingdom* (Princeton) 1968.