

# The Settlement of Church Discipline among Irish Friends

With special reference to George Fox's visit, 1669.

By ISABEL GRUBB

IN 1698 the National Meeting of Friends in Ireland asked some Friends to prepare an account of the rise and progress of the Truth in Ireland. Three MS. copies of this history still exist and I quote from one marked as having been checked and altered by William Edmondson and ten other Friends at the request of the National Meeting. Edmondson's handwriting can be recognised in the corrections.

Under the date 1668 this book records:

In this year it came into the hearts of some faithful friends, who were concerned for the welfare and prosperity of truth to appoint and set up general meetings for each province, once in every six weeks, as well for the edification and mutual comfort one of another, and knowing how friends were in their testimonies, as for regulating some things needful in the church; as in the case of the poor, to relieve them in their necessities, the decent and orderly proceedings in marriage, that all things might be clear, just and equal before the accomplishment, with other things of like tendency; the weight of which concerns much rested upon that faithful elder in the truth William Edmondson; whom the Lord hath been pleased to make instrumental not only in begetting many to the truth in this nation but that they might be preserved in faithfulness to it. and might walk answerable to the holy profession thereof, accordingly such provincial six weeks meetings were concluded of and settled among Friends in the said provinces of Ulster, Leinster and Munster, which so remains to this day. . . .

These meetings were variously known as General, or Province or Six Weeks meetings. At first much time seems to have been spent in exhortation and worship. In the eighteenth century probably the business part of the meeting was taken over by Quarterly Meetings and the Six Weeks Meetings became more like conferences, ceasing before the end of that century. The Dublin Men's meeting met every three weeks, and acted as executive committee for the whole of Ireland. The Leinster Six Weeks Meetings seem to have been held in country places and not in Dublin.

In 1669, George Fox came to Ireland apparently with the object of setting up local meetings for discipline. The account from which I have already quoted, says with reference to his visit,

For by this time many Friends' children were growing up, that came no nearer to truth than the outward form and profession of it, which they had by education and not by inward sense and experience; and some others . . . did live too much in the world's liberty and became loose in their conversations . . . wherefore it seemed good in the wisdom of God to this elder [George Fox] that men's and women's meetings (apart) should be kept once a month or otherwise, for good order and discipline in the church; the men to take care in what more immediately concerned them, and the women in things most proper to their sex. . . . Likewise in those meetings there was to be a care over the poor, the fatherless and the widows to help them in their necessities. . . .

Further on the same account says,

It was also considered it might be of a general service to truth and friends to have a National meeting of some friends out of every province; not only on those accounts [the collection of accounts of sufferings] but for friends mutual comfort and consolation in the truth . . . also to understand the prosperity of truth and welfare of friends in every quarter. . . . And it being concluded so to do Dublin was judged the most fittest place for it; and as now there wanted a larger accommodation for such an assembly, it was thought meet that friends of each province should contribute by a free and voluntary subscription to build such a meeting house; accordingly a meeting-house was built for that general service, backward of Bride Street,<sup>1</sup> but at the same time friends of Dublin had a meetingplace in Bride Alley, which as it was most suitable to their number they made use of for some years after especially on weekdays. And as to the settlement of those general meetings it was concluded to be half-yearly; the first appears to have been on the 5th 9th mo. [Nov.] 1669,<sup>2</sup> and the next on the 5th of the 3rd mo. [May] following; and in some time after for reasons offered to the meeting, it was concluded they should commence the 8th days of the said months, which settlement remains to this day; as also it is and has been the constant practice of friends, upon the beginning of every such meeting, first to hold a solemn assembly for the worship and service due to Almighty God, and to celebrate His name with praises and thanksgivings, for His providential hand by which they were come to together from many places of the nation and though many had long and wearisome journeys some had undertaken to come thither. . . .

In Dr. John Rutt's *History* published in 1751 and also in the notebook which he and his collaborators used in

<sup>1</sup> This National Meeting House was succeeded in 1686 by one in Meath Street, which was sold by Friends in 1952.

<sup>2</sup> Copies of the minutes of this meeting are still extant.

preparing the *History*, the dates are wrongly given and the first National meeting is attributed to 1670. Even those who checked the earlier account seem not to have remembered the national meeting in August, 1669, which Fox mentions in his Journal.<sup>1</sup>

From these extracts it will be seen that an organisation was set up in Ireland in 1668 not altogether similar to that which Fox started in England, and Fox's visit in 1669 seems to have been rather for the purpose of tightening up the discipline than of setting up business meetings. It is obvious from his Journal that his visit was not primarily for the purpose of spreading his message among the unconvinced, and considering his earlier courageous defiance of authority he seems while in Ireland to have been peculiarly anxious to avoid notice. His sensitiveness to wrong had probably been stimulated by grossly biased accounts (such as that of Sir John Temple) about the war between the Irish people and the English invaders, and from the first he was not happy in Ireland. He says "When we came on shore the earth and the very air smelt with the corruption of the nation and gave another smell than England to me, with the corruption and the blood and the massacres and the foulness that ascended".<sup>2</sup>

As he only mentions the names of seven places visited during his three months in the country it is very difficult to follow his itinerary and my suggestions are only tentative.

Arriving in Dublin in May, 1669 he and his four friends (Robert Lodge, James Lancaster, Thomas Briggs, and John Stubbs) wandered about Dublin for some hours before finding any Friends, which seems surprising as some were well-known citizens. After attending a mid-week meeting they went on to a Province meeting, probably that for Leinster, held at the home of William Edmondson at Rosenallis, near Mountmellick. It would be natural for the two leaders to meet as soon as possible and Edmondson in his Journal says he travelled with Fox from place to place in the several provinces. From Rosenallis the party went to a meeting 24 miles away, which might be that at Peter Peisley's near Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow. They then went to New

<sup>1</sup> See also *Journal F.H.S.*, vol. 38, 1946, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Extracts from Fox's Journal are from the 1952 edition (ed. John Nickalls), pp. 536-49.

Garden, Co. Carlow, and from thence their route would probably be through southern Leinster (Co. Wexford) and east Munster (Waterford and County Tipperary).

The next place Fox mentions is Bandonbridge, southwest of Cork, which was an extremely Protestant town, in which Catholics were not allowed to reside. The Provost of the town was afraid that Fox's visit, if known, would bring discredit on him, especially as his wife had been "convinced". Fox did not stay there long but went to the Land's End; this may mean he went to the extreme southwest, possibly to the home of John Hull, near Skibbereen, or that he visited a small place said to be near Kinsale called the Land's End. I incline to think the former suggestion more likely, as there is no known Quaker connection with the place near Kinsale.

One of the most remarkable incidents in his visit occurred when against the advice of Friends he and Paul Morris rode through Cork seen and recognised by many, but escaping those who were searching for him, warrants being out for his arrest. When he came near the prison, the prisoners (Friends) saw him and knew him and trembled for fear he should be taken. He did not stay in Cork but went on to Limerick, probably through Mallow and Charleville, where there were a few Friends. In Limerick, he seems to have stayed with Richard Abell. He attended a Munster Province meeting in that city and a Men's Meeting in which the power of the Lord was so great that Friends "broke out into singing, many together with an audible voice, making melody in their hearts". The party next attended a General Meeting and a Men's Meeting in another province. This would be the Leinster Province Meeting at Abraham Fuller's at Lehinch, near Clara. Fox refers later to being at James Hutchinson's at Knockballymagher in North Tipperary and this visit would probably have been after the Leinster Province meeting. From thence the mileage Fox gives would bring them northeast to Oldcastle in County Meath, where there were some Friends.

It is impossible to trace accurately the itinerary in Ulster; alternative suggestions may be made for almost all his references.<sup>1</sup> There were about a dozen meetings in that province in 1669, some in Co. Tyrone, like Grange (Upper Grange)

<sup>1</sup> George Chapman, of Richhill, Co. Armagh, has kindly given me advice about the Ulster itinerary.

and some as far east as Co. Antrim, where there were meetings at Low Grange and other places. In the present meeting-house at Richhill, Co. Armagh, there is a very old oak seat eight or nine feet long, and three inches thick which seems to have been brought from Ballyhagen meetinghouse when the meeting was removed to Richhill about 1793. Local tradition is strong that Fox sat on that seat when he visited Ballyhagen in 1669.

On his way from Oldcastle to Ballyhagen Fox would probably visit meetings at Cavan and Belturbet and from thence would go to Upper Grange (now Grange) and Charlemount and Dungannon before he went to Ballyhagen. It may have been here that the bailiff failed to arrest Fox who, as he stood in the garden thought he saw three shades of trees, but at last he perceived they were three black coats who were peeping, whilst three other "priests" were on top of a hill a quarter of a mile away. Fox next says he passed over the river where so many were drowned in the massacre. This was probably the Bann at Portadown, where there were a number of murders during the 1641 rising. Sir John Temple gives a greatly exaggerated account of the incident of the drownings.

Roger Webb lived between Lurgan and Portadown, possibly at a place still known to old people as Webbstown and the Ulster Province meeting was held at his house, in rotation with other places, for many years. Reckoning backward from the earliest meeting recorded in the Ulster Province meeting book the meeting in July, 1669 would be at his house. After this Province Meeting and a Men's Meeting, the party came to a market town which may have been Lurgan or Lisburn, but more probably the latter, as Roger Webb's was so near Lurgan. Lisburn, then known as Lisnagarvey, was the home of George Gregson, who built a meetinghouse for Friends there. Fox may then have passed into Co. Down or Co. Antrim. He speaks of a meeting "where the Scots raged" which points to Antrim because it had been largely settled by Scotch. The only place he mentions is Grange, which would be Low Grange at the extreme northwest corner of Lough Neagh. Some Friends came a distance to tell him that the Justice-priest had got a Judge's warrant against him which reached almost as far as Drogheda. He hastened his return towards the south, and mentions passing

through the bishop's town, which would probably be Armagh, where the Archbishop of Armagh lived. When he had reached Drogheda and crossed the Boyne he felt safer. After another visit, perhaps to Ardee, he came to Dublin and stayed at Lazy Hill, near the place of embarkation. He attended various meetings in and around Dublin, including what he calls "the National Meeting about the sufferings, where some might see more into things than others, there being some out of every meeting".

He also went into the country for a week to find time to answer papers and writings from "monks, friars, and protestant priests". After the "great meeting" (the National Meeting) he knew the wind would turn, so he sent James Lancaster to take shipping. They got their horses and things aboard and sailed the next day. A number of Friends followed them for some miles in small boats. John Stubbs remained behind for further service, but two from Ireland joined Fox's party and went with them to Liverpool. The passage was difficult owing to a "mighty storm".

So far as I know the only contemporary record Friends have in Ireland relating to Fox's visit is in an account book of Moate Meeting. In it there is an item,

1669-7-28. Paid 30s. as it was concluded at the man's meeting at Lehinshie ye 20th instant in part of £5 disbursed for freight of horses, and otherwise when George Fox went for England. £1 10s. od.

In spite of his sensitiveness to bad spirits in Ireland, Fox seems to have been satisfied with Friends, he says "A good weighty people there is, and true, and tender and sensible of the power of the Lord God, and his truth in that nation, worthy to be visited; and very good order they have in their meetings, and stand up for righteousness and holiness that dams up the way of wickedness". He says that the only opposition he had (among Friends apparently) was from "Robert Cook and another foolish lad with him at Cork". Robert Cook, who only associated with Friends for a time, would have found much in common with Fox had they known each other better, but Cook was an individualist and probably did not approve of Fox's disciplinary meetings.

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