

Ireland in the Sixteen-fifties

A Background to the Coming of Quakerism

By OLIVE C. GOODBODY

THE hardihood shown and the fatigue endured by early Friends, men and women alike, in the seventeenth century in the publishing of their beliefs, are now too well known to call for comment. Little, however, has been written of the peculiar hazards and discomfort of those who travelled throughout Ireland where the tense political and religious situation and the ravages of the long Confederate War had left the countryside desolate, a prey to thieves, marauders and roaming packs of wolves. The Catholic gentry of Ireland rose in 1642 and formed the Confederation of Kilkenny. It was supported by Irish exiles in Europe, by the Pope and by Cardinal Richelieu, both influenced by Father Luke Wadding the founder of the Irish College in Rome. The Confederacy aimed to restore full Catholic government to Ireland, and sided unmasked with Charles I against the Puritan Parliamentary forces. For seven years Ireland was in a state of war which ruined farm lands, and desolated homes and cities. The country population fled or died. Soldiers pillaged, wolves roamed the denuded country, even to the outskirts of the capital. Life was reduced to a state of chaos and distress which was hardly over at the time of which we write.

A visitation of plague had added to the general misery in 1654 and this is noted by William Edmondson who, arriving in Dublin, was tempted to stay, "trading being very brisk and houses on easy terms, it being not long after the plague."¹ In that same year the Puritan Government in Dublin, under the Deputy Henry Cromwell, had issued an order

that all thatched booths and cabins be removed from Dublin, and that it be taken into consideration whether Irish Papist merchants should not likewise be removed; also that the works and fortifications about Dublin be viewed and repaired.²

The voyage to Dublin was usually made from Chester or Holyhead to Ringsend, the tiny fishing village outside

¹ Edmondson's *Journal*, 1820, p. 45. 3rd ed.

² Dunlop: *Ireland under the Commonwealth*. II, 469.

Dublin, where was the only water with sufficient depth for large vessels. Many times contrary winds held up travellers for days and occasionally blew them right off their course, as when Barbara Blaugdone in 1656, intending to land at Cork was, because of storm, put in to Dublin,¹ or Robert Salthouse who, intending for the Isle of Man, found himself blown to Ringsend.² The journey to Cork and Waterford was usually made from Bristol or from some smaller port as Haverfordwest. Ringsend stood at the end of a narrow neck of land, projecting about a mile into the sea, and the journey thence into Dublin could only be made at low tide when the sandy slobland was uncovered. Cars, known as Ringsend cars, which were low vehicles seating three persons on a cross board at the rear, with the driver in the front, almost on the horse's tail, could be hired to complete the journey.

Most Friends seem to have stayed at the house of Captain Stephen Rich in Lazy (or Lazar's) Hill just outside the city, where is the present Townsend Street. Little has been recorded about this man Rich, in whose house meetings were sometimes held.³ He apparently owned a small packet boat which was hired from him by the Commonwealth government together with his services for the purpose of patrolling the coast and intercepting enemy persons and vessels.⁴ He may also have been attached to the retinue of the Lord Deputy Henry Cromwell in 1656, as Sewell states that after Barbara Blaugdone's visit to the Deputy on behalf of Friends, Rich "*coming home*, told her how troubled the Deputy was."⁵

Edward Burrough, writing from Waterford on the 5th of 11th month, 1655, says [Dublin], "is a bad place, a very refuge for the wicked and God's judgment is over it, and, being moved, I passed from it to this place, for our service lay only in great towns or cities, for generally the country is without inhabitants except bands of murderers, thieves and robbers which wait for their prey and devour many, from which yet we are preserved."⁶ Earlier in the same year he had written to Margaret Fell of the lonely state of Elizabeth Fletcher then in Dublin.

¹ Swarthmore MSS., 3, 133.

² Swarthmore MSS., 1, 369.

³ Wight: "Rise and Progress of People called Quakers in Ireland." Cf. MSS., "Rise and Progress" in Eustace Street Meeting, Dublin, which cites location of his house.

⁴ Addenda to Calendar, State Papers (Irish) 1648.

⁵ Cf. pp. 15, 40.

⁶ Swarthmore MSS., 3, 16.

Little Eliz. Fle[tcher] is present here, but I know not how long she stays . . . truly I suffer for her she being as it were alone, having no other woman with her in this ruinous nation, where it is very bad travelling every way afoot and also dangerous (but we are much above all that). If it were the will of the Lord that any woman were moved to come over to her Fr. [Howgill] and I were speaking of Amy Wilson; thee may write to her or to E. F. if it is as thou art moved; and truly we wait in patience under great suffering at present, hoping that some true lads may be moved to come over, which might be servicable in the work of the Lord here.¹

Edward Burrough concludes this with a plea for letters, having had none since coming to Ireland, though "there is a post weekly if the wind be not wholly contrary," and finishes "truly at present we are men of sorrow."

Inefficient posts were common to both countries at the time, and letters were liable to examination and seizure. Doubtless Friends' letters were among those suspect. Books consigned (not of course by post) to Samuel Claridge in 1659 were held at the Customs House as being seditious and blasphemous.²

Sir William Petty, writing in 1672,³ estimated that the population of Ireland was 1,100,000, averaging five to each family. There were 200,000 English and 100,000 Scots in the country, the latter being Presbyterians and the former "are above 100,000 legal Protestants or Conformists and the rest are Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists and Quakers." The bulk of the Irish Roman Catholic population of 800,000 lived in wretched cabins without window or chimney, and 120,000 of these in houses with but one chimney.

The method of erection of these wretched cabins was described twenty years later by John Dunton, the English bookseller, who travelled in Ireland.

They build them by putting two forked sticks of such length as they intend the height of the building, and at such distance as they design its length; if they design it large, they place three or four such forks into the ground, and on them they lay other long sticks which are the ridge timber; then they raise the wall, which they make of clay and straw, tempered with water, and this they call mud. When the wall is raised to a sufficient height, which perhaps is four foot, then they lay other small sticks, with one end on the ridge piece, and the other on the wall; these they wattle with small hazels, and then cover them with straw or coarse grass, without any chimneys, so that when

¹ Swarthmore MSS., 3, 17.

² Dunlop: *Ireland under the Commonwealth*. II, 716.

³ *Political Anatomy of Ireland*.

the fire is lighted the smoke will come through the thatch, so that you would think the cabin were on fire.¹

Whilst some attempt at road maintenance in Ireland had been made in the early years of the seventeenth century, the Confederate War had brought such attempts to a standstill and early Friends travelling on foot or on horseback met with many unforeseen difficulties. William Edmondson tells us of the two London women, Anne Gould and Julia Westwood, who travelled from Dublin to Londonderry, and thence to Coleraine and Clough, "all on foot in winter time, wading rivers and dirty miry ways." One MS. version of Thomas Wight's *Rise and Progress of Friends in Ireland*, says of William Edmondson that he had

many hard travels and exercises and dangerous journeys . . . alone in the times after the wars when Tories and robbers were abroad, sometimes put to the necessity of passing deep waters in the winter season, bridges not being then made.²

It is interesting to note that the later printed version says "where bridges were not built." Actually, there appear to have been comparatively few bridges except on the ancient highways. Dr. Gerard Boate, writing in the middle of the century describes the deliberate making of fords through rivers, which, had there been bridges, would have been navigable.³ In 1662 the inhabitants of County Tipperary petitioned the government for the repair of the pass of the Long Ford, south-west of Urlingford on the way to Ballymoreen, "being a causeway of a mile long and the only road for most parts of Munster, eaten away and destroyed by the waters." The estimated charge for this repair was £600 and the petitioners claimed that King's and Queen's counties, Limerick, Clare and Kilkenny, all being benefited by the said pass, should share the cost.⁴ Many Friends must have used this road as they travelled on foot or horseback to the South and through these parts. Roadways to the North were in better condition, but those to the West, passing through great tracts of bog and waste land were often mere swampy tracks sometimes petering out altogether. The failure to maintain roads is easily understood when it is remembered that their upkeep was the liability of the landlords in each

¹ John Dunton: *Conversations in Ireland*.

² MS. at Eustace Street M.H., Dublin.

³ Gerard Boate's *Natural History of Ireland* was published posthumously. He was the father of Gershon Boate who became a Friend.

⁴ Ormond MSS. Vol. 3, p. 24 (Irish MSS. Commission).

parish, employing local labour. By 1654, the Cromwellian scheme to transplant to Connaught all Irish with the exception of those "who had shown their Constant Good Affection to the Parliament of England in preference to the King" and such husbandmen, plowmen, labourers and artificers who were necessary to the country,¹ was at its height. Labourers were, therefore, very scarce, many having banded themselves into companies of wandering highwaymen. Even the Irish of the land-owning class had been dispossessed of their homes to make way for the English settlers and adventurers and for soldiers whose arrears of wages were paid in forfeited land. It was obviously to the advantage of the roaming bands of homeless Irish to use, not roads but tracks and paths through bog and heath which were so well known to them, but impassable for English soldiery.

Thomas Wight tells us that John Burnyeat travelled "often in cold, hunger, and hardship" in 1659. He had spent months preaching the Word of God all through Ireland, journeying into each province and meeting many times with opposition. His work, we know, bore much fruit, but of his hardships little has been said.

There were inns of a sort through the country, sometimes no more than the cabins described, sometimes of a better sort, but often Quakers were refused lodging and we know that William Edmondson on at least one occasion, at Finagh, near Mullingar, being refused by an innkeeper, demanded accommodation from the constable of the town.² The fare in these inns was that of the country people—oatmeal bread, milk, cheese, potatoes (about this time becoming the staple food) and sometimes meat. Edmondson, writing thirty years later to Anthony Sharp, the well known Quaker merchant of Dublin, said that soldiers quartered on him had "spurned oatbread, cheese, veal, milk and new butter, our ordinary diet."³

¹ *The Cromwellian Settlement of Ireland*. By John Prendergast. 2nd ed., Dublin, 1875.

² *Journal*, 3rd ed., p. 62.

³ Anthony Sharp MSS. in Eustace Street Meeting House, Dublin.