

NO 'FRIENDS' OF HOME RULE ?

From their first arrival in Ireland in 1654 as a group of radical Christians, the Quakers have played a prominent role in Irish society. By the time of the Great Famine, they numbered approximately 3000 and were concentrated mostly in the south and east of the country. They came to national attention in 1846 in the midst of the Great Famine. In response to appeals for help, they held a meeting in Eustace St., Dublin on 13 November and set up the Central Relief Committee to coordinate famine relief.¹ Following a fund-raising campaign, food, clothing and money were sent from America. Boilers were shipped from Liverpool in 1847 to ports in the west of Ireland, thus ensuring that the most distressed areas received the benefits of relief schemes. To assist with short-term measures, the Quakers set up soup kitchens which later formed a model for government relief programmes. The Quaker famine pots scattered across the countryside have survived as lasting icons of a remarkable period in Quaker philanthropic activity. Long-term assistance was provided through loans, the distribution of seed and emigration schemes. The Society of Friends succeeded in charting a distinctive role for themselves while at the same time standing apart from the political and religious controversies of the period.

Following the Famine, individual Quakers continued to maintain a keen interest in social issues. Among them was the English Quaker, James Hack Tuke, who had a close association with the country for almost fifty years. Raised in a wealthy family noted for its philanthropy in Yorkshire, he moved to Hitchen in Hertfordshire, where he became a partner of the old established firm of Sharples and Company. In the winter of 1846 to 1847, he left the luxury of his stately home in Bancroft to accompany William Forster as they monitored conditions during the Great Famine in Connaught. Forster's aim was to assess conditions in Ireland in respect of food supplies, wages and employment.² Tuke returned to Ireland in the autumn of 1847, recording his impressions of poverty, seeking remedies, raising awareness through correspondence in the press and a series of pamphlets.³ Both Tuke and Forster helped to inform public opinion in Britain that absentee landlords alone were not to blame for the levels of

deprivation and that there were more complex factors involved. In 1880, Tuke highlighted some of the problems in *Irish Distress and Its Remedies: A Visit to Donegal and Connaught in the Spring of 1880*.⁴ His letters to *The Times* raised public awareness in Britain which resulted in important relief measures being approved by Westminster. Because of his extensive knowledge of Ireland and his political impartiality, Tuke was consulted by Arthur Balfour when the latter as Chief Secretary established the Congested Districts Board in 1891, particularly in relation to the designation of disadvantaged areas and the promotion of long-term relief measures. The Board played a major role in the regeneration of the west in relation to agriculture, fishing, cottage industries, textiles and land ownership. Tuke was an active member of the original Board.

As a religious institution, the Quakers won widespread recognition for their charitable work in Ireland as they were perceived as an independent and neutral voice with no political allegiance. Throughout the world, they became known for their fairness and toleration of others' religious beliefs, a factor which was instrumental in their rapid expansion throughout the British Isles and America. Bearing witness to peace and in opposition to military action, their advocacy and testimony, which eschewed the great political controversies of the period, earned them international respect. Although they had representation at Westminster, it was Quaker policy to avoid involvement in the political controversies of the day.

The Act of Union of 1800 was intended to improve relations between England and Ireland in constitutional, political and economic affairs, but did not succeed in winning the support of Irish nationalists. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Home Rule emerged as a major political issue and this presented a challenge for Quakers. In 1886, William Gladstone, Prime Minister, introduced his first Home Rule Bill in Parliament but it was defeated and Gladstone's administration collapsed. The Quaker MP, John Bright, was among those who voted against the Bill. Traditionally, Quakers had supported Gladstone's Liberals but the Home Rule controversy adversely influenced the relationship between the Liberals and the Society of Friends. In Ireland, Quakers strenuously opposed the Bill. In 1893, Gladstone returned to office and a second Home Rule Bill was

introduced. On the second occasion, the Bill passed the House of Commons but was thrown out by the House of Lords. The fact that the measure won the approval of the Commons was a cause of alarm among Quakers, particularly among the business community and it was at this juncture that a number of Irish Quakers proposed to make their concerns known publicly. In March 1893, Irish Quakers decided to organise a conference of Quakers in England to discuss the Government of Ireland Bill before parliament which, in the opinion of Quakers, if passed into law 'would be extremely injurious to the moral and material prosperity of this country'.⁵ In effect, Irish Quakers were looking to their English co-religionists to support their opposition to Home Rule. As a result of this policy, Quakers in Ireland were aligning themselves with the Protestant Unionist tradition and becoming ensnared in what the Irish historian F.S.L. Lyons has described as a 'conflict of cultures'.⁶

The Quaker conference took place at the Cannon St. Hotel, London on 21 April 1893 under the chairmanship of James Hack Tuke with Thomas Hodgkin as Secretary. In an address distributed to fellow Quakers in Ireland, Tuke outlined his reasons for his objections. He deplored the possible damage to the constitutional bonds between the two countries and expressed concern about the impact on trade and commerce, despite the fact that Irish MPs would continue to sit in Westminster. Such issues were routinely raised in parliament but he added that the Bill would 'promote interference by clerical and party domination' of Irish affairs to the detriment of a minority. The address was signed by 1376 of the 1690 adult members of the Society of Friends resident in Ireland.⁷ Reminding the audience that he counted many Roman Catholic clergymen among his acquaintances, he believed that there was no interference with religious liberty in Ireland 'other than that exercised by the Roman Catholic Hierarchy'. The Conference was attended by some of the leading Quakers in Ireland.

Jonathan Pim of Dublin recalled Quaker objections to the first Home Rule Bill of 1886. The Pims had played an outstanding role in the early development of railways in Ireland. J. Theodore Richardson of Lisburn expressed fears that Home Rule would undermine the prosperity they enjoyed under the Union. Coming from a prominent industrial family engaged in the manufacture

of linen, he rejected the argument put forward by Home Rule supporters that Irish industry and agriculture would benefit by the introduction of a system of protection. In his opinion, the Home Rule movement had grown out of agrarian discontent with the support of the Catholic hierarchy. He criticised English liberals who argued that Catholics did not get 'fair play', adding that all positions were open to them with the exception of the Lord Lieutenantcy. With reference to Belfast, he noted the growth of shipbuilding, rope works and tobacco manufacture. He said that in 1850 there were fifty-eight power looms but by 1893, their number had grown to 28,233, adding that prosperity was enjoyed by members of all religions. His greatest concern was that a parliament in Dublin would be controlled by members of the Land League and 'dominated by members of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy'. Both Pim and Richardson were prominent in the Irish Quaker Unionist community.

The strongest denunciation of Home Rule came from John Pim of Belfast, adding that what he dreaded most was 'the invisible and visible tyranny of the Romanish clergy'. He went so far as to accuse the clergy of keeping the people poor because of the expenditure of £300,000 per year on the construction of churches. His comments were supported by George Grubb of Cork who criticised the role of priests in the election of Nationalists to parliament. Priests were influential in the selection of candidates at party conventions for the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster. Bishop O'Donnell of Raphoe acted as treasurer of the party and was a supporter of John Redmond. On the same theme, Joseph T. Pim of Dublin believed that Home Rule would bring Ireland under the control of what he called 'a political Pope'.

A small handful of Quakers stood apart from the controversy and supported the Home Rule movement. They included prominent figures such as Alfred Webb, T.H. Webb and Henry Wigham, who were members of the original Irish Protestant Home Rule Association in 1886 and had supported Isaac Butt in his Home Rule campaign.⁸

Among Unionist opponents of Home Rule, the rallying cry was that 'Home Rule meant Rome Rule' and this was a recurring theme in the speeches at the London conference.⁹ On one hand, this viewpoint was unexpected as cordial relationships existed

between the Society of Friends and clerical leaders of the majority religion throughout the nineteenth century. The engagement of the Society of Friends with the anti-Home Rule campaign also stood at odds with the traditional Quaker policy of non-involvement in party political feuding. On the other hand, as a minority, the Society of Friends had experienced discrimination at many levels and consequently felt particularly vulnerable. During the Land War in Donegal, Tuke had taken a firm stand on behalf of evicted tenants and pleaded with the Chief Secretary, Arthur Balfour, to curb the power of the landlords and the police. He had lengthy meetings with Fr McFadden, parish priest of Gweedore in west Donegal and they appeared to have a sound working friendship. Privately, Tuke had reservations and he referred to him in correspondence with Arthur Balfour as a 'supreme dictator'.¹⁰

As a member of the Congested Districts Board, Tuke worked harmoniously and tirelessly with Catholic clergy on the Board.¹¹ His objections to Home Rule were founded on the belief that constitutional reform would bring no improvement in the lives of the people to whom he had dedicated his life's work. He believed the first Home Rule Bill offered nothing to destitute peasants and consequently in 1893, he decided to take an active stand in opposing Home Rule.¹² Tuke's opposition had only one outcome: the Home Rule controversy was responsible for creating a serious division among the Society of Friends, with a majority of Irish Quakers opposing it and a British majority supporting it.

Tuke died in 1896 and the Home Rule controversy lay dormant for almost a decade and a half. By the time the Home Rule Act was passed by parliament in 1914, Europe was at war and the Society of Friends had harnessed their resources in a different direction. Following the Easter Rising of 1916, Quakers in Ireland found themselves on opposing sides. With the formation of the Irish Volunteers in 1913, the Co. Down-born Quaker, Bulmer Hobson, played a prominent role. It is believed that it was Hobson who suggested to Eoin MacNeill at a meeting in Wynn's Hotel in Dublin that he should establish the Irish Volunteers and lead the movement.¹³ Silently bowing to the inevitable, other Quakers held positions in the newly-formed Irish Free State. One of the best-known was James G. Douglas

whom Michael Collins invited to assist in the drafting of the first Constitution. He held the position of Vice-Chairman of the Senate and served over three terms as Senator between 1922 and 1954.

Irish Quakers emerged in glory because of their philanthropic activity during the Great Famine of the 1840s but their opposition to Home Rule in the 1890s resulted in their role being re-defined as the majority aligned themselves with the Protestant Unionist tradition. In the 'conflict of cultures', they drew closer to the Anglo-Irish and Protestant Unionist establishment. With the formation of the Irish Free State in 1921, Irish Quakers were once again forced to come to terms with a further re-assessment of their role in an Ireland partitioned into two different jurisdictions.

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END NOTES

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