QUAKER PACIFISM DURING THE IRISH REVOLUTION

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Quaker peace testimony had been in place for 240 years and despite serious challenges, it remained intact. For better or worse and very often monetary loss, the Society of Friends remained true to its principle of non-violence. In Ireland this had a positive effect. The compassion with which the Quakers received both army and insurgents during 1798 and the concern they showed towards Catholics and fellow Protestants during the Famine endeared them to the nation and gave them respectability not easily bestowed upon religious groups. During this period the community expended its commitment to the peace principle as part of a much broader reorientation of Quaker thought, initiated in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Originating in Britain and prompted by a general resurgence of spirituality, the instigators of this reform were mostly young Friends who sought a new basis for their beliefs rather than the strongly evangelist, and bible-based theology that had taken hold. They favoured a return to 'grass-root Quakerism' of which pacifism was a basic tenet. 'They saw the peace testimony primarily as a reflection of the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light rather than as a biblically based injunction, and they urged Friends to join with non-Christians in the fight against war'.[1] While the Society's official attitude to war remained the same, individuals began to speak of replacing 'passive resistance' with a more militant approach: 'Our testimony against war, if it is to be vital, must not be mere testimony against armed forces – it must cut at the roots of war'[2] wrote John Rowntree in the *The Friend* of January 26th 1900. What was being pronounced was a more dynamic attitude toward peace action: the extension of the meaning of Quaker opposition to war and a strengthened commitment to peace, which would see pacifism as the one principle 'which distinguished Quakerism from other Christian denominations'.[3] For the Quakers in Ireland this development placed great strain upon their membership and produced an immediate concern in the shape of a resurgent nationalism with militant claims to independence; the effects of which brought revolution and violence once more to Ireland's shores. This paper is concerned with the response Friends made to the outbreak of these hostilities and the extent to which they were successful in maintaining their

commitment to the revised 'principle of peace'.

The revolution of 1916-1923 was the apogee of Irish nationalist agitation and it saw the political framework in Ireland changed forever. Indirectly it was the product of a revitalised Irish identity that found expression within a number of movements at the end of the nineteenth century; the Gaelic League, Gaelic Athletic Association and Literary Revival each sought to celebrate Irish culture and in doing so had re-established a distinct sense of pride among the Irish nation. These movements lent intellectual weight to the political argument for independence and inspired a group of nationalists under the direction of Patrick Pearse to declare an Irish republic in 1916 following an armed uprising during the Easter celebrations. In the aftermath of the failed rebellion constitutional politics quickly became marginalised as moderate public opinion turned against British rule following the harsh reprisals levied against the Easter week insurgents. In the forthcoming years radical change befell the country; republican Sinn Fein won a majority in Ireland in the 1918 general election and an independent republic was declared with the creation of 'an avowedly separatist parliament, *Dail Eireann*, in 1919.[4] The same day as the creation of an Irish parliament the Irish Volunteers, reformed as the Irish Republican Army, began a guerrilla war against British occupation in Ireland. The conclusion of this nationalist labelled War of Independence two years later saw the nation divided; a Unionist state loyal to Britain remained in the North while the rest of country fought a bloody civil war before finally emerging as a 'Free State' in 1923.

The precursor to these dramatic events was the British Liberal party's introduction of a home rule bill in 1886, which set the foundation for a separate parliament in Ireland. Motivated by a renewed nationalist impetus, William Gladstone acknowledged 'the fixed desire of a nation'[5] after Charles Parnell's Home Rule party won an overwhelming victory in the 1885 election. The following year his third administration placed a home rule bill before Parliament. This was a big step toward independence and although it was taken without aggression, with the best intention by the Liberal party, it provoked a series of events that militarised Irish society and greatly increased the chances of a violent encounter like that eventually witnessed in Easter week 1916. The opportunity to govern their own country raised the hopes of Irishmen and women to such an extent that when it was denied because of the outbreak of war in 1914 many lost faith in the constitutional approach, turning instead to armed resistance as the only means for achieving their aim. The reaction of Friends to the prospect of home rule, and the associated tensions it

generated during this period, is worthy of some consideration; it offers an interesting insight as to their largely ignored political affiliation and underlines their efforts during the 1919-1921 conflict and the ensuing civil war.

The prospect of home rule was quick to divide the Irish nation and the Society of Friends was no different. Among many of the older generation there was a great concern as to the position of the Society should a new government be elected. Following the introduction of the Government of Ireland Bill of 1893, a large number of Irish Friends[6] made an address to Friends in Britain. In it they made plain their fears and called upon their co-religionalists to assist in efforts to oppose the bill, which in their eyes 'cannot fail to be disastrous to Ireland'.[7] One area of concern for the signatories of this address appeared to be a strongly felt belief that any new executive would be unable to guard the rights of minorities as effectively as that already in existence.

> 'Living thus under the free and equal administration of laws enacted by the United Parliament and carried out by an Executive responsible to it; actuated by no party spirit or sectarian prejudice [...] we are solemnly convinced that our rights and liberties, both civil and religious, and those of our fellow-countrymen in Ireland of all conditions and of all religions, cannot be securely guaranteed, as they now are, under the new and unprecedented arrangements proposed to be made'.[8]

The foundation of this particular concern is only hinted at within the address. However a more detailed reasoning comes from a letter written by one of the signatories to a member in England a month after the address in April 1893. The author recalls the events of the 1879-1882 Land War where 'the reign of terror in Ireland was quite as real, if not so violent, as France in 1793' and asks the question: 'does anyone, with the least acquaintance with history, believe that the remedy for such a state of things is to place the administration in the hands of the men who have contrived at, if not perpetrated, the crimes by which it has been sustained?'[9] For the author, and many other Friends, the implication is that the proposed home rule bill would see power given to an intolerant body of people who terrorised others simply because they 'would not become members of the Land League or subscribe to its funds'.[10] This particular concern for the protection of minorities has a long standing within the Society of Friends, and can perhaps be linked with their own persecution as a religious minority in the seventeenth century.

However its complete trust in the existing power also suggests that among elements of the Society there resided a great belief in the existing relationship between Ireland and Britain. This last point is well emphasised later in the letter when the author admits to the need for some reform in parliament, but believes such action to be best achieved under the British system:

> 'We, in Ireland, are fully alive to the fact that the present condition of affairs in Parliament is highly unsatisfactory, that many reforms are pressing for accomplishment; but surely the means to achieve these reforms is not necessarily through a revolution in the whole constitutional system of the country [...] it is just *because* we see so clearly the urgent need for liberal legislation [...] that we deprecate the overthrow of the engine by which all our progress hitherto has been achieved – the British parliamentary system'.[11]

In this passage the author is clearly of the opinion that Ireland is better off under the direct control of Westminster and that anything else would be detrimental to the country's moral and economic prosperity, particularly if the reins were handed over, the author continues, 'to those who, up to the present, have shown no signs of breadth of mind or of liberality of thought'. On the basis of this letter and the address itself, signed by more than 81% of the adult membership, it would appear that at this time the Society was broadly Unionist in outlook and viewed the developing circumstances in a less than favourable light. This opinion would prove to be controversial as the situation became more explosive and less inhibited Friends were desirous to intervene.

Although many Quakers were evidently opposed to the idea of home rule, the Society could never unanimously reject it. Perhaps not enjoying majority status, there were Friends who fully supported the proposal, believing that 'there must be some national life and feeling'[12] for the people to feel contented. In a reply to the 1893 address, twenty-two members of the Society laid out their own views towards the proposed bill, citing its importance in bringing about 'a lasting treaty of peace between the two peoples'.[13] In challenging their co-religionalists, the signatories of this address evidence a growing divide among the Society over the home rule issue, suggesting that Friends opposing it 'have largely become associated with those holding the narrow and intolerant views of the Orange Society'.[14] This particular charge is perhaps one born more from emotion than substance' drawing from the accused the 'equally

preposterous accusation...that they [the twenty-two], in promoting their Home Rule canvass, associate with Roman Catholic priests'.[15] The argument lacks heavy substance as Friends were well known for their compassion towards other religions and are particularly favourable to civil liberties and opportunities. The credibility of the address was later seriously undermined by James Richardson[16] but what it was successful in doing was to emphasise the raw passions that home rule engendered within the membership at this time.

Despite being a minority, those Friends who supported home rule demonstrate a more progressive trend within the Society, like Mary Leadbeater and Abraham Shackleton before them, and to a great extent were the primary Irish supporters of the movement towards a less bible-based theology. Among the older of these supporters was Alfred Webb son of Richard Davis Webb, a printer in Dublin, best remembered for his 'small but vital link in the move to free the slave'.[17] Like his father Alfred Webb was unimpressed by the emergent conservatism of the Society and embraced its radical wing, becoming involved in nationalist politics as early as 1865 after witnessing the trial of Thomas Clarke Luby, Charles Kickham and John O'Leary. Writing in his autobiography forty years later, Webb reflects upon the impact of this event in revelatory terms:

> 'All three afterwards my friends either personally or by correspondence, condemned to 20 years endurance of a system of punishment the most barbarous... perhaps ever invented by human ingenuity [...] I felt that there must be something radically wrong, as there was, in a state of things when such men could rise up and submit themselves to such a doom. Like Paul on his road to Damascus a sudden light shone on my mind and I left Green-street Court House a changed man'.[18]

It would appear that Webb was most affected by the severity of the punishment delivered and, particularly, the commitment of the prisoners to their cause. It was his humanitarianism though, together with the Quaker instinct to relieve suffering, that finally brought him into contact with the nationalist circle; becoming involved with the Amnesty campaign and the effort to support the prisoners' families convinced Webb of the nationalist cause. From this point on he was committed to home rule, becoming treasurer of the Home Rule League on its inauguration in 1873 and serving as Parnell's MP for West Waterford until 1895 and the defeat of their Liberal supporters. Although Webb had earlier resigned his membership of the Society of Friends, he is an example of the breadth of opinion that existed

within the religious group.[19] On a somewhat negative note however, his resignation is also an indication as to the monopoly enjoyed by the more conservative among them.

The devision that the home rule debate created among the Society of Friends became much more entrenched as events took a more radical turn. By 1912 a third bill was introduced in Parliament strongly opposed by the Conservative Party. Fearing the forthcoming introduction of a separate parliament in Ireland, unionists in Ulster set about protecting their membership with Great Britain by raising a militia that would 'use "all means" necessary to defeat home rule'.[20] The Ulster Volunteer Force marked a growing crisis within the province and the reaction from Friends was mixed. While there was a general desire to avoid a violent confrontation, opinions remained varied regarding the political issues involved. Some Friends used the threat of violence to lend weight to the anti-home rule campaign, stating that, if passed, the bill could 'only be put into force by the military conquest of Ulster'[21] which would only lead to further discontent. Others accepted the right of Ireland to govern itself but believed that the same right extended to those in Ulster, where a large proportion of the population identified themselves as British citizens. Consequently they advocated a revised bill that would allow Ulster to 'opt out' and remain a part of Great Britain. Opposing each of these views were a third group who sought home rule for Ireland on the basis that it would break down the old rivalries between Nationalist and Unionist and actually 'open the way for a scheme of Federation'[22] as enjoyed in countries like Sweden and Norway. In the face of potential rebellion Friends could not reach a consensus and rather than unite the Society, the 'Ulster crisis' only encouraged Friends on each side to make their case more vociferously. In an attempt to overcome this division Quarterly Meeting in Ulster concluded, in September 1913, that '"prayer is by far the most powerful weapon with which we are armed, and *whatever our political views,* [author's italics] we may truly unite at the Throne of Grace, asking that our country may be kept in peace".'[23] In seeking an agreement over the need for peace and stability above all else, Friends hoped to raise the Society from the political depths in which it was beginning to drown.

Politics had disunited Friends and the strengthening of the peace testimony extended this disunity. The question of home rule and the related 'Ulster crisis' exposed an increasingly conservative attitude among the community that had not been present in the heady days of 1798. At this time Friends had been dynamic and quick to respond to the mounting tensions, many actually sympathising with the

ideology of the rebels whilst maintaining a pacifist stance. Since that time however, many had prospered and were 'unwilling to risk their possessions on behalf of the Society's pacifist principles'.[24] Henry Richard, a Welsh pacifist and secretary general of the London Peace Society found evidence of this feeling as early as 1873 whilst conducting a tour of Ireland. His biographer, C.S. Miall, wrote of an address Richard made in Limerick:

> 'Mr Richard did not find the Friends at Limerick at all zealous in the peace cause. There was a gathering of some 30 persons at their meeting-house, and the gas-meter being out of order, they had to be content with the light of two tallow candles, and he addressed this select company without being able to see their faces'.[25]

The greater emphasis now placed upon Quaker pacifist credentials exposed the depth of this material concern, and at the outbreak of hostilities in 1919[26] there was disagreement concerning the scale of assistance that Quakers should provide. The conservative elements desired a less public role for the Society, afraid that the situation was too political, and that any undue action could jeopardise their standing. For others, especially the younger members, the peace testimony implied an obligation to assist in aid work regardless of the consequences. At a conference of Friends called in November 1920, they rebuked the ' "immovable conservatism of the older Friends" and denied that the [relief] committee "in any way represented the aspirations of the younger part of the Society" '.[27] In the highly charged political atmosphere of early 1920's Ireland, the Quakers had reached an impasse that threatened to split their community irreparably if an agreement could not be reached. The eventual outcome saw those who desired an active role emerge as the victors. This was not simply a victory for the younger Friends over their elders, but a re-affirmation of the authority of their peace testimony:

> 'All our business is over shadowed by the thought of sin and suffering in our country.The loss to the community through the interruption of the spirit of goodwill and fellowship cannot be estimated, and we desire that every word and act of ours may be in that spirit and power which take away the occasion of all strife and contention, and that God will guide our country into the way of peace'.[28]

Although politics had come close to undermining the Society, its violent manifestation had united them once more in the cause for peace.

The peace efforts of the Quakers during the War of Independence and carried into the Irish Civil War were characterised by two new initiatives. In addition to the traditional non-sectarian relief efforts that made the Quaker reputation in the past, 1919-1923 saw the creation of an organised relief effort and the early signs of a Quaker attempt at mediation, first between the British Government and the Irish-elected Dail Eireann, and later between the anti-Treaty and Free State Forces. These initiatives were a product of the new direction Quakers was taking: to work more actively for peace, the Society would be more effective if it provided an organised service rather than rely upon individual exertions. The fruits of such action was first discovered during the Great Famine where the Quakers were able to dispense much sought relief after setting up a committee dedicated to the alleviation of suffering. The success of this venture and the modern demands of the peace testimony made a similar response in 1920 ever more necessary. Consequently, after the decision to participate was made, the Friends' Irish Relief Committee was established and they began investigating the situation in Ireland and where their assistance would be best put to use. It became evident that reconstruction and employment were high priorities and consequently much Quaker aid came in the form of monies raised by the committee for assisting the victims of the conflict. One letter to a supporter in the north of Ireland, dated 14th February 1921, bears this out clearly: 'enclosed is a cheque for £150 for Father O'Boyle of Lisburn. It is our wish that it should be used for relieving the poorer people who have been dispossed (sic) of home or thrown out of work by reason of the destruction of property in that town'.[29] This example is just one of the many acts that Quakers undertook during the period of unrest, and from it there is a real feeling of humanity without sectarian bias, as the letter continues:

> 'When you go to Lisburn I should be very glad if you would try and find out whether any Protestants have suffered loses and are in distress in consequence of the burnings, for we are anxious to relieve such cases equally with the others, if they are not already helped'.

As with their relief efforts during the famine and earlier uprising, the Irish Quakers were careful not to distinguish between religions.

Although not under the auspices of the relief committee, Quaker

organised service came from another quarter and made a great impact upon their relief work. The Irish White Cross was set up early in 1921 by James Green Douglas, a Friend who would later become a Senator in the Irish Republic, after receiving money from Friends in America who were keen to assuage the suffering of the Irish people. In his memoirs Douglas recalls the spontaneity with which the group took place.

> 'I was awakened at about 7 a.m. by the telephone bell. On answering the call I was informed that a telegram had arrived from New York. As far as I can recollect the telegram was worded as follows: "Sending twenty-five thousand dollars for relief work in Ireland – more to follow – writing" and was signed Wood'.[30]

The American Committee for Relief in Ireland from whom the money came were, in true Quaker spirit, very desirous that the funds were not used for political purposes and therefore they sought out a fellow Friend to whom they could entrust their offering. Douglas proved to be a fine choice, quick to organise a committee for the efficient distribution of the funds but also astute enough to include representatives from practically all the Churches in Ireland and even Sinn Fein, although the latter did not take an active role. Before turning to the relief activities of this group, it is worth looking, for a moment, at its relationship with the various political forces in Ireland and in particular the nationalist movement with which it had a curious connection. Douglas, himself a professed home ruler, concedes in his memoirs that although no money went to the IRA 'it was none the less obvious to all concerned that the White Cross was an important factor in the struggle for Irish independence'[31] and throughout its short lifetime was closely watched by the British Army. Prominent Sinn Fein members, including both Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith, were on the governing committee and Douglas it seems enjoyed a great rapport with the IRA chief, lamenting his early death as a personal blow after having 'formed a real affection for him'.[32] Despite this seemingly nationalist formation, the White Cross also involved unionist members such as the Trinity College Professor Edward Culverwell and even appointed ex British Army Captain David Robertson as its honorary secretary, although it would later transpire that Robinson had become a member of the IRA. It would appear that the organisation was well within the nationalist camp and to a certain extent it was. Douglas however remained committed to the Quaker ideas of pacifism, for him the

White Cross was an opportunity for these people to 'conscientiously give their help without approving of violence in any form.'[33]

The Irish White Cross was arguably one of the most successful relief organisations to emerge during the War of Independence. Although it was not exclusively made up of Friends, it is a good example of both Quaker organised service and their preparedness to work with anyone concerned with peace. Catholic nationalists certainly played a big part in the set up but so too did many Protestant figures, with James Douglas estimating support of more than one thousand.[34] In this sense the organisation helped to bring religions together under a united banner at a time when sectarianism was rife and the communities looked poles apart. In terms of relief success, their published report up to 31st August 1922, show that the White Cross raised and distributed £1,374,795[35] to the distressed in Ireland regardless of political or religious affiliation. Much of the money went to those who had lost their homes as a result of the conflict, while a large proportion also went to provide for the many 'Catholics in Belfast who had suffered as a result of an anti-Catholic pogrom in that city'.[36] Throughout the period, the Friends Relief Committee worked closely with the White Cross so as to reach as many people as possible and not squander resources by overlapping. It was a co-ordinated effort on the part of the Society of Friends to alleviate the suffering of the Irish people; through such efforts the impact of the armed struggle upon the civilian population, though not minimised, was made easier to bear.

It is important to stress that the relief efforts of the Irish Quakers did not follow sectarian or political lines. Assistance was given to those in need and any lobbying of government was done out of a sincere desire for peace in accordance with their beliefs. In a letter to David Lloyd George, dated 11th June 1921, this feeling is clearly voiced: 'as professing Christian people we feel the greatness of our responsibility to almighty God to do everything in our power to promote peace and goodwill'.[37] Within the letter Irish Friends had laid out a proposal for a truce between the British and Irish forces in the hope that it would then enable them to sit together around a negotiation table. The proposal included: the re-establishment of British law, Irish leaders to prevent acts of aggression and the British authorities to parole Irish political prisoners, a cessation to the transport of arms during the period of the truce, both sides to observe the truce to the letter and finally that the truce last for one month with its expiration by mutual agreement. Though by no means comprehensive, these suggestions reflect a much more involved attempt by the Society to bring about a resolution to the conflict in

accordance with the recently strengthened peace testimony. Rather than just deal with the consequences of war, the Society began to implement a policy of positive peace *making*, an endeavour that would see the Friends taken an even greater role in Irish life later in the century. For the moment however, their steps remained fairly tentative with some of the older members still reluctant to involve themselves too deeply in the political scene. As such the letter was also quick to emphasise their neutrality should the Prime Minister think they were beginning to take sides. 'We do not support a solution of the problem of the government of Ireland, but we think the proposals [...] would create an atmosphere on which negotiations for a political settlement could be carried on.'[38] Throughout the period, Friends were very keen not to daub themselves in any particular colour but instead to use their position as a non-violent and respected organisation to forge a peaceful solution to the war.

In the spirit of greater involvement in the peace-making process, the Irish Revolution also saw the emergence of a mediating role for the Society of Friends. The opportunity for such a role came out of their glowing reputation for non-violence and impartiality. James Douglas in particular, the Friend who had been so instrumental in the creation of the Irish White Cross, became a good conduit through which warring parties could communicate and hammer out a consensus. After being elected to the Free State Senate in 1922 Douglas was significantly active in the move to end the Civil War:

> '[...] He was sent for secretly by de Valera, and he was the first person on the Free State side with whom de Valera had peace talks. After their first meeting Father (JGD) was not prepared ot [sic] continue the negotiations on his own, and after considering a number of names de Valera agreed that Father should be joined by Andrew Jameson. These talks brought about the end of the civil war'.[39]

Whilst being personally known to De Valera, Douglas's Quakerism gave him an extra quality that made him an ideal choice for the task of mediator. Long respected within Ireland, they had the trust of many on both sides of the religious, and political, divide and perhaps most importantly of all they were emphatically in favour of a peace agreement. Indeed De Valera admitted upon their first meeting that it was a speech the Quaker made upon the Senate's obligation to find a solution to the situation that finally prompted him to get into contact. Throughout the duration of their communication Douglas maintained the trust of the republican leader, recalling one particular

incident late in the negotiations when any army truck appeared outside their meeting place: 'on peeping through the curtain we saw that a military lorry had drawn up outside. De Valera turned pale but said at once that he knew we were not responsible [...] the military had entered the house next door'.[40] In relation to the negotiations between them, Douglas demonstrated the integrity so often associated with his Society and a compromise was reached. Peace and order finally found its way to Ireland and the Quakers had once again played an important part, guiding it upon its journey and giving a helping hand when it stumbled. For the Quakers themselves, a new avenue had opened up in front of them and no longer would they simply be content with providing relief when their efforts could also be directed toward conflict resolution.

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7. *The Government of Ireland Bill, 1893. Address from members of the Society of Friends in Ireland 'to our Fellow-Members of the Religious Society of Friends in Great Britain'*, Ibid., p. 7.
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12. *Alfred Webb: The Autobiography of a Quaker Nationalist*, ed. by Marie-Louise Legg (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p. 4.
13. A nationalist response to the address of March 1893. *To Our Fellow Members of the Religious Society of Friends in Great Britain*, Dublin Friends' Historical Library (DFHL), PB 21/97, p. 36.
14. Ibid., p. 35.
15. *Letter from a member of the Society of Friends in Ireland to a fellow-member*, p. 23.

16. In a speech to the Unionist Friends Conference held in London in April 1893, Richardson questioned the commitment of its signatories, pointing out that several had signed both testimonies and a significant proportion of the others were perhaps not the best judges of the political implications involved. See J.N. Richardson, *Two Irish Members of the Society of Friends on the Irish Question*, (Gloucester, 1893), pp. 3-4. Copy of which was kindly provided to the author by Howard Gregg.
17. Richard S. Harrison (a), *Richard Davis Webb: Dublin Quaker Printer (1805-72)*, (Skibbereen: Red Barn Publishing, 1993), p. 1.
18. Legg, p. 38.
19. Other nationalist Friends included: William Glynn, a school teacher whose knowledge of Irish was often used by the Cork prison authorities during the War of Independence, Herbert Moore Pim a writer and poet who later underwent a conversion to Unionism writing *Unconquerable Ulster* and the IRB activist J. Bulmer Hobson. See Richard S. Harrison (b) *A Biographical Dictionary of Irish Quakers*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997) and also Sandra King, *History of the Religious Society of Friends, Frederick Street, Belfast* (Belfast: Privately Published, 1999).
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22. "Celt", ibid., p. 110.
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28. *Letter to the Yearly Meeting from Dublin, 1921*. DFHL, Pamphlet Box 24, pamphlet 7, no. 8.
29. Letter from Samuel Graveson to F. Lucius O'Brien 14/2/1921, DFHL, MSS Box 69, folder 3, no. 16.
30. Gaughan, p. 61.
31. Ibid., p. 65.
32. Ibid., p. 89. See also James Douglas' Encomium on Michael Collins and his letter to the Provisional Government upon first hearing of his death, both in

appendix four of Gaughan ibid.

33. Ibid., p. 67.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p. 167 and Hatton, Op. cit., p. 246.
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