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# The Quakers of Charleville 1661-1742

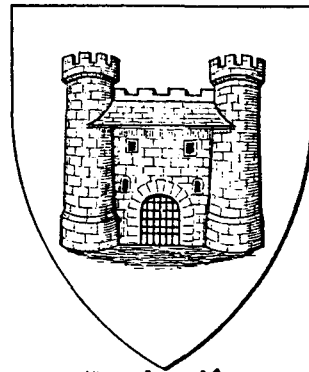
By RICHARD S. HARRISON

## INTRODUCTION

Members of the Religious Society of Friends, known as The Friends or Quakers, are traditionally associated with the bigger urban centres such as Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Dublin. But earlier patterns of distribution for their community indicate that a number of rural locations had proved attractive to them during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

One of these early Quaker centres was Charleville, the town set up as recently as 1661 by Lord Orrery who stated in a letter to Ormonde (11 Nov. 1662) 'I admit neither presbyter, papist nor as our proclamation says any other sort of fanatic to plant there, but all good protestants and am setting up manufactures of linens and woollen cloths and all other good trades'.<sup>1</sup> Whatever about Orrery's aspirations for his new town, a number of Quakers were to find a home for themselves there. The first formal history of the Quakers in Ireland describes the Charleville Meeting as being settled in 1666.<sup>2</sup> It appears to have been part of a secondary pattern of diffusion when adherents moved out from other centres, attracted perhaps by possibilities of setting themselves up in business. Meetings at Skibbereen and Mallow might be seen in such a context also.

The names of Quakers who were to be associated with the Charleville Meeting first occur in Quaker records of 1660.<sup>3</sup> Among those named were John Exham and John Butler. Exham was born in 1630 in Kerry where his father, Richard Exham, gained fame for holding out in the castle of Ballybeggan dur-



Charleville.

'The seal of the mayoralty of the staple of Borough of Charleville' (JCHAS 1895)

ing the rebellion of 1641.<sup>4</sup> Young John was sent away for safety to England but returned as a minor official in the Cromwellian army. He was employed in the collection of the Hearth Tax in Dublin.<sup>5</sup> About John Butler there is little information but he appears to have been a native of Ireland. The first reference to him in Quaker records is in the national manuscript 'Book of Sufferings'. He was imprisoned for 'speaking a few words in the steeple-house yard at Bandon Bridge'<sup>6</sup> and also for having visited prisoners at Kinsale. It is not clear when John Exham returned to Munster. The earliest references to him also occur in the 'Book of Sufferings' again in connection with Bandon.<sup>7</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Quakers did not physically resist their persecutors. Whilst they were willing to seek justice by appeals to the legal authorities, this was often refused to them on the grounds that since Quakers would

not swear to a deposition the justices of the peace were not obliged to act. Exham and Butler do not appear again in Quaker records after 1666 until they turn up in Charleville.

By the 1660s the distraint of goods for tithes had been more generally formalized into a principle accepted by the authorities at large. Previous to this the tithe system had been widely questioned by radicals, including the Quakers who throughout their history were resolutely to resist its imposition.<sup>8</sup> Whilst persecution in many forms had slackened off by 1666, the tithe question was to be the cause of much ongoing abuse of the Quakers who settled in Charleville.

The Munster Six Weeks' Meeting (or Province) minutes begin in 1675.<sup>9</sup> Some of its functions may have overlapped with those of the Three Weeks' Meeting in Cork which could provide a larger base for the elementary administrative procedures required. Its sessions brought together representatives from Cork, Bandon, Youghal, Limerick, Waterford and Tipperary. The meetings took place in the different venues on a regular and agreed formula. Each of the associated meetings would eventually keep its own minute books. Minutes for the Bandon Men's Meeting started in 1677. Its area of influence included Castlesalem and Skibbereen. The Charleville Meeting records may well have existed from an early date but the first surviving minute book does not begin until 1698.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE FIRST PERIOD OF THE CHARLEVILLE FRIENDS' MEETING 1669-88

To help us reconstruct the early history of the Charleville Meeting we must rely on the records of the Munster Six Weeks' Meeting. From a note at the front of the minute book we learn that Charleville held meetings for worship on the first and sixth days of the week, and Mallow on the first and fifth days. John Exham and John Butler were appointed to 'take attention of things relating to truth in

their respective meetings'.<sup>11</sup>

The Protestant clergyman in Charleville was Christopher Vowell. He was not popular with his parishioners, or with his bishop who described him as a 'haughty insinuating young fellow'. Neither was he liked by Lord Orrery who on one occasion assaulted him for his drunken and bullying behaviour.<sup>12</sup> The Quakers had even less reason to feel favourable to him, for he often cruelly and fiercely distrained their goods for tithes. In 1672 John Exham . . .

had his shop door and windows hewed in pieces by one Coleman the constable, by order of Vowell the priest on the day called St John's day. The said John desiring to see his warrant for so doing the constable lift up his broad axe over the said John Exham's head saying, here is my warrant swearing by his maker he could find it in his heart to cleave out his brains and violently forced him into the stocks until night on a cold rainy day<sup>13</sup>

Another Quaker ill-treated in 1673 was Edward Mee . . .

a poor man having seven small children and partly relieved by his garden, at a time of his absence the priest Vowell sent three men digged and carried away for tithe about the third part of his potatoes<sup>14</sup>

Two years later Edward Mee kept open his shop, 'on the day called christmas', this being part of the Quaker affirmation of all days as being equally holy in God's sight. As a result he was . . .

much abused by the scholars of the free school whom Vowell the priest sent on purpose to throw stones and dirt into his shop windows who were like to stone one of his children (had he not been rescued) and hailed Edward to the stocks and kept him until night. This the priest did after receiving what they call sacrament<sup>15</sup>

Such imprisonments and distraints were to be a common part of the life of the Charleville Quaker community throughout most of its existence.

Charleville was not an important centre. For

most of the Quakers who visited to help support and stir up the faith of the little group, it was only one stop in journeys between Cork, Bandon and Limerick. Slowly the Charleville Friends achieved an initial period of consolidation and stability, through their daily work, through the round of meetings for worship and through their connections with other Friends in the Six Weeks' Meeting. From an assumption based on specific subscriptions apportioned on an agreed basis from the constituent meetings it would appear that in 1682 the Charleville Friends constituted in the region of 7% and with the Mallow Friends 14% of the total Quaker population in Munster.<sup>16</sup> When Friends throughout the country signed against the payment of tithes in 1680, seven men and three women from Charleville and ten men and four women from Mallow signed such declarations.<sup>17</sup> We may assume that those numbers reflected those active in the Men's and Women's Meetings, or the nominal heads of families. Birth rates for the community (including Mallow) during the previous ten year periods amounted to twelve (1656-66) sixteen (1668-76) and ten (1677-86) respectively.<sup>18</sup>

The Friends in Charleville were not exclusively involved in their own affairs. In 1684 they contributed £11 to the relief of their persecuted brethren in England.<sup>19</sup> In 1683 they contributed £2.10s towards the construction of a new meeting house in Dublin.<sup>20</sup>

A few of the Charleville Friends showed a special gift for 'ministering'. They would feel led to speak or pray audibly in the usually silent meetings for worship and so help the act of worship forward into new depths. One ministering Friend particularly worthy of note was Abigail Boles, daughter of Richard Boles.<sup>21</sup> She had been 'convinced' in 1675 by the ministry of the visiting English Friend, William Bingley, and about 'eight years after her conviction was called to the ministry. She was an eloquent woman of a majestic

presence, much admired and followed'.<sup>22</sup> Abigail Boles promised great things but went beyond her gift so far as to consent to be married before a priest in 1691. She was thus considered to have compromised Friends' testimony against the hierarchical church. She continued to worship among Friends but was only reconciled to them much later. She died in 1717.

John Exham was noted for his somewhat exuberant approach to witnessing the truth in which he believed. On the accession of James II to the throne he called to the house of his landlord, Lord Orrery. He was at first refused entry but Lord Orrery requested his admission and listened kindly to him. Exham proceeded to announce the eventual destruction of the house, a prophecy that was later fulfilled, and as stated, after the death of Lord Orrery.<sup>23</sup>

In a period of toleration following a grudging degree of acceptance by the authorities, Exham's methods of witness were not always regarded as helpful by his brethren. Criticism of his behaviour surfaced at the Six Weeks' Meeting of the 15th of Sixth Month 1687. A number of Friends were appointed to discuss the matter with him. He on his part submitted the names of George Rooke, Abraham Fuller, George Harrison and Thomas Albey to take up the case on his behalf. The full committee reported back on the 26th Seventh Month in the following words:

The Friends appointed to meet with John Exham at the end of the meeting having spent pretty much time upon the subject met upon, and having to speak much by way of advice and counsel to him, that is to say concerning his speaking at home and abroad in meeting — whilst Friends here present can't be sensible of a service in it, but rather have been grieved and bothered by it

They stated that they did not want any further complaint in the matter.

A more serious scandal occurred among the Charleville Friends in the following year when

Humphrey Maine got involved with his brother's serving-maid and got her pregnant. She subsequently miscarried and died. John Maine, Humphrey's brother, buried her in Cork, 'to the surprise of Friends'. The Six Weeks' Meeting of 23rd Second Month 1688 called on Humphrey Maine to produce a paper of self-condemnation which he duly did. The matter was not to be forgotten and Friends later, for that and other reasons, showed an unwillingness to permit his marriage.<sup>24</sup> His brother John was severely censured for arranging a burial without the correct formalities or otherwise consulting with the relatives of the dead girl.

#### INTERREGNUM 1688-94

There were close connections between the Charleville and Mallow Friends. Indeed, at first Mallow promised to be a larger centre of Quaker population. The relation was formalized, certainly before 1688, by the formation of a Monthly Meeting between Mallow, Charleville and Moeg.<sup>25</sup> (Moeg or Moyge is in the parish of Liscarroll, Co. Cork.) Such meetings would have been held in private houses. It meant that there were now Monthly Meeting units in Cork, Bandon (comprising Bandon, Skibbereen and Castlesalem), Youghal and Charleville.

In 1689 the so-called 'War of the two Kings' broke out. As early as 21st Eighth Month the Six Weeks' Meeting noted the deprivations borne by many Friends. Charleville was in 1690 occupied by Irish soldiers. Houses, including that of Lord Orrery, were plundered and burnt.<sup>26</sup> John Exham had soldiers quartered in his house. One day when he came out of his room after a period of silent worship he met the mockery of his 'guests'. He retorted, 'By tomorrow, not one of you will be here to afflict my soul'. When questioned by an officer as to the meaning of his remark he was unable to explain. By the next day a command had come that the soldiers were to proceed

north to the defence of Limerick. They were soon all gone.<sup>27</sup>

The Friends themselves suffered great losses. John Butler, John Maine, Nathaniel Maine, John Godsell and Abigail Boles between them sustained losses of more than £1,000 worth of shop and household goods and livestock. Such a seemingly large sum is an interesting index of the prosperity of at least some Quakers. A list of the losses incurred gives some revealing detail. In 1690 John Butler lost cheese, malt, tobacco, iron, and two feather beds. Nathaniel Maine and John Godsell both lost linen and woollen cloth. A number of the Friends had goods destroyed in Cork city.<sup>28</sup> In Cork and other parts of the country the Williamite troops and the English were the malefactors. In Charleville the rapparees and the Irish soldiers were blamed. National losses of the Quakers were later computed at £100,000.<sup>29</sup> Subscriptions were raised in England and the Barbadoes to help the Irish Friends. The National Half-Yearly Meeting felt a scruple about the use of such funds until the resources of Irish Friends had been fully utilized.<sup>30</sup>

As the war began to abate, the case of Samuel Abbott surfaced. The Six Weeks' Meeting had already dealt with him on a charge of carrying arms.<sup>31</sup> His case was reviewed on the 16th Tenth Month 1691 when it was learned 'that he had betaken himself to a garrison contrary to the peaceable principles of our profession'. He was asked to forbear coming to the Men's Meeting. It appeared also that he had accepted the intervention of a priest to assist at his marriage. Very few Friends throughout the country had failed to uphold the 'peaceable principles' of their community. Refusing to flee they had remained in some cases between the lines. They had been robbed alternately by both parties. There were a few individual examples of unfaithfulness. In Bandon, for example, two Quakers had joined with the townspeople in throwing out the garrison of James II.<sup>32</sup> The two Bandon Quakers

were severely censured. Ironically Friends were often accused of being secret supporters of the same king.<sup>33</sup> One Irish Quaker is supposed to have helped James II escape back to England.<sup>34</sup>

Mallow Meeting had become weakened partly by the wars and partly through the unfaithfulness of its members. John Exham suggested to the Six Weeks' Meeting that they be encouraged to meet as formerly and on the 29th Tenth Month 1692 it was suggested that the Charleville Meeting be held alternately in the two locations.

A sign that Charleville had superseded Mallow as the chief area of Quaker activity in North Cork was the building of its first meeting house in 1693. The Munster Six Weeks' Meeting gave £6 towards obtaining a place.<sup>35</sup> In 1694, as part of a pattern of post-war reconstruction, William Edmundson, the first advocate of the Quaker movement in Ireland, came on a visit to Charleville. He noted in his Journal that after attending the Province Meeting and accompanied by Friends . . . 'both of Cork and Limerick, we rode to Charleville, where we had a brave heavenly meeting, the glorious mysteries of life and salvation were opened by the Spirit and power of Christ'<sup>36</sup>

#### WILLIAM PENN: THE LATER PERIOD OF CHARLEVILLE, 1698-1742

William Penn, later the founder of Pennsylvania, had spent a number of his younger years in Cork where he was in 1666 'convinced' by the ministry of the Friend, Thomas Loe.<sup>37</sup> He had inherited lands in both east and west Cork. His visit to Cork in 1669-70 was partly in settlement of some private business affairs, but was also a visit of some spiritual significance.<sup>38</sup> He came on a second visit in Fifth Month 1698, and this time included Charleville and its new meeting house in his itinerary.<sup>39</sup> He travelled to Charleville with Christopher Vowell, the local clergyman, who was determined to prevent his congregation from atten-



WILLIAM PENN, AGED 22

ding the meeting for worship where William Penn would be present. Vowell deliberately devoted his sermon to an attack on the Quakers and prolonged it in an attempt to prevent the going out of his hearers. The sermon had the opposite effect. His congregation deserted him to hear the famous man. One man told him to his mortification that 'Mr Penn preached better than he'.<sup>40</sup> In spite of William Penn's links with Ireland there is no evidence that his impact on Irish Quakers was to be as direct, as dramatic, or as lasting as it proved in the progress of Quakerism in Pennsylvania and England. Penn's writings were, however, read among the Irish Friends. We might note that the Charleville Friends at a later period subscribed for such Quaker classics by Penn as *Primitive Christianity Revived* (20 copies) and *Call to Christendom* (10 copies).<sup>41</sup> William Penn's colony of Pennsylvania was also to prove a draw for a large number of the

Irish Quakers. Richard Pike, a Cork Quaker, was among those who owned extensive tracts of territory there.<sup>42</sup>

The first surviving minute book of the Charleville Men's Meeting begins in 1698. Some of its early entries refer to the meeting house itself and to some necessary improvements that were required.<sup>43</sup> Among subscribers to these were John Maine, Nicholas Harris, John Exham, Nathaniel Maine, James Phillips, John Ruby and Abigail Boles. The minutes refer to the collection and disbursement of moneys for the necessities of the poorer members, or towards the use of the provincial or half-yearly meetings. Typical Quaker procedures of mutual review were now implicit in the proceedings to handle the increasing pressures of a second and third generation. The spiritual life of the community was of course central to these business meetings.

The functions of such meetings as the Men's Meeting of Charleville reflected the increasingly more rigorous disciplinary assumptions of the Quaker community. It also reflected the difficulties of adapting to the more subtle attractions of prosperity and the contemporary temptations of rural life. Occasionally Friends would be 'arraigned' for over-indulgence in alcohol. Sometimes the business included help to a needy Friend. On 16th First Month 1698, 18s 6d was given to Edward Shimkin's wife and also 10s 4d to himself for 'a cow in which he has an interest'. Presumably he was too poor to own the cow entirely. Robert Maine undertook on the 24th Eighth Month to take care to get the meeting house repaired and to buy some straw, perhaps for its thatched roof. A minute made on 5th Tenth Month 1700 states: 'It's desired that when any travelling Friends do come to visit us that Friends do not stay until they see such Friend or Friends draw towards the meeting but that Friends mind the appointed time and meet accordingly'.

Concern for the education of their children was from the earliest time central to Friends'

viewpoints. An improving standard of literacy is testified to by the least perusal of early Quaker documents. In the Province minutes where signatures remain there is very little indication of any Friends affixing marks. The writing in the Men's Meeting minutes becomes more legible and exceptions of spelling disappear. A Province minute of advice was read out at the meeting in Charleville on 18th Second Month 1701. It asked parents not to indulge their children in 'pride and idleness'. On 4th Fourth month 1702 Elizabeth Maine expressed a willingness to undertake the instruction of Friends' children. On the basis that she was (25th Eleventh Month 1704) given 2s 6d for 32 weeks for this service and that this represented 2d per child, we may assume perhaps 15 children under her care. Because few children attended the school run by Elizabeth Maine the Province Meeting agreed to make up the difference in price to make it worth her while.

The Men's Meeting contributed subscriptions to books ordered to be printed by the Half-Yearly Meeting. Copies of *Barclay's Apology*, the standard exposition of a normative Quaker theology, were ordered 7th Eleventh Month 1702. Friends were encouraged to make their wills, and on the 27th of Sixth Month John Exham was requested to see that he wrote his will. It took him until 1705 to do it! Friends were expected to make inventories of their estates and property. Bankruptcy was severely regarded, as was a failure to repay debts. Friends who were bankrupt were encouraged to offer up all their property to their creditors and to show a willingness to repay every penny outstanding or else suffer the penalties of the discipline.

Seeing marriage as a divine ordinance not requiring the intervention of any ecclesiastical functionary, Friends were careful to ensure that all parties to a marriage should be clear of any prior engagements. Since the authorities had been loath to give recognition to Quaker marriages, extra care was taken that all the

proceedings should be above reproach. The following extract from the Charleville minutes of a typical Quaker marriage certificate illustrates this:

4th fourth Month 1702. Whereas Benjamin Head formerly of Limerick Meeting and Sarah Day of Charleville having declared their intentions of taking each other in marriage before several public meetings of the People of God called Quakers, in Cork, Limerick and Charleville according to the good order among them whoso proceeding therein after a deliberate consideration thereof with regard onto the righteous law of God and example of his people according to the scriptures of truth: in that case were approved by the said meeting They appearing clear of all others and having consent of relations concerned. Now these are to certify to all whom it may concern that for the full accomplishing of their said intentions this twenty sixth day of twelfth month (called February) in the year according to the English account one 1000 7 hundred and one, they the said Benjamin Head and Sarah Day appeared in a public assembly of the aforesaid people and others met together in their public meeting place in Charleville aforesaid and in a solemn manner he the said Benjamin Head taking the said Sarah Day by the hand did openly declare as followeth, "In the presence of the Lord and you my witnesses I take Sarah Day to be my wife promising with the Lord's assistance to be unto her a just faithful and loving husband and as such to live with her according to the holy ordinance of God until by death we shall be separated" and then and there in the said assembly the said Sarah Day did in like manner declare as followeth . . . etc.

Throughout the history of the Charleville Quakers young couples were always seeking to leave to move to the bigger centres of population. They were expected to consult on this with the Friends before so acting. The Men's Meeting did not prove to be very cooperative on many such occasions. It was only too well aware how such departures could further weaken the group and sometimes hurt the individuals involved as well. In a number of cases the young people would, after a period in

which they patiently acquiesced, simply head off and risk the disciplinary consequences. Benjamin Head, originally of Limerick, who had moved to Charleville on his marriage, was a pillar of the meeting. He had been censured by Friends for complying with a distraint of his goods for tithes. For this he expressed his sorrow. Some time after, he wished to move back to Limerick. He was refused a 'certificate of clearness' to present to the meeting there. On appeal to the Province Meeting on the injustice of this refusal he was permitted to remove.<sup>44</sup>

Richard Boles of Ballynalty (in the parish of Liscarroll, Co. Cork) over a number of years proved a great trial to the Men's Meeting. He comes to notice first on the 27th Sixth Month 1702 when he was reported for striking Joseph Sleigh, 'yet . . . his said behaviour is altogether disagreeable to our holy profession'. On another occasion we find Richard Boles, 'coming under the consideration of Friends and notice being taken of his absenting himself from meetings more than formerly as also being sensible that he may be in some danger through a desire of liberty that truth allows not of'.<sup>45</sup> They sought, through their advice and counsel, his amendment. They went so far as to 'suffer' him to join the Men's Meeting on 14th Eighth Month 1703 in the hope that it might benefit him. Several times during the next few years he was found overtaken in drink. This was regarded as 'being both dishonorable to our holy profession and a grief to Friends'.<sup>46</sup> Suspension from the Meeting was eventually not to prove sufficient. He became broken in debt and fled, deserting his wife and family. He ended up in Dublin where he clearly continued to move among Friends since he was visited there on his behaviour in that city.<sup>47</sup>

The meeting house proved adequate until 1708 when its condition prompted the consideration that it would be a waste of money to spend any more on it. In addition the place was offensive to its neighbours because of the



smoke it discharged into adjoining premises. Discussions were started in 1711 to secure a new site. One of the local Friends bought a piece of land at the back of the place. He let it on the same terms as he had got it from the Cork Quaker, Richard Pike. The Six Weeks Meeting gave £20 and the local Friends added £10 towards it. A fine new building, 30 feet by 18 feet, was erected, with a slate roof, glazed windows and shutters.<sup>48</sup> Apart from the meeting house the Charleville Friends had burial grounds at Moeg and Ballynalty in Liscarroll parish.

Most varieties of persecution were to slacken off as the eighteenth century progressed. Charleville Quakers began to enjoy a period of relative tolerance. It was noticed that strangers were appearing at Friends' meetings. The phenomenon was noted in Charleville in the context of the disturbance that visitors caused, seemingly through not understanding the nature of silent worship.<sup>49</sup> A degree of recognition had been achieved for Friends through the Affirmation Act of 1697<sup>50</sup> an issue on which the Irish Friends held out for a more rigorous interpretation.<sup>51</sup> A revised form of affirmation was granted in 1721.<sup>52</sup> The registration of meeting houses was permitted.<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Harris, on 15th Third Month 1720, reminded the Charleville Friends of the duty to register.

Slowly the community declined. The effects of removals to other meetings, the rate of disownments, the limited opportunities for commercial advantage or for marriage began to take their toll. The community was increasingly an old one. John Exham died in his 92nd year in 1721.<sup>54</sup> The Meeting for Worship was to continue for a while but the Men's and Women's business meetings were discontinued in Sixth Month 1730. The last Charleville Friends were probably Nathaniel Maine and Dorothy his wife who removed to Cork. Nathaniel died aged 86 in 1742.<sup>55</sup>

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(Where specific references to Quaker minute books have been adequately made in the text of this article, further references have not been reproduced. All dates from Quaker sources have been left according to the 'old style' (Julian) calendar and also, out of respect for Quaker usage, in the 'plain language').

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