



The former Quaker School at Priory Park, Clonmel, built in the 1840s and sold in 1864.

The Quaker Schools in Clonmel

by Michael Ahern

The Quaker community in Clonmel never exceeded 300; yet they exerted an influence out of all proportion to their number. Families such as the Grubbs, Malcomsons, Watsons, Dudleys, Sparrows and others monopolised the commercial life of the town, while at the same time making an enormous contribution to alleviating the dreadful conditions of the poor and underprivileged.

The Religious Society of Friends, more popularly known as Quakers, was founded by George Fox, a Leicestershire shoemaker, between 1648 and 1666. The word "quaker" was first applied by a Justice Bennett, when Fox appeared before him charged with blasphemy. Fox told the judge that he ought to "tremble at the word of the Lord"; the justice in turn dubbed Fox and his followers "Quakers".

As far as Ireland was concerned, Quakerism first made its appearance during the Cromwellian period. The real founder of Irish Quakerism was an old Cromwellian soldier, William Edmondson, who settled in Ireland in 1662.

The Quakers date their origin in Clonmel to the latter part of the 17th century. The earliest member was George Collett, a glover from Wiltshire, who took a house in West Gate Street and who is remembered today by the nearby lane in O'Connell Street which bears his name.

By the end of the century the community had grown sufficiently to have a meeting-house. In 1699 the sons of George Collett, Stephen and Joseph, provided a site for this purpose off Mary Street. A ruin to the rear of Quirke's chemist shop in O'Connell Street is thought to have been where the meeting-house was located.

At the same time provision was made for the education of their members. A meeting at Knockgraffon held on 12 July, 1701 decided that Samuel Cooke "write to William Dower, a English young man, being a schullmaster and hier him for one year to teach friends children belonging unto this and our six weeks meeting. Clonmel is the place apinted to settle the said schull in the meeting house for the present untill Remuft by concent and order of this meeting."

It was further ordered by the meeting "that all such friends that have sons abroad at schull do bring them home and send them to our schull in Clonmel." ¹ If such a school came into existence as a result of these demands, there appears to be no record of it.

The two schools associated with the Quakers in Clonmel were started towards the end of the 18th century. The first was a Charity School, which was held in the Society's Meeting-House. It was one of many such schools set up by the Society at this time, and similar to those established by the English Quaker, Joseph Lancaster. In keeping with their policy of educational philanthropy, its aim was to provide education for the poor of the town.

The Charity School was the result of a meeting held in the Clonmel Court House on 3 December 1789. The minutes recall that "several inhabitants of the town and neighbourhood" were in attendance, and that it was proposed to establish "daily and sunday Schools for the instruction of the Children in this town and its vicinity", for those "whose parents are not of Ability to bear the Expenche being much wanted" and "that a Subscription be opened for this benevolent purpose." ² Accordingly, these subscriptions, supplemented by various conditions and legacies, helped to finance the school.

Originally it catered for both boys and girls; but after 1804 the boys' school was discontinued. The girls' school was under the guidance of Miss Ann Grubb, who was assisted by a management committee, most of them women. The school was non-denominational; of the 100 girls enrolled in 1826, 93 were Catholic and the remaining 7 Protestant. ³

The education provided was very basic. It taught the "3 rs" and had reading from the Bible without note or comment. In addition to this, needlework formed a very important part of the curriculum, two and a half hours each day being devoted to it. The school day itself was extremely long - in summer 7.00 to 9.00 a.m., 10.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. and 2.00 to 4.00 p.m.; in winter 9.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. and 2.00 to 4.00 p.m. ⁴

Every year a printed annual report was published. Among other matters, it included a list of the subscribers and an account of the school's income and expenditure. It also showed the garments made and repaired by the students, including shifts, shirts, table-cloths, stockings and a host of other articles.

The industry of the pupils in this respect would suggest that instruction concentrated on handwork rather than book learning, a fact borne out by the Endowed Schools Commission, 1856, which states that "The industrial department is the one principally attended to in this school." It went on to say "that only a small portion of the schools hours" were "devoted to the ordinary branches of secular instruction; and in these, accordingly, the pupils have only a very elementary knowledge."

The money received for this needlework was "expended in the purchase of useful clothing for



the children.”⁵ This was most necessary in the light of William Savery’s observations. He visited the school in 1798, and saw 150 “poor ragged children” and “nearly all without shoe or stocking.”⁶

Initially, the school was very successful. The annual report of 1809 states that there were 150 pupils on the roll and a total of 2,012 admissions during the 20 years of the school’s existence.⁷ However, as the century advanced and the catholic religious schools became established, numbers began to fall off. By 1836 enrolments had dropped to 82⁸; by 1860 there were just over 30 pupils⁹ in the school, and in 1863 when it closed there were ten.¹⁰ However, it was only in 1883 that the management committee held its final meeting to wind up the school’s affairs.

The second Quaker school in Clonmel was an exclusive boarding school for Quaker girls, established in 1787 by Sarah Grubb and liberally endowed by her husband, Robert. Robert was the son of the prominent miller, corn merchant and founder of the family fortunes, Joseph Grubb. In 1782 Robert married Sarah Tuke, the clerk of the York Quaker Meeting. She was the daughter of William and Elizabeth Tuke, wealthy and generous York Quakers, who had done much work in securing better treatment for the insane.

Being childless, Robert and Sarah devoted themselves to a life of humanitarian and philanthropic work. As travelling ministers they spent much of their time on the continent, particularly in France and Germany, preaching and bringing succour to the needy. In Clonmel Robert founded the House of Industry, or workhouse as such institutions were more popularly known, situated on the site of the present meat factory in the Irishtown.

Robert built the school as an extension to his home on Suir Island. It was run by his wife Sarah and her sister Anne, who came over from York to assist her. The Suir Island School was modelled on a similar one in York of which Sarah was a patron, and the aims were somewhat similar. Built to provide accommodation for 32 girls, it became one of the leading Quaker finishing schools for girls in Ireland.

In 1788 Sarah Grubb recorded in her journal that she had 12 girls in attendance in her school. They paid 24 guineas a year plus an additional guinea for washing. For this they were taught French, German, the principles of Geometry and Natural Philosophy, Physical Geography and the elements of Astronomy, English Literature, Drawing, the keeping of accounts, deportment, household duties, Scripture and Needlework.¹¹ In relation to the latter subject beautiful samplers produced by the pupils of the school show a high degree of skill. Examples of this fine embroidery can be seen in the Quaker museum in Dublin.

Sarah Grubb died in 1790 at the early age of 34, and her husband Robert died seven years later. However, in his will (made the previous year) he made careful provision for the continuance of the school. He “bequeathed his premises on Suir Island, now used as a Girls Boarding School, to 12 Trustees to hold for the purposes of the school.”¹² He also left an annual rent of £60, which was derived from flour mills held by his brother, Thomas, this to be paid to whatever governors of the school the trustees should appoint.

In the 1820s the school is reported as being under the direction of the sisters, Elizabeth and Anne Jacob, and in 1826 it is listed as having 38 pupils,¹² a figure that had dropped to 11 nine years later. In 1846 the trustees of Robert Grubb’s estate applied successfully to the Court of Chancery to let the school premises, on the ground that it was no longer suitable for use as a school, and the following year it was leased to Joshua Malcomson.

The money was used to buy a portion of Prior Park estate in the north suburb of the town from Mr. Henry Peddar. Here they built a new school, costing approximately £2,500. As was the case of the Charity School, the limited funds were carefully managed, hardly surprising considering the business acumen of the Quakers.

The premises on Suir Island was destined to become a school once more with the arrival of the

Loreto Sisters in the town in 1881. Seven years later a fire broke out in the neighbouring flour mill, and a spark from the blaze was responsible for causing extensive damage to the school. As a result, the sisters moved to their present house on the Coleville Road; but the residence and portion of the old school that survived can be still seen today.

Although the minute books and most of the school papers were destroyed, it is still possible to build up a picture of the school. The code of conduct laid down for the pupils is still extant. It is believed to be in Sarah Grubb's own handwriting, and was said to have been written shortly before her death. We also have Sarah Grubb's Journal, and can take into account the educational philosophy of the Quakers.

Sarah Grubb recorded in her journal that she hoped her school would bring about "simplicity of manners and a religious improvement of the morals of the youth."¹³ This moral and religious aim, which was reflected in the curriculum of Suir Island School, was one of the fundamental principles of Quaker education. Consequently, much time was devoted to studying the scriptures and the Quaker Catechism. Apart from producing moral upright citizens, they also catered for their vocational needs by providing secular subjects to prepare them for their future occupations.

Whereas the children of Quakers in poorer circumstances were given a very basic education to fit them for more menial jobs, the children of the wealthy were given a far broader curriculum to enable them to pursue careers in business or the professions. At Suir Island this liberal approach had certain limitations. They confined themselves to what Sarah Grubb referred to in her journal as "useful history and geography". Music of any kind was excluded, since it did not meet with the approval of the Friends.

Closely allied to the religious aim was one of character formation, the pupils being trained to live out their lives according to strict principles. The conduct expected of them was set out in a document said to be written in Sarah Grubb's hand. One of the most grievous faults a Quaker could be guilty of was to tell lies; "If they have committed fault" they were duty bound to "candidly acknowledge it".¹⁴ It was this rigid honesty that won the Quakers a reputation for fair dealing in the business world.

The daily routine of the school was regulated down to the last detail, and the pupils were subject to strict discipline. They were expected to "Cheerfully and duly attend to the sound of the bell from rising and going to bed, meals, meeting, school etc." and to "forbear talking to one another in school hours, at meals and reading except there be sufficient reason for it". They were requested "to shut all doors after them which they know ought to be so, with as little noise as possible", and to "walk to and from meetings with sobriety becoming the occasion."¹⁵

They not only tried to discipline a Quaker's inner life, but also sought to influence even his outward appearance, according to the Quaker principle which advocated "plainness of speech, behaviour and apparel". They were expected to "express themselves in as few comprehensive words as they are able", and advised to "encourage one another to simplicity of heart, conduct and appearance" and to reject "a disposition to follow any unbecoming fashion in their apparel."

"Finery and fashion lead from God" was the Quaker motto. It was also impressed on them to show a concern for fellow men by cultivating "an affectionate regard for one another", and "if one be offended, by no means to revenge it." They were encouraged to look after the welfare of others "to serve those with whom they sojourn, but specially strangers and the sick".¹⁶

Even their leisure hours were to be spent productively - "That they employ most of their leisure hours especially when it is with their needle be in something which is useful, remembering that time is precious".¹⁷ This utilitarian philosophy is also evident in their attitude to cultural pursuits. They discouraged children from pursuing an interest, unless it had a moral or religious end.

On the Quaker educational system Cyril Brannigan writes: "What they wore, spoke, read, ate,



and even played was determined by an unyielding disciplinary system, the object of which was to produce consistent, reliable, industrious, obedient and serious-minded young Quakers."¹⁸

With the decline of the Quaker population the history of the Prior Park School was to be a short one. Twelve months after the closure of their charity school, Prior Park was sold on 29 June 1864 to Benjamin Murphy, a member of the famous local brewing firm in the town. It then passed into the hands of the O'Gorman family, who ran a successful coach business in the town earlier this century.

The closure of these schools brought to an end the Quaker involvement in the educational life of the town. They were but a small part of the contribution that this remarkable community made to the economic and social life of Clonmel for over two hundred years.

FOOTNOTES

1. W.P. Burke: *History of Clonmel* (Kilkenny, 1983), p. 296.
2. Grubb collection, box 3C5. (Friends Arch., Dublin).
3. Report of commissioners of Irish education inquiry, 1826.
4. Grubb collection, Box 52.
5. Endowed schools commission, 1856, p. 382.
6. Mr. Wm. Savery (extracts from his diary, 1798.) Portfolio 19, item 112. (Friends Arch., Dublin).
7. Report of Clonmel Charitable School, printed. Sc. 4 (Friends Arch., Dublin).
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Prospectus of Suir Island School, 1821. Grubb collection. box 56, S 126.
12. Report of commissioners of Irish education inquiry, 1826, p. 1118.
13. Sarah Grubb Journal, (Belfast, 1837).
14. Advices to the pupils of Clonmel female boarding school, c. 1800. Grubb collection. S 124. (Friends Arch., Dublin).
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. C. G. Brannigan: "Quaker education in 18th and 19th century Ireland", *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (1984), p.63.

