

# The Grubbs of Carrick-on-Suir

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*Quakerism was founded by George Fox in the north of England in 1651 and introduced to Ireland three years later by a former Cromwellian soldier, William Edmundson. By 1658, the Quakers had settled in County Tipperary in the far north of the county, in the vicinity of Tipperary town and in the Suir valley from Cashel to Clonmel. They also established a meeting in Waterford city but, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, there are only two references to a Quaker presence in Carrick-on-Suir.*

The first mention dates back to 1721 when the records of the Tipperary Monthly meeting for that year refer to the marriage of Thomas Leather of Carrick to Hannah Cherry. The second concerns James West, who arrived in Carrick in 1788, and is listed in the Census of Carrick-on-Suir of 1799 as a widower and cardmaker. His wife Anne died in 1798 and he two years later. Both were buried in the Quaker graveyard in Clonmel. In 1840 John Grubb married Rebecca Strangman, daughter of a prominent Quaker family in Waterford. When he arrived in Carrick with his wife and two children, Anna Strangman and Joseph Ernest three years later there were no other Quakers in the town and every Sunday they travelled to Clonmel to attend the Quaker meeting there.

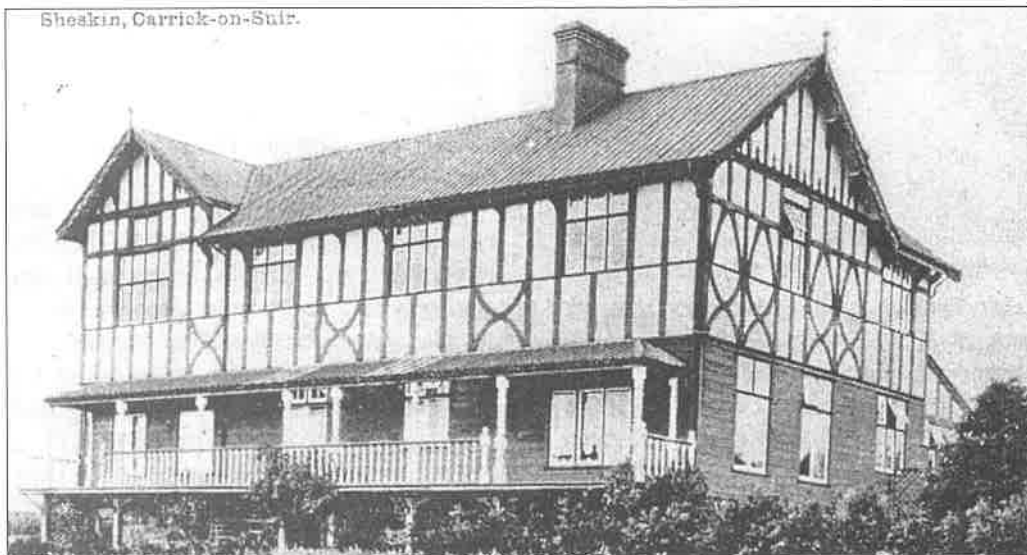
Thirteen years later, a meeting-house was opened in Carrick-on-Suir in 1866. The impetus for this development can be attributed to John Grubb and his family who, by this time, had four further children, Joshua, Lydia, John and Rebecca. They had been joined by the Doyles and the Howells, bringing the total membership of the community to fifteen. The meeting house was erected on a portion of the castle grounds, at Ashpark, Carrick-on-Suir. It was built at a cost of £459. 2s. 2d. and leased to John Grubb, George Howell and Joseph Ernest Grubb as trustees.<sup>1</sup>

John Grubb, who was born in Clonmel in 1816 and came to Carrick-on-Suir in 1843, was a direct descendant of another John Grubb, who arrived in Ireland from Northamptonshire in 1656. This former Cromwellian soldier, linen-factor and farmer first settled in Waterford. When his linen business failed, he became a farmer in County Wexford. It was around that time also that he became a Quaker.

His grandson, Benjamin, set up a grocery business in Clonmel at a time when the town was experiencing a period of considerable economic growth, much of it fuelled by Quaker enterprise.

In 1838, Benjamin Grubb's grandson, John Grubb, with the assistance of £1,000 from his father Joseph, set up in business. He went into partnership with his cousin, Henry Jacob, operating an iron and brass foundry on New Quay in Clonmel, where they manufactured steam engines, pumps, cranes, castings, boilers, mill brasses etc.<sup>2</sup> This seemed a foolhardy venture for such a young, inexperienced man as John Grubb. He was twenty years of age

and had no expertise in engineering. Five years later, the firm got into financial difficulties and the partnership was dissolved on 17 August 1843. John Grubb surrendered all interest in the firm, in addition to paying £250 out of his private estate to meet debts incurred in the course of trading.<sup>3</sup> Grubb's degree of culpability for the bankruptcy is not clear. According to Isabel Grubb, the Quaker historian, her grandfather had no real responsibility for the finances of the firm<sup>4</sup>, but the list of disownments for the Tipperary meeting of the Society of Friends stated that he was guilty of issuing a false audit.<sup>5</sup> While the firm continued under the management of Jacob, John Grubb was left to honour his obligations as best he could.



In view of his debts, the Society took immediate action and John Grubb's membership of the Tipperary meeting was revoked. Such disciplinary procedures not only helped to build up public trust in the business rectitude of the Quakers, but they also ensured high standards of caution and avoidance of risk-taking by the members themselves. However, the shame of disownment for such an ardent Quaker struck deep and John Grubb did everything in his power to redeem himself. He sold off his wedding presents,<sup>6</sup> and auctioned off his household furniture from his home in Anglesea Street.<sup>7</sup> He paid off ten shillings in the pound at the time, and fifteen years later, when he paid off his creditors in full, membership of the Society of Friends was restored to him.<sup>8</sup>

In December 1843, the year that he went bankrupt, John Grubb and his wife Rebecca and their two year old daughter and their infant baby, Joseph Ernest, moved to Carrick-on-Suir where he opened an iron and coal business on the quay, presumably with assistance from other members of the family. The business later moved to the corner of New Street and the Fair Green. It developed into a wholesale and retail trade in corn, flour, oats and other feeding stuffs.

John's health broke down before he was fifty and, after several years of ill-health, he died in 1870. Joseph Ernest, his eldest son took over the business. He had been working in the family firm since 1857 and sometime later he was taken into partnership. It became known as John Grubb & Son, and the monogram 'GBS' can still be seen high on the gable-end of the building that now operates as a supermarket.



Joseph Ernest

Joseph Ernest decided to diversify and became involved in the milling industry. He built a corn mill at the New Bridge, Carrick. When the milling industry went into decline in the latter half of the nineteenth century due to the importation of cheap American grain, Joseph Ernest took to supplying the surrounding area with Indian meal from his Carrick mill. For a few years at the beginning of the twentieth century he operated the Grubb mill on Suir Island in Clonmel. Thirty years previously he was the owner of Suirville Mill, a few miles downstream.

Joseph Ernest is perhaps best remembered for his association with the river Suir. The Grubbs, more than any

other Quaker family, were associated with promoting it as a commercial highway. As far back as 1755, Joseph Grubb was employed by the Navigation Board to improve the commercial possibilities of the Suir between Carrick and Clonmel. Later, members of the family served on the board of the Waterford Harbour Commissioners, while others became directors of the Suir Navigation Company. This joint stock company was set up in 1835, as a result of a meeting in Tinvane Hotel, to remove impediments to the navigation of the river. The position of secretary to that company was held by three generations of the Carrick branch of the family, John Grubb from 1853 to 1870, his son, Joseph Ernest, from 1871 to 1896, and his grandson, Louis, from 1896 to its disillusion in 1921.

In August 1877, Joseph Ernest placed advertisements in all the local papers announcing the establishment of the Suir Steam Navigation Company, an export-import business operating through the port of Waterford and based on a combination of tug-boats and flat-bottomed barges. The market towns of Carrick-on-Suir and Clonmel<sup>9</sup> acted as dispatching and collecting centres for the surrounding areas with goods and parcels carried to and from nearby towns and villages. The goods were to be received at Waterford and shipped out to Belfast, Dublin, Cork, Glasgow, Greenock, Liverpool, London, Plymouth and Southampton by arrangements with the Waterford Steamship and the Clyde Shipping companies.

Grubb bought a tug in Liverpool, and renamed it the *Fr. Mathew*, in honour of the famous Tipperary-born apostle of temperance, whom he admired. A contemporary wrote: 'The boat is not new and looks to be valued about £500. It has 25 h.p. This is the first thing of the kind ever introduced on the river between Carrick and Waterford'.<sup>10</sup> It was used to transport the goods between Waterford and Carrick-on-Suir. They were conveyed onward to Clonmel on flat-bottomed barges pulled by a team of twelve horses, accompanied by four men on a specially constructed towpath.

When the service began, Grubb's initiative was widely resented by rival boat owners because he offered the men on his tug a fixed wage of 20 shillings a week. Before this, the lightermen or bargemen received two-thirds of the load profits, an agreement that had been wrenched from the barge owners during the latter part of the eighteenth century by secret combinations. Rival bargemen encouraged the Grubb's employees to go on strike, giving

financial support to the strikers and their families. One observer felt that:

It is evident that Grubb & Co. is making a big effort to monopolise the river traffic, but he will hardly succeed. Time was when Grubb, his steamer, and his lighters would be taken one fine night and planted on top of a bonfire, for half the present cause; but 'the boatmen of Carrick' are an extinct race."

By the end of August, the strikers had all returned to work and Grubb was victorious.

Subsequent events would suggest that Grubb neither tried to create a monopoly nor could he be accused of exploiting his



Joseph Ernest

workers. He was generous to his competitors, offering them towing facilities, and the evidence also suggests that he was a conscientious and compassionate employer. In 1882, he was presented with the following address from his employees:

As an employer you have dealt liberally and fairly towards us in the matter of wages, and you have also taken a deep and practical interest in our welfare and that of our families, always showing yourself solicitous for our advancement morally and socially, as well as pecuniarily.<sup>12</sup>

A similar tribute occurred in his obituary notice which said that 'he and his family had intimate personal knowledge of the workers, visited their homes when they were ill and were unceasing in their zeal for their comfort and welfare.'<sup>13</sup>

His company carried a wide range of products:

The principal articles brought up the river were coal, grain, flour, feeding stuffs, artificial manures, foreign timber, and a large variety of shop goods, including farm implements and machinery, whilst down the river went oats, condensed milk, wool, eggs, fruit, honey, willows, native timber etc.<sup>14</sup>

Grubb also recognised the supreme importance of the cattle trade and made special trips to Waterford for fairs and markets to make arrangements to carry the port cattle, sheep and pigs. Since many of these commodities formed the core of Quaker commercial undertakings, the provision of an efficient network of communications between Clonmel and Waterford played a vital role in the expansion of their economic interests.

The only item that Joseph Ernest refused to carry was alcohol. His workers were warned to avoid intoxicating drink while in his service. On their arrival in Clonmel, the boatmen were provided with hot meals in an effort to deter them from visiting local taverns. Joseph Ernest was also an ardent nationalist and many of his advertisements indicated a pronounced emphasis on native produce. One example highlighted the fact that all flours on sale were of genuine Irish manufacture, and the building blocks on offer were made in Kilkenny, while the garden pots, pans, saucepans etc. were of Wexford origin.<sup>15</sup>



The development of alternative transport systems was to prove detrimental to Grubb's business interests. Establishing the Steam Navigation Company almost twenty-five years after the opening of the Limerick-Waterford railway could be regarded as a courageous, if foolhardy, attempt to keep the commercial viability of the river alive. This Quaker enterprise had a uniquely local flavour and does not appear to have been replicated elsewhere.

By 1887, the company was employing the railways to handle a portion of its business. This tacit admission meant that Joseph Ernest's antiquated methods of haulage made the navigation of the Suir to Clonmel no longer profitable.<sup>16</sup> In the summer of 1912 Ernest Grubb sold his two businesses in Carrick, and at the beginning of 1913 disposed of his Clonmel Company.

In summing up his career, his daughter wrote, 'the result of many years of hard work could hardly be called commercial success', but with typical Quaker spirit she felt that he 'had no need to think pessimistically about his fifty-six years of commercial activities, for in his daily occupation he had found much scope for services to humanity'.<sup>17</sup> When Joseph Ernest retired, he was seventy years old and there was no one to succeed him. In 1872 he had married Hannah Jacob of Cork, a union that produced five children, Anne, Louis, Lydia, Gertrude and Isabel. His only son, Louis, was plagued by ill health.

The Grubbs epitomised all that was best in Quakerism and they were staunch upholders of the Society's pacifist principles. In the months leading up to the Young Ireland Rebellion of 1848, John Grubb tried to pre-empt violence by attempting to reduce the weapon supply. When the disturbances began, he refused to sell steel that could be used to produce pikes.<sup>18</sup>

His son, Joseph Ernest, was also called upon, on more than one occasion, to uphold the Society's peace principles. During the war of independence, when a party of British soldiers called to his residence searching for Sinn Féin literature, he took advantage of the situation to plead for peace and friendship and to point out the sacredness of human life. During the ceasefire that followed, he wrote a letter of protest to a local paper objecting to the activities of an IRA. commandant who was levying money in Waterford for the maintenance of the Volunteers. Although he favoured an independent united Ireland, he felt it must be achieved though peaceful means and that the prospect of civil war might be averted. He felt that:

The great obstacle to national growth is organised force claiming supremacy over the human being. True fellowship, not force, is the index of a healthy nation.... Let us each live according to our individual opportunities and abilities, ever working for

the good of all, gladly recognising the good qualities of others, and endeavouring to mend our own defects. May the dark pall of militarism, which has destroyed many nations, never overshadow Ireland.<sup>19</sup>

Through his involvement in politics he found a means of putting his Quaker principles into action, especially his views on equality and social justice. From 1878 he was a member of the Town Commissioners in Carrick, and at one time served as chairman of that body. His involvement in local politics continued with the passing of the local government act of 1898. In that year, he became a member of both the Tipperary SR county council and the Carrick-on-Suir urban district council. As a member of the former, he had the honour of being elected chairman in 1907.<sup>20</sup> In 1911, he announced his intention of not contesting the forthcoming election for the county council,<sup>21</sup> but continued to serve on the Carrick urban district council until he was returned for the final time at eighty years of age. He never lost any election he contested and frequently headed the poll.

It would be difficult to sum up the scope of his activities on these bodies. As a member of the county council, he served on all its committees at one stage or another. On the Technical and Agricultural Committee he encouraged technical and domestic science education, but his membership of the governing board of the Local Asylum was the one that gave him the most satisfaction. In his native Carrick his work on the Sanitary Committee brought him in touch with some of the worst unhygienic living conditions in the town. He also successfully campaigned for an improved fresh water supply, the provision of a new cemetery and housing schemes for the needy. It was said that 'at the meetings of these bodies his knowledge of the details of public administration, finance, acts of parliament governing the work of local bodies, local history and archaeology, made him an outstanding, highly respected and esteemed member'.<sup>22</sup>

In 1904 he became a justice of the peace for the counties of Tipperary and Waterford. In keeping with his sense of fair play, his decisions on the bench were humane and compassionate. As a magistrate, he was appointed by the Prisons' Board, as a member of the Visiting Committee of the Clonmel Borstal. He paid regular visits talking to the boys, offering them encouragement and often bringing gifts of fruit and buns.

He did not confine his attention to local issues. He was made a freeman of Waterford and supported initiatives for the improvement of that city. He was a member of the committee for the building of a new bridge that was opened in 1913. Earlier he became an enthusiastic member of the Land League, although he disassociated himself from any violence or intimidation. He also became a member of the Home Rule Party in the days when, in the circle in which he moved, it was far from fashionable to do so. In 1893, 1,376 out of 1,698 adult Friends in Ireland sent an address to English Friends looking for support opposing home rule.<sup>23</sup> These Quakers believed 'while disestablishment would be a spiritual blessing for the Church of Ireland there was the threat of a new ascendancy appearing - that of the Catholics'.<sup>24</sup>

Quakers were noted for their philanthropy and their practical assistance to the poor and under-privileged. During the famine John and Rebecca Grubb helped to relieve the sufferings of the starving people of Carrick by opening a soup kitchen. Rebecca devoted herself to helping the poor of the town. 'All her life she was much sought after by her poor friends for medical advice, and for many years ran a charitable maternity association'.<sup>25</sup> In this charitable work she was assisted by her daughter-in-law, Hannah Jacob, wife of Joseph Ernest.

In 1847, the four year old, Joseph Ernest assisted his parents in collecting tickets in the soup kitchen. Almost forty years later, he set up a scheme to give assistance to unemployed workmen in the town. Grubb was appointed treasurer of the Relief Fund, and subscription lists indicate that the majority of the funds were raised among the Friends.<sup>26</sup> Twenty-five to thirty men were employed at any one time, and they were paid sixpence a day. They were employed as sweepers, and undertook road repairs and sanitary work. The relief work commenced in the autumn of 1885 and lasted until January 1886, when all the funds were exhausted.

At the age of eighty-three, he was still committed to alleviating local distress. In January 1926, when many of the houses in the lower part of the town were flooded, he did not hesitate to come to the assistance of those affected. He walked through the floods to examine the houses for himself, and then proceeded to procure coal and food for those who needed them. This was one of his many acts of kindness and generosity.

He also supported the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and, being a total abstainer, became a keen promoter of the temperance movement. In combating the evils of alcohol he was supported by his wife, Rebecca, who was equally committed. She held temperance classes in her house,<sup>27</sup> and her name appears on an undated document addressed to the directors of the Great Southern and Western Railway Company, requesting that only non-alcoholic beverages be served on their trains.

Despite his heavy workload and numerous commitments, he also found time for numerous leisure activities. In his younger days he was a keen swimmer and canoeist and, even in advanced years, remained a dedicated walker. In addition to being an enthusiastic gardener, an interest he inherited from his father, he was an avid botanist who took delight in seeking out rare plants.

The architecture and history of old buildings fascinated him and he was a member of various historical and archaeological societies, including the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. Meteorology was another of his life-long interests. Isabel Grubb writing of him stated that:

He kept a meteorological diary as a young man, and again regularly after 1899. One of the first things he did when he was free from business was to arrange with the Meteorological Office to supply them with weekly and monthly observations. Besides the rain-gauge, thermometers, and barometers, he had a sunshine recorder, the only one in the south-east of Ireland.<sup>28</sup>

Within the Society of Friends Joseph Ernest Grubb was regarded as a national and an international figure, holding various offices in the Society and travelling to meetings in Ireland and England. In his eighty-fourth year, while attending a Friends' conference in London, he fractured a hip descending a stairs in the meeting hall, from which he never recovered. He died peacefully on 9 October, 1927 and was buried beside his wife in the public cemetery at Carrickbeg.

Isabel Grubb (1881-1972), youngest daughter of Joseph Ernest, was the noted Quaker historian. As a child she was sent to the Quaker school at Mountmellick, and later returned there to spend six years as a teacher. One of her former pupils remembered with affection her enthusiastic teaching of botany and how she encouraged the girls to take an interest in weather recording. She later took up a teaching post in England and took her Master of Arts degree in London. Her thesis, 'Social conditions in Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries as illustrated by early Quaker records' is regarded as an important contribution to Irish Quaker studies.

In 1925 she became a student at the Quaker theological college in Woodbrooke, Birmingham being offered a fellowship in the college the following year. This was the beginning of the most active period in her life. Within four years she published three books of historical interest. These included *Quakers in Ireland 1654-1900*, *J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, an affectionate biography of her father, which has been quoted above and *Quakerism in Industry before 1800*, an account of how Quakerism during that period impacted on the



Isabel Grubb

economic life in Ireland and England. These were followed in 1935 by a book in a lighter vein, *Quaker Homespuns*, an imaginative re-telling of various Quaker anecdotes she came across in her studies.

Over the years she contributed numerous articles to various Quaker journals. Her last major work appeared in 1952 when she published an edited version of *William Penn's Irish Journal 1669-1670*. This was a journal kept by William Penn when, as a young man, he was sent over to Ireland to look after his father's extensive estates. Her status as a historian was confirmed by her contemporary, Olive Goodbody, who stated:

There has been no Irish Quaker historian of the calibre of Isabel Grubb since the time of John Rutt (1697-1774). Her grasp of the essentials of Quakerism enabled her to place it in the varying Irish scene with its historical background, and her works are consulted by scholars of many countries in their search for knowledge of Irish Friends.<sup>29</sup>

She also took a keen interest in the Historical Library of the Society of Friends, and was responsible for much of the cataloguing in the library, in addition to donating her large collection of manuscripts to it. She also spent a good deal of time travelling attending Quaker meetings all over Ireland, in England, on the continent, in the United States and Australia.

In a tribute to her, William Glynn wrote:

She will be best remembered for her many years of faithful service in the Ministry and business of the Society of Friends. She was a wise counsellor, a valued member of various committees, local as well as national, combining sound common sense with a good knowledge of established procedure. Frugal to the point of parsimony where her own personal comfort was concerned, she was generous in her donations to Quaker funds or individual needs and her gifts were frequently made anonymously.<sup>30</sup>

She died on 1 February 1972, a few months following her ninetieth birthday.

From the beginning the Grubb family were the backbone of the Carrick-on-Suir meeting, and over a fifty year period from 1866 to 1916 made up, on average, half the membership.



The Carrick-on-Suir meeting was always small. In 1873, there were fifteen members, never exceeding more than thirty members. From the opening years of the twentieth century numbers fell rapidly and, by 1916, the Grubbs were the only Quaker family in Carrick.

By then the Grubbs had been in Carrick for three generations. Although John Grubb had six children, it was left to Joseph Ernest to perpetuate the family's connection with the town. One of John's other sons, Strangman, had become a doctor in England, while the third, John Jr. died at the age of twenty one as the result of a bicycle accident. Two of his daughters, Anna Strangman and Lydia, married and settled in England, while Rebecca remained at home and died unmarried. As has been stated, Joseph Ernest had five children. Lydia, his second eldest daughter married and went to live in England, while Anne, Louis, Gertrude and Isabella all died unmarried. In 1924, when the meeting-house closed, Joseph Ernest Grubb and two of his children, Louis and Gertrude, were the only Quakers left in Carrick. Seskin remained the Grubb family home until 1951. Following the death of her sister Gertrude, Isabel moved to a small house in Grange Park, Waterford, bringing the Grubb connection with Carrick to an end.

### References

- <sup>1</sup>Grubb Collection. MS. box 56, s. 97 (Friends Historical Library, Dublin).
- <sup>2</sup>*Shearman's Directory* 1839, p. 29; *Triennial Directory 1840-42*; Maurice Wigham, *The Irish Quakers* (Dublin, 1992), p. 79.
- <sup>3</sup>Indenture between Henry Jacob and John Grubb and John Sparrow, Wilson Kennedy and John Thacker Pim, 17 Aug. 1843 (National Archives, D 16460).
- <sup>4</sup>Isabel Grubb, *J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir* (Dublin, 1928), p. II.
- <sup>5</sup>R.T.M. Minutes of men's monthly meetings 1818-49 (Friends Historical Library Dublin, MM X A6).
- <sup>6</sup>Isabel Grubb, *J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, p. II.
- <sup>7</sup>*Tipperary Constitution*, 4 Sept. 1843.
- <sup>8</sup>Isabel Grubb, *J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, p. II; Maurice Wigham, *The Irish Quakers*, p. 59.
- <sup>9</sup>Grubb papers, (National Archives, D 16466). The Clonmel headquarters was located on the New Quay, adjacent to the Gashouse Bridge.
- <sup>10</sup>From unpublished Carrick journal/commonplace book known as 'Kenny's Diary' in private hands, 12 August 1877.
- <sup>11</sup>*Ibid*, 23 August 1877.
- <sup>12</sup>Isabel Grubb, *J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, pp. 49, 50.
- <sup>13</sup>*Clonmel Nationalist*, 12 Oct. 1927.
- <sup>14</sup>Isabel Grubb, *Joseph Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, pp.40, 41.
- <sup>15</sup>*Clonmel Nationalist*, 10 August 1889.
- <sup>16</sup>Isabel Grubb, *Joseph Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, pp. 50,51.
- <sup>17</sup>*Ibid*, p.51.
- <sup>18</sup>M. E. Hirst, *The Quakers in peace and war*, (London, 1923), p.253.
- <sup>19</sup>Cited in Isabel Grubb, *J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, p. 89.
- <sup>20</sup>*Clonmel Nationalist*, 14 June 1907.
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid*, 20 May 1911.
- <sup>22</sup>*Ibid*, 12 Oct. 1927.
- <sup>23</sup>Cited in Dorren Mc Mahon 'The Irish Quakers 1870-1925', unpublished M.A. thesis (U.C.D., 1985), p. 209.
- <sup>24</sup>Desmond Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800-70* (Dublin, 1978), p. 38.
- <sup>25</sup>Isabel Grubb, *J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, p. 16.
- <sup>26</sup>Relief Committee Minute Book, Carrick-on-Suir, 1885-86 (Friends Historical Library, Dublin, MS. box 52, s.c.2)
- <sup>27</sup>Isabel Grubb, *J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, pp. 16, 17.
- <sup>28</sup>Isabel Grubb, *J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir*, pp. 23, 24.
- <sup>29</sup>Olive Goodbody, 'Isabel Grubb' in *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, diii, no. 1 (1972), pp. 3-8.
- <sup>30</sup>*The Munster Express*, 11 February 1972.