

A 19th Century Tipperary Quaker Family

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Today the Society of Friends, or Quakers, represent only 1,600 members of the Irish population, in contrast to 1,790 Jews and 1,943 Muslims,¹ the community has played an important role in Irish history out of all proportion to their numbers. Here we will consider the fortunes of one particular family in the hope that it will throw some light on the nature of the general community and its Irish significance.

Some time in the late 1700s, Samuel Davis, son of a Quaker merchant, left Minehead, Somerset, a watering place on the Bristol Channel.² He emigrated to Ireland to join the small but increasingly influential Quaker community in the burgeoning town of Clonmel in Ireland's largest county, Tipperary. There he made an excellent match, marrying Mary, daughter of Benjamin and Suzanna Grubb. The Grubbs represented the Quaker élite, with powerful commercial interests in flour-milling and the provisions trade. As merchant princes their fine houses dominated the wharf on the River Suir which formed the boundary between Tipperary and Waterford. The couple possibly met when Mary and her parents took the waters at Minehead. Samuel, no doubt a keen and promising young man, may have been offered patronage by his future father-in-law.

By the late 18th century, the Quakers, or Society of Friends as they preferred to be known, had achieved some recognition for the peculiar views emanating from George Fox, the great 17th century religious radical. Eschewing clergy, liturgy and creed, the early Quakers had endured considerable persecution before tolerance in the 18th century. In 1749 legislation exempted Quakers from oath-taking. Their rejection of violence in all and every form was similarly accepted. The insistence upon absolute honesty in business dealings led to commercial success and great fortunes for bankers like the Barclays and chocolate makers like the Rowntrees and Cadburys.

In the 1770s Irish Quakers left the declining textile trade, which they had pursued in Carrick-on-Suir, and turned to flour-milling in Clonmel. Soon they had established ten large concerns, five in Clonmel itself. With a network of family alliances, giving them connections in the ports, and links with banking houses such as the Gurneys of Norwich, Quakers came to dominate Clonmel, which in the early 19th century was the third city of Ireland with 12,000 inhabitants. According to its historian, Thomas Power, 'They monopolized the occupations of flour miller and grain merchant, and were to the fore in banking, boat transport, and the bacon trade.' Quakers were strongly represented in brewing. To Catholic merchants were left the secondary pursuits of retail grocery, baking, linen and woollen drapery.³

In the heart of Catholic Tipperary the community offered entrepreneurial drive coupled with a stern, if humanitarian, morality. Friends who 'married out' ceased automatically to be members of the Society, as did those who took up occupations which bore arms. The community was sometimes unpopular with the Catholic majority, represented by the *Tipperary Free Press*,⁴ who took exception to their growing wealth during times of depression, while the established Protestants refused to accept Quakers as fellow Christians and banned their dead from orthodox cemeteries. Hence the Quaker burial ground at Clonmel.

Under the guidance of his father-in-law, Samuel Davis worked manfully for the commercial enterprises of the clan. On 9 November 1786 Mary, aged 25, a year younger than her husband, gave birth to a boy, named Robert after his Davis grandfather. Another child, Deborah, married her second cousin, Samuel Grubb. Jacob and Grubb was a leading engineering firm in Clonmel. With money from various sources, including his Davis parents-in-law, Samuel bought the great estate of Castle Grace two miles from Clogheen, with land rising to the top of the Knockmealdowns and extending to the border of County Waterford. They established a new mill on River Tar and a considerable Georgian residence.⁵

The older Davises, Samuel and Mary, lived through the trauma of the Napoleonic wars and the Rising of 1798 which, fortunately for them, affected Tipperary less than counties such as Wicklow and Wexford. They saw the Act of Union unite Ireland with Great Britain in 1800. Samuel died in 1818, three years after Waterloo, at the age of 58; Mary lived until 1833. Dying at 72 she saw, probably with no great enthusiasm, the rise of Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, Catholic Emancipation enfranchising the Catholic middle classes in 1829 and the Great Reform Bill of 1832, which did relatively little for Ireland. Had she lived a few months longer, the Act freeing slaves in the British Empire would have warmed her exhausted Quaker heart.

Mary's last years were brightened by the growing reputation of her son Robert. Now nearly fifty he had advanced steadily in business and community activities. He married Rebecca Chaytor, four years his junior in 1807. She bore six sons and two daughters before her death in 1830, at the early age of forty. The demands of childbirth undermined the health of many women of the period. Her husband, Robert, did not marry again, but remained a widower for the next nineteen years. He lived at a house in Birdhill, but had a new house, Ashbourne, designed by the architect, William Tinsley,⁶ later well known for his American Catholic churches, and conducted a store in Clonmel, probably with other interests in the grain trade. According to Tinsley's biographer,

Ashburn [sic] still stands across the Suir from Clonmel proper in County Waterford. It is a charming example of Gothic revival architecture with steep gables, clustered chimney pots, a bay window and suggestion of half-timbering. The plan is roughly T-shaped. Decorations include hoodmouldings over the windows and a porch hung with wooden tracery. This last feature, open-work ornamentation with repeated arch motive, reappears in a number of Tinsley's later buildings.

There is, however, some doubt as to whether Tinsley designed as well as built the house. Tinsley regarded his patron Davis as 'my old tried and esteemed friend'.⁷ According to Robert's obituary in the *Tipperary Free Press*, he was 'enlightened and refined, with a sound judgment and cultivated taste.' Though 'modest and retiring', he 'was always amongst the

foremost in promoting every good work'. The fostering of the local Mechanics Institute was his particular achievement.⁸

The advent of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-49, led to some criticism that the Quaker community continued exporting grain when Irish people were starving for want of potatoes. Nevertheless, Quakers became renowned for their charitable activity with no sectarian strings attached, 'that truly benevolent body', as the *Tipperary Free Press*, now called it.⁹ The *Young Ireland Nation* was equally emphatic: 'these Friends have indeed been friends to Irishmen.'¹⁰ However, Frank McCourt's best-selling *Angela's Ashes* attached the epithet 'souper' to those who took aid from the Quakers: 'woman, if you go to the Quakers you'll lose your immortal soul and the souls of your children.'¹¹ Professor Thomas P. O'Neill disagreed, and accorded the community 'the highest traditions of philanthropy... Their assistance was given to the poor, irrespective of religion, and there was not the slightest breath of suspicion cast on their motives.'¹² Indeed, the Quaker Ebenezer Shackleton, attending one of O'Connell's Repeal meetings in 1843, denied that he was a Protestant, as Friends protested against no religion.¹³

Members of the Davis family did their duty at the soup kitchens. When too much soup was made, Sarah Davis gave away 120 gallons gratuitously.¹⁴ The recipe was one quart of Indian meal, one quart of oatmeal with pepper and salt and onions and three herrings to 8 gallons of water. Robert Davis was commissioned by the Central Body of the Society of Friends to investigate the needs of the Burncourt-Tubrid area of Tipperary at the base of the picturesque Galtee Mountains. His subsequent 1847 report, published in the papers of the Central Committee of the Society of Friends on the Famine, has attracted the interest of local historians. Riding through Ballyboy, Clogheen, Burncourt, Tencurry, Ardfinnan and Castlegrace to view Quaker soup kitchens, Davis found 'there was no mistaking the shrunken looks and sharpened features of the poor creatures, who were slowly and with tottering steps assembling to partake of the accustomed bounty. Sheer destitution marked their attenuated countenances too legibly, to admit of a doubt that it was all a sad reality.' It was particularly 'heart-rending'. Demoralisation had set in, land lay desolate and uncultivated, while young and old were 'down-stricken and dejected'. Surprisingly, Davis found that flour and meal were conveyed past such miserable people without any escort, either because of their 'right feeling' or sheer exhaustion.¹⁵

Robert Davis, with Benjamin Grubb, unsuccessfully lobbied the Quaker head office in July 1847 for a loan for their local area. Jonathan Pim and Joseph Bewley, of the famous restaurants, as secretaries of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends, could not release the money. Charitable expenditure had been scaled down in the previous month and 'reached a low level by July when over three million people were being fed daily by the government.'¹⁶ The task of Famine relief had becoming too great for the Quakers though their efforts continued.

Quakers had no sympathy for the forlorn hope Tipperary insurrection of William Smith O'Brien in July 1848, but Robert Davis's friend William Tinsley attended O'Brien's trial at Clonmel and sketched the accused. It may have been the strain of these years that, despite his healthy appearance, wore down Robert's constitution and brought about his death on 4 July 1849. As T.P. O'Neill pointed out, 'Quakers earned the gratitude of the people for their great sacrifices; for the giving of assistance to the destitute in those tragic years of famine was fraught with danger of infection and death from the virulent typhus which spread through the country.'¹⁷ Tinsley, who soon emigrated to the United States, attended the



Ashbourne

at the age of 3. A family photograph at *Ashbourne* in 1863 shows a top-hatted William Davis reading a newspaper on a garden seat in front of the house, William and Sarah's eleven-year old daughter Emily (who died unmarried in 1908) seated in the foreground, a young man (probably Alfred from the first marriage) lolling on the grass, a smaller hatted figure with a stick (perhaps the six-year-old Percy dressed up). At a window, inside the house, is a lady in a cap. This was the unfortunate Sarah, perhaps already suffering the problems that required residence in Bloomfield Mental Hospital, Dublin, for several years before her death in 1877 at the age of 56.¹⁹ This hospital had been set up by Quakers such as Pim & Bewley in 1812 to treat mental disorders 'with kindness and the minimum of restraint.'²⁰ Swanbrook House, where Sarah finished her days, is now the Dublin Society of Friends headquarters. Sarah was buried in the Quaker Cemetery at Temple Hill, Blackrock, Co. Dublin.

Despite his sad family history, William Davis shared his father's devotion to public duty. For forty years he was an elected and influential Guardian of the Clonmel Poor Law Union, and for twenty-one a governor of the Clonmel District Lunatic Asylum, the latter office, given his wife's fate, had considerable poignancy. William was also Secretary to the Clonmel Gas Consumers' Union.²¹ Quaker records show him delegated to remonstrate with an errant Friend who had joined the River Police, an arms-bearing body. Failure to resign incurred automatic 'disowning'. Furthermore, as secretary to the Quaker Meeting, William had to sign what a member of the family described as 'one of the regrettable incidents of Quakerism', when the meeting disowned William's cousin, Richard Grubb, and his wife Maria for attending 'those hurtful and injurious entertainments called Balls at which Music and Dancing form a chief part of the amusements'.²²

Before William's death in 1888 in his eightieth year, his surviving son, Percy, had in about 1869 suffered a serious bout of scarlatina which totally destroyed his hearing. For the rest of his life, Percy, who spoke thickly and clumsily without hearing himself in his Tipperary accent, depended on sign language to communicate. According to a business superior, Percy's 'speech was such that one had to be familiar with [it] to get the gist, on occasion.' His mother's mental illness and death followed by his own disability might have made his future

funeral. Local praise of Quaker effort was not unqualified, shortly before Robert's death, his relatives the Grubbs faced a strike of boatmen on the Suir.¹⁸

Robert Davis's second son, William, was, at the time of his father's death a remarried widower. His first wife, Elizabeth, another Grubb, had died in 1842 at only 28, a few days after the birth of her second son who himself expired at thirteen. The Grubbs may have helped with the completion of *Ashbourne*. He married his second wife, Sarah Hughes, in 1845. Poor Sarah lost her first child Edwin at

difficult. Percy, however, gained experience in the family business. Deafness made sole responsibility unlikely, and he left for Dublin some years before his father's death. The Quaker community, however, looked after its own. Though partly disabled, Percy Davis was found a position in about 1880 as an accountant and secretary with another Quaker industrialist, George Shackleton and Sons, flour millers. Distantly related to the Shackletons, he was known as 'cousin Percy' or P.D. to the family. The firm's head office was then at 35 James's Street, Dublin.

Percy and his wife Christine (née Whitton) settled down in 'Mountain View', Clondalkin, about four miles from Lucan down a quiet country road now intersected by a massive motorway. Every morning, Percy took the train at the nearby Clondalkin station to Kingsbridge, now Heuston Station, walked for five minutes up Steeven's Lane to the Shackleton's head office at James Street where he worked with Abraham Shackleton. James Joyce mentions Shackleton's office in *Ulysses*. The firm was then considerable with three mills, Lyons, Straffan, at the 13th Lock on the Grand Canal, Grange, at the 12th Lock (provender for grinding maize and bruised oats), and Anna Liffey in Lucan. There were also two bakeries in Meath Street. Percy's deafness was 'useful, for any requests or instructions had to be written down.' His deafness could, however, be disconcerting as when he slammed down his desk lid 'with a resounding crash'. Percy was impressed with the 'buy Irish' campaign of the early 1900s and pointed with pride to the Irish trade mark on the Shackleton flour bags. He may not have realised that a director of the firm, William Shackleton, was a member of Arthur Griffith's infant Sinn Féin party,²³ a sponsor of the Irish trade campaign and destined to revolutionise Ireland.

With Percy Davis's settlement in Lucan, the links between this branch of the Davis Quakers and Tipperary was finally broken. Percy's son Harold ended his connection with the Quakers when he joined the British Army during World War I. The descendants of Percy Davis now live in England and Australia. Percy Davis was buried in the Society of Friends' cemetery at Temple Hill, Dublin. Earlier Davises are interred in the Quaker cemetery at Clonmel. Unlike the headstones of the Grubb family, their graves are unmarked. Records of individual burial plots still exist.

On 30 June 1989 the present writer, a great-great-grandson of Robert Davis whose actions in the Great Famine are mentioned above, was received by the Mayor of Clonmel, Tommy Norris, as a gesture in recognition of the Davis family's contribution to the district.

The story of this family illustrates the rich texture of Irish society, where people of many faiths and backgrounds can find their niche and earn acceptance and full recognition for their activity. Originally under some suspicion from their fellow citizens, the Quakers during the Great Famine established an enviable reputation for philanthropy, maintained into the 20th century when they worked to mediate in the Ulster Troubles.

References

¹Stephen Skuce, *The Faiths of Ireland* (Dublin, Columba Press, 2006), p. 198.

²I thank the Society of Friends Library, formerly at Eustace Street, Dublin, for the genealogical information in this article.

³Power, Thomas P., *Land, Politics and Society in Eighteenth-Century Tipperary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 7, 38, 46-9, 53, 65 & 115.

⁴*Freeman's Journal*, 23 January 1833, quoted the *Tipperary Free Press*: 'these meek professors of forebearance have taken every opportunity in their power, not only of injuring the humbler classes of Roman Catholics

- by a system of exclusive dealing, but also of outraging the feelings of most respectable commercial gentlemen by studied insults.' Clonmel Quakers were 'more thoroughly imbued with illiberal and jealous feelings—with an intolerant and vindictive spirit, than any class of persons in his Majesty's dominions.'
- ⁵Grubb, Geoffrey Watkins, *The Grubbs of Tipperary: Studies in Hereditary and Character*, Cork, Mercier, 1972, pp. 85, 100 & 108. See also Isabel Grubb, *Quakers in Ireland*, Swathmore, 1927,
- ⁶Tinsley (1804-1885), emigrated to Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1851. See J.D. Forbes, 'The Tinsley portrait sketches of the William Smith O'Brien Trial', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Ireland*, 1953, pp. 46-52.
- ⁷J.D. Forbes, *Victorian Architect: The Life and Work of William Tinsley*, Bloomington (Indiana University Press), 1953, p. 16.
- ⁸*Tipperary Free Press*, 7 July 1849.
- ⁹*Tipperary Free Press*, 19 May 1849.
- ¹⁰*Nation*, 10 April 1847.
- ¹¹Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*, London (Harper Collins), 1996, p.65.
- ¹²T.P. O'Neill, 'The Society of Friends and the Great Famine', *Studies*, Vol. 313, June 1950, p. 213. See also Robin B. Goodbody, *Quaker Relief Work in Ireland's Great Hunger* (Quaker Tapestry Booklets, Cumbria, 1995).
- ¹³*Nation*, 19 August 1843.
- ¹⁴Grubb Historical Collection, Committee Record, p. 11 (September 1846), Society of Friends Archives, Dublin.
- ¹⁵*Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847*, (Dublin, Hodges & Smith, 1852), pp. 176-8., quoted by *Cahir Heritage News Letter*, Oct./Nov. 1987.
- ¹⁶*Clonmel Chronicle*, 21 July 1848 and Goodbody, *Quaker Relief Work*, pp. 20-21.
- ¹⁷O'Neill, *Studies*, p. 213.
- ¹⁸*Dublin Evening Mail*, 20 April 1849.
- ¹⁹Interview with Mrs Pearl Lamb of Society of friends Library, Eustace Street, Dublin, 15 September 1982.
- ²⁰Maurice J. Wigham, *The Irish Quakers: A Short History of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland* (Dublin, Historical Committee of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland, 1992), p. 74.
- ²¹*Clonmel Chronicle*, Tipperary and Waterford Advertiser, 29 December 1888.
- ²²G.W. Grubb, *The Grubbs*, pp. 140-41.
- ²³See Richard Davis, *Arthur Griffith and Non-Violent Sinn Fein* (Dublin, Anvil, 1974), p. 141.