

Contribution to the Heroes of the Great Irish Famine project (D/AHG)

The Religious Society of Friends, Quakers or simply 'Friends' as they also known, are a Christian group who are well remembered in Ireland for their compassionate assistance to victims of the Great Irish Famine. At the time of the famine, there were approximately 3,000 Friends in Ireland out of a population of 8.5 million. However, the impact of their work far outweighed their numbers and the gratitude of people in Ireland resonates today.

The Quakers were a practical and solution focussed Society who not only distributed aid but also sought long-term solutions to the situation which Ireland found itself in during this bleak time in our nation's history. They were highly organised and through a network of Committees managed to create a structured system of relief to the areas hardest hit by famine in Ireland. Although often remembered for their work in creating 'soup kitchens' across parts of the country most affected by the devastation of famine, they did much more than this. They did not seek to convert people to their beliefs which was common amongst other faiths at the time but offered help and assistance to anyone in need. They also managed to give those suffering the effects of famine in Ireland a voice by spreading awareness of the true conditions in Ireland at this time, generating aid and assistance from abroad.

News of conditions in famine stricken areas across Ireland was already beginning to come to the attention of some influential members of the Religious Society of Friends. Many had witnessed firsthand the devastation caused by successive potato blights and were already providing aid in their localities around the country but at a meeting in November 1846, it was decided to co-ordinate efforts to have maximum impact and the Central Relief Committee was established in Dublin. This would later develop into a system of auxiliary committees around the country in the areas most affected by the famine. Joseph Bewley and Jonathan Pim, prominent members of the Religious Society of Friends, were instrumental in setting up the CRC and were Joint Secretaries. The CRC immediately set about gathering information on famine conditions and documenting the situation around the country. Reports of the famine in Ireland had reached London and a relief committee was also established by the Quakers there which in turn established links with the CRC to co-ordinate efforts and help with the fundraising efforts. Shortly after the worst years of the famine had passed Bewley and Pim published a very detailed account of the work of their committee. Reprinted in 1996 this remains one of the most detailed descriptions of the suffering and of the attempts to bring relief.¹

The Quakers also reached further afield and spread their fundraising efforts to North America and Canada. Many in America believed that the situation in Ireland was being managed and that the famine was contained. However, through the writings of Irish and English Quakers, the truth of the situation was publicised and fundraising began in earnest. Both funding and other aid came from North America, Canada and Great Britain such as clothing, food supplies and boilers for soup. In fact fifty boilers were donated by the Quaker family of Darby, the Coalbrookdale ironmasters.^[1] The Quakers also persuaded the Government to provide more aid for the starving population.

The Friends documented everything they saw and much of this documentation survives today painting a vivid and often harrowing picture of life during this time. One member of the

¹ Johnson, J. and R. Goodbody. 1996.

^[1] Maurice J. Wigham: *The Irish Quakers (1992)*

'Friends', William E. Forster (whose son would later become Chief Secretary of Ireland) travelled extensively throughout Counties Roscommon, Leitrim, Donegal, Sligo, Galway, Fermanagh, Mayo, Cavan and Longford, documenting conditions he saw in a series of letters published by the CRC. These letters served to raise awareness about the plight of Irish people and boost the coffers of the fundraising effort. They also served to recruit volunteers to help the 'Friends' in their work. The letters outline the terrible conditions endured by people during this time. In one letter, W. E. Forster writes:

"Poor wretches in the last stage of famine, imploring to be received into the (work) house; women who had six or seven children begging that even two or three might be taken in some of these children were worn to skeleton, their features sharpened with hunger, their limbs wasted almost to the bone"

In another letter to his mother, he said:

"It is an awful crisis, the greatest possible number living on the lowest possible product, and that product is now universally failing, starving the people, and ruining the landlords, who will now reap the fruits of their thoughtlessness"

The Quakers were well organised and were careful not to duplicate the work of other organisations and the Government at the time. Under Irish Poor Law, an elected board of guardians were responsible for looking after the poor and operating the workhouse system. However, once the workhouse was full, they had no obligation to offer assistance to anyone outside the system^[2]. This was woefully inadequate and the Quakers filled an important gap. One of their most important schemes was the establishment of soup kitchens across the country. The soup kitchens provided nutritious, low-cost soup to those in need and as relief supplies poured in from North America (and Canada), as much as possible was turned into cooked food – Irish people called it “stirabout”^[3].

Huge boilers were distributed, 37 in Leinster, 65 in Connacht, 35 in Ulster and 137 in Munster. The recipe for the soup was as follows^[4]:

100 gallons of water
75 lbs of meat (salt beef or pork)
35 lbs of dried peas
21 lbs each of oatmeal and barley
1.5 lbs of pepper
14 lbs of salt.

However, the Quakers did not believe in distributing aid in isolation. They had a strategic view and much like the NGOs of today, they sought to alleviate the causes of famine, develop prevention strategies and promote land reform in Ireland. They wanted to improve the situation of the famine stricken people so that when the famine was finally over they would

^[2] Robin B. Goodbody: Quaker Relief Work in Ireland's Great Hunger 1846-1849 (1995)

^[3] Helen Hatton: The largest amount of good: Quaker relief efforts. Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, Ed. J.Crowley, W.J. Smyth and M.Murphy (2012).

^[4]Helen Hatton (2012)

have sustainable futures and avoid being dependent solely on the potato crop for food which could lead to becoming trapped in a cycle of poverty^[5].

It is well documented that among the causes of the famine were the lack of security of tenure; lack of fixed rent beyond the current year, an increasing population leading to pressure on the small landholdings and an over reliance on the potato crop for many peasant farmers. In this regard, the Quakers sought to help peasant farmers to diversify their crops. A seed distribution scheme was initiated by the Quakers to encourage people to plant alternative crops such as turnips, peas etc. The Quakers also set about revising farming methods. They were ambitious in this task and purchased a model farm in Co. Galway to teach people how to farm more efficiently and effectively.

They also sought to improve the lot of the fishing communities in Ireland. Many fishing communities had sold or pawned their fishing equipment to buy food and the Quakers gave out loans or grants to improve fishing in some of the poorest areas. They encouraged new fishing methods and set up fishing stations around the west coast. Some projects proved unsuccessful in the long-run but gave vital employment and food during a critical time and saved many fishing communities from ruin.^[6]

In addition, they also set up small clothes making businesses to help local communities generate income of their own and provide work and income for women. As Thomas P.O'Neill said in "The Society of Friends and the Great Famine" published in *Studies* in 1950, "the real merit of the activities of the Quakers... lay not in the immediate steps taken to alleviate distress but in the approach to the fundamental economic causes of poverty in Ireland"^[7].

Despite the reluctance of the Quakers to become involved in political debate, after the famine they remained convinced of the need for land reform and had a significant impact on land law reform and public opinion from 1849 onwards. Led by CRC Secretary Jonathan Pim, the Quakers embarked on a campaign for land reform which culminated in the great Land Act of 1881 which finally gave the Irish tenantry the 'three Fs' of fair rents, fixity of tenure and fair sale.

The numbers whose lives the Quakers saved will never be known. However, the Irish people today will always remember the kindness and compassion showed by this small community to the people across the country who struggled during the Great Irish Famine.

ENDS

^[5] Helen Hatton (2012).

^[6] Robin B. Goodbody (1995)

^[7] Robin B. Goodbody (1995)

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