

# Some Irish/Welsh Methodist Links

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It was a pleasant summer morning as the packet from Holyhead made its way up the Liffey into Dublin port on Sunday, 9th August, in the year of grace 1747. The crossing of the Irish Sea had been free of storm, and had taken just over twenty-five hours, thanks to a favouring gale. One passenger noticed that this wind was very localised, as a ship about a mile away appeared to be totally becalmed. The journey, even more fortunately, had been free of danger. For several days a French privateer had been harrying shipping in the vicinity, and only that morning it had been captured and brought into Dublin Bay.<sup>1</sup>

At a little before ten o'clock the ship tied up at George's Quay, and the passengers began to disembark. Among the first to come ashore were two or three men soberly dressed in black. There is some dispute about the exact number. That they were among the first we need not doubt, as their leader was always impatient of wasted time. He advised his followers, 'Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed.'<sup>2</sup>

He was a small man, not quite five feet six inches in height, but well proportioned, lean and muscular. The most striking features of his fresh-complexioned face were a prominent pointed nose, and piercing blue eyes. Unfashionably, he did not wear a wig, which he regarded as an unnecessary extravagance; nor did he powder his hair. Descriptions of its colour vary from black to auburn; it was probably dark brown with somewhat lighter highlights. It was luxuriant, and he wore it long. He was dressed, as always, with fastidious neatness, in a suit of plain black cloth, the breeches fastened at the knees without buckles. The black of his costume was relieved only by the snowy white bands at his throat, which fell from the short upright collar of his coat, marking him as a priest of the Church of England. For all his lack of height he had a commanding presence, and was not a man to be easily overlooked. He was then forty-four years old.<sup>3</sup>

This was the Reverend John Wesley, Master of Arts, Fellow of Lincoln College in Oxford, and leader of the Methodist societies in England. He was arriving in Ireland for the first of twenty-one visits he would make to this country over a period of forty-three years. The background to his coming is interesting.

In 1739 he had begun the work from which the present-day Methodist Church has grown. Part of the Evangelical Revival, its aim was to revitalise the spirituality of the Established Church, which had fallen to a very low ebb in many places. Establishing bases in London and Bristol and, a little later, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Wesley travelled throughout the country, preaching in whatever premises afforded, from assembly rooms to barns, and if none afforded, then at market places or in fields. Very quickly a number of others joined him. Those who responded to their preaching were formed into societies, which adopted the name Methodist, first applied in derision to Wesley and his friends by the undergraduates of Oxford.

His first sermon out of doors had been preached to the miners of Bristol, and it was from the working classes that most of the members of his societies were recruited. This class also supplied the non-commissioned officers of the British regiments, and it was not long before a

significant number of these were Methodists. Between the Cromwellian and Williamite Wars in the middle and at the end of the seventeenth century more than half the land in Ireland had changed ownership. Both Cromwell and William III rewarded their followers with grants of land in Ireland which had been declared forfeit by their opponents. This created a new landlord class, predominantly Protestant, whereas the old landowners had been predominantly Roman Catholic.

The new landowners felt a considerable measure of insecurity. The peasant population was almost entirely Roman Catholic, and sympathetic to the old regime. The newcomers feared that at any moment these would rise and restore the former owners. Their nervousness was not helped by the government in London, which was itself deeply insecure from the accession of George I in 1714 until the death of the Old Pretender in 1766, when the likelihood of a Stuart restoration evaporated. The new landlords, generally now termed 'the ascendancy', demanded protection by the army. Originally limited to 12,000 men, this garrison rose during the course of the eighteenth century to 15,000. In 1704 these were quartered in no fewer than 263 barracks, but by the middle of the century this number had dropped to 69. The vast majority of these troops were recruited in Britain, and from the middle of the eighteenth century likely to have Methodists among their junior officers.

It was one of these junior officers, whose name has not been remembered, who, posted to Dublin, formed the first Methodist society in Ireland. Quite soon the leadership of this society passed into the hands of one Benjamin La Trobe, a Baptist who had studied in Glasgow. His son, Benjamin H. La Trobe was later the architect of several important buildings in America, including parts of the Capitol and the Supreme Court. One of the members of the society was a man called Antisel Tayler who had spent some time in London and had heard John Cennick. Cennick had been one of Wesley's Methodist preachers, but had joined the Moravian Church. Tayler persuaded the society to invite Cennick to Dublin. It took several letters to persuade the reluctant Cennick to make the journey, but he eventually came in 1746, and the following year led most of the society to form the nucleus of a Moravian congregation in Dublin.<sup>4</sup>

What happened next is not quite clear, but in the summer of 1747 one of Wesley's preachers, Thomas Williams arrived in Dublin. No letter survives, but it is very probable that some member of the society wrote either to Wesley or to one of Wesley's preachers, for Wesley was disinclined to go anywhere without being sure of a base from which to work. It is hard to believe that Williams made the journey on his own initiative. He is the first Welsh link with Irish Methodism.

He came of good Welsh family, and had been accepted as one of Wesley's itinerant preachers in 1741 or 1742. He seems to have been a man with ambitions beyond his capabilities, and in 1744, against the advice of Charles Wesley, he sought ordination from one of the English bishops. He was refused. He seems to have blamed the Wesleys for his refusal, and turned violently against them. He described them as 'papists, tyrants and enemies of the Church', and spread slanderous stories about Charles. This threatened to divide the Methodist societies in England.<sup>5</sup>

On August 2nd of 1744 Wesley wrote: 'I was constrained to declare in the society that Thomas Williams was no longer in the connexion with us'.<sup>6</sup> Williams seems to have realised his error, and confessed his fault, for he was again used as a preacher, though it is doubtful if Wesley ever trusted him fully again. He continued to show signs of unsteadiness, and was finally excluded from the Methodist connexion in the early 1750s. All of which raises questions as to why Williams should have been sent to Dublin under the circumstances. To

these no answer is at present available.

On his arrival in Dublin Williams began to preach, probably on Oxmantown Green, which was then a place of popular resort on the north side of the river. He formed a small society the nucleus of which appears to have been a number of people whom he drew away from the Moravians. The Moravian Archives say:

Mr. Williams, one of the Methodists, who has some time ago been obliged to leave Mr. Wesley for slander, debts, etc. came over to Ireland and pretended to be a Brother, and said he was well acquainted with and loved Mr. Cennick, and by which means (although what he said was false) he got in favour with some of the Awakened Souls, and began to preach, and then sent over for Mr. Wesley

Williams's letter to Wesley does not appear to have survived. Whether it was simply a report of what he was doing, or whether it included a request for help must remain a matter of speculation. In either case it was sufficient to bring Wesley to Dublin in the August of that year.

For his coming Williams rented a disused Lutheran chapel in Great Marlborough Street, and it was the intention that the Methodist society should continue to use it indefinitely. However, in late August one of the periodic riots between the butchers' apprentices of Ormond Market and the Weavers' apprentices of the Coombe found new prey in the Methodists, badly damaged the Marlborough Street chapel, and continued to rampage for several days. A number of the Methodists were injured, but fortunately none seriously. Not surprisingly, the owner of the chapel took alarm for the safety of her premises, and gave the Methodists notice to quit. Later, when it was evident that the attacks were not going to be repeated, she allowed them to return, but in the September of 1747 it was necessary for the Methodists to find another place.

The eyes of Thomas Williams were on Skinners Alley. There a disused Baptist chapel had been taken by the Moravians at a rent of £8 a year. Their first year was nearly up, but they obviously expected the lease to be renewed. However, Williams had met the Baptist Trustee, Samuel Edwards, and had suggested that the Methodists would be willing to pay twice the sum. The dispute which followed was extremely acrimonious, and created a breach between the two bodies that was not healed for many years.<sup>7</sup> The immediate outcome was the occupation of the premises by the Methodists, and the removal of the Moravians to a site between Bishop Street and Lower Kevin Street where they worshipped for more than two centuries. The Methodists only occupied the building for a few years, vacating it when they built a new chapel at Whitefriar Street.

The term 'Methodist' is now exclusively applied to members of the denomination which grew from the work of John Wesley. It was not always so. Associated with him in Oxford was George Whitefield, who was also a preacher of the Evangelical Revival, to whom the term was also applied. Whitefield differed from Wesley in that he was Calvinist while Wesley favoured a modified form of Arminianism. Whitefield influenced Selina, the widow of the 7th Earl of Huntingdon, who set about the conversion of the aristocracy with a zeal equal to that which Wesley brought to the conversion of the working classes. The difference was, of course, that Lady Huntingdon could not preach herself. That would not have been socially acceptable. She had to do it through others, and so established a college at Trevecca in Brecknockshire where young men could be trained to preach Calvinistic evangelical doctrine. The firm grip which she maintained on the college, and her interference, did much to reduce its effectiveness.<sup>8</sup>

It was Horace Walpole who nicknamed Lady Huntingdon ‘The Queen of the Methodists’. In fact for several years there was a real contest as to who should rule the Methodist roost, and it came to a head in 1770 when Wesley published the Minutes of the Methodist Conference, firmly declaring his Arminian position.

Lady Huntingdon had a cousin, the Hon. and Revd. Walter Shirley. He was the brother of three successive Earls Ferrers, of whom the first, Laurence Shirley, 4th Earl Ferrers, was sentenced to death for the murder of his land steward. As a peer of the realm he had the privilege of being hanged with a silken rope. Walter was the rector of Loughrea in county Galway and shared his cousin’s Calvinist opinions. The two of them circulated a letter calling on all their Calvinistic supporters to descend on Bristol in 1771 at the time when Wesley was holding his next Conference there, and to go in a body to demand the recantation of the Minutes which so offended them. In the event the forces failed to respond to the call, and it was a very tiny group which Shirley led to meet Wesley. The Minutes were not withdrawn, and a vigorous though not always dignified pamphlet war ensued, to which Shirley made some contribution. When in 1779 Lady Huntingdon seceded from the Church of England and established The Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion, Shirley parted company with her and returned to his parish in Loughrea. Even Ireland, which he had described as ‘a dreadful Country. . . unprincipled and lawless’ was preferable to nonconformity.<sup>9</sup> He died not long afterwards.

In 1752 Wesley summoned the first Irish Methodist Conference to meet in Limerick. From 1756 it met every two or three years when Wesley was in this country. By 1782 the work in Ireland had grown to the point where a Conference was really necessary every year. However, it did not suit Wesley to come to Ireland more than once in two years, and in the years when he did not come himself he sent Dr. Thomas Coke. Wesley died in 1791, and Coke came to Ireland in 1792. Then from 1794 until 1809 Coke came every year. His last visit was in 1813. He thus became the Welshman with the most significant influence on Irish Methodism.

Thomas Coke was born at Brecon in 1747, where his father was an apothecary and an alderman. Educated at Brecon Grammar School and Jesus College, Oxford, he took his master’s degree in Arts in 1770, the year in which he was ordained to the diaconate of the Church of England by the Bishop of Oxford. In 1771 he became curate of South Petherton in Somerset, and a year later was ordained priest by the Bishop of St David’s. In 1775 Oxford awarded him a doctorate in Civil Law. As was the case with so many others at the time, the reading of Alleine’s *Alarm to the Unconverted* had a strong effect on him, and led him to a greater religious seriousness.<sup>10</sup>

The turning point in his life, however, came in the August of 1775 when, at the home of his friend James Brown, vicar of Kingston St Mary, near Taunton, he met John Wesley. Coke warmly embraced the Methodist way of doing things, and within eight months had been dismissed from his curacy. Of independent means, he now threw in his lot fully with the Methodist societies, and soon became Wesley’s right-hand man. In 1784 Wesley ordained him as superintendent of the Methodist societies in America, an office he was intended to exercise jointly with Francis Asbury. However, Coke did not settle permanently in America, but paid nine visits there. The American Methodists referred to him as Bishop Coke, a title which he liked, but which the English Methodists would not recognise. It was his vision which inspired the commencement of Methodist foreign missions, and he died at sea while on the way to open work in Ceylon in 1814.

In 1798 Coke came as usual to preside over the Irish Methodist Conference. The year 1798

has been called the Year of Liberty. Inspired by the ideas of the French Revolution, the United Irishmen planned a simultaneous rising in various parts of the country to overthrow the government and establish a republic in which, as Wolfe Tone hoped, the names of Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter would merge in the common name of Irishman. Plans were leaked to the authorities, and the rising in Dublin was frustrated by the arrest of the leaders. Elsewhere there were risings in Kildare, in Wexford and in Antrim and Down, and a French army landed at Killala in Mayo. However, these did not happen simultaneously, and the government was able to put them down one by one. The conflict in Wexford was marked by particular cruelty on both sides.

It is nowadays generally believed that Irish Protestants are Pro-British, and Irish Catholics are Nationalist, though this is not necessarily true for every individual. It was even less true in 1798. The leadership of the United Irishmen in Dublin was predominantly Protestant. In Wexford the leadership was mainly Roman Catholic, but two members of the Church of Ireland, which is Anglican, shared the command of the insurgent forces. About a dozen Catholic priests played important roles in the leadership of the Wexford rising, but the bishop and the great majority of the priests of the diocese supported the government. In Antrim and Down the leadership was mainly Presbyterian. In fact, of the four main Churches in Ireland today the one which was consistently on the government side in 1798 was the Methodist. In this was a large Pro-British element, but the ease with which their descendants transferred their allegiance to the Irish Republic in the twentieth century suggests that an equally large element would have been opposed to violent revolution.

One of the measures which the government adopted to stifle the rising was to prohibit all meetings of more than five men. The Chief Secretary for Ireland at the time was Lord Castlereagh, and his private secretary, Alexander Knox, was the son of a Londonderry Methodist of the same name. The influence of the younger Knox was instrumental in obtaining a licence from the Lord Lieutenant to enable the Conference to meet as usual. It was the only meeting so licenced that year.<sup>11</sup> The amenability of the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Cornwallis, to Knox's advocacy of the licence may well have been determined by the fact that the Methodists were known to be, in the contemporary phrase, 'King and Country men'.

Prior to the meeting Coke, as usual, carried out a tour of the country, and in the course of this observed some of the destruction caused by the conflict, and heard stories of the atrocities. The ins and outs of Irish politics were something of which he probably knew nothing. He saw only that an attempt had been made to overthrow the government, in the course of which many lives had been lost. As an evangelical it was his conviction that the best way to prevent a recurrence of such events was to convert everyone to evangelical Christianity. He asked the Conference what it proposed to do about it. The Conference had no idea.

However, by the time it met again in 1799 the Conference had had time to reflect, and it proposed to establish a general mission in Ireland. It would set apart three preachers who would travel the country preaching wherever opportunity afforded. What was new and significant in the plan, was that all three were required to be fluent in the Irish language. That was a barrier in this country that Wesley had never overcome. He had assumed that everyone spoke English, and therefore could be addressed in English. What he overlooked was that the majority of the Irish people spoke among themselves and thought in Irish. They used English only when necessary in dealing with people who knew no Irish. For this reason the early Irish Methodists were people of English, Welsh, French or German background. While many of the Irish listened to the Methodist preachers, few joined the Methodist societies, probably reckoning that

they were preaching to 'their own people'. In 1799 the Irish Methodist Conference began to take the Irish language seriously.

The first three preachers appointed were Charles Graham, James McQuigg, and Gideon Ouseley. After a short while McQuigg returned to circuit work, and Graham did so a few years later, both being replaced by other preachers. Ouseley spent the whole of his ministry in the work of the general mission, and was one of the most colourful characters in the Irish Methodist connexion.<sup>12</sup>

The Ouseleys were a Northamptonshire family who incurred heavy losses supporting the King in the Cromwellian wars, and were obliged to sell their estates. Reckoning that life would be cheaper in Ireland, three of them moved to Wexford, to Limerick, and to Galway. The one who went to Galway settled in the town of Dunmore, and it was there in 1762 that Gideon was born. His father intended that he should be a clergyman in the Established Church and so gave him a good education. What was much less usual for such children, Gideon as a boy was allowed to wander freely among the cabins of the Irish people in the town. There he acquired two things that were to be most useful in his later life. One was a fluency in the Irish language, and the other was a familiarity with Irish folklore and music.

His father's ambitions were never fulfilled, and Gideon grew into a wild young squireen, whom marriage failed to tame. He was not twenty-one when he married Harriet Wills. It was to be a very happy marriage in spite of his early wildness. On one occasion, in the course of a drunken scuffle after a wildfowling expedition, the fowling piece of one of his friends was accidentally discharged into Gideon's face. He lost his right eye, and thereafter always covered the wound with a black patch. This gave to his face, a half-sinister, half-comical aspect which helped to draw attention to him.

The turning point in his life came when a detachment of the Fourth Royal Irish Dragoon Guards was sent to the cavalry barracks in Dunmore. Some of these were Methodists, and their Quartermaster Sergeant Robinet engaged a room in one of the local inns for Methodist meetings. That Dragoons should go to an inn to pray was not to be believed, and Ouseley was sure that this was a cover for something else. He determined to find out what it was, and was very surprised, on going to one meeting, to find Robinet leading prayers, reading the Bible and delivering a sermon. This was an odd sort of soldier. Ouseley went again, and again, until it gradually dawned on him that the Dragoons were genuine. In the end Robinet's addresses and his conversations with the young man convinced Ouseley, who became a Methodist himself. His education fitted him to be a schoolmaster, and he and Harriet moved to Sligo, where he started a small school, and began to work as a Methodist local preacher. It was from this that in 1799 the Conference called him to the general mission.

One of Ouseley's methods made full use of the lore he had acquired from his neighbours in childhood. He would ride to a fair, and, still seated on his horse, begin to sing. The people would immediately recognise the air as one which they all knew well, but they would not recognise the words. Ouseley wrote a number of Christian hymns in Irish to fit the folk-tunes. The appearance of this little man with his eye patch sitting on a horse singing hymns to Irish tunes would soon attract an audience, and when Ouseley thought it sufficiently large, he would begin to preach, still on horseback. The fact that he and his colleagues preached from horseback earned them the nickname 'Cavalry Preachers'.

Their work was eminently successful. Of course, not all of their converts were Irish-speaking, for they did not confine their preaching to that language. They preached happily and effectively in English when appropriate. The growth of Methodism in Ireland through the first

half of the nineteenth century owed more to them than to any other single agency. Ouseley himself died in Dublin in 1839, some three months after his seventy-seventh birthday.

We have noted that there was more than one strand to early Methodism than the Wesleyan. Another of the early Methodists was Howell Harris, who was born at Trevecca in Brecknockshire in 1714, and died there in 1773. At the age of twenty-one he went to Oxford, but remained for only one term. Disgusted by the immorality of the University, he returned to Wales, and began evangelistic work.<sup>13</sup> He met Whitefield in 1739, and under his influence became a convinced Calvinist. Without Harris's assistance Lady Huntingdon could not have established her college at Trevecca, and indeed the building there now commemorates Harris rather than the Countess. It was to the labours of Harris more than to those of any other that the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church owed its origin and growth in the eighteenth century. About thirty years ago this Church changed its name to the Presbyterian Church in Wales, leaving the name Methodist to the Wesleyan Arminians.

By the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century there was a small but significant Welsh presence in Dublin. Much of this was provided by Welsh sailors working between the port of Dublin and various Welsh ports. For some years the only spiritual provision made for these was organised by a Welsh sea captain. Then in 1831 the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists obtained the use of a Lutheran chapel in Poolbeg Street at times when the Lutherans were not using it. They proposed to send a preacher to Dublin each week. The arrangement proved unsatisfactory, and lapsed after a very short while.<sup>14</sup>

In the following year a second and more successful attempt was made, when the Revd Robert Williams was sent as a missionary to Dublin. He obtained more satisfactory terms for the use of the same Lutheran chapel. However, worship there was occasionally disturbed by noisy crowds attending Repeal meetings in a nearby hall, part of Daniel O'Connell's campaign for the repeal of the Act of Union. Talk began about the possibility of building a chapel somewhere else. Towards this end a collection was organised among the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists and their friends in North Wales, and in March 1838 the Foundation Stone of a chapel was laid in Talbot Street. The site was taken on a lease of 999 years, and the building was soon ready for use. Four opening services were held on Sunday, 11th November, of the same year. Preachers were: at 9.30 in the morning the Revd Cadwaladr Williams, at noon the Revd W. H. Cooper, and at 2.30 in the afternoon the Revd W. Roberts. The evening service at 6.30 had two sermons, a second address by the Revd W. Roberts and one by the Revd C. Williams. The building cost £500, of which £110 was raised in Dublin. In Welsh tradition the chapel was given the name Bethel. A small chapel at Dun Laoghaire, which for some years served as a sort of chapel of ease to Bethel, was known affectionately as Bethel Bach. To most Dubliners Bethel was familiarly 'The Welsh Chapel'. In 1839 a small house was built adjoining the chapel, and housed the missionary.

However, in 1841 the Revd Robert Williams returned to Wales and was not replaced for twenty-four years. During those years the services were supplied from Wales, ministers coming from one part of Wales or another for one or two Sundays. They were accommodated in the house, where a Scottish lady was housekeeper. In spite of this apparently awkward arrangement, the work seemed to thrive, and in 1862 a gallery was added, for the exclusive use of sailors. Some of the pews here were fitted with spittoons, and it was offered as an added inducement to the more reluctant sailors that they could continue to smoke during the sermons! The chapel preserved the original Methodist tradition of seating the men on one side of the

chapel and the women on the other. If, as happened on occasion, a young man strayed to the wrong side, the leading figure in the chapel, Captain Ifan Lloyd, was known to correct him by calling 'Starboard side, my boy!'

In 1865 a resident minister was again appointed to Bethel in Talbot Street in the person of the Revd Edward Jones, who remained until 1878. At the time of his arrival it was recorded that there were fourteen Welsh families resident in the city, and attending services there. In addition there were a number of Welsh menservants employed by some of the Dublin gentry, and a large number of Welsh girls in domestic service in the city. The final component of the congregation was Welsh students attending Trinity College. Although University Colleges were formed at Aberystwyth in 1872 and at Bangor in 1884, the University of Wales was not founded until 1893, and prior to those dates it was easier for Welsh students to cross the Irish sea than to take the land routes to the English universities. Sunday by Sunday the congregations numbered between seventy and eighty people, but not all were Welsh Calvinistic Methodists. The chapel had become a 'rendez-vous' for all of the Dublin Welsh, and the list of deacons included a few Congregationalists, and even, surprisingly, one Anglican.

In 1878 the Revd Edward Jones was replaced by the Revd J.R. Jones, and in 1885 the second Mr. Jones was succeeded by the Revd John Owen, who, to distinguish him from another of the same name, was nicknamed John Dublin Owen. He completed his ministry in Dublin by having the chapel partly rebuilt in 1894, and later that year the Revd John Lewis was appointed in his place. Lewis remained for forty years, and was noted for the composition of hymns in Welsh. However, he was presiding over a declining congregation, and when he retired in 1934 he was not replaced.

For the next five years the chapel reverted to the practice of having a minister from a different part of Wales each Sunday. It was the Second World War that put an end to that in 1939, and for a few years the building was let to a Baptist congregation. Finally, it was sold in 1944 to Griffiths, who adapted it to serve as a boot shop. It is still recognisable as a chapel, but is now used as a gambling hall.

It was in 1838 that the Welsh Chapel in Dublin was opened. Seven years later, the potato crop partially failed. It had been infected by a fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, which originated in the New England states, and was carried to England, Ireland, the Netherlands and northern France. Only in Ireland was the failure serious, as the landless farm labourers, and those eking out a living from less than one third of an acre depended exclusively on the potato for food. The partial failure caused them considerable distress, but the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel instituted some relief measures, and these combined with voluntary efforts eased the situation. People hoped for a bountiful crop in 1846, as such had always followed a poor harvest in previous years. But in 1846 the crop failed completely.

The poorer rural population was now faced with utter starvation. To make matters worse, Daniel O'Connell, in pursuit of Irish political aims, had unseated Peel's government, which had been replaced by Lord John Russell's Whig administration. It was a basic tenet of Whig philosophy that market forces should be allowed to run their course without government interference. To some extent they were obliged to modify that doctrine, but it, combined with the conflicting reports which came from different parts of the country, reduced the effectiveness of relief. More than a million people died, and as many more fled the country, which they believed to be doomed.

In fact, the immediate causes of death were seldom famine, but more often the diseases which



were endemic in a community which knew little of hygiene, and to which the hungry had no resistance whatever. Commonly remembered as ‘famine fever’, there were actually two fevers involved: typhoid and relapsing fever. For some reason which has not been explained cholera, also endemic, did not strike until 1848.

One of the areas of the country of which much contemporary documentation survives was West Cork, and the town of Skibbereen, which during the Famine earned the nickname ‘Skibbereen-where-they-ate-the donkeys’, was the home of James H. Swanton. Swanton was a Methodist and a miller, who owned several ships which operated out of the little harbour of Baltimore, within ten miles of Skibbereen. With these he imported grain from various ports in England and Wales. During the height of the famine, instead of filling his ships with ballast for the return journey, Swanton used them to give free passage to any starving people who wished to avail themselves of the opportunity.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Daniel Donovan, who was the workhouse physician in West Cork, co-operated with Swanton in this scheme by using funds at his disposal to supply the passengers with ‘sea-stock’, which was presumably rations for the voyage. The authorities were furious with both of them for ‘shovelling paupers’ into England and Wales. Their crime was threefold.

In the first place, they were defying the Whig principle that each parish should support its own poor, a defiance that was all the worse in official eyes for the fact that they were not simply moving the poor from one Irish parish to another. They were moving them from Irish parishes to English and Welsh ones.

In the second place, the funds which Donovan was using were presumably those granted by the government to provide a measure of relief ‘in West Cork’. Donovan and Swanton obviously saw that using it to buy food would only delay the death of the unfortunates. Used to feed them during a voyage to England or Wales, it afforded them a chance of surviving longer.

In the third place the poor wretches were certainly carriers of fever. In Ireland the better off who died during the Famine were not starving, but caught typhoid from those who were, and whom they were seeking to relieve. The arrival of the starving from West Cork brought the risk of that infection to the people of the English and Welsh towns.

The *Monmouthshire Merlin* of 6th February 1847 carried the following report:

Hundreds of unfortunate creatures from the land of famine have recently been thrown upon our shore, and the numbers increase so rapidly [that the paper here urged the government to take particular steps to provide food for them]

On Monday last a vessel called the *Wanderer*, Capt. Casey, from Baltimore, Ireland, arrived in this port, which place she left on the twenty-third of December last, with 113 destitute passengers, consisting of men, women and children, several of whom were from Skibbereen: owing to adverse winds the vessel was obliged to put into Monkstown; they were then driven back again to Cork, and once more were obliged to put into Monkstown, from which port they sailed, and finally reached here as before stated ... [The voyage had lasted for six and a half weeks]

Men, women, and children, to the number of twenty-six were found in a dying state stretched upon a scanty portion of straw which but partially protected them from the hard and damp ballast on which they were lying in the hold ...

We are happy to say, that through the prompt and assiduous care extended to these destitute people, but one death is likely to ensue, and the case of the survivors will be brought before the Board of Guardians at our Union tomorrow.

The issue of the following week reported that in fact four of the twenty-six had died. A report

in West Cork suggests that the vessel was detained by the Mayor of Newport pending the outcome of the inquest. The *Merlin* on 27th February published an account of the inquest on one of them, a married woman of thirty-two named Elizabeth Barry. No inquest was carried out on the other three, but it emerged that they were all her children. The wretched husband and father excited considerable sympathy in the coroner's court. Provisions had been taken on board in the assumption that the voyage would be much shorter than it had been, and these were exhausted while the *Wanderer* was still in Cork waters. The people of Skibbereen sent money for more, and yet more was obtained from Cork. James Swanton was named as the owner of the vessel, and it was confirmed that no passenger had been asked to pay for the voyage. There was evidence of neglect on the part of captain and crew, but Swanton was almost certainly ignorant of this, and the passengers felt deeply indebted to him.

The authorities may have been furious with Swanton and Donovan for 'shovelling paupers' into England and Wales, but there is no question that the people of Newport reacted to the arrival of the poor starving people of West Cork with humanity, Christian compassion, and generosity. It is good to end this brief survey of Welsh links with Irish Methodism by telling a story which reflects so much credit on the Welsh at home.

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