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Butler's "The Quaker Meeting Houses of Ireland" - Book Review

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BUTLER, D., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Friends Historical Committee, 2004), pp. 256. ISBN 0 9519870 6 2, Hardback, €18.

What to do after one has systematically described every Meeting House in Britain? Well, move onto Ireland of course. Although this book is complete in itself it can also be thought of as Volume Three of David Butler's work on the Quaker Meeting Houses of the British Isles (for my review of *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, Vols. 1 and 2 see QS 5/1 [2000], pp. 85-88). The first thing that struck me in leafing through this volume is the unchanged format—no need to fix something that already works perfectly well. The text is pithy and the plans and drawings meticulous. Similarly, Butler takes little time to get down to business and after a brief introduction we arrive in Connaught Province. Each province is dealt with in turn, and is structured similarly: an introduction to the province, a list of courses especially relevant to that province, a map showing the location of all Quaker sites, followed by accounts of each Meeting House (and Meeting) in the province. This simple organisation, supplemented by a complete index, works very well.

But let us return to Connaught... Apart from the typically concise accounts of buildings and their development, Butler provides plenty of interesting material on the organisation of Quakerism in the Republic. After reading in the first sentence that 'Quakers were neither numerous nor strong enough in Connaught to manage their own province Meeting', I am stopped in my tracks and begin to ponder why this might be the case—perhaps the region is especially thinly populated, or maybe in the seventeenth century Catholicism was unusually combative in preventing the growth of this new English horror? And if Quakerism did not find a foothold in Connaught why should *any* Meetings have been established? These kinds of fascinating questions always arise when I consult Butler. This book, like the earlier volumes, includes just enough information on each Meeting to provoke one's interest. The few Meetings founded in Connaught each represent a unique story. For example, on p. 18 we read that Letterfrack Meeting was established by James and Mary Ellis, two wealthy Bradford Friends who emigrated to Ireland in order to provide gainful employment

for those who had suffered due to the potato famine. During their seven-year stay they built a model farm, including a house for themselves, a teacher's cottage, a dispensary, and a two-storey schoolhouse which served also as a Meeting House where the Ellises and visiting guests met for worship. There was no resident Irish population and Letterfrack, Butler informs us, never became a recognised Meeting.

Don't be fooled then by this book's apparent modesty: Butler is interested in Quaker buildings of course—indeed, he likely always to be the leading authority on the subject—but the reach and significance of these narratives is both wider and deeper in that they speak of Quakerism itself, as both faith and practice. After reading this book (from cover to cover—not the best way to do it) I can confirm that this is a book full of such stories. Apart from accounts of Irish Meetings and Meeting Houses, Butler includes no less than 17 appendices, all relevant and all including useful information and ranging from a brief history of Quakerism in Ireland, to 'The Womens' Meeting Room and its Shutters'. We should congratulate the Irish Friends Historical Committee for publishing this wonderful book and Kelso Graphics for the quality of its production. If you can, please ask your library to obtain a copy of all three volumes of what is the definitive account of Quaker Meeting Houses of the British Isles.

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