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Besse's "Collection of the Sufferings of the People called Quakers. Selections: etc." - Book Review

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Besse, J., *Collection of the Sufferings of the People called Quakers. Selections: Ireland, Scotland and Wales, including Monmouthshire & Shropshire, 1653 to 1691. with new introduction and newly compiled index of people and places by Gandy, M. Fasim. of part of ed. originally published as: A collection of the sufferings of the people called Quakers.* London: Luke Hinde, 1753; repr., York: Sessions Book Trust, 2003, pp.124. ISBN 1 850722 85 4, Paper, £12.

This is the fifth volume in the facsimile series of Joseph Besse's 1753 *Collection of Sufferings*, published under the direction of Michael Gandy, and it provides some valuable insights into the early struggles of the Religious Society of Friends in the Celtic countries and the border county of Shropshire. This is an invaluable resource for researchers in the field of Quaker studies and for genealogists/family historians, and more generally for those interested in the nature of seventeenth century persecution in Britain and Ireland. Although Besse does not always provide the complete accounts of the maltreatment of Friends, his compilation of the Sufferings nevertheless supplies some easily accessible infor-

mation concerning the early decades of the Society and the fortitude of its Members from the Interregnum to the post-Toleration Act (1689) period. These were years when Friends challenged the authority of the State and the ecclesiastical authorities, defined their own value systems, and established a more coherent organisation. As a separate people, an alternative community, they regarded themselves as 'the Children of the Light', and practised their beliefs in opposition to the pre- and post-Restoration governments and the State Church. Not surprisingly they were vilified as dangerous subversives. Friends were regularly imprisoned, fined, whipped, placed in the stocks, and heavily distrained of their goods for holding their own meetings for worship or for recusancy, for refusing to pay tithes, for holding pacifist sentiments, and for sending 'Messengers to declare against Deceit and Deceivers' (p. 462).

The fifth volume offers graphic descriptions of the various punishments meted out to Friends from the mid 1650s onwards, including the arrest of five Irish Friends in 1660 when they were seized after a Meeting in County Cavan. They were 'much abused on the Road', beaten and later imprisoned amongst felons. While being taken to Cavan prison one unfortunate Friend had his feet tied under a horse's belly (p. 465). In 1662 several Shrewsbury Friends suffered 'grievous bruising of their bodies' (p. 749), and in 1668 William Thomas of Llanddewi in Pembrokeshire was 'struck on the Head and Shoulders with a great Staff' by a paid informant of the Crown (p. 752). Later in 1671 Aberdeen Friends saw their burial ground desecrated and the body of a child disinterred (p. 501). There is some fascinating incidental information about individual Friends, their missionary journeys, and dramatic events. For example, Besse recorded a violent storm at sea in 1655 in which the Irish Quaker Mary Blagdon almost lost her life when the crew attempted to throw her overboard. It appears that they 'imputed the cause [of the storm] to her, as being a Quaker' (p. 458).

These documents are admirably indexed, while Michael Gandy offers a helpful introduction to the volume and indicates some of the problems associated with providing a modern facsimile of an eighteenth century text (pp. iv-viii). He presents a brief overview of the history of the publication of the *Collection* and its value for later generations. In this Gandy draws upon the views of Besse himself, and modern assessments of this seminal work. Yet he could have strengthened the volume by referencing, or simply appending a bibliography listing other historical analyses of the persecution of Friends in Ireland, Scotland and Wales (including Monmouthshire), notably the work of Kenneth Carroll, Maurice Wigham, and Richard S. Harrison (for Ireland); W.H. Marwick, William F. Miller, George B. Burnet, and Gordon DesBrisay (for Scotland); Thomas Mardy Rees, R.C. Allen and Christine Trevett (for Wales), and more generally to Craig Horle and Rosemary Moore. Despite this, the new facsimile volume is an extremely helpful addition to our understanding of Quakerism in its formative period in these Celtic counties.

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