

Early Irish Baha'is

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Early Irish Bahá'ís

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In presenting a brief study of the introduction of the Bahá'í Faith to Ireland, this paper will draw upon sources not from Ireland but from the United States. In examining the period 1900 to 1925, I have restricted my discussion to individuals from three backgrounds using the US sources: (1) Bahá'ís who visited or lived in Ireland; (2) Those born in Ireland who became Bahá'ís in the United States; (3) Those in Ireland who became Bahá'ís there.

The best-known early Irish Bahá'í is George Townshend. I will not discuss him here, due to comprehensive coverage existing elsewhere, except where he is directly associated with the sources used. Another well-known early Bahá'í whose association with Ireland has not been discussed at length is Lady Blomfield. She was born in Ireland of Irish parentage but functioned as an “English” Bahá'í. I will not, however, discuss her association with Ireland as the sources used add little to what is already known.

There are nine individuals to be discussed: Two Bahá'ís who went to live in Ireland; five people who were born in Ireland and became Bahá'ís in the United States; and two people who became Bahá'ís in Ireland. The two Bahá'ís who went to live in Ireland were Colonel and Mrs Culver. Mary Diana Culver was born in Fort Klamath, Oregon, on 20th May, 1856. Henry S. Culver was born in Sunbury, Ohio, on 19th April, 1854. They were married in 1876. Henry was admitted to the Ohio Bar and practised law in Delaware, Ohio. He served as Delaware County prosecuting attorney and then as mayor of Delaware, each for four years. He joined the State Department in October 1897 and was appointed United States Consul in London, Ontario. In London, the Culvers learned of the Bahá'í Faith and first Henry and then Mary became Bahá'ís. They later stated that this was in New York city in 1906.

Also in 1906, Henry was appointed United States Consul in Cork, Ireland. The Culvers lived in Queenstown (now Cobh), near Cork, from 1906 to 1910. They were connected to wider Bahá'í circles through Mason Remey who corresponded with them. The Culvers' daughter, Dorothy, lived with them at first. In 1907 she

joined her sister, Louise, at school in Paris where they associated with the Bahá'ís. Dorothy became a Bahá'í in Paris, as probably did her sister. Mary Culver visited Paris and the Bahá'ís there in 1909. While in Ireland, the Culvers treated their Bahá'í identity as a personal matter. They engaged in no public Bahá'í activity. It is possible that Henry's official position was felt to impose restraint. In 1910, Henry was appointed United States Consul in St John, New Brunswick, and the family moved there in September of that year. Despite his almost immediate attempt to be transferred back to Europe, Henry spent the remainder of his consular career there, retiring from the service in 1924. In 1925, Henry and Mary moved to Eliot, Maine, and were active in the Bahá'í community there and with Green Acre Bahá'í School. Henry died in 1936 and Mary in 1937. The Culvers' four years of residence in Ireland is the earliest documented presence of the Bahá'í Faith there, low profile as it was.

Information on the five individuals born in Ireland who became Bahá'ís in the United States is available from the Bahá'í Historical Record Cards compiled in 1935-1936. Mrs Catherine Burke was born in Duleek, County Meath, on 10 June 1851. She was however naturalised as a US citizen in Chicago in 1913 where she became a Bahá'í in 1914. She gives her previous religion as "Christian." According to the Irish census of 1861, the population of County Meath was 93.6% Roman Catholic so she was probably of Catholic origin. In a tablet to Marion Jack, dated 8th November, 1921, 'Abdu'l-Bahá requests that she "Convey my utmost kindness to that Irish lady"; this refers to Burke. Peter Coyne was born in Clifden, County Galway, on 1st March, 1877. His family emigrated to the United States and he was naturalised through his father in 1880. He became a Bahá'í in Nevada, Missouri, in November 1907. He gives his previous religion as "Christian." An autobiographical account he wrote in 1927 shows that he was a Catholic.

Coyne is the earliest known case of someone born in Ireland becoming a Bahá'í in the United States. Marie (Martha) du Bedat was born in Dublin on 25 January 1860. She became a Bahá'í in New York in 1909, and was later naturalised as a United States citizen in 1932. She gives her previous religion as "Irish Protestant". She was a singer who worked for many years at the New York Metropolitan, possibly until the early 1920s. We turn now to Mrs Juliet Jordan who was born in Ireland on 15th April, 1894. She was married to a United States citizen in Detroit on 15th July, 1914. She became a Bahá'í in Detroit in August 1916, and gives her previous religion as "Catholic." Mrs Helen Miller was born in Ireland in 1870. She became a Bahá'í in Brooklyn, New York, in July 1924. She gives her previous religion as "Catholic."

We now turn to the two people who became Bahá'ís in Ireland, Joan H. and T.R. Fforde. In his biography of George Townshend, David Hofman quotes from a letter Townshend wrote to Shoghi Effendi in 1925, "We have seven Irish Bahá'ís – the two Ffordes, my wife, my sister, my two children (aged four and five) and myself!" However, on 28th October, 1933 the Treasurer's Report to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States noted ten

shillings received from Miss Maude Townshend who described herself as a “sympathiser.” This is the only mention of the Ffordes in Hofman's book. He explains in a footnote that according to the Townshends’ daughter, Una, they were from Donegal and stayed with the Townshends in Ahascragh.

John Esslemont had written a more realistic assessment of the situation in Ireland to Albert Vail in 1924. He noted that Townshend “seems to be a convinced Bahai” and then added, “I only know of two other Bahais in Ireland, a Mr. & Mrs. Fforde.” Esslemont later quotes from a letter he has just received from Townshend: “I met the Ffordes in the spring of 1921 while passing through Dublin & keep in touch with them by correspondence. Except for them nobody in this island is known to be interested in Bahaism.”

Information on the Ffordes in American sources is fragmentary, but documents a decade of Bahá’í activity. The earliest apparent mention is an entry of 5 December 1913, recording receipt of \$24.35 for the Temple Fund from Miss J. Waring of Waringstown, County Down, Ireland. This is followed by an entry for 30 September 1914, recording receipt of \$47.52 from Joan Fforde of Waringstown. These contributions are likely from the same person.

Unlike the Culvers, the Ffordes were known publicly as Bahá’ís and are thus possibly the earliest Irish Bahá’ís to have a public Bahá’í identity in Ireland. .. This was a period of considerable political upheaval in Ireland and it is not known if she went. A Miss Anna Emerson appears on a 1920 Washington Bahá’í list “c/o British Embassy.”

This paper has identified a number of possible “firsts” in relation to the association of the Bahá’í Faith with Ireland and the Irish. I hope that this presentation of data from American sources may provide leads that can be followed up by those with access to materials elsewhere in order that a fuller picture of the early Bahá’í history of Ireland and the Irish may eventually be developed.

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