

THE STORY OF QUAKERISM IN SCOTLAND

INTRODUCTION

IT is usually agreed that the Movement known to-day as the "Society of Friends" originated in 1647, the year in which George Fox began his work as a preacher in England at the age of twenty-three. The earliest names of the Society were "Children of the Light" and "Friends in the Truth". But despite the existence of religious sects of all kinds, the Friends did not regard themselves as a sect. They did not formally constitute themselves as a Body with a properly defined membership till 1737, forty-six years after Fox's death.

The traditional title "Quaker" dates from Fox's arrest and appearance before the magistrates at Derby in 1650 for attempting to harangue the congregation in the Church at the close of a "great lecture". In his defence, given as usual with considerable heat, he imitated the Prophets in calling upon the Justices to "quake at the Word of the Lord". One of them, Gervase Bennett by name, caught at the verb, and in scorn labelled Fox and his followers as "Quakers" there and then.¹

But this explanation needs considerable modification. The word "Quaker" or "Trembler" was in use long before the Derby Sessions in 1650, or before it became identified with any particular religious body. It was a common generic term, used intermittently for centuries in religious rites from the shaking of the Delphic priestess onwards, to cover certain physical and psychical phenomena.

Southey in his *Commonplace Book* gives an instance of its early use in "Quakers' Grass",² and in 1647 the word "Quakers" was applied to a sect of Moslem women who preached at Southwark, "for in all this fitt, Mahomett's holy-ghost hath bin conversing with them".³ For long after 1650 too, the word was used in reference to people who had no connection with Fox's followers;⁴ and during subsequent decades, the Friends had accordingly to bear the brunt of things for which they were not responsible. The same kind of phenomena, if not the title itself,

occurred in *The Stewarton Sickness* in 1625 and in the famous Kirk of Shotts Communion in 1630; among Jonathan Edwards' converts, and even in the Methodist Revival, both in the eighteenth century. All that Justice Bennett did then, was to crystallise and popularise the term "Quakers" in reference to the Friends. He thus unwittingly made it the title which has stuck to them in law⁵ and in popular usage to this day. The Friends have never regarded any visible trembling or commotion as a necessary expression of the indwelling power of the Spirit, and have seldom shown any real dislike to being called "Quakers". But Fox hated the nickname from the first, and wrote a letter to Justice Bennett in somewhat strong language, censuring him as "given upp to misname the saints".⁶

The story of Quakerism in Scotland can be divided into four main periods: its rise during the few years of Cromwell's dominance: the 'epic' period during the latter Stuart dynasty, in which it wielded its greatest influence and suffered its cruellest persecution, especially in Aberdeen: its gradual decline and decay, with occasional resurgences of social and philanthropic activity, from the Revolution Settlement of 1689 to the middle of last century; and its activities during the last hundred years.