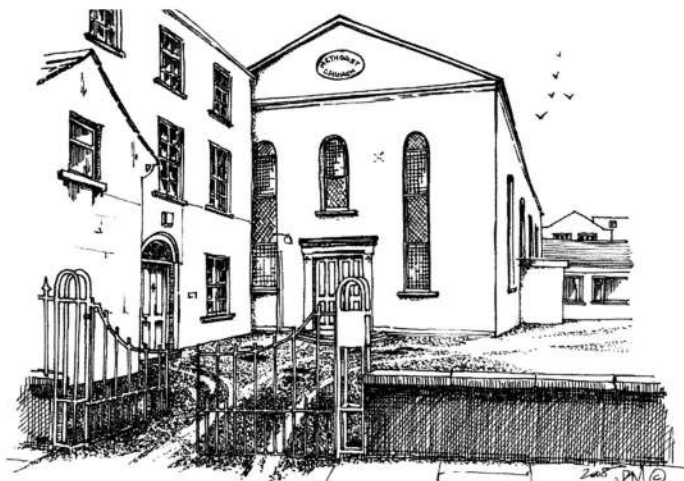


ROUND THE CHURCHES

Drawing: Church, hall and former manse, Peter Murray

117: Kilkenny Methodist Church

Text: Robin Roddie



Kilkenny city's Christian roots go back to St Canice (or Kenny). Its Cathedral, Castle and Tholsel (or Exchange) are of special interest and Kilkenny College was once one of the most important schools in Ireland, Jonathan Swift and George Berkeley being among its pupils.

Methodist origins in the city owe much to Wesley's visits, the first being in 1750 followed by another 12. However it was soldiers who formed the first society which Wesley met in 1756. By the time of his eighth

visit Methodist progress had resulted in the erection of the first chapel in the town in 1771. It was again a new regiment of soldiers who, shortly before his final visit in 1787, helped to revitalise what Wesley frequently described as a small, dead society.

After Wesley, Kilkenny was visited on numerous occasions by Adam Averell, Charles Graham and Gideon Ouseley, and the city even welcomed the American evangelist Lorenzo Dow, but with little permanent fruit for their work.

By 1802 the 1771 preaching house was in need of replacement and a site was acquired in William Street and here they built their second chapel. This building served for just over 30 years. By 1836 when Walter Croggon, the Superintendent of Irish Missions and Schools, visited he found it had become a ruin and the society lacked even a room where 'our missionary' could have liberty to preach the gospel. However the following year a new lease on an adjoining site was acquired and on this the present church (1838) and later an adjacent manse was built.

Kilkenny's gift to wider Methodism has been Thomas McCullagh (1822-1908) who, although born in Athlone, was converted through Methodism in Kilkenny while employed with the Ordnance Survey in Ireland. Transferring to the British Conference, he was a preacher of extraordinary power and popularity as well as the author of a number of biographies.

By the 1940s, at which time Kilkenny, Carlow and Athy were on the same circuit, three

Methodist drapery firms which employed live-in staff played a major influence in their respective towns. In Carlow it was William Hadden; in Athy, Sam Shaw and in Kilkenny, Harry Good whose successful drapery and shoe store (founded in 1927 and still under family control) employed many young people who were encouraged to take part in the resurgent Kilkenny Christian Endeavour Society.

In 1967 a small yard to the side of the church was covered to create a hall, kitchen and toilets. Among those who attended the 'Sunshine Club' in the late 1960s was a young boy who has become one of television's noted celebrities, Graham 'Norton' whose family name is Walker. In his biography he tells of being introduced in his primary years to evangelical faith in the afternoon gatherings in the Methodist hall.

At present Kilkenny Methodists are planning to relocate by building a new community church outside the city and maintain a unique witness which has continued in the city for over 250 years.