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Remembering Mrs Smyly

Tony Moore

Smyly Trust Service

Ellen Franks was born in Dublin city on the 14th of November 1815. She was nineteen when she married Josiah Smyly, a well known Dublin doctor. She had eleven children, two of whom died in infancy. As a young girl she was appalled at the poverty on the streets of Dublin and sought to alleviate the plight of the numerous destitute and abandoned children. Aged seventeen, she was chaperoned as she visited hospitals, workhouses and began feeding the many hungry children on the streets. Later, through tireless fundraising, buildings were secured to house and educate many of these children. The inadequacy of state provision or aid encouraged the growth of many charitable organisations. This began in the late 18th century and by 1900 it took almost 300 pages of the Dublin Charities guidebook to list the hundreds of charitable organisations operating in the city. This article provides a brief overview of the contribution made by Mrs Smyly to helping alleviate the problems faced by many families and children in Dublin due to poverty and lack of educational opportunities.

It is difficult to overstate the hardship and deprivation suffered by the working and poorer classes of Dublin in the late nineteenth century. The city had greatly declined in terms of wealth and importance, following the closure of the Irish Parliament. This prompted a mass exodus of the aristocracy leaving for London, with many landlords leaving their properties to land agents to manage. These were to become the notorious tenements of the time. Following the Great Famine there was a huge influx to the city and the population grew steadily throughout the 19th century. Overcrowding and poverty were chronic. Diseases such as cholera, typhus and smallpox were endemic. Despite the extensive construction of fever hospitals, dispensaries and asylums, the rise in population put a severe strain on these institutions into the 1830s.

The introduction of the Poor Law Relief system provided some relief but the inadequacy of this scheme was demonstrated by its inability to cope with the crisis of the Great Famine and the hardship that continued, well into the 1850s. Life for the poor continued to be wretched for decades. In 1900 Dublin had the highest death rate and highest infant mortality rate of any city in Ireland or Britain. In the momentous year of 1913 the city had a population of 400,000 of whom 87,000 lived in tenements. The need for housing was chronic, often with three and four families as joint-tenants. According to official statistics

over 22,000 lived in houses classified as ‘unfit for human habitation’.

The turning point in the work of Mrs. Smyly came, when a six year old boy was suffocated in a limekiln where he had gone for warmth and shelter. It was time to provide a place where children could be housed and cared for. In 1852 the first home was opened in Townsend Street. This was followed by a home for girls in Luke Street in 1855. At the outset she hired a stable loft to act as a school room. As numbers increased rapidly she hired an unused forge in Harmony Row, near Grand Canal Street. Each morning and evening children were given hot meals. They were thought basic education and verses from the bible. By the 1870s the first purpose built facility was completed and Mrs Smyly’s Homes and Schools were founded. In the next ten years five homes and three schools were opened. They became known as the Ragged Schools of Dublin. When Mrs. Smyly died in 1901 there were seven homes and four schools serving up to 1,600 children. The largest home, accommodating 180 children was in Dun Laoghaire, was known as the Bird’s Nest.

The poverty of the time and lack of any official aid had spawned a noble army of Christian volunteers. Mrs. Smyly was one of many women, lay and religious, who responded to the social problems that were rampant at that time. There was a notion abroad that most of the children in the homes were Roman Catholics, enticed in by the need for food. It was also believed that Protestants had very little need of charity because they came from the upper and middle classes. However early records of the homes indicate otherwise. From 1869 to 1919 over 700 children were enrolled and just under half of the parents were recorded as being of Protestant faith. Children with both parents Roman Catholic numbered less than a quarter, with over a quarter of the parents in a mixed marriage of one Catholic parent and one Protestant parent. A legion of Protestant charities had been established from the late eighteenth century. In the first half of the nineteenth century a number of Catholic religious congregations and charities were founded. It is clear that religion was a primary motivating factor in engaging in charitable work in these times. For many philanthropists the provision of relief was a material and spiritual battle, often being fought for the souls of the poor.

Conflict between Protestant and Catholic charities was a feature of the mid-nineteenth century. The founder of the Irish Church Missions (ICM), the Rev. Alexander Dallas was a friend of Mrs. Smyly and there was a close association between the ICM and the Smyly Homes. The ICM’s objective was to make known the gospel to the poor, especially to Roman Catholics. The ICM was responsible for education in the schools and the teachers also thought scripture. It was seen by the Catholic hierarchy to be proselytising, though this was strongly refuted by the ICM. As the most public Protestant female philanthropist, Mrs.

Smyly's biggest foe was Margaret Aylward, who in 1851, founded her own branch of the Ladies Association of Vincent de Paul, based in the inner city. She was also the founder of the Sisters of the Holy Faith in Dublin in 1867. She kept careful watch on the activities of the ICM and later founded St. Brigid's Orphanage to counteract the work of Protestant orphanages. She publicly berated Protestant charities, picketed Sunday schools and was involved in removing Catholic children from Protestant orphanages. There were many cases of violence and abductions.

The funds to rent or buy buildings and run the homes were entirely derived from donations. As the Smyly homes and schools got bigger more volunteers were needed for the many tasks. Throughout the year there were designated fund raising days. Donations were sought from friends and acquaintances. Mrs. Smyly wrote numerous letters and made successful appeals to newspapers and charitable associations in Ireland and England. Bequests were made and many who supported her work left legacies. Ellen Smyly devoted her life to the care of children in need. Her belief in the power of prayer and work, and her dogged persistence and unflinching spirit in the face of many obstacles and personal losses, was typical of the many unsung heroines of her era. When Mrs. Smyly died aged 86, her two daughters, Anne and Ellen managed the homes and continued the work. Her daughters went on to establish a home for Irish orphans in Canada in 1905, which ran for over 40 years. But that's another story.

Mrs. Smyly's homes continued to care for large numbers of children through the early 1900s when Ireland was still a very poor country. Many parents were forced to emigrate and temporarily put their children in the homes until they got settled in a new country. For Mrs. Smyly there was always an emphasis on education, as it was believed that this was the way to progress in the world. By the 1950s the schools were no longer needed and in the following decade large homes were scaled down to cater for changing needs. The introduction of social welfare benefits and payments for single parents, were major factors in enabling families to look after their own children. In time, the numbers of children requiring care dropped dramatically. It was no longer possible to rely solely on charitable donations. In 1972 the government started to subsidise the homes. The Health Boards were created and children were referred by their designated social workers. By the time the Bird's Nest closed in 1977, family group homes had been established. Two such Smyly homes or children's residential centres as they are now called, continue to provide care today. An aftercare service has been added, to what is now Smyly Trust Services. The needs of young people out of home today are more complex and require a greater range of skills and resources than in the past. Centres

are staffed by trained and experienced social care staff. Residential services for children are largely provided by the State, with a small mix of services run by private providers and voluntary groups. Clearly the conditions and needs of today are vastly different than two centuries ago. Yet Dublin again finds itself in the midst of what is termed a ‘humanitarian crisis’ with unprecedented levels of homelessness. News reports are replete with the increase in numbers sleeping rough, and attending night shelters and food kitchens. Front line street organisations are frequently in the media seeking funds, donations and volunteers for the increasing numbers they serve. Focus Ireland record the number of homeless people in January 2019 as 10,262, while the number of children in emergency homeless accommodation numbered 3,784 in February 2019 (Focus Ireland, 2019). Two centuries on from the era of the Victorian do-gooders and a vastly changed social landscape, it seems that the poor or needy are indeed, always with us.

References

Focus Ireland (2019). *Latest figures on homelessness in Ireland*. Retrieved from: <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland>