

**MARGARET LOUISA AYLWARD**  
**1810-1889**

**DONALD BRADY**

© Waterford County Council

# Margaret Louisa Aylward 1810-1889

*“At her father’s house in Thomas Street on November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1810 she opened her eyes upon a rapidly depopulating city.”<sup>1</sup>*

## **Family and Early Years**

The Aylwards were a long established and distinguished Waterford family. They had originally settled at Faithlegg where

“the first Aylward who came to this country accompanied King Henry II, receiving from him, by Charter 1172, the lands of Faithleg and other estates...”<sup>2</sup>

Peter Aylward, who died in 1594, served as Mayor of the City [1566-67] and his son Richard, 1540-1626, held the post in 1592, 1605-07 and 1616-1617. William, Margaret’s father, was a “merchant prince of the city of Waterford” who made a fortune in the Newfoundland trade. The family was also well known and even wealthier at this time on the female side. Ellen Murphy was previously married and had one son, Maurice Mullowney, by that union. She brought to her second marriage considerable property and her unmarried sisters, Mary and Margaret Murphy, sold to “their brother-in-law ‘all the property he possessed in King Street, Waterford and in Thomas Street and other places.’”<sup>3</sup> Mrs Aylward’s brother, Patrick Joseph Murphy was a central figure in the establishment of the Christian Brothers. He entered the Order at 22 and by 1831 returned to Waterford as Director or Superior of the Community in Mount Sion where he served in the position until 1851. “There is nothing recorded of Mrs Aylward, except that she lived to the age of seventy-nine, having out-lived her husband by nearly twenty years.”<sup>4</sup>

Margaret was the fifth child in a family of ten. Three siblings, Anne, Francis and Richard died in childhood. Her brother William was by 1845 at the age of 39 a Grand Juror and a significant figure in Waterford Public life but he died in 1860 shortly before another brother John who was “outwardly at least a failure.” Mary her eldest sister joined Margaret as a secular and another sister Ellen joined for a short time but left and died on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 1895. Catherine who was two years older than Margaret joined the Irish Sisters of Charity in 1830 and died aged 37 at their convent in 1845. Jane the youngest joined the religious life for a short time but left and married a Mr. John Fagan. Following the death of their only child, he absconded to Australia leaving significant debts and Jane then joined Margaret as Mother Scholastica.

Margaret spent her early life in Waterford and as “Catholic private schools, for young ladies were non-existent in those days (1815), so the child was sent to a Dame School kept by two Quaker ladies, near at hand.”<sup>5</sup> This school was on the Quays in the city and it is interesting to note that the famous Cardinal Paul Cullen, a staunch supporter of Margaret also began his schooling at a Quaker School. From Waterford Margaret went to the Ursuline Convent in Thurles “the first Catholic Young Ladies’ Boarding School in Ireland after the Penal times...”<sup>6</sup> It was at this time the only such school in the country and also boasts further connections with Waterford through William Vincent Wallace and Henry Grattan Flood who served on the staff there. In 1830 Margaret finished her education and returned home.

“In 1831 she threw herself heart and soul into the organisation of the classes in the crowded school of the Presentation Convent.”<sup>7</sup> In 1834 she joined her sister Catherine at her Convent of the Sisters of Charity in Sandymount Dublin under the name Sister Mary Alphonsus Liguori<sup>8</sup> but left the convent on July 8<sup>th</sup> 1836. Her choice of the name Liguori is noteworthy as,

---

<sup>1</sup> Gibbons, Margaret, 1884-1969 *The life of Margaret Aylward: Foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Faith.* London: Sands & Co., 1928 xix, 426p pg. 5

<sup>2</sup> Do. pg. 1

<sup>3</sup> Prunty, Jacinta *Margaret Aylward 1810-1889: Lady of Charity, Sister of Faith* Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1999 192p pg.12

<sup>4</sup> Gibbons pg. 19

<sup>5</sup> Gibbons pg. 21

<sup>6</sup> Gibbons pg. 26

<sup>7</sup> Gibbons pg. 32

<sup>8</sup> Saint Alphonsus Liguori [also Liguori] was born in Naples in 1696. Following a short career as a lawyer he became a priest in 1726. He founded the “Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer” and spent much of his life ministering to the poor. Ordained Bishop of Saint dei Goti he died in 1787. He was canonised in 1839 and his multiple works [111] attest to his status as one of the most widely read Catholic writers.

“Waterford City, and in particular the local Ursuline Convent, was the earliest and possibly the principle source from which the Italian teaching was to be incultured into Irish Catholicism.”<sup>9</sup>

The tradition of St. Alphonsus Ligouri was a central and “enduring aspect of Margaret Aylward’s spirituality.” The Ursuline Manual a distillation of Alphonisian teaching was her first and primary spiritual reader, introduced by her into the boarding school, Glasnevin. A copy of this was amongst her effects and among the few possessions “she disbursed among friends in her will.”<sup>10</sup> She founded “a poor school in Waterford.”

In The Mail on March 12<sup>th</sup> 1840 the following obituary notice was carried:

“Died: on Thursday, at an advanced age, at his residence, Thomas Street, in the city; very highly respected, William Aylward, Esq., one of the most judicious, most spirited and most successful of our merchants.”<sup>11</sup>

A contemporary local newspaper noted that “Miss Aylward was Father Tim Dowley’s associate in founding the first Penitents’ Home in Waterford about the year 1842.”<sup>12</sup> After the death of Margaret’s father, the family moved to 39 The Mall and a sister lived in No. 40. At the end of October 1845 Margaret joined the Ursulines in St. Mary’s Waterford but left in January of the following year to live with her brother in Clontarf. Her flight from Waterford was partly prompted by the disappointment of some of her family in what was perceived as a second “failure.”

Of central and enduring significance to the career of Margaret was the circle in which she and her family mixed during the period of her life spent in Waterford. The family numbered amongst its acquaintances, friends, and regular visitors to the house some of the most influential educational, religious, political and social figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century; figures such as Edmund Rice, her Uncle Patrick Joseph Murphy, Tobias Kirby,<sup>13</sup> native of Tallow and “perhaps the most influential of Irish churchmen of the nineteenth century...”<sup>14</sup>, Daniel O’Connell and neighbour Thomas Francis Meagher.

### **Ladies of Charity**

On her return to live at the Mall in Waterford in 1845 the plan which began to form in the minds of “Miss Aylward and Miss Kelly was to provide a ‘house of rest’ for the lady-members, a house where they might live in semi-religious fashion, though without vows...”<sup>15</sup> Essentially they wanted to establish a group of women who were committed in a common purpose, were staunchly Catholic and unified in the provision of “Christian charity” to the poor. Margaret’s return to Dublin was also motivated by the need to receive treatment for “severe erysipelas” from which she was then suffering. She set up an office in Lower Dorset Street on June 6<sup>th</sup> 1855 and a meeting was convened to launch the “Ladies of Charity.” This society was based on the First Ladies of St. Vincent de Paul which was founded in 1617 with its first Irish group founded in Dublin in 1843.

A central aspect of their mission was to explore and challenge protestant proselytism which was considered endemic at the time following the devolution of

“The powers formerly vested in the Governors of the Foundling Hospital, namely, to seize on all deserted and destitute children, and to have them nursed in infancy and afterwards brought up as Protestants now devolved upon the Parish Vestries.”<sup>16</sup>

---

His moral theological insights based on rational responses to practical problems are his greatest contribution to Catholicism.

<sup>9</sup> Prunty pg. 139

<sup>10</sup> Prunty pg. 139

<sup>11</sup> Gibbons Pg. 12

<sup>12</sup> Gibbons pgs. 74-75

<sup>13</sup> <sup>13</sup> Tobias Kirby was born in Tallow on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1804. He was the son of David and Elizabeth Kirby [Caplice]. He was raised in Waterford City where his father worked as a chandler. He studied at St. John’s College and then in Rome. He was ordained in 1833 and in 1836 became Vice-Rector of the Irish College where the future Archbishop Paul Cullen had been Rector since 1832. He served in this post until 1850 and then became Rector [1850-1891]. In 1881 he was appointed Titular Bishop of Lete and then Titular Archbishop of Ephesus a post he held until his death on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1895. It is recorded that he only visited Ireland on two occasions in 1841 and 1851-52.

<sup>14</sup> Prunty pg. 15

<sup>15</sup> Gibbons pg. 97

<sup>16</sup> Gibbons pg. 106

“The association of Ladies of Charity had not been one year in operation when the Lady President formed an educational and anti-proselytising sub-committee for the especial guardianship of tempted children.”<sup>17</sup>

The Society was founded in direct opposition to the then virtually universally accepted concept of indoor relief or “workhouse incarceration.” She “was not satisfied with merely recording the nature and extent of destitution in the city, but sought to expose its root causes. The want of employment, especially among women, was the over-riding cause of destitution repeatedly noted in the charity records.”<sup>18</sup> Illness which was endemic in the city slums was frequently catastrophic and it was in this eventuality that the Society stepped in and provided food, fuel and furniture and assisted with the search for employment. An interesting initiative was the redeeming of clothes from pawnbrokers in order to facilitate the “making of an appearance” at interview. “Within five years she had built up her numbers to 148 active visitors<sup>19</sup> to the poor. She also provided direct employment through St. Mary’s Industrial Institute [1853-55] which was located in a vacant coach factory at 5 Upper Dorset Street. This enterprise worked well, if seasonally, initially but it was eventually closed due to lack of finance.

### **St. Brigid’s Orphanage: Foundation and Early Years**

Having provided assistance to the destitute families and particularly the orphaned children of Dublin Margaret recognized the need for more concerted action and more structured methodology to meet the needs of the community. Her response was formulated in the knowledge that within Ireland the care of “children born outside marriage was therefore in law the sole charge of the mother” and “the law decreed that all children presented for admission to the workhouse, the religion of whose parents was unknown should be reared in the Established Church...”<sup>20</sup> Her religious convictions dictated that orphaned children, the majority of whom were Catholics, should be brought up in the faith of their parents. Though a “boarding out” system had existed under the Dublin Foundling Hospital [1703-1838] this had become totally discredited. However, by 1857 there were serious concerns over institutionalisation but virtually all social groups, including the Catholic Church, believed that it was the most appropriate method for the care of abandoned children. Margaret Aylward believed fervently in the raising of children in a “family environment” and through her new orphanage became *the pioneer* of a boarded-out system. In setting out on this course she was strongly supported by Fr. John Gowan<sup>21</sup> who was “responsible for formulating some of its philosophy”

In the winter of 1856 St. Brigid’s Orphanage was founded and to advance the cause a Committee Established which held its first meeting on January 16<sup>th</sup> 1857. Donors and sponsors were sought and financial support was forthcoming from the start. Following the establishment of St Brigid’s Margaret moved from 1 Hardwicke Place to 6 Berkeley Street in a deliberate effort to establish a “House of Rest” for those involved. By 1858 there was considerable dissension at the new residence which precipitated a move to 42 Eccles Street.

In a review printed in 1859 of the now established “Congregation of St Brigid” a rule is published which sets out the central aims of the society which would include a “number of Ladies who shall be the Servants of the orphans and destitute children.” They would “love god” and “establish a lay Congregation where the associates will live in Community and enjoy the happiness of a religious life without making vows...” Her aims were ambitious from the start with an intention that the Society would facilitate up to 500 children and though initially opposed by Cardinal Paul Cullen he was unequivocally supportive by 1859. Though based in Dublin she accepted children from all over Ireland and indeed Britain. The methodology involved the fostering out of children to good homes and the monitoring of these charges by her team on a regular basis.

### **Opposition to proselytism and consequences**

The historical context in which Margaret Aylward founded St. Brigid’s Orphanage and that ultimately led to her trial and imprisonment is not only critical to an understanding of her life and career but serves as an essential microcosm of a major philosophical religious and political power-struggle in Ireland and more

---

<sup>17</sup> Gibbons pg. 110

<sup>18</sup> Prunty pg. 27

<sup>19</sup> Prunty pg. 30

<sup>20</sup> Prunty pg. 58

<sup>21</sup> Fr. John Gowan was born in Sherries in 1817. In 1852 he became spiritual director to Margaret and her group. He was a critical figure throughout the career of Margaret and died on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1897 at the Glasnevin Convent where he was subsequently buried.

remarkably in England during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The origins of this struggle lay initially in the major expansion of the British Empire during the era but more critically in the industrial revolution which not only generated huge surplus wealth but also created a new middle class of entrepreneurs whose world view was focused on their retention of new status and was perceived through, and centred on, the promulgation of, staunch evangelical Protestantism. This view was challenged in England by the immigration of thousands of Irish Catholic poor to the industrial heartland and the fact that as was reluctantly admitted at the time “one-third of the British Standing army consists of Irish Romanists.” At the intellectual level the development of the Oxford Movement immediately precipitated a “Protestant counter-offensive against the Anglo-Catholic Tractarian<sup>22</sup> movement.” Ireland became a battleground for the struggle precisely because of its large Catholic Population. Allied to this were other critical factors. The power of a mass popular movement led to the granting of Catholic Emancipation and

“the protestant establishment was rocked by Daniel O’Connell’s agitation to secure for Roman Catholics the right to sit in Parliament.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite the granting of Emancipation in 1829 by the government headed by the Duke of Wellington the obligation to pay tithes remained and in 1831 the government faced with non-payment tried to gather monies by force leading to the “Tithe War” which continued until 1836. In 1839 the government passed the Tithe Commutation Act which reduced the payment by about a quarter and the rest was paid by landlords. Landlords consequently raised rents heightening tension and it was only after Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland that tithes were abolished. The Irish Church Disestablishment Act 1869 came into force on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1871. The Act was warmly welcomed by Catholics and non-conformists but opposed by Conservatives, Irish Anglicans and the Queen. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the protestant elite felt that their position was under serious threat and endeavoured to prevent every change and inevitably generated a counter reaction from the Catholic majority.

From this explosive scenario emerged a major development of protestant evangelical theology-philosophy and a movement to promote its conclusions. Times of political and social upheaval frequently precipitate intellectual and analytic responses of the highest quality and power which in turn create accelerated reactions in the community at large. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was to the Anglo-Irish community just such a period and in *Gothic Ireland*<sup>24</sup> Jarlath Killeen has traced the evolution of their response back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Likewise Crawford Gribben has highlighted the re-emergence and influence of the writing of Archbishop James Ussher<sup>25</sup> in the development of Irish protestant thought. Ussher’s identification and nomination of the Pope as “Antichrist” had been “ratified by the Convocation of the Church of Ireland.” His view had, in consequence, “gained confessional status in Ireland before anywhere else in Europe.” The colonial situation in Ireland had undoubtedly a big impact on “eschatological consciousness.” Perhaps the key figure in crystallising and expanding this intellectual movement was Trinity College graduate John Nelson Darby.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> The Oxford Movement or Tractarianism originated at Oxford University and its members held that the church of England originated in the Church established by the Apostles. It became known as the Tractarian Movement from a series of publications, Tracts for the Times [1833-1841]. The last of these tracts was written by John Henry Newman and “argued that the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, as defined by the Council of Trent, were compatible with the Thirty-nine articles of the sixteenth-century Church of England.” [Wikipedia] The approach of the movement led to major controversy in the Church of England and adherents within the Church of England were posted to difficult and poverty stricken parishes where “they developed a critique of British social policy, both local and national.” Augustus Pugin, who is well known in Waterford due to his contribution to the redevelopment of Lismore Castle, was a member and subsequently converted to Catholicism.

<sup>23</sup> Gribben, Crawford “*Introduction: Antichrist in Ireland – Protestant Millennialism and Irish Studies*” pgs. 1-30 [In Gribben, Crawford Ed. & Holmes Andrew R. Ed. *Protestant Millennialism: Evangelicalism and Irish Society* U.K. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006 x, 244p] pg. 13

<sup>24</sup> Killeen, Jarlath *Gothic Ireland: Horror and the Irish Anglican Imagination in the long Eighteenth Century* Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2005 240p.

<sup>25</sup> James Ussher was born in 1625 in Dublin. He was the son of Arland and Margaret Ussher. A relation of his father, Henry Ussher, was Archbishop of Armagh, 1595-1613, and was a major figure in the opening of Trinity College. His uncle, Richard Stanyhurst [1547-1618] was a powerful exponent of the “polemical possibilities of historical scholarship.” James studied at Trinity and later became a member of the staff. Though created Archbishop of Armagh [1625-1656] it is as a writer and bibliophile that James Ussher is most remembered. He died in 1656 and is buried in Westminster Abbey.

<sup>26</sup> John Nelson Darby was born in Westminster in 1800 the son of an Anglo-Irish Family. His family were the owners of Leap Castle in Offaly which they had held since 1659. Admiral Horatio Nelson was his

Central to this evolving philosophical-religious thinking was Irish protestant millennialism intermingled with strong apocalyptic overtones. “Darby’s theology posited a ‘pre-tribulation rapture’, arguing that Jesus Christ would return true believers to heaven before the unleashing of the reign of Antichrist on earth.”<sup>27</sup> His views became powerful in 1840s,

“but the significance of its late development has been eclipsed by its sheer momentum; by the end of the century it would dominate evangelical thinking about eschatology across the transatlantic world.”<sup>28</sup>

His work is described as “being characterised by ‘biblical literalism, social and ecclesiastical pessimism, Calvinism, anti-Catholicism, anti-radicalism, anti-rationalism and support for the Established Churches.’”<sup>29</sup> Gribben in his introduction quoting an article by Patrick O’Farrell who states, that “collective insecurity, uncertainty, and social atomisation could act as a millennial catalyst.<sup>30</sup> Such an analysis vindicates the discrepancy that existed between northern and Dublin protestants which saw the latter flocking “to this kind of pessimistic millennialism precisely because...their privileged world seemed to be coming to an end.”<sup>31</sup> In his seminal work, *Prospects of the Ten Kingdoms of the Roman Empire* published in 1849, B.W. Newton saw the break-up of the British Empire as a prelude to the arrival of the Antichrist and Ireland as a “site of an important apocalyptic struggle...” In the growth of Fenianism Newton postulated that it revealed “a state of feeling which shows what inflammable elements are at hand for a Celtic Revolution...”<sup>32</sup>

A central response required from “true believers” was “social and religious activism as evidence of true faith...”<sup>33</sup> and as Prunty has suggested this could, and did, “lead establishment clergy into urgent missionary activity amongst Irish Catholics, from Achill in the rural west to Dublin in the urban east.”<sup>34</sup> Conversely, a rigorous Catholic response to “this sudden, and often frightening, surge in eschatological thinking” and consequential “missionary effort” was inevitable.

The philosophical debate found its most concrete and practical expression in the works of the Irish Church Missions Society. This organisation was founded in 1847 by Alexander Dallas<sup>35</sup> [1791-1869] who had been a member of Wellington’s forces from the Peninsular War through to the Battle of Waterloo. His missionary efforts continued in Ireland “from 1843 to his death at the age of 80 in 1869 supported from 1846 by “wealthy English businessman, Mr. Edward Durant.” The ICM was assisted by Mrs. Ellen Smyley and her committee through the establishment of homes and schools for orphans. By 1860 their network of facilities numbered 26 including a school in Fermoy. In its literature the ICM acknowledged a central motivation for conversion of Catholics stating that it was “of importance to ‘the safety, peace and prosperity of the British Empire.’”

The efforts of the ICM and its sister organisations led to the creation of a large number of Protestant Orphanages and schools and the funds largely raised in England were “probably between two and three hundred thousand a year.” Margaret Aylward was vociferously opposed to their efforts which she described as “pecuniary proselytism.” Central to the success of the schools was their manipulation of the over-riding wish of the Irish poor to keep their families “out of the poor-house” and while given assurances that proselytism would not occur the “undermining of Catholicism was a central tenet” of these organisations.

Inevitably a strong Catholic reaction occurred and this became focused not only on the efforts of the proselytizing organisations but eventually led to a movement seeking the disestablishment of the Church of

---

godfather and following elementary education at Westminster Darby went to Trinity where he graduated with the Classical Gold Medal in 1819. Having qualified for the bar he did not practice “lest he should be selling his talents to defeat justice.” He became an Anglican Priest based in Wicklow where he was successful in making converts from the Catholic peasant community but when he was asked to require an oath of allegiance from his converts to the King he resigned. He was a founder of the Plymouth Brethren and spent his life in evangelical pursuits. He died in 1882 and is buried in Bournemouth.

<sup>27</sup> Gribben pg. 15

<sup>28</sup> Gribben pg. 16

<sup>29</sup> Gribben pg. 12

<sup>30</sup> Gribben pg. 4

<sup>31</sup> Gribben pg. 14

<sup>32</sup> Gribben pg. 18

<sup>33</sup> Gribben pg. 2

<sup>34</sup> Gribben pg. 23

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Dallas [1791-1869], was Rector of Wonston, Hampshire, from 1843 he played an active role in evangelical efforts in Ireland. Dallas began his efforts by sending over 20,000 letters to householders throughout Ireland. He then sent eight missionaries throughout the country and personally visited Galway.

Ireland. A motion was proposed by Alderman Dillon at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual meeting of St Brigid's Orphanage in November 1864:

“That whereas all the proselytizing institutions in this country are fostered and almost entirely carried on by Protestant ministers, we recommend the abolition of the Church Establishment in Ireland...”<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly the campaign for disestablishment was supported by Oscar Wilde. On the achievement of the objective Dr. Tobias Kirby wrote to Margaret Aylward effectively in acknowledgement of her contribution to this effort. The central role played by Aylward in the anti-proselytising movement made her a major target for the Protestant Establishment and it was in her role as the Manager of St. Brigid's that she was assailed.

Two cases one in Italy and one in Ireland became causes célèbres in this struggle. One concerned Edgar Mortara, a Jewish child, raised as a Catholic despite international pressure on the Pope to return him to his own community following the death of his parents. The second involved an Irish child called Mary Matthews and encapsulated the extent to which both sides would go to promote their cause.

Henry Matthews was a Dublin tradesman. His wife, Maria, was an English Protestant who had converted to Catholicism on the occasion of her marriage. She “remained a practicing Catholic during her stay in Dublin, which was about three years.”<sup>37</sup> Due to the shortage of work in Dublin Henry went to England in search of employment and while there he was deserted by his wife who went to West Indies taking the youngest of their three children. Matthews returned to Ireland with his other children, Henry and Mary. He died shortly after his return to Ireland and placed both children in care specifically requesting that they be raised as Catholics. Mary was committed to the care of St Brigid's Orphanage in the month of April, 1858 and was boarded out virtually immediately.

Maria Matthews returned from the West Indies and with the support of the Smyley group retrieved Henry whom she had placed in a Protestant orphanage. She then demanded the return of Mary from St Brigid's Orphanage but was informed that she had already been placed in fosterage with a nurse in the country. A “pious gentleman,” Mr. Heffernan, fearing that the child would be removed transferred her to the continent and eventually had her settled in a convent in Brussels.

Margaret Aylward was now brought to court in a writ for the return of the child. A series of legal wrangles followed which continued for two years. In court she was eventually found “guilty of a contempt of its jurisdiction and she was “committed to prison for six calendar months” and was required to “pay all the costs of the proceedings.” As outlined in *The Freeman's Journal* on November 7<sup>th</sup> 1860, she was to be committed to the Richmond Bridewell which was an exclusively male prison. But after one night spent in the Governor's quarters she was transferred to Grangegorm Penitentiary.

She was now 50 years of age. The Board of the Prison instructed that she “be treated well” but the Prison Matron, Marian Rawlins, despite the wishes of the Prison Governor, Thomas Synnott, treated her with unusual severity and had her placed on committal in an airless room “off one of the hospital wards.” She suffered almost immediately from degradation of her health and despite medical advice the Authorities refused to release her from prison. The support of the Catholic Community was virtually universal and “on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1861, Dr. Dixon, the Primate of Armagh called to see her...”<sup>38</sup> In her absence the 4<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of St Brigid's took place on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1861 and it

“was a provocative display of clerical support, with Archbishop Cullen in the chair, flanked by the bishops of Kerry and Dromore, and an impressive array of high ranking clergymen.”<sup>39</sup>

The *London Times* commented on the case with venom directed at Cardinal Cullen stating that he “fixed upon the church of Rome in Ireland, the stigma of an odious crime against the human affections.”<sup>40</sup> The *Irish Times* was no less vociferous in its substantial review of the case:

“The Times on the case of Miss Aylward-

In their secret souls the Ultramontane Roman Catholic Clergy of England and Ireland must believe us Protestants to be consummate fools. But they can have no knowledge of, still less any respect for, those great principles of civil and religious liberty which compel us, tolerate even their tolerance....even when we punish so gross an outrage as child-stealing the Archbishop of this intolerant Church comes forward in public and wail over the misfortunes of the suffering

---

<sup>36</sup> Gibbons pg. 270

<sup>37</sup> Gibbons pg. 154

<sup>38</sup> Gibbons pg. 179

<sup>39</sup> Prunty pg. 95

<sup>40</sup> Prunty pg. 95

prisoner...her faith has been sustained and her martyrdom sweetened by the visitations of the most notorious among the priestly zealots of her creed;...Dr. Cullen, the titular Archbishop, whom nothing daunts – Dr. Cullen, the great embroiderer of damaged escutcheons – Dr. Cullen, the athletic Catholic whitewasher, advances, in confident conviction of Protestant gullibility, to call down the sympathy of the world for the poor Prisoner Margaret Aylward...fixed upon the Church of Rome in Ireland the stigma of an odious crime against the human affection...we are not more free from the frauds and tyrannies of the Roman priesthood than tare the Austrians or Romans, or than were the Neapolitans.”<sup>41</sup>

While in prison her landlord at 46 Eccles Street wrote to her demanding rent and all but two of her “ladies” left the organisation during this time.

“It was on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1861, the festival of St. Pius V, at nine o’clock in the morning, that Miss Aylward, having completed her six months, sentence to the last hour, left the precincts of Grangegorman....”<sup>42</sup>

### **Schools**

Margaret Aylward had displayed an interest in education from her early days and was involved in the establishment of elementary schools in her native city. However, it was as a corollary to St. Brigid’s Orphanage in its opposition to the national school system on several grounds including religion but also its insistence on education through English, that a distinct and groundbreaking system and philosophy was formulated. Her motivation is perhaps best summarised in a response she made to the provisions of the Vagrancy Act Ireland [1847]<sup>43</sup> and its application to children in Ireland

“Men are seldom reformed by coercion. In the ordinary providence of God, human beings are made good by enlightening the mind and directing the will. It is quite right to reform those, who, by their misdeeds, have forfeited their liberty. But it is a totally different thing to take away liberty lest a bad use should be made of it. Experience proves the evil consequences of such experiments. Hence the surest and least expensive way of making Christian men and women of the poor hungry children, is to entice them to good schools by a little good and clothing.”<sup>44</sup>

The prevailing wisdom held that the hordes of children for whom neither schools nor employment was available should be placed in institutional care. The Catholic Bishops appeared to be primarily concerned with the religious persuasion of the children when, while assembled in synod in 1861 they “demanded for their Catholic Children the rights of a thoroughly Catholic Education.”<sup>45</sup> Margaret accepted this challenge and “on October 7<sup>th</sup> 1861, the first of St. Brigid’s Schools was opened at No. 10 Crow Street, off Dame Street Dublin.’ On that day fifty pupils were received.”<sup>46</sup> The second school was located at Great Strand Street and opened in 1863 and the Park Street schools shortly afterwards with many others including a school in Mullinavat, birthplace of Father Gowan, some years later. “Village schools” were opened to facilitate children who had been fostered out.

The Convent in Glasnevin became a central site and “training School for religious teachers” and “especial attention” was given to the study of the science of teaching. Noteworthy as “in the ‘eighties – and for a good thirty years later – there was not that hubbub about the necessity for the technical training of religious in charge of elementary schools with which we ourselves have since been familiar.”<sup>47</sup> Realising the importance of reading,

---

<sup>41</sup> The Irish Times *The Times on the case of Miss Aylward* Tuesday, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1861 pg. 2. This is a short extract from an extensive three column long diatribe of the greatest virulence and venom against Margaret and the Catholic Church.

<sup>42</sup> Gibbons pg. 187

<sup>43</sup> This Bill debated during the middle of the Famine is notable as illustrating in stark relief the attitude towards the poor of Ireland that permeated the British Parliament and it is particularly noteworthy that its provision were still a source of deep concern when Margaret made her comments many years later. Within the debate the obvious motivation of preventing the Irish poor becoming a draw on England was directly stated. Lord John Russell directly stated his concerns that the Landlord class of Ireland were evading their responsibilities and within his bill begging was prohibited. He stated that his target was not the starving people but rather the “mendicants of this class.”

<sup>44</sup> Prunty pg. 104 [From SBO Twenty-eight Annual Report, 1885 pg. 13]

<sup>45</sup> Gibbons pg. 223

<sup>46</sup> Gibbons pg. 225

<sup>47</sup> Gibbons pgs. 318-319



“school lending libraries were promoted from 1875 as an outreach to the families, simultaneously promoting both literacy and religious knowledge. A book was borrowed for the weekend and read ‘especially on a Sunday evening, by the child, or some other member, for the family’...”<sup>48</sup>

The key objective of her educational institutions was specifically outlined by Margaret, “what we aim at is not precisely the stimulation of the talent of the gifted few, but the education of all according to their state.”<sup>49</sup> Perhaps the greatest significance of her initiatives is best stated by Prunty:

“In their distinctly Irish flavour, St Brigid’s schools were a politically subversive force, well in advance of the establishment of the Gaelic League and the resurgence of Interest in the language and traditions which made such cultural revivalism popular.”<sup>50</sup>

The schools became a central part of the “physical fabric of the city, but more importantly contributed to the building-up of the city’s social fabric.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Later Years**

In 1886 Margaret sent a report to Archbishop Walsh in which she gave a nominal, though not fundamental, account of her life’s efforts:

“Number of houses of our Congregation nine. There are eight houses of the Holy Faith in this diocese, viz.; The Convent of the Holy Faith, Glasnevin; St. Brigid’s House, 46 Eccles Street; House of the B.V.M. Queen of Charity, 65 Lower Jervis Street; Convent of Our Lady of Good Counsel, 23 Clarendon Street; Convent of Our Lady of the Rosary, 54 Lower Dominick Street; ‘Our Redeemer’, West Parliament Street, Coombe; Convent of the Sacred Heart, Skerries Co. Dublin; Convent of the Mary of Ireland, Celbridge, Co. Kildare; Convent of Mt. St. Joseph, Mullinavat, Co. Kilkenny, not in this diocese but under Convent of Holy Faith, Glasnevin, and directed there from.”<sup>52</sup>

An account given in 1896 gives a synopsis of the success of St. Brigid’s:

“Since the institution of the Orphanage 2350 destitute and orphan children have been received, 2100 have been provided for (and of these provided for 548 have been adopted by their foster parents and become permanent members of those families) leaving the Orphanage at the present moment 250 children.”<sup>53</sup>

Margaret visited Rome in 1865 and had a papal audience in which she sought formal recognition for her order. On October 10<sup>th</sup> 1865 she took possession of the Glasnevin property which had previously been used by Sacred Heart nuns and was earlier the home of the Protestant Bishop of Kildare. The Sisters of Holy Faith received canonical erection in 1867 but it was 1869 before the “first group of Sisters were publicly ‘professed.’ This group included Margaret Aylward. It was not until September the 6<sup>th</sup> 1910 that the Vatican issued the final decree of approval of the order. Her latter years “were strained by conflict with ecclesiastical authorities”<sup>54</sup> due in part to an instance on “pontifical status” for her Order. Her confidence never wavered and her conviction about the rectitude of her cause is well illustrated in a letter in response to a critical missive she had received:

“...You seem to think that ‘parochial rating’ is out of the question...But is not the Orphan child of the parish local, and when he falls or is about to fall into the hands of heretics is not his salvation before every other demand? Is the seating of a Church to be put in comparison? Would it not be lawful to melt and sell the sacred chalice to save him?”<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Prunty pgs 104-105

<sup>49</sup> Prunty pg. 105

<sup>50</sup> Prunty pg. 106

<sup>51</sup> Prunty pg. 119

<sup>52</sup> Gibbons pgs. 326-327

<sup>53</sup> Gibbons pg. 200

<sup>54</sup> Prunty pg. 154

<sup>55</sup> Aylward, Margaret *Letter to Bishop Niall Donnelly* (HFA) 14.01 1884 [In Curran, Eugene *Margaret Aylward and the sisters of the Holy Faith – Concluding Part*. Colloque No. 39 Spring 1999 pgs. 226-242] pgs. 231-232

What makes this letter a stunning rejoinder is that the correspondent was no less than Bishop Niall Donnelly of Dublin. Unfortunately difficulties she encountered in Mullinavat, with the local PP Fr. Raftice, which were extraordinarily wearing were unresolved at her death.

As she neared the end of her life Margaret was unable to walk and eventually became bedridden. Fund raising for her causes was taken over by the redoubtable John Joseph Steiner 1832-1916 under the auspices of "Guilds of men for fund raising." He was a German Lutheran who had converted to Catholicism. He carried out his role with enormous success from 1878 until his death when like Father Gowan he was buried in the Convent Cemetery in Glasnevin in recognition of his crucial contribution.

According to the Freeman's Journal of October 12<sup>th</sup> 1889 Margaret Aylward died at 6.30am on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October and was buried in the Glasnevin Convent cemetery.

### **Assessment**

In approaching the life and work of Margaret Aylward, someone of whom I knew nothing, I expected to be disappointed and unsure as to how she could possibly be placed in the company of great Waterford "Scientists." What I found was a feisty, opinionated, decisive, charming, deeply religious and ultimately absolutely inspirational woman.

Her philanthropic contributions to the poorest and most marginalised children is well documented and possibly without compare in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland. But what was central to her work was its philosophical and social basis and two further examples are striking and noteworthy:

"through the combination of varied services which they provided in the parishes, such as the provision of Christmas dinners in Jervis Street, night classes for working girls in Clarendon Street...they made an important contribution to the local community."<sup>56</sup>

"Miss Aylward was also incidentally he pioneer of outdoor relief by subsidizing from the Orphanage funds poor young widows to enable them to rear their children at home – thus strengthening the ties of family life, so essential to the well-being of society."<sup>57</sup>

In an era marked by the establishment of "monumental institutions" the system of home and outdoor care for orphaned children championed by Aylward was revolutionary and even opposed initially by the Catholic Church at the highest levels in Ireland. In developing this methodology she "made a major contribution to the formulation of child care policy"<sup>58</sup> and this was recognised as early as 1862 when the *Poor Law Amendment Act* of that year enabled some boarding out and the official record stated that "St Brigid's played a significant role in enabling the union to take advantage of this relaxation..."<sup>59</sup> By 1868 the media had accepted her contribution and on the 1<sup>st</sup> July the Freeman's Journal commented:

"The late Dr. Hancock was the first political economist who, eight years ago drew attention to the system of St. Brigid's Orphanage."<sup>60</sup>

She established educational opportunities for those who might never have benefited. She made significant contributions to teacher education and helped shape a curriculum which reflected the heritage and nationality of her students.

Religion was central to everything that she did and her struggle against proselytism and discrimination against Catholics was unending. Her contribution to the disestablishment of the State Church was enormous and a study of the obstacles and personal difficulties she faced should serve as a lesson to historical revisionists today. The Order which she founded now has houses in Trinidad, Peru, USA, Australia New Zealand, Samoa and Mexico.

She was faced with enormous obstacles as a woman in an extremely chauvinistic society. This society not only saw a woman's place as being in the home but their position in the church she served so well has been succinctly summarised by Jacinta Prunty:

"Clearly women's contribution to the social mission of the Church was to be welcomed and extolled as long as it was subservient, gratuitous and under clerical control."<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Prunty pg. 119

<sup>57</sup> Gibbons pg. 201

<sup>58</sup> Prunty pg. 77

<sup>59</sup> Prunty pg. 64

<sup>60</sup> Gibbons pg. 188

<sup>61</sup> Prunty pg. 163

However her contribution in altering this view cannot be overstated as has been suggested by Mary Cullen in her introduction to *Women, Power and Consciousness*.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps the most appropriate epitaph for Margaret Aylward is that proposed by her sister Jane:

“My father looked to his son to perpetuate his name, but now – see – it is not his son, but his daughter who will hand it down in honour to posterity.”<sup>63</sup>

Donald Brady

28<sup>th</sup> September 2009

---

<sup>62</sup> Cullen, Mary and Maria Luddy *Women, Power and Consciousness: in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland* Ireland: Attic Press, 1995 304p

<sup>63</sup> Prunty pg. 165 [Quoting Romuald Gibson, *Tomorrow began yesterday* Dublin: Holy Faith Sisters, 1982 pg. 5]