



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

'An uplifting of the heart'



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'Mrs. Atkinson', according to the Irish Daily Independent, 'had the gift of splendid intellect beside her endowment of the rarest virtues - she was assiduous in her charities, and, knowing the extent of them, one marvelled how she found time for other things.

In many a quarter of the world, the souls rescued, sick comforted, the hungry fed, the prisoners visited, must bless her name.' It would, the paper concluded, 'be impossible to overestimate her good works'. So ran the Irish Daily Independent's obituary for Sarah Atkinson, a philanthropist, activist and historian.

'wrong side of the river'

She was born in Athlone on 13 October 1823, the eldest daughter of John and Anna Gaynor. The family, as later described by the novelist Rosa Mulholland in the Irish Monthly, 'lived not many paces from the western bank of the Shannon, which divides the rich lands and picturesque scenery of Westmeath from the far less interesting plains of Roscommon.' Indeed, if we are to believe the Irish Monthly, a popular Catholic periodical of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Atkinson would occasionally remark that 'she was born on the wrong side of the river'.

Little is known of her childhood, except that the young Sarah was fond of reading and had a remarkable capacity to absorb information. According to a contemporary, she 'loved stories; and made up imaginary characters of her own, with whom she conversed in a way that astonished the younger members of the family.' The Gaynor family, who seem to have been relatively wealthy, moved to Dublin when she was about fifteen, although there are few details on her life during the next decade.

In 1849, Sarah married George Atkinson, a chemist and part-owner

of the Freeman's Journal, a leading national newspaper at that time. A few years later, the couple suffered an appalling tragedy with the death of their only child, a son who was around four years old. That tragedy has been identified by historians as sparking Sarah Atkinson's commitment to philanthropy. It is not clear if that contention is entirely accurate although a friend of Atkinson later wrote that the '...grief which endured through all her subsequent years, seems to have changed completely her view of life. She was never able to speak of him; many who thought they knew her most intimately were unaware that she had ever been a mother.'

Schools, hospitals and a future

Atkinson became well-known for her charitable work during the 1850s. In 1855, she founded St. Joseph's Industrial Institute, in partnership with Ellen Woodlock, a leading philanthropist and social worker. Located on Richmond Avenue, the institute catered for impoverished young women, including those from the South Dublin Union Workhouse. The women were provided with training in laundering, knitting, glove making and baking bread with the ultimate aim of helping them to gain employment. From 1856, the institute also included a primary school for younger children. At the time, the institute was considered to be both successful and progressive but it was a very expensive undertaking that struggled to maintain adequate funding. After several years, the institute was closed and the pupils were transferred to the Sisters of Charity on North William Street.

Another of Atkinson's initiatives, a school for girls in Drumcondra, suffered the same fate as the St. Joseph's Industrial Institute and closed through lack of funds. Nevertheless, she persisted and, in 1872, was a member of the group that helped Ellen Woodlock to establish St. Joseph's Infirmary for Children on Upper Buckingham Street in Dublin. Atkinson was one of the two founding secretaries and she was responsible for the infirmary's daily management as well as the provision of financial aid to patients. One of the first children's

hospitals in Ireland, it was later managed by the Sisters of Charity before relocating to larger premises on Temple Street.

Atkinson's close links with religious orders was a trait she held in common with other Catholic philanthropists of the time, as shown in the work of historian Maria Luddy. Ellen Woodlock, for example, had spent time as a convent novitiate while Atkinson worked closely with the Sisters of Charity and was a member of the Sodality of Our Lady, an association formed by the Jesuits with the stated goal of 'fostering in its members an ardent devotion, reverence and filial love towards the Blessed Virgin Mary'. Another trait shared by Atkinson and Woodlock was their wealth. Both women had substantial financial resources which could be directed towards specific causes or in response to social crises, particularly those involving orphaned or destitute girls and young women.

Yet Atkinson's philanthropy went far beyond the provision of funds or the utilisation of her administrative talents. She was a regular visitor to hospitals, prisons and refuges across Dublin, where she took time to assist and talk with the people she encountered. One such trip was

recalled by the contemporary writer and journalist Katharine Tynan: 'I remember visiting a patient in a Dublin hospital one wet winter Saturday. Outside, the streets steamed with rain; and inside, the dark shadows crept up the great, blank walls, and the unadorned ward looked unutterably dreary. While I was there, Mrs. Atkinson came in, in her long cloak and black bonnet, her arms laden with packages. She stopped at every bed; for every patient she had a few cheery words and a little gift: there was an orange for one, a story-book for another, a package of tea for a third. Her face brightened the dreariness...'

Spreading the word

Apart from her social work, Atkinson was a prolific and highly-regarded writer. Her most famous work was a biography of Mary Aikenhead, the founder of the Religious Sisters of Charity, a book which she prefaced with a long essay on the penal laws.

A cross marks the grave of Sarah Atkinson in Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin



Among Atkinson's other published essays were biographies of various saints and a history of 'Irish wool and woollens'. She wrote many articles on foreign travel which were inspired by frequent trips to Europe in the company of her husband. Most of those articles were published anonymously in publications such as the Irish Monthly, The Nation, and the Freeman's Journal. Atkinson also used writing as an extension of her philanthropic efforts, particularly in the pages of the Irish Quarterly Review.

She died 8 July 1893 and was buried in Dublin's Glasnevin cemetery. Her husband George, whom newspapers described as fading away after her

death, died five months later. It is clear from reading contemporary accounts that Sarah Atkinson's death was the cause of genuine sadness throughout Ireland. The Roscommon-born journalist and novelist Charlotte O'Connor Eccles wrote: 'I am glad to claim her as a country woman - she was born at Athlone, 1823 - and I shall always look on her as one of the finest types of character it been my good fortune to know.' Perhaps Katharine Tynan best encapsulated the wider melancholy when she lamented her friend's death as 'so much sweetness lost out of the world'. 'I have never known', she added, 'anyone in whose presence one felt such an uplifting of the heart.'

