

HEADLINES FROM HISTORY



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An Irishwoman of the noblest type had passed out of the world, leaving behind her a long record of work of the highest order successfully done, and assured of future development and increase.'

With those words, the Freeman's Journal newspaper informed its readers of the death of Anna Gaynor, Sister of Charity and first superior of Our Lady's Hospice, Harold's Cross, Dublin.

'the western bank of the Shannon'

She was born in Athlone on 17 March 1826, the eldest daughter of John and Anne 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.' The Gaynors were a wealthy family and when Anna was aged about twelve, they moved to a new home in Dublin's Belvedere Place.

Little is known of Anna's childhood but, according to historian Marie O'Leary, she completed her education in Germany. On returning to Ireland, Anna contributed to her parents' charitable activities and the family provided support to starving and ill people during the Great Famine. Perhaps during this period Anna began to consider a religious life and she entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Charity, Harold's Cross, in November 1854. She professed her vows in May 1857 after receiving the name 'Sister Mary John'.

Gaynor's first assign-

ment was at St. Vincent's Hospital, where she was to remain for nearly two decades, working as secretary to the superior and as a general-manager for the many visitors. By that stage, St. Vincent's was an important part of Dublin's healthcare system. It had been established by Mary Aikenhead, the Cork-born founder of the Religious Sisters of Charity, who purchased the Earl of Meath's town-house on St. Stephen's Green. The house was transformed into a hospital that officially opened in 1835 with twelve beds. St. Vincent's expanded its facilities during subsequent years by incorporating surrounding houses into its hospital complex. The hospital remained open on Stephen's Green until 1970 when it moved to its current location at Elm Park in south Dublin.

'A class apart'

In September 1878, the Sisters of Charity, after moving its novices from Harold's Cross to a different location, decided to transform the vacated accommodation into a hospice for the dying. Gaynor was giving the task of establishing the new venture, which was given the name Our Lady's Hospice. It was a notable development in medical care since, at that time, Dublin hospitals routinely refused admission to dying and destitute patients. A shortage of accommodation meant that hospitals prioritised patients who had the possibility of recovery, with the result that people suffering from incurable diseases, particularly those who were destitute, had little to no support and care. The situation was described by Rosa Mul-

'The kindest thing to be done'

Pedestrians walking past St. Vincent's Hospital, St. Stephen's Green. The photo dates from around 1900 (National Library of Ireland).



holland: 'Such sufferers had hitherto been a class apart, ineligible for admission to hospitals ... The only door open to the forlorn dying was the Poorhouse Infirmary, and unhappily, owing to the lack of classification in our workhouse system, a deathbed in the infirmary wards was definitely more to be dreaded than a deathbed in any miserable attic or lonely cellar.'

The decision to base the hospice in Harold's Cross, which was then on the outskirts of Dublin, and to use a building that once been a domestic rural residence was significant since, as noted by the historian Sarah McGann, it heralded a future of health care outside of major urban hospitals. Locations such as the hospice in Harold's Cross provided patients with homely surroundings as well as extensive gardens. The approach

taken by the Sisters of Charity ensured that Our Lady's Hospice, is considered, internationally as well as in Ireland, as a pioneer in the provision of hospice and palliative care.

Little is known about the medical treatment provided in the hospice during that period. However, it is clear that the Sisters of Charity attempted to provide care appropriate to the specific needs of their patients. An internal report from the hospice's first decade noted: 'The dying cannot be treated as one would common patients: they require the more costly diet and treatment by their weakened condition.' Given the constant need for funds, both to maintain and expand the hospice, Gaynor was required to launch regular appeals that targeted Dublin's wealthy families. In those endeavours she seems

to have been largely successful: by 1880, the hospice had more than 40 beds, a figure that reached 108 by the end of the decade.

Sisters of charity

During 1878, Anna Gaynor undertook another notable project when she provided research assistance to her sister Sarah who was writing a biography of Mary Aikenhead. Sarah, who married chemist and newspaper owner George Atkinson in 1849, was a highly-regarded writer, whose life and career we explored in an earlier article. Like Anna, Sarah Atkinson was well-known for her charitable work. In 1855, she founded St. Joseph's Industrial Institute, in partnership with Ellen Woodlock, a leading philanthropist and social worker of the time.

St. Joseph's Industrial Institute eventually

closed through lack of funds, as did another of Atkinson's initiatives, a school for girls in Drumcondra. However, in 1872, she was a member of a 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.

Anna Gaynor was perhaps less famous than her sister but each played an immensely important role in expanding the availability of hospital care in Ireland and in providing young women with training and educational oppor-

tunities. Gaynor was a popular figure in Dublin, especially among residents of the hospice. Rosa Mulholland, who knew Gaynor, described her character and the manner in which she cared for patients: 'Her light step, her bright, yet soft, dark eyes, the eager expression of questing about for the kindest thing to be done, her lively jest and innocently droll story brought sunshine to the wards, and often left laughter where there had been tears.' She remained active until shortly before her death, succumbing to illness in March 1899. Anna Gaynor, Sister Mary John, was buried in the Convent Cemetery in Donnybrook, Dublin. Today, the Extended Care Unit of Our Lady's Hospice, a purpose-built residential unit for those who require full-time nursing care, is named in her honour.

