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A short synopsis of the life of Mother Mary Aikenhead

Part One



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Mary's grandfather comes to live in Cork

Sarah Atkinson tells us in her book, "Mary Aikenhead: Her Life, Her Work and Her Friends" which was published in 1882 that Mary's grandfather David, a Scottish gentleman, relinquished his military profession, married a Limerick lady, Miss Anne Wight and settled in Cork. David died early leaving two children, a daughter Anne, who afterwards married Dr. Galway of Cork and settled in Mallow and a son David who having studied medicine, established himself as a practising physician and chemist in Cork.

David Aikenhead's marriage

The young David like his father, was a member of the Established Church of the time. We would call it the Protestant Church, the Church of Ireland or the Anglican Church. In due course David married Mary Stacpole, the eldest daughter of a Cork merchant whose family were staunch Catholics with strong national leanings. They were married on 22nd October, 1785 in a Cork church with a double-barrel name, Holy Trinity/Christchurch, situated in South Main St. In modern times that church became the keeper of the archives of Cork and in April 2011 it was opened as a concert hall under the title, Triskel/Christchurch, Triskel being the name of a small theatre next door.



Birth of Mary Aikenhead

The Penal Laws introduced in 1695 forbade a Protestant marry a Catholic under penalty of losing his inheritance and his business and to borrow a phrase from a prominent politician of today, those laws had "not gone away you know" by 1785 but they had become partially relaxed and David Aikenhead suffered no penalty. However, before his marriage, he made one stipulation that whatever children heaven blessed them with, they should be brought up as members of the Established Church. So, on the 19th January 1787 when the first child, a little girl was born to Mary Stacpole and David Aikenhead she was whisked off to her father's parish church, St. Anne's Shandon, Cork's Anglican Church where she was baptised



on 4 April 1787 and given the name, “Mary”. The baptismal font used at her baptism with the date it was made, 1629 clearly etched on the side, is still in use in the church today.

Mary is “fostered”.

Soon after her birth, Mary Aikenhead was taken from Daunt’s Square where the Aikenheads lived, to be fostered by a Catholic nurse, Mary Rorke who with her husband John lived in a cottage on Eason’s hill, a semi-rural site quite near the top of Shandon hill.

We might ask ourselves why a child so young was taken so soon from her home? Some reasons have been proposed: **Firstly**, Cork city was built on marshy islands around which the River Lee wound its way on its journey to the sea. From about 1700 some of these marshes had been reclaimed to form streets. When Mary Aikenhead was born there were still many channels or canals in the city, some of them quite near low-lying Daunt’s Square. This position of the Square made it prone to damp and fog and this may have been a cause of concern to the parents of their new-born child. **Secondly**, and according to Donal S. Blake in his book, “Mary Aikenhead, Servant of the Poor”, Mary was, “quite frail, probably asthmatic, and according to the medical wisdom of the time it was decided to have her fostered in the more salubrious ground to the north of Shandon”. **Thirdly**, and here again I quote from Donal Blake: “It would appear that the young Mrs. Aikenhead was already having qualms about agreeing that all her children would be raised as Protestants and for that reason she handed her young daughter over to Mrs. Mary Rorke, a devout Catholic. Dr. Aikenhead, possibly wishing to humour his young wife, did not object. Perhaps he already had leanings towards the faith which he was to embrace on his deathbed”. **Fourthly**, a system of fosterage was practised in Ireland even from the time of the chieftains whereby a child was handed over to another family to be reared for a while and then brought back to the original family. Mary Aikenhead always referred to Mrs. Rorke as “Nurse”.

Life on Eason’s Hill

Mary was cared for lovingly by the Rorkes and loved them as her second parents. A story is told that Mrs. Rorke had little Mary baptised secretly according to the rites of the Catholic Church.

Mary joined in the family Rosary every night before bedtime and accompanied the Rorke family to Mass every Sunday in the Bishop’s Chapel, as the church of the north parish was usually called. The present Cathedral of St. Mary and St. Anne is on that site. She played

with the children of the hill and got to know some of the adults too. On one occasion when her parents arrived on their weekly visit Mary ran to her father saying, “Oh! Father, I got such a fine supper of sprats from Joanie Keating; and now I want you to give me some medicine for her”. The doctor was well known on the hill for his many kind visits to the poor. The little girl was so happy, so well cared for and looked so healthy that it was decided to extend her stay on Eason’s hill indefinitely.

A glimpse of life in the City

Mary made trips now and again to her home in Daunt’s Square in the city. These were followed by a walk on the Grand Parade where she met new friends. She was beginning to learn that there were two worlds in Cork – one up on the hill where most of the people were poor and went to chapel; the other down in the city where most were well-to-do and better dressed and went to church.



Mary returns to Daunt’s Square

In 1793 when Mary was six years of age, it was decided it was time for her to leave Eason’s Hill and rejoin the family in Daunt’s Square. By this time there were two other little girls in the family, Anne born in 1790 and Margaret about 1792. A brother, St. John was born later, about 1796. To the delight of all, Dr. Aikenhead invited ‘Mammy Rorke’ to come and work full time in the nursery and ‘Daddy John’ to act as coach driver and general help. It was arranged that Mary would attend a nearby school established for the education of the children

of Protestant gentlemen and soon she began accompanying her father on Sundays, to service in Shandon Church.

1798 affects the Aikenhead family



1798 was a memorable year in the Aikenhead household as well as in the whole of Ireland. From the early 1790s Dr. Aikenhead had become imbibed by the principles of the United Irishmen. He subscribed to fair play in worship and employment for ‘Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter.’ On one occasion Lord Edward Fitzgerald disguised as a Quaker sought refuge in the Aikenhead home. He was

enjoying dinner with the family when the house was surrounded by troops with the sheriff at their head. After a few hurried but instructive words from the doctor, the visitor disappeared reaching safety across the river. The house was searched but because of the loyalty of his apprentices who knew and kept the doctor’s secret, no incriminating documents were found among the drawers apparently filled with just medical prescriptions.

Dr. Aikenhead retires

The strain was beginning to tell on Dr. Aikenhead. Already worried about matters of religion and the delicate health of his only son, St. John, the political fall-out from the 1798 rebellion began to affect him. He sold his practice and with his family retired to Rutland St. the home area of his wife’s people, the Stacpoles. He was fifty years of age. Coincidental to this change of residence was the return to Ireland of Mrs. Rebecca Gorman, the widowed sister of Mary’s mother. Mrs. Gorman was to have a profound influence on the young Mary Aikenhead.

Mary’s spiritual struggle

A struggle was going on in Mary’s soul. On the one hand there was her father, whom she loved dearly and his well-to-do, good Protestant friends and on the other hand were the Stacpoles, in whose company, permeated as it was with the Catholic faith, she felt so much at home. She was living in a state of divided loyalty and, young



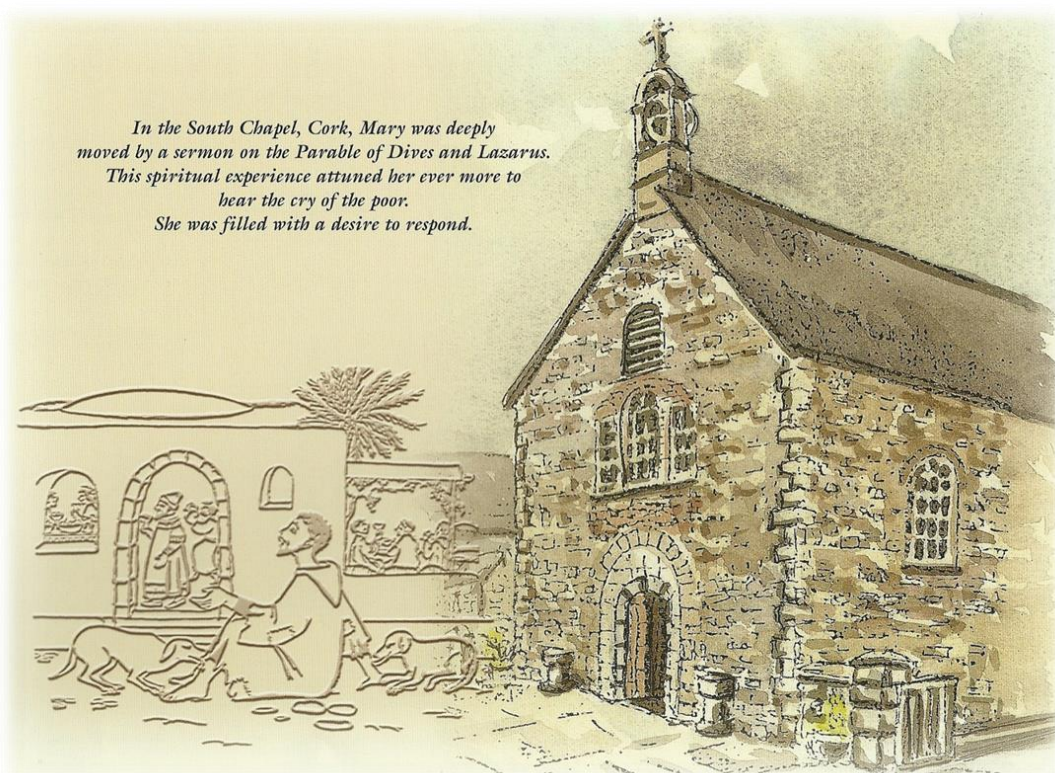
though she was, she realised that she must go one way or the other and that nobody but herself could make the decision. She began to slip out to early morning Mass in the nearby South Chapel and people in her household noticed that before retiring at night, “she burned down a whole mould candle while saying her prayers.”

The death of Dr. Aikenhead

Dr. Aikenhead did not live long to enjoy his retirement. Towards the end of 1801 he became seriously ill. The minister from his church came and prayed with him. Later and of his own accord he asked to see a Catholic priest. His doubts vanished and he asked to be received into the Catholic Church. He died on 28 December 1801 while his family, Bishop Moylan a close family friend and faithful ‘Mammy Rorke’ knelt around his bed.

Dr. Florence McCarthy’s influence on Mary’s life

Her father’s conversion and death cleared the way for Mary’s entry into the Catholic Church. About this time too, when Mary accompanied her aunt Mrs. Gorman to Mass in the South Chapel she heard a sermon by Dr. Florence McCarthy, Coadjutor Bishop of Cork, that was to influence her for the rest of her life. The topic was the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Lk. 16: 19-31), the story of the uncaring rich man who ends up in hell and the crumb-begging poor man who inherits paradise. Mary applied the story to the Cork scene. She felt that she herself and her kind, the well-to-do had a gospel obligation to reach out to the thousands of poor, starving wretches who cohabited the city with them. The focus of the rest of her life was, to quote her own words, ‘God’s nobility, the suffering poor.’



Mary's reception into the Catholic Church

Mary began to receive systematic instruction in the faith and on 6 June 1802, she was solemnly received into the Catholic Church at the age of 15. Her first Holy Communion followed on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, 29 June and she received the sacrament of confirmation on 2 July. She took Frances as her confirmation name, probably in honour of Bishop Francis Moylan, and she was to use 'Mary Frances Aikenhead' on her copy of the vows many years later. Shortly after her confirmation, her younger sisters, Anne and Margaret and her little brother, St. John were also received into the Catholic Church.

Mary is obliged to learn business skills

After the death of her father and because her mother was semi-invalided and unable to cope with business and financial affairs, Mary found herself learning how to keep accounts and transact business, skills that stood her in good stead in the years ahead. Her sisters, Anne and Margaret attended the school, run by the Ursuline Sisters while her frail brother, St. John was educated at home. Until she was twenty-one years of age, Mary took her place in society, entering into the round of social activities, balls and soirees that were part of Cork middle class life of the time. But she did not forget the destitute poor that tried to survive in the lanes of the city.

A bird's eye view of 18th - 19th century Cork

What was Cork like in Mary Aikenhead's time? It was a busy international port. Through this port beef, butter and grain from the hinterland were transported to feed the British armies in their European wars while in the miry lanes of the city, hordes of starving, ill-clad men, women and children tried to eke out an existence by hoarding and selling human waste. As the water supply for the poor came solely from the contaminated river, diseases such as



typhus fever were quite common. Into these lanes and into the grossly overcrowded, airless hovels ("airless" because windows were taxed and thereby generally boarded up) went Mary Aikenhead with her middle-class friends including Cecilia Lynch, bringing whatever help they could to ease the suffering of these unfortunate people.