

# EDMUND RICE AND THE PRESENTATION BROTHERS<sup>1</sup>

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Edmund Rice, founder of both the Presentation and Christian Brothers, was born in Callan, Co. Kilkenny, on 1 June 1762. He came from a large family of seven boys. He also had two step-sisters, children of his mother by a previous marriage. His father was a farmer with almost two hundred acres of land, leased from a local Protestant landlord, Lord Desart. In comparison with the majority of Irish Catholics of the period, his family were considered 'well-off'.

## **Early education**

In common with the practice of the time, Edmund was taught his prayers and the basics of his religion by his mother at home. At the age of seven he began to attend a local hedge school in Callan. The name hedge was derisory since these schools were usually accommodated in little thatched houses, called cabins, which were often used as mass houses on Sundays.

## **School in Kilkenny**

The deplorable physical amenities of the hedge school did not, however, prevent Edmund from quickly mastering the 'three Rs', and, at the age of fifteen, he moved on to a more advanced school in Kilkenny, operated by a Mr White, a Catholic. Here the curriculum included 'Mathematics, Latin, Greek, French, Grammar, Book-keeping, Globes, Maps, Drawing, Music and Fencing'. We do not know whether Edmund took all these subjects, but, being a conscientious young man, he probably took most of them. There is a tradition that he excelled at mathematics and book-keeping. Moreover, the progress he was making in his studies, allied to his natural courtesy and good manners, attracted the attention of his uncle, Michael Rice, a successful merchant and ship's chandler in Waterford.

### **Into business**

Edmund's uncle, Michael, was so impressed with his nephew that he invited him to join him as an apprentice in his business. With the full approval of his parents, Edmund accepted this generous invitation and, before long, he was his uncle's right-hand assistant. Though Michael Rice had two sons of his own, neither was interested in their father's business. His nephew, Edmund, on the other hand, had a great flair for it: he was quick at figures, he was a good organiser and he got on well with people. After a few years it became obvious to Uncle Michael that his nephew was the most suitable person to succeed him in charge of the business and, when he died, it was no surprise to anyone that Edmund inherited it.

### **A bright future**

A bright future stretched ahead of Edmund: though not yet thirty years of age, he already owned a flourishing business. His knowledge of business and legal affairs and his prudence and sound judgement were beginning to be recognised and appreciated by his growing circle of friends. In 1787 his own father, Robert Rice, chose Edmund to draw up his will, making him executor of it, even though Edmund was then only twenty-five years of age and the fourth son in the family. This was just one of the many instances where people showed their confidence in his skill and integrity. As the years went by, he would be called on by many people to execute their wills, to invest their money and to make legal representations on their behalf.

### **Marriage and tragedy**

At the age of twenty-three, Edmund married a young woman, thought to be named Mary Elliott, the daughter of a well-to-do neighbour. Little is known for certain about her, though tradition says that she was outgoing and vivacious with a great love of horse-riding. About a year after the marriage she died suddenly. Some say her death was the result of a fall from a horse while out riding, others from a fever. She was pregnant at the time and, before she died, she gave birth to a baby girl, also named Mary, who seems to have been handicapped.

Edmund's world seemed to collapse about him: in one cruel blow fate deprived him of his much-loved wife and gave him instead a handicapped daughter.

### **Prayer and the Bible**

Though initially overcome by grief, Edmund soon accepted with resignation the cross laid on him by a Providence he firmly believed to be compassionate and loving. It brought home to him the transient nature of human joy and the need to look beyond this life for lasting happiness. Though his business flourished under his wise and painstaking management, he began to give more attention to his spiritual life. He acquired his own copy of the Bible and began to read it daily. He underlined texts which made a deep impression on him and returned to these again and again. Always a practical man, he paid special attention to what the Bible had to say about honesty in business affairs, especially Exodus 22:25; Proverbs 22:16; Ezekiel 13:21; Matthew 5:42 and Luke 6:35.

### **Charitable works**

Edmund took an active part in the charitable work of his adopted city of Waterford. When two young Connolly girls suddenly became orphans, Edmund had them reared and educated at his own expense. When the Gaelic poet, Tadhg Gaelach O'Sullivan, underwent a religious conversion and wished to publish a book of religious poems in a *Pious Miscellany*, Edmund was one of those who subscribed to the publication of the volume. He was also a signatory to a petition to King George III protesting against the wording of the Oath of Allegiance which Catholics found offensive. This petition was forwarded to His Majesty by a committee of the people of Waterford in 1792 and was one of the events that helped to prepare the climate for the Relief Act of 1793. But one of his most enduring and enlightened actions was to negotiate a lease for the site of Presentation Convent, Waterford, on 1 June 1799. This was Edmund's first encounter with the spiritual daughters of Nano Nagle, a woman he greatly admired and whose example he was eventually to emulate.

Soon after they were established in Waterford, the Presentation

Sisters had to call on Edmund Rice again for advice about their financial affairs. Edmund invested their small capital so as to give the best possible dividend. In return, the Sisters loaned him a copy of their Rule, and he studied it with more than casual curiosity.

#### **Works of mercy**

Meantime, Edmund had begun to attend daily Mass and to read religious books. In the year 1794 he and some friends founded a society for visiting the sick and lonely as well as helping them out financially. As this work expanded it brought him into contact with the poor people living in the slums of Waterford. He was especially touched at the sight of many young boys who were not attending school and were growing up, not only ignorant of their religion, but also unable to read or write and without discipline or restraint of any kind. Today, we might call them juvenile delinquents. The only free schools were Protestant and the teachers in those felt they were entitled to proselytise any Catholic pupils who attended. True, there were some small private Catholic schools but they charged fees and were intended for the children of more prosperous Catholics. Free primary education, as we know it today, was as yet unheard of in Ireland.

#### **Ministry to poor boys**

Very soon Edmund, though engaged in business during the day, began a ministry of his own in the evenings. When he finished work he would open up his own house to poor boys, giving them meals and teaching them their prayers and catechism. He also gave lessons in reading and writing to those boys who were interested. When he saw their tattered clothes, Edmund's business training and flair came to the rescue: he purchased a bale of cloth, hired a tailor and had him make suits for the boys. Shoes were his next venture: he purchased the leather in bulk and hired a shoemaker to make shoes for his charges.

#### **Starting in a stable**

As the number of boys increased, Edmund looked around for larger premises. He purchased a building, formerly used as a stable,

with good stone walls, and made the ground floor into a classroom, while upstairs he made space for the tailor and shoemaker. This was Edmund Rice's first school. It provided what the pupils wanted: clothing, shoes and education. But soon he became aware of the fact the boys were sometimes hungry. So his next venture was a bakery. Now, in addition to the other things, the boys could be sure of a good meal.

#### **The search for good teachers**

Though Edmund was the first teacher of these boys, as the tailor's shop, the shoemaker's shop and the bakery developed, he had less time for teaching so he looked around for helpers. It was comparatively easy to find a tailor, a shoemaker and a baker, but finding teachers proved more difficult, not least because the boys were very rough and difficult to control. The teachers whom he initially engaged gave up in frustration and departed and, for a while, the future of the project seemed in danger. But Edmund put his trust in Providence and, when things seemed hopeless, two young men arrived from his native Callan offering their services and asking to join him in his work. These first companions attracted others and Edmund's school prospered and grew.

#### **Religious congregation**

Meantime, however, he began to feel the call to give up his business and devote himself full-time to the work of educating poor boys. The ecclesiastical rules of the day demanded that any religious group requiring approval from Rome had to live a monastic life and wear religious habit. Inspired by the example of Nano Nagle, Edmund attended the first Mass celebrated in the new Presentation Convent Waterford on the Feast of St Joseph, 19 March 1801. One year later, in 1802, he took the historic decision to found a small community of Brothers of the Presentation. He had studied the Presentation Rule of the religious sisters of Nano Nagle and had come to the conclusion that God was calling him and his companions to do for poor boys what these charitable women had done for poor girls.

### **Much suffering**

Edmund's decision to found a religious congregation ensured that there would be a steady stream of young men joining him to continue his work. Initially the group was called the Society of the Presentation, the members being popularly known as the Monks of the Presentation and, also, as the Gentlemen of the Presentation. In 1803 Edmund built a new monastery and school in Ballybricken, outside the walls of the city of Waterford, and named it Mount Sion. Here, he and his companions made vows of chastity, poverty and obedience in 1808, and began to wear a black habit – indoors only, because the Penal Laws, though somewhat relaxed, were still on the statute books, and they forbade the wearing of any religious garb by Roman Catholics.

### **Spreading out from Waterford**

As the number of volunteers joining Edmund increased, he acceded to requests from priests and bishops in other towns and dioceses to open schools. Soon there was a network of them: Carrick-on-Suir (1806), Dungarvan (1807), Cork (1811), Dublin (1812), Limerick (1816), Thurles (1816) Preston (1825).

### **Many sufferings**

Edmund encountered many difficulties in the second half of his life. Certain members of the clergy and some bishops opposed him, while some Brothers in his own Congregation suspected, misunderstood and even made false allegations against him. Eventually, he offered his resignation as leader and this was promptly accepted. But he cheerfully accepted each of these crosses, just as he had the death of his beloved wife and the handicap of his daughter, Mary. He believed that God purifies with suffering those whom he has specially chosen.

### **Death**

Edmund died at Mount Sion, Waterford, on 29 August 1844. In April 1993 Pope John Paul II declared him venerable. This, however, was merely a preliminary step to his beatification on 6 October 1996. The decision to beatify Edmund came at the end of a long investigation into his life and work and after the accep-

tance of a certified miracle attributed to his intercession. Edmund, like many other saintly people, was purified in the crucible of suffering and it is not only his great success as the founder of a world-wide network of schools for poor children that inspires people, but also his patient and cheerful acceptance of the many sufferings God sent him. Nor must it be thought that what he achieved was accomplished because the circumstances were ideal or the odds always in his favour: no, indeed! It was, rather, because of his perseverance and heroic efforts. Indeed, it could be said that many of his good deeds and achievements were effected *in spite* of difficulties, misunderstandings and opposition.

#### **Revered in Waterford**

A Waterford Quaker who witnessed Edmund's funeral summed up his life with remarkable insight:

The display of feelings manifested at the interment of Brother Rice shows that the people are neither forgetful nor ungrateful. No wonder, as they see the extraordinary change brought about mainly by his instrumentality. The Roman Catholics believe he was a messenger from God.... Mr Rice is not dead! He lives! Yes, he lives the highest, noblest and greatest life. He lives in the noble band of Christian workmen to whom he has bequeathed his spirit and his work. (Normoyle, 414)

#### **Brothers of the Presentation to Cork**

Soon after Edmund Rice founded his Society of the Presentation in Waterford, Bishop Moylan of Cork got to hear of it and determined to establish a branch in Cork. In 1804 he sent a postulant named Sheridan to Waterford but this young man did not persevere in his vocation. In 1809 Bishop Moylan paid a personal visit to Mount Sion and was so impressed with the class discipline and teaching methods of the Brothers and the conduct of the children that, on his return to Cork, he called a special meeting of the committee of the Cork Charitable Society, which managed no fewer than nine schools for poor children in Cork at the time.

At this meeting Bishop Moylan outlined the miseries of the

poor in Cork and the need to provide their children with a good basic schooling. He was convinced that only people who were strongly committed to their faith and had both the requisite knowledge and classroom skills could accomplish this work satisfactorily. The committee had experienced many difficulties in finding suitable teachers for its schools in recent years and had encountered some who proved unsatisfactory. Following Bishop Moylan's appeal, the following resolution was adopted at a subsequent meeting of the committee on 25 February 1810:

It was also resolved that the sum of one hundred pounds shall be applied to the purpose of sending two young men who shall be approved of by the Bishop and the clergymen of this committee to the monastery in Waterford in order to have them fitted for an Establishment of a similar nature in this city. (Allen, 35)

Two young men, Jeremiah O'Connor and John Leonard, volunteered their services and were accepted and, on St Patrick's Day 1810, proceeded to Mount Sion, Waterford, where they received their religious and teacher training under the personal supervision of Edmund Rice. In November 1811 they returned to Cork, having been professed as Brothers of the Presentation before leaving Waterford.

#### **Success of the first school in Cork**

On their return to Cork the two young men were given charge of the Cork Charitable Society's North School, then situated off Chapel Lane, in the shadow of the North Chapel (now Cathedral). They found accommodation in nearby Clarence Street. The school was small and badly in need of repair and their own accommodation less than adequate.

When the Brothers took over management of the school in Chapel Lane there were two teachers and seventeen pupils, who were reported to be very undisciplined. Shortly afterwards they were joined by Brother Francis Ryan, also trained in Waterford, and, the following March, by Patrick Leonard, brother of John, who had considerable experience of working in a bank. By mid –



1814 Michael McDermott and Michael Augustine Riordan had joined them. There were now six Brothers on the staff teaching arithmetic, reading and spelling, geometry and mensuration and book-keeping. From seventeen boys in 1811 the numbers had jumped to 450 in 1815. Meantime the Brothers had moved into more congenial quarters in Peacock Lane. Later, they went to live in the new North Monastery, designed and built by one of their Brothers, Michael Augustine Riordan. In 1818 they moved into the new North Monastery school also built by Brother Riordan.

### **Hunger, typhus and debt**

Unfortunately, this period of expansion coincided with a general failure of the potato crop, the staple diet of the people. The hunger and starvation of 1816-17, coupled with overcrowding in the tenements of the poor, led to a severe outbreak of typhus throughout the city and thousands died. The fever hospitals were completely inadequate to meet the situation. In this emergency, the Brothers handed over their new school to the city authorities to be used as a temporary fever hospital. The Brothers themselves suffered severely, subsisting on potatoes and milk, not being able to afford meat. Were it not for the charity of the Lyons family, they would have been hungry. As it was, Brother Francis Ryan died of typhus and Brother Ignatius McDermott of the 'decline', as tuberculosis was then known.

Though helped by the Cork Charitable Society, the Brothers went into debt to erect the new buildings on the new site of the North Monastery. It was a particularly bad time to incur a debt in Cork. In addition to an extended recession following the end of the Napoleonic wars, which affected the country as a whole, there were the mini-famine and typhus outbreak in Cork. The latter affected the earning power of the community by directly causing the death of one of the Brothers while it is very likely that under-nourishment contributed to the death of the other. This debt was to be a burden on the Cork community for many years to come.

