

**Review:-**

**Jacinta Prunty, *Margaret Aylward 1810-1889: Lady of Charity, Sister of Faith*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, (1999) pp. 192, ISBN 1.85182.438.3 (pb), in *Irish Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3, (December 1999), pp. 401-2.**

Jacinta Prunty's life of Margaret Aylward, Founder of the Sisters of the Holy Faith, charts impressive pioneering initiatives for the spiritual, material and educational welfare of needful Catholic children in nineteenth century Ireland. Mobilised against the imperialist proselytising successes of the Protestant Irish Church Mission, Aylward's indomitable commitment to the Catholic dictum, 'out of the Church there is no salvation' (p. 152), inspired a unique blend of bravery and pragmatism and earned her extraordinary freedoms in a context not conducive to female independence.

Developed from a doctoral thesis, Prunty's book utilises all necessary scholarly apparatus; inclusion of illustrative graphs of entrances to and exits from the Holy Faith community and St Brigid's Orphanage helps retain something of the 'feel' of a thesis. This apart, meticulous, comprehensive notation draws on impressive source material organised in a way that should offer a valuable basis for further research into the impact of nineteenth century Catholic philanthropy on the regeneration of Irish cultural pride. For the uninitiated there is a useful synopsis of the primary theological influences on Aylward's 'apostolic' mission. An extensive account of the founding of

Prunty's dual role as professional historian and Holy Faith Sister does create some tensions. Her congregation's initiation and part-sponsorship of publication suggests possible cause for discretion (See Preface). Treatment of Aylward's precipitate departure from two religious houses and subsequent, face-saving remove to Dublin is noticeably brief. Aylward's alignment with the mischievous novice mistress Sr. Ignatius' view that her charges were 'squandering intellectual gifts' is also handled delicately. Her subsequent rejections of religious life are attributed largely to ill health and distaste for 'loss of liberty and innumerable "annoyances"' of communal life. This is a notable departure from an earlier essay that illuminates more thoroughly the frustrations of contemporary women of Aylward's class driven to convent life rather than face 'no real marriage prospects ... [and] a future of single idleness or perpetual dependence upon the whims of older relatives'.<sup>1</sup> On the take-over by a religious order of Aylward's lay organisation, Daughters of Charity, Prunty does question the silencing of women's history in 'ecclesiastical and lay power structures within which all philanthropic women had to steer a course'. This is her most overtly radical critique of the Catholic *imperium*:

Margaret's role in bringing this Charity to Dublin has been almost entirely blotted out of history to date ... removed from the memory of the Daughters of Charity as effectively as her collecting box was prised out of the wall of the North William Street convent and the space cemented over (p. 90).

Prunty wisely avoids the hagiographic enthusiasms of Margaret Gibbons' *Life of Margaret Aylward* (Sands & Co., 1928). Gibbons' 'heroine' is a robust 'ready sympathiser' of Sr. Ignatius offering stubborn resistance to the 'exhortations of her "pious" elder sister'. This 'warrior' figure takes on the 'unlettered men teaching our perverted little ones ... that St. Patrick was a

Protestant' with such magnetism that one postulant 'solemnly offered her life' that her Foundress be delivered from a fatal illness (pp. 36, 44, 266). However, failing to 'flesh out' Aylward's character, Prunty falls into serendipity, deferring to a style of Irish history-making that 'creates folk heroines "comparable only to ancient Gaelic Queens"'.<sup>2</sup> Aylward, the twice recusant, fierce promoter of lay interventions for the poor dissolves before the beatified 'Lady Aylward' of the closing chapters; is frustratingly disconnected from the compromising, battle-weary veteran who – even as she rejected religious dress herself – led her Sisters into holy orders for 'respectability'. Also needing more balance is Prunty's backdrop to Aylward's attack on 'souperism' by colonialist-inspired Protestant evangelical sects (p. 40). Her context 'begins' in Dublin in the aftermath of the 'great famine of 1845-7' with no pointer to recent scholarship that tends overwhelmingly to credit the 'souters' with initiating templates for relief programmes. These filled the desperate vacuum created by a widespread loss of faith during the famine that was exacerbated by the seeming indifference of a moribund Catholic hierarchy. Aylward's arrival in Dublin, for example, coincided with militant nationalist James Maher's complaint in the late 1840s that 'bishops travel about in their carriages, our priests in their gigs as comfortably as in the most abundant of seasons'. Cullen himself admitted that some clerics had abandoned parishes fearing 'the dangers of death from starvation or fever'.<sup>3</sup> Introducing *Women, Power and Consciousness* (Attic, 1995), editors Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy comment on nineteenth century philanthropism that 'while political and social alliances were formed between Quakers and Presbyterians, and members of the Church of Ireland, such alliances rarely breached the walls of Catholicism' (p. 16). Without fuller engagement with famine politics that created 'bitter division between Catholic and Protestant

clergy and laity' (Lang, 1995, p. 268), Prunty ultimately does not persuade that her subject's Cathlocentrism was fundamentally benign. Nor does she offer a convincing alternative to the view that 'the sectarian divide became more entrenched as the result of the activities of people like Aylward' (Cullen and Luddy, p. 16).

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