

## Sister Mary Ursula Frayne

Clara Mary Frayne was the youngest child of Bridget and Robert Frayne. She was born on October 15, but there is some question as to whether it was 1816 or 1817. Her father was a prosperous businessman with premises of his own, and the family enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle in their Dublin home on the Liffey waterfront. Clara's biographer, Catherine Kovesi Killerby, relates

that she had a privileged childhood, was highly-educated and was an accomplished pianist and embroiderer. In her book *Ursula Frayne*, Killerby suggests that Clara may have been educated privately in Dublin, or like many of her contemporaries in comfortable circumstances, may have studied in one of the illustrious schools in France.

Although Clara's oldest sister, Mary, joined the Sisters of Charity in Dublin, it was the newly-founded Sisters of Mercy who attracted Clara. She entered at Baggot Street on July 2, 1834 and was received into the novitiate by Catherine McAuley on January 20, 1835 as Sister Mary Ursula. Her novice mistress throughout her two years of novitiate was Catherine McAuley. When Sister Mary Ursula made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on January 25, 1837, she became the twenty-second member of the Order.

In April of that same year, the newly-professed Sister Mary Ursula went to Carlow in southeastern Ireland as a member of its founding community. According to her biographer, Sister M. Ursula suffered from frequent and debilitating attacks of a troubling illness. After a few months in Carlow, one of these bouts of illness made it necessary for her to move to St. Patrick's Convent in Kingstown, a seaside town near Dublin, which had been opened by Catherine McAuley as a convalescent house for ailing sisters. When St. Patrick's closed because of financial problems in 1838, Sister M. Ursula was assigned to the newly-established St. Anne's Convent, Booterstown. This convalescent home for sick sisters, located on the coast quite near Dublin, operated as a branch house under Catherine McAuley's personal direction. Although Sister M. Ursula was named superior, her responsibilities were mainly concerned with the invalid sisters from other convents who came there for care and rest.

Sister M. Ursula was a versifier, and she became well-known for her ability to respond to Catherine McAuley's rhymes, depicting

day-to-day events in the community and in her travels. There are a number of examples of verses she and Catherine McAuley sent back and forth to each other. One such is the playful greeting that Sister M. Ursula sent to Catherine on her feastday, April 30, 1839:

My dear Rev. Mother on this festive day  
Some words in your honour I gladly would say  
But vain the endeavour, in  
vain do I try  
My Muse is too humble for subjects so high.

In 1841 when Catherine McAuley's health was seriously deteriorating, it seemed logical that Sister M. Ursula would be called back to Baggot Street to care for her. She had managed a convalescent convent for nearly four years and had developed skills in caring for the sick. Catherine's words to Sister Mary Frances Warde in a letter dated October 4,

1841, make it evident that Sister Mary Ursula tended the ailing Catherine devotedly and efficiently:

My affectionate Sister Mary Ursula Frayne is my nurse and never ceases thinking of something for me.

On November 9, it was Sister M. Ursula who notified the superiors of all the houses of Catherine's worsening condition, and two days later, when Catherine died, it was she who notified them of her death. She is one of the sisters named in the codicil to Catherine's will, making her, in the words of Catherine Killerby "a true spiritual heir of Catherine McAuley."

Presumably, after Catherine McAuley's death, Sister M. Ursula remained at Baggot Street until she left for Newfoundland on May 2, 1843. She was the senior sister of the three members of the founding community, and her biographer attests that the Dublin *Register* had named her as superior of the Newfoundland foundation. However the page referred to in the original *Register*,

preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland, does not mention Newfoundland. Despite all the assertions and all the questions, the identity of the actual superior of the Military Road Convent has continued to be a puzzling question.

Upon arrival in St. John's where the needs were so many and so drastic, Sister Mary Ursula's many talents were undoubtedly appreciated. When Our Lady of Mercy School opened in May of 1843, she would have been a welcome addition to the whole school, because of her excellent educational background and proficiencies in music and the arts. However, six months after the school opened, she and Sister Mary Rose set sail for Ireland, leaving Newfoundland and a Mercy mission that was still in its infancy. Both sisters returned to the convent in Baggot Street, where they remained until each was assigned a new mission.

In volunteering to come to Newfoundland, Sister Mary Ursula's heart must have harboured a dream of making a difference in the lives of the people of this far-flung mission, of responding in mercy to the great need she saw all around her, of making this mission a success. She had already been on two foundations and experienced the excitement and the challenge of being part of a new venture. In her seventeen months in St. John's, she had visited the sick and the poor, bringing comfort and assistance; she had helped prepare for the opening of school and had been called upon to share her many gifts with her students.

Sister Mary Ursula never lost her missionary zeal, as is evident in the work she undertook after her departure from Newfoundland. In all likelihood, her Newfoundland experience would have prepared her well for the demanding mission she was soon to lead. In September 1845, Bishop John Brady came to Baggot Street, pleading for a foundation of the Sisters of Mercy for Perth in Western Australia. Sister Mary Ursula volunteered for that far-off mission, and in September of that

year, the new community of six, with Sister M. Ursula as superior, left for the long and arduous voyage to that distant land. She was not quite thirty years of age when she

arrived in Perth, having already been part of several Mercy foundations spread across the world.

Sister M. Ursula was a prolific writer and her letters from Australia reveal her keen interest in people and places, her love of nature, her eye for detail, her sense of humour and her great practicality. In her many letters to Ireland from Australia, she only made three references to Newfoundland, none of which gives any idea about how she felt about the mission, the community or her departure.

There is no doubt that Sister M. Ursula was a woman of great determination, resourcefulness, courage and faith. Her work among the aboriginal people of Australia is legend, and in the field of education, she achieved marvels for the people she served. In November 1856 she and two other sisters established a foundation in Melbourne in the Australian state of Victoria, and it was there that she was to spend the rest of her life. Sister M. Ursula died in the Convent of Mercy at Melbourne on June 8, 1885 at the age of sixty-nine years. She had given nearly forty years of her life to the Mercy mission in Australia, and is remembered as an outstanding educator, a zealous missionary and a devoted woman of Mercy.

### **Source: Standing On Their Shoulders**

Stories of the "Irish" Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland

By Charlotte Fitzpatrick, rsm