

# Alice O'Sullivan, Clonmel missionary and martyr (1836-1870)

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By Áine M. Chadwick

At some time in 1831 or 1832 Cornelius O'Sullivan with his wife Mary Waterson and young son Daniel moved from Newry in County Down southwards to Clonmel. The family settled in a house beside the newly erected Gothic structure, the West Gate, designed by Mr Joyce, merchant of Irishtown, to replace the mediaeval town gate. Shearman's Directory, 1839, sees him established in his pawnbroking business at No 1, West Gate.<sup>1</sup> Clonmel had many attractions for an enterprising businessman. Inglis, in his *Journey through Ireland 1834* perceived "a hundred indications of an improving town", the chief branches of trade as he records them being corn, bacon and butter.<sup>2</sup>

Five children were subsequently born to the O'Sullivans – Timothy (1832), Cornelius (1833), Michael (1835), Alice (1836), and Francis (1838). Since the accounts of Alice's life agree that she lost her mother at an early age it seems reasonable to assume that Mary O'Sullivan did not long survive the birth of the child Francis, but that she died, along with the baby, in childbirth. "Baptismal records almost always recorded the Christian name of the child, the Christian name and surname of the father, and the Christian name and pre-marriage name of the mother. They record also the date of the baptism, the names of the sponsors or God-parents and the name of the officiating priest."<sup>3</sup> The actual date of Alice's birth is therefore not given, but she was baptised on 1 December 1836 by Father John Baldwin, parish priest of St Mary's Church.<sup>4</sup>

In his article "Clonmel's Pay Schools" Michael Ahern gives a graphic account of such establishments which "mushroomed" in the streets of "spacious Georgian houses" in Mary Street, Anne Street and Gordon Street.<sup>5</sup> Alice and her siblings would not, however, be dependent on such education as these afforded. In the aftermath of the Penal Laws religious orders had begun to provide a sound basic education, secular, religious and vocational. The Christian Brothers, brought to Clonmel about 1810, the Presentation nuns brought about 1813, and the Sisters of Charity arriving about 1845 had all opened schools in the town.

After the death of their mother the O'Sullivan children were looked after by a nurse; Alice was "somewhat spoiled by this very pious and devoted servant".<sup>6</sup> She learned to read very early and was allowed free access to books. The town was well supplied with bookshops and circulating libraries,<sup>7</sup> and the novels of Sir Walter Scott and Maria Edgeworth were probably available to her. Perhaps the writings of Lawrence Sterne, born in 1713, reputedly in a house not far from her own, amused her. At any rate, "beyond exciting her lively imagination, no great harm was done".<sup>8</sup>

She attended the Presentation Convent Schools and, writing in 1902, Francis Hogan was able to hear at first-hand from some of her former teachers. "Some of the nuns who welcomed the little girl in those happier days ... speak with deep affection of their pupil". She was just ten years old when she presented herself at the new establishment of the Sisters of Charity and asked to be admitted as a postulant, only to be told that she was too young.<sup>9</sup>

From Clonmel Alice went on to the Dominican Convent in Dun Laoghaire. Personal accounts paint a picture of a young woman of strong character and deep piety. She was not highly



accomplished, but of “solid education and deeply religious, unassuming and humble”.<sup>10</sup> A later photograph of Alice, Soeur Louise, dressed in the grey-blue habit and white “cornette” of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, shows her to have been tall and well built and dark complexioned, while later accounts speak of her merry and pleasing manner.

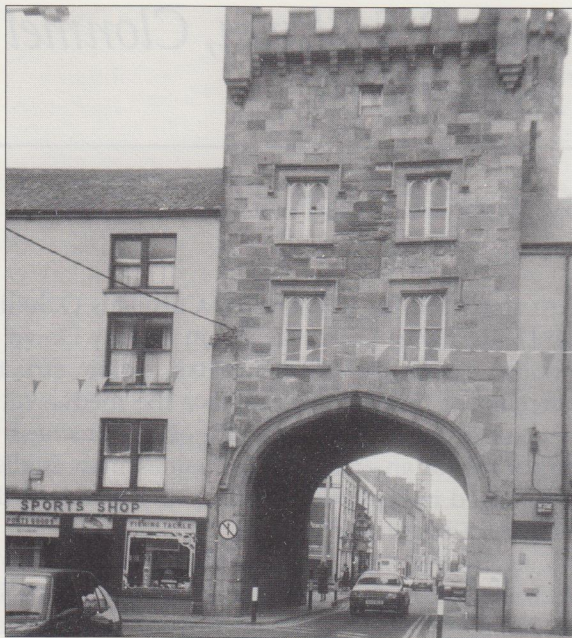
Dates of her acceptance as a postulant at Amiens and of her novitiate at the Motherhouse of the Order at Rue du Bac, Paris are difficult to establish, but she spent some time in Boulogne where one of her Irish pupils, Miss Cartwright, remembers her as possessing a happy character and being always sweet, patient and even-tempered. “Her features were truly angelic”.<sup>11</sup> She was sent next to Drogheda where, at the invitation of Cardinal Cullen, the Daughters of Charity had been established. Here she made her vows and in the years between 1857 and 1862 she worked among the poor and distressed.

In the aftermath of the events at Tientsin an effort was made to gather together memories of the martyred sisters, and in Drogheda another of Alice’s former pupils, Mary Byrne, told of her complete devotion to the children whom she taught in an old haybarn. When in 1859 the Association of the Children of Mary was instituted in Drogheda, Alice had charge of the proceedings, a task which she performed “avec la plus grande ferveur”.<sup>12</sup> From Ireland she went to the Order house in Hereford where she made plain her desire to go on the foreign missions of the Vincentians. In later years a school-friend recalled that Alice had remarked, when a girl of sixteen, “Later on you will see that I shall go to China and there die a martyr”.<sup>13</sup> Though it may have been no more than girlish piety, it proved to be prophetic.

The opium wars of 1837-1842 ended in defeat for the Chinese empire and the sacking and looting of the fabled Summer Palace in Peking by French and English soldiers. In the aftermath of war trade flourished to the advantage of the European powers. In 1857 a spate of anti-foreign rioting brought the gun-boats back into Chinese harbours. By the Treaty of Tientsin in 1857 further trading concessions were wrung out of a reluctant Emperor and his advisers. In addition missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, were to be allowed to travel, escorted, into the interior.

“Missionaries come in the train of the opium carts”, it was caustically noted. Catholic Bishops were accorded the status and privileges of mandarins, though it was the Protestant missionaries who had wives and children who were often accorded the greater respect. A fragile peace was shattered when in 1860 some French and English travellers were captured, tortured and killed.

The European nationals, – Germans, French, English, Russians and Americans – treated the



*The Westgate, Clonmel, beside which Alice O'Sullivan was born.*



Chinese, their customs and beliefs, with careless disdain. Railways were cut across ancient burial sites. The placing of telegraph poles and lines often greatly upset the peasants who feared that they would disturb the flight of the spirit-dragons who brought good fortune. Church spires soaring higher than the imperial palaces were often located in defiance of the rules of feng shui, the ancient science which governs the proper placing of buildings and household objects so as to ensure harmony in living. In Tientsin the Cathedral of Notre Dame des Victoires was erected on the site of an ancient mandarin palace, the French Consulate on the ruins of a temple.<sup>14</sup>

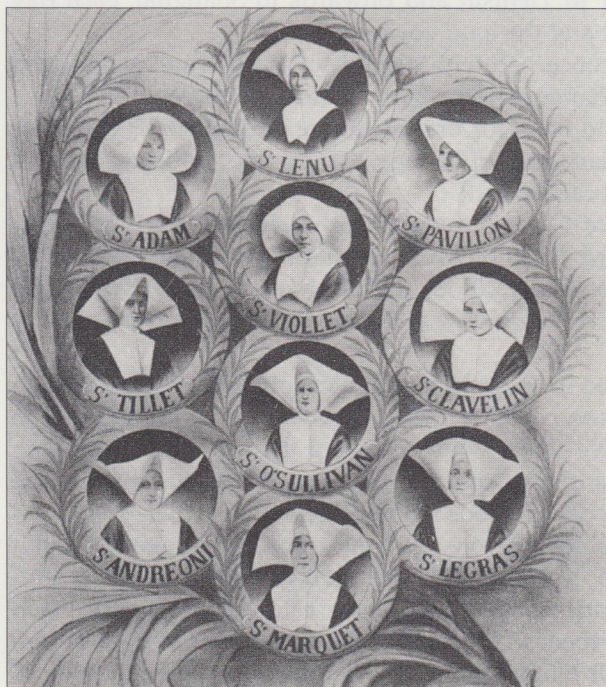
Alice and the small community of Sisters who sailed from Marseilles in 1863 probably knew nothing of this. As Soeur Louise she was part of a truly international body of women from France, Italy, Belgium and Ireland. They travelled with the firm purpose of bringing the Christian message to the people of China, but they seem by today's standards to have been pitifully poorly prepared for the realities of the life facing them. Their presence in Shanghai had been specifically requested by the directors of the hospital there, aware, perhaps of the sterling work done by the members of various religious orders during the Crimean War.

On arrival, the sisters, in their starched cornettes – surely difficult to maintain in pristine condition in the humid heat of the country – and their heavy woollen blue-grey habits – surely uncomfortable in the heat of hospital wards – were dismayed to find that conditions were primitive in the extreme. Their own living quarters were practically unfurnished and only through the efforts of members of the Protestant Mission were they able to procure beds and a cooking stove. Alice, who seems to have been the only English-speaking member of the group,

was particularly valuable as with her cheerful and outgoing spirit she was able to communicate effectively with the hospital authorities.

In the few letters sent from Shanghai to Father Daniel and preserved in the archives of the order at Raheny, her brave bright spirit shines through. Written on thin paper, lines criss-crossing in true Victorian fashion, they are now the only personal reminders of the girl from Clonmel. The wonders of the voyage out had engrossed her; there was so much that was interesting, amusing and puzzling that the uncomfortable conditions were kept at bay. She speaks of the plaited hair of Chinese men "like a long tail that goes down to their feet".

On arrival the Sisters travel by Peking cart, a rough-and-ready form of transport rather like a farm cart and drawn by one or two men. A young Englishman, a convert, eventually comes to the English Concession and helps out with the work. She expresses her relief at this since the local help is not always trustworthy. She



*An In Memoriam card showing the ten nuns martyred in China in 1870. (From archives, Rue du Bac, Paris).*



writes a few words in Chinese; "guatty", she says, means "Hurry" and "Chin-chin" means "Good morning". She tells of her personal difficulties. She finds it hard to go to confession in French. The nuns she finds "not as nice as the Irish sisters".

There are other situations which disturb her greatly. The ever-present dirt and filth she finds hard to cope with. "People may say we are dirty in Ireland", she writes in December 1863, "but I have not seen anything like conditions here, not even in Drogheda". The citizens do not change their clothes. Vermin is killed and eaten. Most distressing of all are the "corpses you meet in dozens outside the town. They are thrown out in the fields". For Alice, surely a reminder of Famine days in Ireland. Innocent and unworldly though Soeur Louise undoubtedly was, she was nevertheless aware that the French as a group were unpopular in the land. "It is the French soldiers who cause the most trouble", she says, adding that the worst of the troops are those sent to China.

Irish soldiers in the British Army, on the other hand, come to her on St. Patrick's Day, 1867, thirty of them, to present her with "five pounds out of their meagre pay" as she tells Father Daniel.<sup>15</sup> Later on when the massacre at Tientsin was but a memory the Sister Superior said of Alice: "No one could resist the charm of her manner. It was impossible to live with her without loving her".

But the strain of the unremitting labour, the pain of exile and the scarcely veiled hostility of the people to whom she had come to minister began to tell. When late in 1867 her duties took her northwards to Peking, her revulsion at the conditions there was so overwhelming that she begged permission to return to France. She wrote to the Superior General of the Order, Father Etienne, and he granted her request. She was to travel as companion to Sr Azias on her journey home. Joyfully then, from Peking down river to Tientsin and onwards to Shanghai, each day brought her nearer to the ship lying at anchor and the long voyage home.

During her years in Peking Alice had been concerned with the care of the sick and abandoned children, mainly girls, in the schools and orphanages of the Holy Childhood there. "We receive every day little babies," she wrote, "and I hold them for the Sacrament of Baptism".<sup>16</sup> Reaching Tientsin she found that in the convent, infirmary and orphanage, the group of buildings known as the Jen-tse-t'ang, the same work was being carried out.

Some years earlier the intrepid explorer of China's mysterious hinterland, the Vincentian Pere David, had visited the city and had heard "with pleasure the sterling work being done by the missionaries there".<sup>17</sup> He was worried, however, about the safety of the nuns who lived unprotected in the very heart of the city and who would be at the mercy of the mob should any trouble arise.

In 1862 Sr Azias had with five Sisters landed in Tientsin to find a chaotic situation prevailing there.<sup>18</sup> A house designated for the work was too small for the task envisaged – too big for the furnishings which were reduced to basics: five chairs which changed their function according to the need of the moment, two Chinese cooking pots, one large earthenware pot and one small cup – these represented the sum total of the worldly goods at their disposal.

They were not short of patients, however, since a severe epidemic of cholera broke out and it was necessary to set up dispensary and hospital without delay. With the help and encouragement of two mission priests, the orphanage was quickly established as well. Soon mothers were bringing their infants, placing them in the care of the sisters and of the Chinese converts. Then in December 1869 the Church Notre Dame des Victoires was inaugurated. Its location, the site of an ancient palace, caused resentment and offence to the people.

The Spring of 1870 was humid and the cholera epidemic which raged in the area caused the deaths of 30-40 of the children. It was hardly unexpected since the sisters found so many



abandoned children, mortally ill and left to die by their parents. In order to ensure that all cases would be reported to them the nuns had at times given small sums of money to the informants. Sadly, it was from this charitable concern that rumours of kidnapping spread. Worse than this were the false tales told of magic rituals practised by the Christians, which required the hearts and eyes of children. Groups of people began going to the cemetery by night to disinter bodies searching for signs of mutilation.<sup>19</sup>

This was the situation at Tientsin when Alice and Sr Azias halted en route for Shanghai. Alice was received with particular joy since there was great need of an English speaker in the community. She was begged to stay and at first resisted all pleading. In purely human terms her change of mind was a heart-rending one as in floods of tears she told her Superior: "I am not going home". On leaving Sr Azias said, "Goodbye till we meet again". Alice replied, "We shall never meet again in this world. You will return but we shall all be gone". Across the centuries and into a new millennium those last recorded words of the girl from Clonmel echo with undiminished courage.

She was to refuse a second opportunity to flee to safety when James Mercer, English master of a frigate, having been given rumours of a planned massacre, tried hard but in vain to persuade her to go with him to the safety of the British Consulate.<sup>20</sup> The sisters now seem to have accepted the fact of imminent martyrdom. Whenever they found a cornette which was particularly fine and white they would say, "Let us put it aside for the day of martyrdom". That day began on 21 June 1870, the longest day of the European calendar year.

In an angry altercation with the Chinese magistrate, M. Fontanier, the French Consul, shot and wounded a servant of the court. When he and his Secretary, M. Simon, left the building in order to confront the town officials they were set upon and torn to pieces by an enraged mob. The two mission priests were set upon and killed as they prayed in the church.

Then the crowd surged on towards the orphanage where the sisters, the children and some converts waited.<sup>21</sup> The babies were shepherded into the crypt and in the chapel Viaticum was distributed. When the doors were burst open Sister Marquet, the Superioress, went forwards, calmly to meet the leader. "If you wish for our lives we are here, all ten of us. We are ready to die, but spare our poor children". She was cut down where she stood.

Alice, coming through the kitchen, had a pan of boiling water thrown over her. In her agony she ran towards the chapel and was killed there near Sr Marquet. All the members of the community along with many of the children and the converts died horribly. By three o'clock the killing had ceased.

The bodies of two of the sisters were impaled and exposed to the right and left of the main door; the other corpses were mutilated. The remains of the other victims were set on fire. At about half past five in the evening the gong sounded the retreat. The few poor remains were finally interred in 1903 in a small courtyard near the restored church of Our Lady of Victories in Tientsin.

On 25 July 1870 Pere David was on the first stage of his journey home to France. He was tired. He was looking forward to meeting with his colleagues at Tientsin, and the Sisters. He met the commissioner of customs and told him his plans. M. Viguiet's face turned ashen grey. "Have you not heard?" he stammered. The rebels were there. All the mission houses were burnt. All the priests and nuns were massacred. Many Christians too!<sup>22</sup>

Father Daniel O'Sullivan died at St Joseph's, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, in 1917. Cornelius O'Sullivan had emigrated to Syracuse, New York, some time earlier along with one of his sons. I have been unable to trace any descendants of the family there. On the quiet lawns in front of the Presentation Convent in Clonmel stands a statue of St Joseph. Donated by some of those



with whom she had come in contact during her short life, it commemorates "The Glorious Martyrdom of Sister Alice O'Sullivan".

Born in a house beside the river Suir she seems, though bereft of a mother at a young age, to have had a happy childhood. In the care of the Presentation nuns she developed into a caring young woman who, guided by her brother, entered the French Order of Charity. Thenceforth her steps would lead with strange inevitability to that other house by a river, the Pei-Ho, and to martyrdom. Though hers was a life lived in obscurity few citizens of Clonmel can have exemplified better than she the proud motto of the town – *Fidelis in Aeternum*.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. *Sherman's Directory*, 1839, p. 46.
2. *Inglis's Journey through Ireland, 1834* (St Luke's Hospital, E. Lonergan, Clonmel 1984).
3. Waterford Heritage Services. Waterford, per Ms C. Meehan. 12/1/2000.
4. *Ibid*.
5. Ahern, Michael, in *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 2000.
6. Sr Alice O'Sullivan and Companions (St Vincent's, N. Wiliam St. Dublin).
7. Inglis, op.cit. p.7.
8. *The Martyr of Clonmel*, by Francis Hogan (U.S., c. 1902), p. 3.
9. *Ibid* p. 4.
10. Sr Alice and Companions (op. cit), p. 22.
11. Archives: Compagnie des Filles de la Charité de Saint Vincent de Paul, Rue du Bac, Paris.
12. *Ibid*.
13. Hogan op. cit, p. 5.
14. *Illustrated London News*, January 1903.
15. Quotations from the letters of Alice O'Sullivan: Archives of Vincentian Order, Raheny . Co Dublin.
16. *Ibid*.
17. G. Bishop, *Travels in Imperial China* (London, 1990), pp 102-104.
18. *De la Chine au cile* (imprimature: Amboise 8/10/1926), translated A.M. Chadwick 1998.
19. *Sr Alice and Companions*, op. cit, p. 29.
20. *De la Chine*, op. cit, p. 21.
21. *Bishop*, op. cit, p. 173.
22. Archives of Diocese of Syracuse, New York, per Carl Roesch, archivist.

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I would like to add that the information on the plaque recording the birth place of Alice O'Sullivan at the West Gate, Clonmel, is incorrect in the English version. The massacre of missionaries, diplomats, converts and others took place in 1870. The Boxer Rising did not take place until 1900. I wrote twice to the Town Clerk, 1997/98, asking that this be corrected or amended, but not have had the courtesy of a reply.