

Canon R.C. Patten

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Cecil Richard Patten (R.C. Patten from about 1916) was ordained in 1898. He became rector of Fethard in 1904 after a short spell at neighbouring Magorban. Like most post-disestablishment incumbents he was paid much less than his predecessors under the establishment. Readers of the THJ have recently been told (2005, pp. 87-95) that the Revd. Henry Woodward, rector of Fethard 1812-1863 received an income of £1361 p.a. As late as 1937 Canon Patten's stipend was a mere £330 p.a.

Certainly no one then imagined that Irish independence was just around the corner. All informed opinion believed that British rule in Ireland would go on forever and there was even Lady Aberdeen as the living proof of the new age, with her vigorous campaign to promote Irish manufacture and to support Horace Plunkett, the founder of the Irish Creamery Movement.

The other aspect of life which it is difficult for us to imagine now was the grinding poverty and the huge gulf between rich and poor. There were virtually no benefits if you were sick or unemployed. The whole panoply of handouts for one thing and another just did not exist. If you had no job, you depended on charity from your neighbours or you could go to the County Home.

It was in this sort of situation that Canon Patten operated and made such a contribution. Here I am going to draw on some of Miss Phyllis O'Connell's reminiscences that she kindly recorded for me some years ago. She pointed out that little towns like Fethard had to be much more self-supporting than nowadays. People had to live, work and enjoy themselves in the one environment. Canon Patten was just as concerned about the last of these as the first two. He helped to lay out the greens for the first golf links in Fethard and not only played himself but encouraged every member of the community to play – even children at school, as Miss O'Connell then was.

But the thing with which he was associated that made a real difference to the poor of Fethard was the milk depot which was the principal achievement of the Fethard Branch of the United Irishwomen, founded as a result of a public meeting in the Court House on 12th October 1914 at which Father Ryan P.P. presided and Canon Patten was present. He became an associate of the branch and in fact a leader in all its activities, along with Mrs. Patten. It is hard to imagine in these days of pasteurised and frozen milk from giant companies how different it was to secure a clean, reliable source of milk for a town like Fethard. The project seems to have filled a real need and by 1916 fifteen gallons a day were being sold at 10d per gallon, the supply coming from Mrs. O'Brien of Lakefield. But milk was not the only need in that momentous year and we get a whiff of far-off events when we read in the minute book of discussions as to how an adequate food supply to the town was to be obtained. Plans



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included a scheme of Captain O'Brien's for twenty barrels of wheat to be ground and sold to the poor at a very cheap rate. By 1917 the manager of the Fethard Creamery was being asked to sell twenty gallons of milk, twice weekly, to the depot as a special measure to relieve the poor. And so it went on – one good deed led to another and in 1919 a scheme was started to distribute cocoa in the schools and 28lbs of cocoa was requested from headquarters in Dublin. By now monthly sales of milk amounted to 217 gallons while a coffee van had been added to the activities of the branch. Mrs. Hughes, of happy memory, became secretary of the branch in 1926 and thereafter it developed rapidly into what we know now as the I.C.A., including a lecture by Miss Ruth Patten as part of the programme for 1927.

But of course the milk depot was just one example of Canon Patten's eagerness to fulfil a need in the local community. A totally different venture was his famous garden. He set up as a small nursery-man, not to make money for himself – Miss O'Connell told me that he never did much more than balance his books – but to give much-needed employment. At its height the garden employed eighteen men, a very significant contribution in a town as small as Fethard. The men came to him knowing virtually nothing and they left as fully trained gardeners and several went on to the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin.

But not only did it give employment, it also, in the words of his daughter Ruth 'introduced many local people to the possibilities of gardening and increased the enjoyment of life for many people in South Tipperary'. For Canon Patten himself it was all an expression of the need to see God in the beauties of nature – 'O Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness', as the psalmist put it – and he began each day with a visit to the garden at 8am, winter and summer.

But there were many other facets to his character – for instance his favourite charity was the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. He used to get up at 4am on Fair Days to man the coffee/tea bar as a counter attraction to the public houses.

Perhaps most important of all, he would take endless trouble to set just one individual on his feet. Many as well as myself may remember the almost blind Paddy the Racket whom Canon Patten set up as a carrier between Clonmel and Fethard and helped him to buy his horse and cart. Indeed everyone and anyone in Fethard could and did call at the rectory for a chat and advice about anything that was on their mind.

He had a very strong sense of social justice which must have been maddening for his wife as the following story, which I had from my cousin May, will show. A local was calling at the rectory to deliver some shirts she had made for Canon Patten. Mrs. Patten was just about

to pay her when Canon Patten overheard mention of the sum involved. He interjected, 'But how much did the cloth cost...and how much were the buttons...and the thread...and how long did the job take you...? Well we must pay you more than that!'

As his daughter Patience was careful to point out to me, much as he loved his garden, Canon Patten was first and foremost a priest. When any of his parishioner was ill he would call almost daily – and unlike clergy now he only had his pushbike to travel on. But by 1935 there were in the diocese only fifty-seven people per incumbent and this left him plenty of time for other things. Fethard was the centre of his universe – he adored Fethard and when he was dying in Clonmel his great wish was to get home and die in Fethard, looking out to Slievenamon. That was in 1942.