

EDMUND IGNATIUS RICE

a story of compassion

CALLAN

« Were we to know the merit and value of going from one street to another to serve a neighbour for the love of God, we should prize it more than Gold or Silver. »

Edmund Rice



*House where
Edmund Rice
was born*

A place of pilgrimage

A large tour bus and many cars were drawn up in a neat line on the side of the widened road. Small groups moved over the carpet of green grass or among the trees while the children threw pennies to the fish in the pool. Outside the door of the neat thatched farm-house a queue had formed and the hum of prayer could be heard above the whispering breeze and the hum of human conversation.

This was Westcourt where, in June 1762, Edmund Rice was born and where as a boy he taught prayers to his poor companions after his charitable mother had fed them.

The Rices were better off than their poor neighbours and on their farm they grew wheat, flax, potatoes and oats and they also kept cows, sheep and pigs. The family was almost self-sufficient as the farm provided milk, eggs and meat for the family table. Mrs Rice and her two daughters ground the corn, made the bread and butter, and spun and weaved the cloth for the family clothes.

At last our turn came to be shown into the Rice home. Little has changed since Edmund lived there as a boy. At first a silent prayer at the bedside where he was born and then the

tall Brother who was acting as guide explained that the parlour in which we stood was used only on special occasions by the family. It is there that family marriages and baptisms took place and at times a priest « on the run » would secretly say Mass for the family and friends there.

The large kitchen was the centre of family life for the Rices and it was here, around the wooden table that they had their meals. At night they gathered around the blazing fire and listened to the news and stories of the area.

During the long winter evenings Edmund would have heard of the stirring events that were happening in the area; how, for example, six priests were secretly ordained by the Archbishop of Cashel at the Butler mansion just down the road or how the priest hunters of the area had taken Fr. Sheehy and had him « hanged, drawn and quartered at Clonmel » in March 1766. There were tales too of hardships and starvation of the poor who lost their lands and water due to the fencing of the commons. These poor people headed for the cities and towns and lived in filthy hovels where the pig in the kitchen was the only barrier between them and starvation.

In the kitchen we were reminded by the Brother that it was here that the character of

Edmund was formed. From his mother he learned his love for the poor and it was in this kitchen that he learned to pray the Rosary as each member of the household and any neighbour who came in for the night murmured the Paters and Aves to a Mother who would lead them safely through difficulty and persecution. They learned to trust Mary and her Son.

A house of prayer

Although the Rice home is today decorated and furnished as it was in Edmund's time it is more than a museum. It is a house of prayer. Thousands of visitors call each year to pay honour to the name and work of Br. Rice. They kneel and pray in the simple bedroom, join in the Rosary at the kitchen fire or attend Mass and visit the Blessed Sacrament in the beautiful memorial church where they ask God that some day the virtues of the great man will be recognised by the Church and that his name will be placed officially in the roll of saints.

We left Callan realising that Edmund is still influencing the lives of people and drawing them to Christ. The Rice home is a reminder of the power of the family in building the Kingdom of the Father on earth.

Early influences

« Let us do ever so little for God we will be sure He will never forget it, nor let it pass unrewarded. How many of our actions are lost for want of applying them to this end. »

Edmund Rice

The Family

Edmund was a member of a large family: two step-sisters from his mother's first marriage, and six brothers. In this house he learned to love and to share with others. His mother was very kind to the poor and the members of the family inherited this as is seen from the influence of Joan, Edmund's step-sister, on his decision to give up his wealth for the poor.

The Hedge School

Edmund may have gone to the hedge school in Moat Lane, Callan. However, his knowledge of the hedge schools would prompt him to improve the lot of the Catholics.

The Little Grey Friar

Fr. Patrick Grace, had been a hedge school teacher before he joined the Augustinian Order. Later he was ordained a priest. While he was stationed in Callan he often visited the Rice home in Westcourt where he instructed the members of the family. It is not so strange that when John Rice decided to become a priest he joined the Augustinian Fathers. Fr. John was a great help to Edmund later, in founding the Brothers.

Kilkenny and Uncle Maurice

Edmund went to live with his uncle Maurice in Kilkenny while he attended a pay-school in that city. Edmund always spoke of Maurice and his influence with respect, affection and gratitude. Maurice's example had a lasting effect.

Uncle Michael the Merchant

At 17 Edmund went to work for Uncle Michael in Waterford. Edmund's cousins, Patrick and Robert, had no interest in the vast business but Edmund made up for the two of them. He was a wonderful judge of character and soon had gathered a group of trusted buyers and under his supervision the provision trade prospered.

Michael was so pleased with Edmund's performance he decided to show him every facet of his trading and before long Edmund could manage the provisioning of vessels leaving Waterford for England, Europe and Newfoundland. 3,000 to 4,000 passengers each year sailed to Newfoundland and Edmund was providing pork, beef, butter and salt for the journey.

Edmund's prayer and Courage

When Edmund left home he did not forget his prayers or the poor. We know that he invited the captains of ships to say the Rosary with him for the safety of the voyage. On his way to a fair he would ask his companion to join him in the Rosary.

Edmund felt very strongly for the poor. After the famine of 1783 the starving flocked to the city. The streets were crowded with beggars while children roamed the streets to beg or steal. Edmund took some of the poor to his home to feed and instruct them.

The Catholic men of Waterford tried to help by founding hostels for the poor. Edmund was a constant visitor to these and not only did the support these charities, he founded some himself. One such hostel was for unfortunate people who lived alone, forgotten even by their neighbours.

We are told that his heart went out to the children and that he « fretted when he saw the poor children of Waterford apparently having no one to interest himself in them, and notwithstanding their neglected state he saw the goodness in them. »

A Man with a Smile

Edmund had a sense of fun and he loved to join with the country people at the YELLOW HOUSE INN on a fair day where he would dance a jig or sing a song before they started their dangerous journey home. The people travelled in large groups on account of the robbers.



Waterford in 1800

FAMILY MAN

EDMUND - THE FAMILY MAN

Edmund soon made a name for himself in Waterford and was invited to the best houses. At the age of 23 he married Mary Elliott the daughter of a wealthy man.

Mary helped Edmund in his many works of charity and soon they were extremely happy. Michael left all his property to Edmund and he became one of the richest men in Waterford.

After a short few years the shadow of the cross fell on Edmund. When Mary was well advanced with child she was thrown by a horse in an accident. Mary died but the doctor, however, managed to save the child. At Baptism the little girl was called Mary but she soon gave signs that she too had been injured in the accident and as a result she was retarded.

Edmund lavished all his love on the child and tried to forget his loss by giving more and more energy to his business. As he grew richer he became more and more charitable. The plight of the poor moved him and it is said that he founded many charitable organisations and helped the ones he did not found.

CHARITY

There are many stories of Edmund's charity towards needy individuals and of his kindness and compassion towards all who asked his advice. There were two sisters, the Connollys, who had been left orphans and whom Edmund had reared and educated at his own expence.

Tadhg Gaelach Ó Suilleabháin, « a notorious old sinner », spent much of his time singing at the YELLOW HOUSE INN. It was here that Edmund met the poet and a firm friendship grew up between them. The poet often visited Edmund's home in Arundel Place and at last Edmund persuaded Tadhg to see a priest. Tadhg became a very fervent man and wrote his beautiful poems in « Pious Miscellany ». He died a holy death on the steps of the Big Chapel.

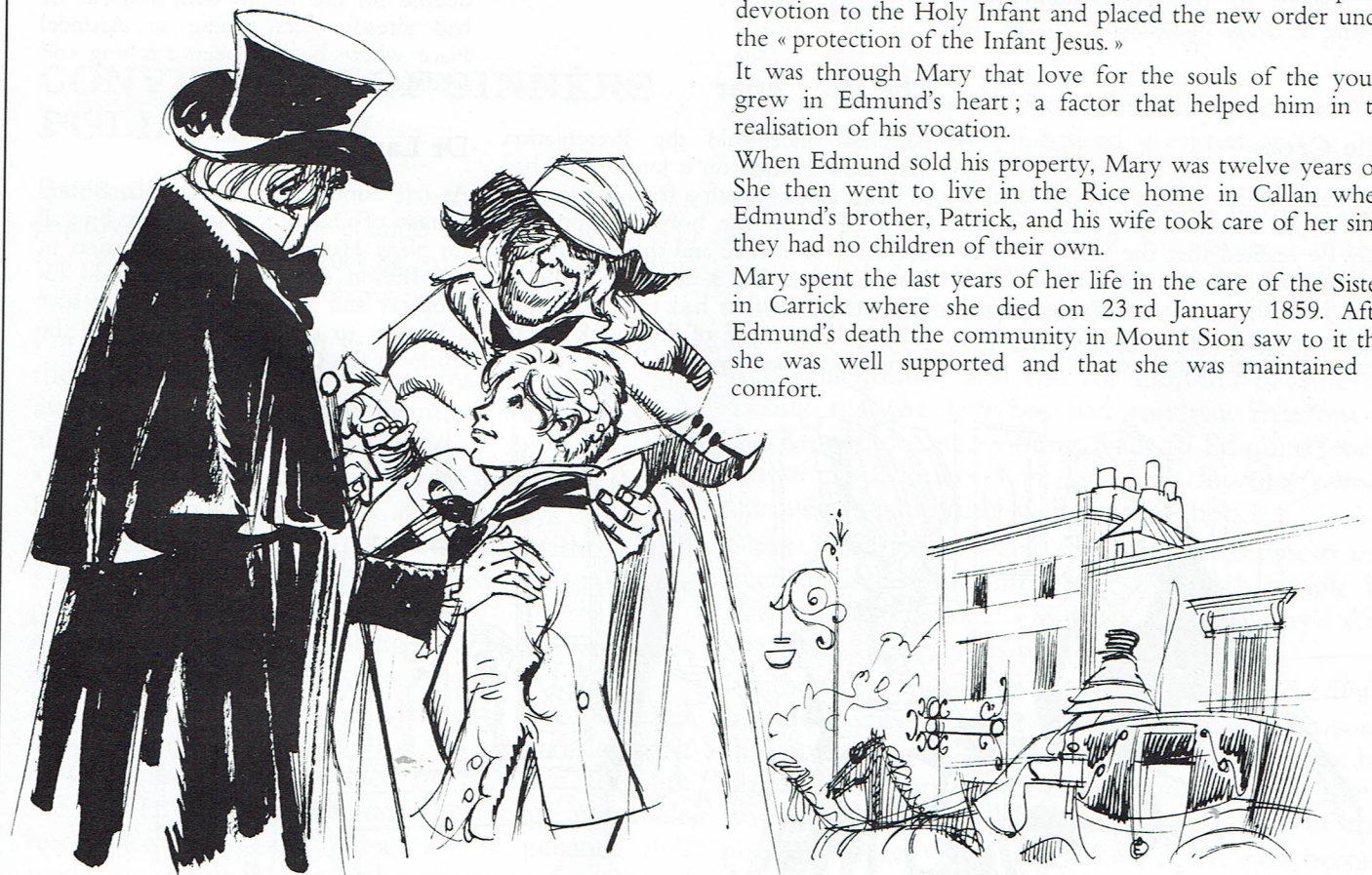
MARY RICE 1789-1859

Edmund's daughter, Mary, was injured in the accident that caused the death of her mother. She was very delicate so Edmund's step-sister, Joan Murphy, came to take care of the house in Arundel Place. Here Edmund took care of her and it was the sight of the helplessness of his little daughter that brought Edmund to a realisation of the helpless Infant Jesus in the arms of His Mother Mary. Edmund developed a devotion to the Holy Infant and placed the new order under the « protection of the Infant Jesus. »

It was through Mary that love for the souls of the young grew in Edmund's heart; a factor that helped him in the realisation of his vocation.

When Edmund sold his property, Mary was twelve years old. She then went to live in the Rice home in Callan where Edmund's brother, Patrick, and his wife took care of her since they had no children of their own.

Mary spent the last years of her life in the care of the Sisters in Carrick where she died on 23rd January 1859. After Edmund's death the community in Mount Sion saw to it that she was well supported and that she was maintained in comfort.



STEPS TOWARDS A VISION

« The world and everything in it is continually changing which proves that there is nothing permanent under the Sun, and that perfect happiness is not to be expected but in another world. »

Edmund Rice

Presentation Sisters

A girl who was educated by the Cork Presentation Sisters arrived in Waterford. Edmund's friend, Fr. Power, was astonished at the standard of her education and invited the Sisters to Waterford. Edmund helped to procure a site for their convent. He was drawn to do the work that they were doing.

Steps Towards a Vision

Edmund was forty when he sold all and started his school in the stable. His wife had died thirteen years before and in the meantime he had become a very wealthy man. One does not suddenly give up all and change one's whole life over a short time. It took Edmund long years of self-examination before he took the step.

Mass and Holy Communion

In his troubles and difficulties he turned more and more to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. He attended Mass each day and very often went to Holy Communion - frequent Communion was unusual at that time. Edmund also turned more and more to Mary, the Mother of God, and said daily the Office of Our Lady.

Dr Hussey

In 1797 Dr. Hussey issued a very strong pastoral letter on the evils of the schools that were a danger to the Catholic religion of the pupils. Edmund was aware of these schools and their aims and felt drawn to do something about the situation.

Little Mary

That Mary was retarded had a lasting effect on him. In her he saw the helplessness of the Infant Jesus. He dedicated his Society to the Holy Infant by starting his work in a stable.

Study of the Bible

About 1791 Edmund bought a Bible and on the title page he wrote a list of the texts that appealed to him. All the texts, from the Old and the New Testaments, deal with justice and charity to the neighbour.

Other Promptings

Joan Murphy, Edmund's step-sister, had come to look after little Mary. She knew of Edmund's desire to become a monk and reminded him that it would be better for him to stay at home and devote his life to his own boys as he had already been doing in Arundel Place where he had been teaching and feeding them.

The Cross

The death of his young wife made him look at life and his own success. Gradually he realised that the values of this life are passing and short-lived. God gave him the grace to change from being a very good man to become a man of the highest holiness.

The Holy Friar

Edmund once told the Presentation Sisters that, while on a journey he had to share a room with a friar. During the night he heard the holy man pouring out his soul in love and thanksgiving to God. Edmund had a desire to relate to God just as the friar had. He resolved to follow the example of the monk and to go into a monastery.

Dr Langan

At last Edmund consulted with Bishop Langan of Ossory and set before him all his plans. Having got the permission of the Bishop of Waterford, he sold his property and gave up his house to start a Society to educate poor boys in the truths of the Catholic faith.



HELP TO THE POOR



CONVERSION OF SINNERS POLL CARTHY

Edmund saw Bianconi rise from rags to riches but it only symbolised the change he wished to see in the souls of the people he met. He was instrumental in the spiritual change of many.

For years Edmund had known the poor woman of the streets, Poll Carthy. She was an outcast and avoided by all. One day Edmund was giving her alms on the street.

« Would it not be time for you Poll », said Edmund, « to give up drink and the ways of sin ? »

« I would love to, Sir, but I would die without it ».

« Will you not go to the priest and take the pledge ? »

« What, me ? Take the pledge ! Who are you kidding, Mr Rice ? »

But Edmund did not give up and as a result of his encouragement, Poll was soon after put on a coach to Cork in clothes provided by Br. Rice. In Cork she met Fr. Mathew and took the pledge and made her peace with God. As an act of penance Poll made the whole homeward journey on foot in her bare feet. After that she lived a holy life.

FREEDOM FOR A SLAVE BLACK JOHNNY

« See that you do not despise one of these little ones. » (Matt. 18 : 10). Edmund had an eye for boys in trouble and he was ever willing to come to their aid. One day he saw a poor lonely coloured boy being ill-treated by a crew-member of a merchant ship which was alongside the Quay wall. His penetrating eyes met the eyes of the poor youth and his heart was filled with compassion for the young slave. Edmund sought out the captain and endeavoured to get him to give the boy his freedom.

« He is worth money, Sir, and I would thank you for not meddling in my affairs. »

« But he will be worthless if he is beaten ! » exclaimed Edmund,

« People work well if they are treated well. »

« I will treat him any way I like, he is my property, » said the captain.

« How much will you sell him for ? » asked Edmund.

Although the captain was reluctant to part with a young healthy slave, Edmund persisted and at last bought the boy from the captain.

Edmund took the boy home, where he gave him food, clothing and above all friendship. Edmund sent « Black Johnny » to the Presentation Sisters for instruction and in time he expressed his wish to be baptized. The day of his baptism was a happy one for Black Johnny and also for Edmund because he realised that the slave boy had now true freedom in the Kingdom. Later Johnny went to Edmund's new school in Mount Sion, and on leaving school Edmund put him in a well-stocked shop.

Black Johnny was very successful in business and lived an exemplary life. After his death people in Waterford remarked : « Well, if Black Johnny's skin was black his soul was whiter than snow. »

Neither trouble nor expense mattered with Edmund when it was a question of rescuing a soul. It had been a life-long practice with him to be unsparing in personal labour or money when there was good to be done, especially on behalf of the poor and those who were almost defenceless before the law, or those who were the victims of a corrupt social system.

FROM LUXURY TO HARDSHIP

Edmund gives up his wealth to found a new Society.

« The half-hour's explanation of the Catechism I hold to be the most salutary part of the system. It's the most laborious to the teachers; however, if it was ten times what it is I must own we are amply paid in seeing such a reformation in the children »

Edmund Rice

THE QUIET REVOLUTIONARY

AT LAST EDMUND sat and surveyed his little community. The two of them had arrived only this morning and already they had settled in to the life in the room above the stable. They seemed to have had a good session with the boys and that was the test. Poor boys! They are tough, and wild, and starving: we must feed them!

The despair of the last few days! If only friends would try to understand: but how could they since they did not understand his vision - the urge to do something with his life for Christ?

It was hard when the two helpers left. « Not for all the money you have, » they said. It took more than money to face his boys but they had a right to their religion. Now he had to face the objections of the people of New Street who did not want the « hoards of ragged urchins » passing their doors each day.

But now he saw hope for the urchins and he would see that they would soon have a proper school, the best school, and he and his little band of helpers would work and pray and lead lives for the glory of God and for the boys.

Was he mad to start in a stable? How could he explain that it was part of his aim to live like the people with whom he worked and whom he loved? Deprived of the wealth and power he had gained in Waterford over the past twenty-five years he was setting out

« naked to follow a naked Christ. » He was starting a revolution; taking a radical step because he believed in the dignity of the person and the beauty of the human soul. On account of his love for the poor he acted and would continue to act because he realised that this was God's will.



MOUNT SION

After some time in New Street Edmund set about the next part of his plan to set up a religious society. In June 1802 he commenced to build a monastery where he and his followers could live a full religious life.

Although Edmund had got encouragement at first he was now opposed by the Bishop Dr. Hussey who asked Edmund to sign over his property. The test of following the will of God is obedience to authority and Edmund stood this test as one would expect from a man of his courage. Without question he handed over the deeds to the Bishop with the request to be allowed to live in part of the building so that he could continue his work for his poor boys. The Bishop, seeing his humility and dedication, blessed his work and named the new monastery and school « Mount Sion ».

GROWTH IN SORROW

Soon the new community began to grow and the Brothers lived hard lives and carried out a staggering work-load. The hours in school were long, and at night they instructed adults and young people. At weekends they prepared the children for the sacraments and at the same time they continued the charities to which Edmund had been attached for many years.

The worst cross Edmund had to bear was caused by misunderstanding. Some wrote condemning the work he was doing. Others wrote lies about him and his Society and he was also complained about to the Bishop and to the Pope.

In spite of all this Edmund applied for and got permission from the Bishop for his new rule adapted from the rule of the Presentation Sisters. On the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, Edmund and seven companions made annual vows in the presence of the Bishop, Dr. Power in 1808.

An Apostolic Congregation

At first each monastery was subject to the Bishop of the diocese with the Bishop as head of the monastery. Edmund wished to change Brothers from one area to the next and to start new schools but found this very difficult. Prompted by some of the bishops, he applied to the Holy Father for permission to have a congregation like the De La Salle Brothers in France. In 1820 approval of such an Order arrived and Edmund, now fifty-eight, having made his Final Vows, was elected Superior General of the Congregation that would be called THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS.

Not all the Brothers accepted the Papal Brief of 1820. The Brothers of Cappoquin and North Monastery remained under the Bishops. The school in Cappoquin was kept going by Br. John Mulcahy but later died out. Over a few years the Brothers of the North Monastery went to Waterford and made vows according to the 1820 Brief. After much prayer and consideration, Br. Michael Austin Riordan decided to continue living the Presentation Rule of 1808 under Dr. Murphy of Cork. He founded a new school and monastery and, being a man of outstanding qualities, he attracted many more young men to the religious life and so continued the PRESENTATION BROTHERS.

Edmund's Property

Edmund became very prosperous and, mistrusting the banking system of the time he invested his property in real estate. Before he started his Society in 1802 he owned the following: The Garter Inn in Callan, 76 acres of land in Huntstown, Co. Kilkenny, 64 acres in the Callan district, 9 houses in Barrack St. Waterford, 1 house in Barron Strand St., an extensive business in the city of Waterford.

From time to time Edmund received large sums in trust for Catholic charities and these he also invested.

Last Resting Place

On Saturday, 31 August, 1844, Br. Rice was buried in the Community cemetery in the grounds of Mount Sion. For years a simple cross marked the grave of the great man.

In 1846 a Memorial chapel was solemnly blessed in Mount Sion « As a tribute of gratitude for the services and

respect for the virtues of Edmund Ignatius Rice » and this chapel is the Monastery chapel still.

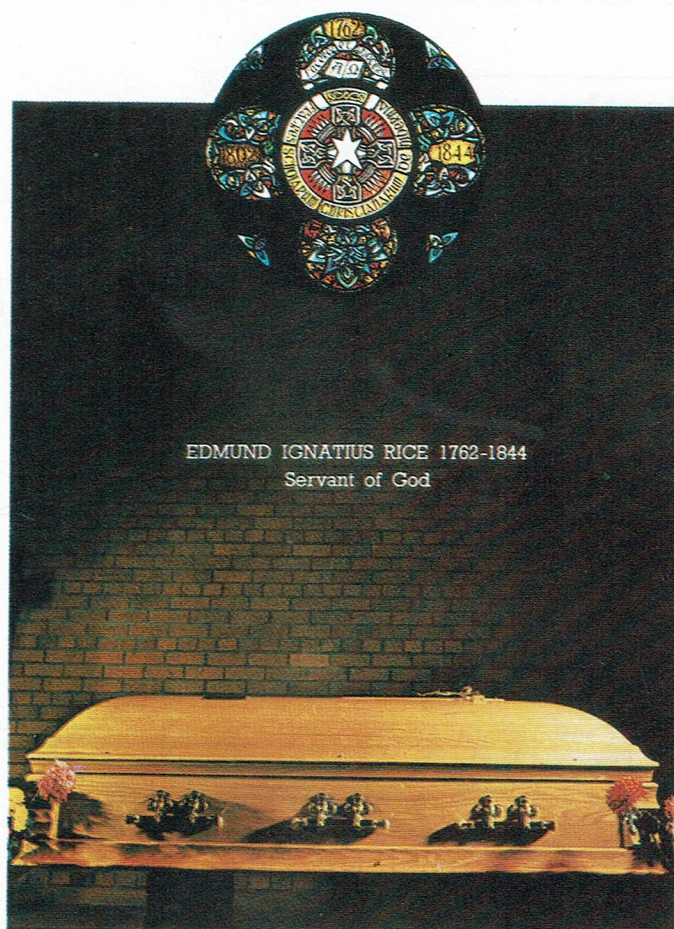
In 1944 the remains of Edmund Rice were exhumed and placed in a beautiful Mausoleum in the grounds of Mount Sion. Owing to the growing number of pilgrims from all over the world to visit the tomb of the Founder, the Brothers and their friends raised the money for the building of a church to hold the mortal remains of the one they loved.

This church, the BLESSED SACRAMENT CHAPEL, was blessed on Thursday 23 August, 1979, and after an open-air Mass on the following Sunday the remains of Edmund Rice were placed in the chapel, witnessed by the leaders of Church and State.

The CHAPEL OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT is a place of prayer and devotion for the people of Waterford and a place of pilgrimage for many thousands from all parts of the world.

Wish of Pope John Paul II :

« That the life and work of the Founder of the Christian Brothers will be an ever more powerful inspiration to those who have accepted God's call to the honour of serving him in that Congregation ».



Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Mount Sion