

Isabella Croke: A Nurse for the Catholic Cause during the Crimean War

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Dedicated to the memory of Sister M. Albeus (Nora Russell 1910–95) who made available the Croke Diary and who now lies beside Sister M. Joseph (Isabella Croke) in the Charleville Convent graveyard.

Fully confident of its essential place in modern health care, nursing has turned to the past in search of its founders. The focus of this article is Isabella Croke and the diary that she kept during her stint of nursing in the Crimean War (1854–56).¹ Croke's diary transforms the nature of the evidence upon which the history of Crimean War nursing is based and throws new light on gender issues in nineteenth-century Ireland.

Background

Isabella Croke (1825–1888) had been a Sister of Mercy for seven years when the Crimean War (1854–1856) began. She entered the convent in Charleville, County Cork in 1847 at the height of the Great Famine, which reduced the population of her town from 4,472 in 1845 to 2,862 in 1850. Among its victims was Croke's twenty-eight year old brother, the Reverend William Croke, who picked up a fever while caring for his famine-stricken parishioners.²

Death was very much a part of Croke's life. Her father William Croke had died when she was nine years old, leaving his wife and eight children in Dromin, Castlecork, Co. Cork in desperate straits. His widow Isabelle (Plummer) Croke was an Anglo-Irish Protestant and a descendant of the Fitzgerald Knights of Glin in Limerick. She had been alienated from her family when she married William Croke, a Catholic from Tralee, Co. Kerry. Nor did their attitude change when he died seventeen years into their marriage.³ Indeed, had they not been rescued after his death by his brother, the Reverend Thomas Croke, William's wife and family might have fallen into the poverty which was such a feature of nineteenth-century Ireland. Instead, Thomas Croke settled the family in Charleville, Co. Cork, where he was parish priest. The older boys lived with their uncle in his house and the girls and younger boys lived with their mother in a house on the Limerick Road

1 Sr M. Joseph Croke, *Diary of Sister M. Joseph Croke*, Catherine McAuley Museum Archive, Charleville, Co. Cork. 2 Mark Tierney, *Croke of Cashel: The Life of Archbishop Thomas William Croke, 1823–1902* (Cork, 1964). 3 *Ibid.*

around the corner from the Catholic Church. This arrangement reflected more than convenience, for in mixed marriages like the Croke's, boys were often raised in the religion of their father and girls in that of their mother.

Three of the boys became priests: William served in Charleville until he died during the famine, James served in the foreign missions in California and Oregon in the United States, and Thomas, named after his uncle, became Archbishop of Cashel. The two girls converted to Catholicism and entered the Sisters of Mercy convent in Charleville.

Their uncle, Thomas Croke, had persuaded Catherine McAuley to establish her Sisters of Mercy in Charleville. McAuley and four of her nuns arrived there on 29 October 1836, when Isabella was nine. In December 1838 McAuley returned again for the laying of the cornerstone for a purpose-built convent in Charleville's main street.⁴ Little is known of Isabella's life, and much of that is known only through her brothers' biographies. So it is a matter of conjecture as to whether she attended the school which the Sisters of Mercy established in Charleville. There can be no doubt, however, that she was aware of their work as teachers and carers for the sick in the locality. Perhaps the most significant public event which Isabella may have witnessed as she grew up occurred in May 1845 when Daniel O'Connell spoke at a Monster Meeting in Charleville. Afterwards he dined with Isabella's uncle and the town's leading men.

Isabella Croke becomes Sister Mary Joseph Croke in 1847

In 1847, at the age of twenty-two, Isabella Croke became one of the hundreds of women who were to enter a convent in nineteenth-century Ireland. She became a Sister of Mercy, serving under a religious superior and being guided by the principle that 'the act of one was the act of all'.⁵ As Sydney Woollett, Isabella Croke's Jesuit chaplain in the Crimea, said, 'In religion you become part of a body, no self-seeking allowed there, mind that.'⁶ If ever Isabella chafed at having to submerge her own will for the good of a common mission, she had only to remember the words of Mother McAuley that the superior symbolised Christ, and when she obeyed that superior she was, in spirit, following Christ.⁷

Yet for all their organisation and internal self-determination the Sisters of Mercy were not autonomous and had to take account of the wishes of the clergy. Of all those who took vows in the Church priests, brothers, monks and nuns, nuns were in many respects the least powerful.⁸ If Isabella did not have much

4 Mary Teresa Austin Carroll, 'Foundation at Charleville' in *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy* (4 vols; New York, 1881-1895), i, p. 148. 5 Catriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 34-5. 6 Sydney Woollett, 'Obituary', *Crimean War Papers*, Archives of English Province of the Society of Jesus, London.

7 [No Author] *Rules: Familiar Instructions of Rev. Mother McAuley* (St Louis, 1927), p. 41. 8 See Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*.

independent power as a Sister of Mercy she gained both prestige and the opportunity to use her talents for the good of others when she became Sister M. Joseph Croke. Indeed, other women, among them Florence Nightingale, envied convent careers and women's useful place in the Roman Catholic Church. The Church of England, noted Florence Nightingale, gave her neither work to do, nor education for it.⁹

As Isabella made the transition into Sister M. Joseph Croke, she walked in the steps of her foundress Catherine McAuley and all the Sisters of Mercy who had preceded her. She visited the sick. She instructed the ignorant. She helped the poor. She raised the status of women: educating them and teaching them skills by which they could become self-sufficient. As the famine spread, Croke and her sisters in Charleville, as indeed Sisters of Mercy throughout Ireland, fed the starving, nursed the sick in the fever hospital, prayed with them and prepared many for death. There was not much that could be done for the sufferer as typhus, typhoid fever, relapsing fever and scurvy overwhelmed their wasted bodies. This experience provided the young nun with a nursing education, honing skills that in 1854 propelled her into political prominence.

Even as the famine prepared Croke for nursing during the Crimean War, it sharpened in her a healthy scepticism of British policy. The thinking that rationalised famine deaths as divine providence, the retribution of a just God against Irish popery, came from the same cast of mind that a few years later permitted British soldiers to perish in the pestilential hospitals in the East. Many of them were Irish boys and men who had joined the army only to die of the same diseases that had claimed their country men, women and children at home.

'There are no nurses'

The first battle of the Crimean War in September 1854 found the British unprepared to care for the wounded and the sick. War correspondent William Russell asked, 'Can it be said that the Battle of Alma has been an event to take the world by surprise?' His demand for answers grew: 'Has not the expedition to the Crimea been the talk of the last four months? ... And yet, after the troops have been six months in the country, there is no preparation for the commonest surgical operations!' As a result, he informed his London *Times* readers,

Not only are the men kept, in some cases, for a week without the hand of a medical man coming near their wounds; not only are they left to expire in agony, unheeded and shaken off, though catching desperately at the surgeon whenever he makes his rounds through the fetid ship, but now, when they are placed in this spacious building [the Barrack Hospital at Scutari] where we

⁹ Florence Nightingale to Edward Manning in C. Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale* (London, 1954), p. 98.

were led to believe that every thing was ready which could ease their pain or facilitate their recovery, it is found that the commonest appliances of a British workhouse are wanting.

There were no nurses to care for the men when they arrived in Constantinople from the Crimea,

without having been touched by a surgeon since they fell, pierced by Russian bullets, on the slopes of Alma. The ship was literally covered with prostrate forms ... The worst cases were placed on the upper deck, which, in a day or two, became a mass of putridity. The neglected gunshot wounds ... the putrid animal matter ... the stench ... [the] misery ... The men attend to each other or receive no relief at all ... The sick appeared to be attended by the sick, the dying by the dying.¹⁰

Russell's frequent dispatches to the *Times* were read by a shocked public and his columns were flanked by the names of the dead and wounded. Never before had the civilian population of Britain known war with this immediacy, and never before had so many British soldiers perished as a result of injury, disease and lack of organisation. As a result, demand grew for a nursing service for British soldiers to compare with that provided for French soldiers by the Sisters of Charity.

If Russell, the Irish-born war correspondent, had changed the way war was reported, his dispatches also effectively inaugurated female military nursing in the British army. Competent nurses, not Sairey Gamps¹¹ nor the do-gooding Ladies Bountiful, were needed, it was argued. The War Office turned to the Anglican Sisters of St John's and the Sellonites but they were too few in number to meet the demand and silence the public uproar. At this point, Florence Nightingale offered her services as a 'real hospital nurse'. She was not, of course, but she was trying to distinguish herself from the Ladies Bountiful. She knew a lot *about* nursing, but had little – almost no – experience *in* nursing. As most women did, she had cared for family members. She had observed at the Kaiserweth Deaconess Institution in Germany for three weeks and returned for a three month stint of direct work, but found that 'the nursing there was nil'.¹² Then for just over a year, she had administered the Harley Street home for gentlewomen in distress. This 'hospital nurse' took charge of the nursing experiment with its contingent of nurses, nuns, both Anglican and Catholic, and civilians – forty people in all. Soon after the party had arrived in Constantinople, Florence Nightingale claimed that 'about ten of us have done *the whole work*. The others have only run between our feet and hindered us'.¹³ The Battle of Inkermann on

¹⁰ *Times*, 12 and 13 October 1854. ¹¹ Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844).

¹² Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale*, p. 91. ¹³ Florence Nightingale to Sidney Herbert, 10 December 1854, in S. Goldie (ed.), *'I Have Done My Duty': Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, 1854–56* (Iowa, 1987), p. 47.

5 November 1854 had brought shiploads of sick and wounded to the hospitals, filling them to overflowing with more than three thousand men. It was evident though that the need for nursing care far outran the capacity of Nightingale and her colleagues to supply it. The War Office then turned to the Irish Roman Catholic Church and to the Sisters of Mercy.

Service to the Catholic cause

The superior at the Mercy Convent at Baggot Street, Dublin, responded to the appeal for nurses. She wrote to her brother, Monsignor Robert Whitty, the Vicar General at Westminster in London, offering her nuns as skilled nurses, who could speak the Irish language and sympathise with the habits and feelings of the Irish soldiers.¹⁴ 'Attendance on the sick,' wrote Sister Vincent Whitty, 'is ... part of our Institute; and sad experience among the poor has convinced us that ... many lives are lost for want of careful nursing.'¹⁵ The offer was keenly supported by clergy in Dublin and London as being for the good of the 'Catholic cause'. For the newly-resurgent Catholic Church in Britain, in particular, it was an opportunity to demonstrate that Catholicism was compatible with patriotism.

If the dilemmas of the British Government and the Catholic hierarchy propelled the nuns into prominence, it was a position of prestige which was full of danger. Indeed two nuns would die in the Crimea, one of cholera, the other of typhus. Several others nearly lost their lives from infections they contracted while caring for their patients. Croke herself almost died from Crimean fever, the same typhus that had claimed her brother, the Reverend William Croke, though then it had been called 'famine fever'.

By means of skilful planning the Irish Sisters of Mercy who went to nurse the soldiers kept themselves as a distinct organisation, under the leadership of Mother Francis Bridgeman of Kinsale, County Cork. First the Irish Sisters of Mercy signed a contract with the War Office that established them as a separate unit. They agreed to provide corporal care to all soldiers but spiritual care only to Catholic soldiers. However, they insisted that their group have its own chaplain. The continuing public outcry about the conditions of the soldiers made the War Office amenable to such a demand. Their contract gave the Sisters a good deal of freedom for their sixteen months as military nurses. It was a freedom of which they took full advantage.

Croke and her fourteen fellow Sisters of Mercy knew 'the eyes of the whole world would be on the poor nuns'.¹⁶ But nothing could have prepared them for

¹⁴ Sister M. Vincent Whitty to 'My dear Reverend Mother', 20 October 1854 in Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals*, i, p. 144. ¹⁵ Sister M. Vincent Whitty to Monsignor Robert Whitty, 18 October 1854, Crimean Papers, Mercy International Archives, Dublin. ¹⁶ Sister M. Vincent Whitty to 'My dear Reverend Mother', 20 October 1854 in Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals*, i, p. 144.

the reception they received on 17 December 1854 when they arrived at Constantinople.¹⁷ Grateful for surviving the rough sea voyage and eager to be at work, Croke and her sisters were taken aback when Florence Nightingale sent word to their ship that they were 'not wanted'. What is more, she had no room for them. Then she said, 'The Sisters are assigned . . . to the Inspector General, not to me.'¹⁸ This effectively released the nuns from their contract to serve under her in matters of nursing. However, once their chaplain, the Jesuit William Ronan from Gardiner Street in Dublin, confronted Florence Nightingale, 'things were much better' and there was plenty of work for the nuns.¹⁹ Within a few weeks, Croke and nine of her fellow Sisters of Mercy were working independently of Florence Nightingale and successfully implementing the McAuley system of organised nursing at the Koulali Hospitals which were under the sponsorship of Lady Stratford de Redcliffe, the wife of the British ambassador to Constantinople.

The remaining five nuns worked at the Scutari Hospital with Florence Nightingale's group. She had made room for them by sending five nuns in her party back to England, thus keeping constant the numbers of Protestant and Catholics. At first she assigned them to the kitchen and linen room to prevent them from 'intriguing' for their church, but a fresh outbreak of cholera soon ensured that these experienced nurses were called on to tend to the sick and wounded.

'One mind appears to move all'

Confident about the success of their nursing, Croke and her sisters became concerned about accusations that they were proselytising Protestants. When they were accused of proselytising, they demanded an open and fair hearing and proof of the charge. This had a way of silencing the uproar, but only until the next accusation was made. When pressed for details one woman retracted her accusations that the nuns had distributed Catholic pamphlets to Protestant soldiers. The matter seemed resolved but flared up again when this same woman took her charges to other more sympathetic listeners.

The 'Protestant howl and the Roman Catholic storm' got so vehement at the Koulali Hospitals that it was decided to organise the wards along religious lines, separating Catholic patients and Catholic nurses from Protestant patients and Protestant nurses, though this worried some Protestant patients. 'I care not for creed or difference of opinion', one patient told Croke's nuns, 'To me, you are all angels of mercy.'²⁰ Though often done with difficulty, Croke kept nursing in

¹⁷ Contemporary accounts and Croke's diary give this date for their arrival at Constantinople while works about Florence Nightingale state 15 December 1854. ¹⁸ M. Francis Bridgeman, *An Account of the Missions of the Sisters of Mercy in the Military Hospitals of the East, Beginning December 1854 and Ending in May 1856*, Archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Silver Spring, Maryland. ¹⁹ William Ronan to 'My dear Reverend Sir', 22 January 1855, Cullen Papers, Dublin Diocesan archives. ²⁰ Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals*, ii, p. 173. By this time two nuns had returned home and one had died.

perspective. Mindful of her patients' need for the restorative powers of sleep, Croke sought to silence 'a pious orderly' who read 'at the very top of his voice a chapter of the Bible for the good of the would-be sleeping patients'. She begged he would do her the 'pleasure of closing his mouth if not his book'.²¹ On another occasion Croke was at the receiving end of the confrontation about religion. She became involved in a dispute with one of the Protestant clergy about dispensing Catholic booklets. But she and he were able to resolve the matter. She was eager not to offend the man because she and her sisters 'like[d] the minister very much [because] he is straight forward and acts on principle'.²²

An atmosphere of smoothing differences and arriving at new understandings was even more to the fore at Balaklava in the Crimea itself. When the work at the Koulali hospitals became 'slack' the hospital was given to the allied Sardinian troops. At this point the nuns offered their services for the hospitals at Balaklava which were still filled with patients. The British military leadership went out of its way to be amenable to the Catholics. For example, the senior officers invited the English Jesuit Sydney Woollett to dine with them. During these dinners, Woollett answered their questions about the Society of Jesus. Such discussion tended to correct some of the misinformation about the Jesuits that the officers had gained from reading contemporary novels. Out of such interchange came an increased tolerance for Catholics and regard for their sensibilities. The officers also acknowledged how offensive it could be to Catholic soldiers to be read the Bible and Protestant tracts by the Protestant clergy. And they stopped soldiers from burning the pope in effigy on bonfire night, 5 November 1855. The disparities in salaries, however, with the Protestant clergy earning twice that of the Catholic clergy, remained unchanged.²³

Woollett paved the way for Croke and her sisters who arrived from Koulali to take charge of the Balaklava Hospitals. There were few obstructions to their access to patients. One of the doctors, in admonishing Croke, acknowledged how her nursing care softened the harshness of military practice. 'Sister,' he said, 'you must not listen to the patients when they ask you for any thing. It will be impossible to get them out of the Hospital, they will be so petted.' Croke countered, saying that Sisters of Mercy always listened to their patients.²⁴ Indeed, sickened by the cries she heard from an orderly being flogged she appealed for one of her patients, a prisoner scheduled for flogging, and was 'kindly answered'.²⁵

Irritated by their success, Florence Nightingale, 'the sweet songstress' as Croke ironically referred to her, tried to undermine the growing reputation of Croke and her sisters. She, too, used the religious issue, saying Croke and her sisters were teaching Catholic doctrine to Protestant patients. But her claims were found to be just as unreliable here as they had previously been in Constantinople. Next she railed against the expense of the nuns' system of care, though a governmental

²¹ Croke, *Diary*, pp. 62–3. ²² *Ibid.*, p. 92. ²³ Sydney Wollett, *Crimean War Diary*, English Jesuit Archives, London. ²⁴ Croke, *Diary*, p. 73. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

study was to find against that charge as well. In fact the twelve nuns were fifty per cent less costly than the seven nurses who had preceded them. Moreover, the study concluded:

The superiority of an ordered system [of nursing] is beautifully illustrated in the 'Sisters of Mercy', — one mind appears to move all; — and their intelligence, delicacy, and conscientiousness, invest them with a halo of confidence extreme [*sic*]; the Medical Officer can safely consign his most critical cases into their hands; — stimulants or opiates — ordered every five minutes, will be faithfully administered, though the five minutes labour were repeated uninterruptedly for a week. The number of Sisters, without being large, is sufficient to secure for every patient needing it, their share of attendance; a calm resigned contentedness sits [on] the features of all — and the soft care of the female and the Lady breathes placidity throughout.²⁶

Among the more remarkable features of the work of the Irish nuns was their continuing of care for their patients throughout the night. Fearful for her nurses' moral protection, Florence Nightingale would not allow nurses to be on the wards after 8.30 p.m. Croke and her sisters, however, made their rounds throughout the night 'up and down the wards every half hour with [their] little lamps'.²⁷ What is more, Croke and her sisters were on their own as they tended to the soldiers in the hospital huts spread over the Balaklava hills.

One of the first things the nuns did on taking over the hospital at Balaklava was to relieve the hospital orderlies of the job of giving out wine and brandy. This reduced the drinking among the orderlies and ensured that those most in need of it received the alcohol and felt its numbing effects. Croke reported that the orderlies were 'not at all pleased at the prospect of being soon deprived of their happiness of giving "spiritual consolation" to their patients'.²⁸

The Sisters of Mercy depended on their Jesuit chaplains — William Ronan in Constantinople and Sydney Woollett in the Crimea — to speak for them with the military officials and to conduct religious rituals. Often their paths crossed those of the chaplains who were also on the hospital wards hearing confessions and praying with those near death. Although Croke and her sisters tended to the spiritual needs of their patients as did the Jesuits, there was no sharing of power with the chaplains. The nuns depended, too, on the female network of support they had created with and for one another as they continued their convent careers while in the East. Daily Mass and meditations, enhanced by periodic spiritual retreats, continued the usual routines of convent life, while evening recreations provided respite from work on the hospital wards. But neither the oversight of the Jesuits nor the nuns' caring for one another eliminated the anxieties Croke and her sisters experienced. They were within a ten-mile march of the battlefield

²⁶ 'The Confidential Report' in Goldie, *I Have Done My Duty*, p. 301. ²⁷ Croke, *Diary*, p. 41. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

and the cannon roar was part of the rhythm of each day and night. Croke swore she saw the flash of the cannon but knew her sisters would refute such a claim as the work of an inflamed imagination. During their leisure hour, however, they joined Croke 'amazing [them]selves by going in idea to Siberia as prisoners of war'.²⁹ The nuns had more to fear from the rats that scampered over them as they slept in their huts than they had from their imagined Russian captors ten miles away. Unknown at the time, these rats spread the Crimean fever (typhus) which had almost carried off Croke herself.

Conclusion

Croke's career as a military nurse came to an end with the signing of the peace treaty on 30 March 1856. Two weeks later she left the Crimea for Ireland, exclaiming in her journal that 'Every heart beat light – Going home! Alive after such scenes! And going home, *alive!*'³⁰ All in Charleville 'were in the greatest joy' at her return, and for a long time thereafter she entertained her fellow sisters during evening recreations with tales of her 'Eastern Campaign'. Within six years of her return, the bishop of the diocese appointed her the superior for her community, a position she subsequently was elected to for six terms. She was a 'large-minded, generous, warm-hearted Mother' who led her community in the care of Charleville's poor. Towards the end of her last term, after eighteen years of governance, on 7 November 1888, 'calmly, consciously and peacefully' at the age of sixty-three, Croke died in her own bed.³¹

29 Ibid., p. 105. 30 Ibid., p. 138. 31 Annals of Charleville Convent, Catherine McAuley Museum Archives, Charleville, County Cork.