

Reflections from Annette Schneider RSM: the experience of writing *'A Lens on the Works of Mercy: Clare Agnew and her Legacy'*.

Very early in the process I realized the importance of learning as much as I could about Elizabeth (Sr Mary Clare) Agnew. As I look back now, having concluded this stage of the journey of discovery, I acknowledge her as a research companion whose unique story was revealed gradually. Following very slim leads has its challenges, given the little information we had initially on her life and her sketches! Now and again, when the disparate facts made no sense at all, I had a conversation with Clare about my dilemmas. On a number of occasions she sent me back to her correspondence and I saw things I had missed first time round.

We know Catherine McAuley said of the Mercy congregation that 'it commenced with two.' In my case, I think this project 'commenced with four', namely the four things I knew about Clare and her sketches when I arrived at Mercy International Centre (MIC) in mid-January 2019. From previous visits to MIC I knew that:

1. the 15 sketches hanging in MIC, outside the Doyle Room and Catherine's Room, had been drawn by Clare Agnew;
2. Clare was an English Sister of Mercy;
3. Clare had been Superior at Bermondsey Convent for a short time and
4. Clare's eccentric behaviour caused her to be removed from her leadership role.

I decided that the best way to further my knowledge was to begin with existing Mercy publications and to develop an evolving timeline of verifiable facts about Clare, her family and the sketches. The Mercy International Association Archives contain primary sources in the Agnew Papers File so I spent time reading Clare's correspondence. This was a significant step in bringing her to life – seeing her letters and becoming familiar with her handwriting. As my knowledge expanded and the timeline grew, I went back to those letters on a number of occasions to see what I had missed in my earlier perusal of the documents. There were many significant breakthroughs but I would like to focus on three of them.

The MIA database had no date of birth or date of death for Elizabeth (Clare Agnew) and identified John and Elizabeth as her parents. No siblings were recorded. I had 'discovered' her brother, Henry, and her sister Caroline, but not her parents. A significant breakthrough came after I re-read a letter dated July 25, 1837, in which Elizabeth referred to visiting her sister, Mrs Millett, in Brighton. After reaching some frustrating 'dead ends', I found an Eliza Amelia Agnew had married a George Millett and that Eliza Amelia had been born in Bombay. This fact enabled me to discover that John Agnew and Elizabeth Stevens had been married in Bombay in 1790, where John was with the East India Company and that their child was Eliza Amelia – what a breakthrough!

The second breakthrough occurred when I discovered the date on which Elizabeth (Clare) entered the Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre, a Catholic contemplative order, at New Hall early in 1835. A newspaper report had given her date of conversion as 1837 but she would have to have been a Catholic before she went to New Hall. That led me to find her Confirmation records, giving her date of Confirmation, her formal entrance into the Catholic Church, as December 5, 1833.

The third breakthrough came late in my time at MIC, ten days before I was due to leave. Marianne Cosgrave, MIA Archivist, had found a manuscript in a box of mostly anonymous spiritual notebooks. She recognized the initials ECA in handwriting at the front of the notebook as being those used by Elizabeth (Clare) Agnew. We had located Elizabeth's record of her journey to Catholicism, in her own handwriting! What a discovery! I read the manuscript and was deeply moved by her writing, especially by her documentation of the steps she took to find out as much as she could about the Catholic faith. The psychological and spiritual strain it placed on her was also evident from her reflections.

These three events, and many more, enabled Clare to come to life to me as a person. She was grappling with the sorts of issues which other religious women experience as well, even in our own time. I think the depiction of the Sister at the steps of the chapel altar in the 16th sketch reflects her own struggle to make sense of this new form of apostolic religious life in 1839. As an artist, she made this sketch stand out from the other 15 for a purpose. Your reflections may lead you elsewhere of course.

I recall the day when I realized that the 'researcher' in me had met the 'educator'! The narrative for the book began to emerge. By then I had 15 pages of an annotated timeline of facts and events relating to Clare, her family and the sketches of the Works of Mercy so I used that to start weaving the threads of her story in a way which made it accessible to readers. You, the readers, can judge whether that aim has been achieved!

It would please me greatly if other mercy researchers could join in this ongoing discovery of Clare Agnew and enable some of the obvious gaps in our knowledge of her story to be filled. If this book enables that to happen then it has been worthwhile.

Annette Schneider RSM

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