

Presentation on 'Clare Agnew and her legacy', MIC, September 26, 2019

Good morning everyone and thank you for introducing me today Marianne. I am grateful to you for hosting this presentation as you were one of the people who came on the journey with me as I discovered what I could about Clare Agnew and her sketches earlier this year.

For the first 20 minutes we will explore the theme 'Clare Agnew and her legacy' under four headings:

1. Discovering Clare Agnew: her family and her faith journey
2. Some background to Clare's illustrations of the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy
3. The significance of the sixteenth sketch - 'Praying for the living'
4. Clare's legacy to our Mercy world and beyond

We will then have time for some questions to conclude our 30 minutes together. Hopefully the Zoom technology will enable all this to happen without Plan B having to come into play!

First: Discovering Clare Agnew (1798 – 1881) - her family and her faith journey

When I accepted Mary Reynolds' invitation to undertake research into the Illustrations of the Works of Mercy I knew four things about Clare Agnew:

- I knew she sketched the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy which I had seen many times hanging in the corridor outside the Doyle room. I had purchased sets of the 15 sketches from the Shop downstairs on visits here to MIC and used them in my Mercy ethos formation work.
- I knew she had been superior of the Mercy Community in Bermondsey in England.
- I knew or, more accurately, had gleaned from what people said anecdotally, that she was eccentric which is probably why her time as Superior did not work out.
- I knew her parents were John and Elizabeth. That was it!

At the same time as I sought to discover the when, why and how of the Illustrations themselves, I wanted to find out more about the woman behind them. This led me to the Archives in Herbert Street where Clare's correspondence was held, to the Archives in Bermondsey, to the Mercy-focused writings of Austin Carroll, Angela Bolster and Mary Sullivan, to other writers who shed light on conditions in Ireland and England in the 1830s. Slowly I built up a timeline of key dates and verifiable details about Clare's life, from her birth in 1798 till her death in 1881, and her legacy began to unfold. This timeline became the framework for the narrative of the book.

We don't have time to mention every discovery so I have chosen three which were significant in bringing Clare and her family to life. Marianne has organized copies for you of two archival documents to which I will refer shortly.

Perhaps the most significant discovery was finding Clare's sister, Mrs Millett, to whom she referred in a letter written in July 1837. In her letter of December 17, 1839, written in Bermondsey, Catherine McAuley had referred to Clare's mother, Mrs Agnew, to Caroline and to another unnamed sister as being the extent of Clare's family. Catherine did not seem to know of Clare's brother Henry at all. Marianne helped me decipher the name 'Millett' in a letter Clare had written to Fr Peter Butler, PP in Bermondsey, so I used *Findmypast* to find any females named Millett, born within the broad timeframe I had developed. Seven possibilities emerged so I changed each one's name back to Agnew and found Eliza Amelia Agnew had married George Millett and that Eliza had been born in Bombay. This led me to the British East India Company records where I discovered Clare's parents,

John and Elizabeth, who had married in Bombay in 1790 and whose first child was Eliza Amelia, born in 1795! I had found a previously unnamed sibling and had found Clare's parents.

A second significant discovery was finding Clare's Confirmation details in the Westminster diocesan records. Her Confirmation date was recorded as December 5, 1833. This was significant because it marked the date on which she became a Catholic. In the public arena, Miss Agnew was usually referred to as 'a convert to Catholicism and the author of the successful novel *Geraldine*'. Newspapers contained listings of people known to have converted to Catholicism or Protestantism and in one newspaper report 'Miss Agnew' was recorded as converting in 1837. When I discovered Clare had joined a Catholic contemplative order in 1835, remaining only five months, I knew she had to have already become a Catholic before 1835 in order to do that.

A third significant discovery was Clare's notebook, compiled in 1832/33, in which she recorded the reasons for her conversion. I think Marianne has that notebook here today so I am going to ask her to briefly tell us how she found it and recognized its significance.

As I read and re-read Clare's correspondence, and rejoiced at finding this notebook, she continued to come to life as a person to me. She was a woman gifted and vulnerable, just like us. I learned that Clare was an acclaimed writer and conversationalist, an accomplished musician, intelligent and theologically literate, a line drawing artist who also painted. She was a daughter, sibling, aunt, friend and colleague to many. I learned that periodically she did not enjoy good mental health. Clare wrote at various times of her anxiety and of her nerves being shattered, especially during the time prior to her conversion to Catholicism. She also wrote of her fear of failure and of being criticised if she joined another religious congregation and had to leave again. She pondered about whether or not to accept an offer of marriage and thus share responsibility for managing an estate in Derbyshire. She wrote of the stress arising from being the peacemaker in a family which had become much estranged, possibly because of the circumstances of her brother Henry's first marriage. During the six months she was Superior at Bermondsey Clare became ill, so much so that her mother, after visiting her at the Convent on one occasion, sought medical help for her daughter.

I suspect that each of us could relate to some or all of these pressures and appreciate their potential effect on our health; we are each eccentric in our own little ways too. Perhaps we have been placed in designated leadership roles for which we were not suited or we have worked with leaders whose gifts did lie elsewhere. My compassion for Clare in her situation grew as I realized that she was trying to navigate many stressful issues.

Second: Some background to Clare's illustrations of the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

When and where did Clare produce her illustrations? The only archival reference I could find to the date or place when the illustrations were done comes from the *Cork Annals*, p.4. In an entry recorded for July 28, 1838, following the Reception ceremony for Clare Agnew and Maria Taylor, it is stated that "About this time Miss Agnew devised the 'Illustrations of the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, besides writing the third volume of *Geraldine*'".

Clare was familiar with the works of mercy being done by the group of pious women to whom she belonged during 1837/38 and who worked with the poor and needy people of the Bermondsey/Dockhead parish in London. This was the world of *Oliver Twist*, where Charles Dickens gives readers a stark description of the area and the poverty of the people amongst whom Clare and her companions worked.

While Clare was in Cork for her novitiate, we know from the *Cork Annals* that the sisters, who had only arrived there 9 months earlier, were engaged in the works of mercy within the Convent and out in the local community. Clare would have seen the work of the sisters firsthand in Cork.

In a letter written to Miss Agnew by the publisher, Charles Dolman, dated August 19, 1839, the date of her Profession ceremony, Dolman referred to the copyright, design and bookplates for the sketches. It is difficult to determine if he had already received some sketches, possibly the first set of four, or if he was awaiting their arrival. Earlier in that same month, when Clare dated her will on August 4, she knew the details regarding the publication of the illustrations in four sections. She bequeathed the proceeds from copyright and sales to the Bermondsey Convent for work with poor women. It seems likely that she had completed the sketches during her novitiate, before she left Cork, but we can't be sure. I think Marianne has one of the original editions held in the Archives here with her today so I'll ask her to show you a couple of the sketches, especially 'Burying the dead' and 'Pray for the living'.

My research into the background context for the sketches revealed that the sisters were responding to needs arising from particular social, political, economic and ecclesial factors operating in the late 1830s. Their works of mercy grew out of their interactions with people around them. There isn't time to refer to each sketch so I will comment briefly on the background context for the sketch 'Burying the dead'. As an aside, this is the only sketch which includes a date. On the coffin is the name of a young woman, Annie Price, and a date, June 7, 1839, - I wonder if Clare is telling us that this sketch was completed on this date, while she was a novice in Cork!

Why was this depiction of 'burying the dead' so significant? The Anatomy Act was passed in 1832, around the same time as medical research was expanding in Ireland and England, necessitating a steady supply of corpses for use in research. Prior to the passing of the new law, only the bodies of executed murderers or people who had made the decision to donate their bodies to medical research after death, could legally be used. Body snatching from graveyards located close to hospitals became a huge issue. The new Act provided for unclaimed dead bodies to be used for research and poor people were being exploited by the new laws. It was the body of a poor person which was most likely to lie unclaimed in a hospital or workhouse or debtors' prison, without funeral funds or a family member who could pay for a funeral. You can imagine the sisters will make sure that Annie Price is buried with dignity and that her grave is watched over for the following couple of days so the body is not snatched.

Third: The sixteenth sketch 'Praying for the living'

It wasn't until November 2018, two months before I began this research project, that I first viewed one of the original copies of the book of Illustrations/sketches. I realized for the first time that Clare had done 16 illustrations and that each illustration had an accompanying anecdote. Clare's sketch 'Pray for the Living' had not been included in the set of 15 on display at MIC or in the original sets produced for sale. I took a mental note of that but it wasn't until I became immersed in my research in Dublin that I began to think more deeply about this 16th sketch. So, what have I learned?

You will notice it is the only sketch done in portrait orientation, though it is printed side on in the book. The other 15 are all landscape orientation. It is also the only sketch depicting a single figure. In the other 15 there is at least one other person shown with the Sister or Sisters undertaking the particular Work of Mercy. I don't think an artist of Clare's ability would do something like that unintentionally so I thought a lot about what she might be telling us by making it so different.

When I pondered the words in the anecdote accompanying this 16th sketch it struck me that Clare may have done this as the final sketch, even though it is listed as the fifteenth, with 'praying for the living' coming before 'praying for the dead' in the list of the Works of Mercy. The anecdote begins as follows: *"We have followed the Sisters through the laborious duties of the Institute, let us now enter into the holy calm of the Convent chapel, where, like its ever-burning lamp, the Community perpetually adore and supplicate their Divine Spouse before the hidden glory of His Sacramental Presence..."* Was Clare referring to the other 15 sketches when she said we have followed the Sisters through the laborious duties of the Institute? We won't ever know but I think it is possible.

I learned something else during my visit to the Archives in Bermondsey. By then, I had viewed four copies of the original edition of the Illustrations and each of those copies had 'Praying for the Living' as the 15th or penultimate sketch but in the copy held at Bermondsey it was placed 16th, as the final sketch in the book. Given the wording in the anecdote I think it is intended to be the 16th sketch, as in the copy held in Bermondsey, but we will probably never know.

I think there is something else significant about this 16th sketch and its anecdote. Clare depicts a Sister in prayer, kneeling at the foot of the altar. The anecdote refers to perpetual adoration in the Convent chapel, something which has not been the practice of Mercy communities. I am wondering if Clare is revealing something of herself here. Throughout her life, briefly before and certainly many times after this sketch was done in 1838 or 1839, Clare sought the contemplative life. In this sketch and its accompanying anecdote she may be depicting the struggle she was experiencing with integrating the contemplative and the active dimensions of this still new form of religious life to which she was about to commit herself, or to which she had very recently committed herself as a Sister of Mercy. Again, we will never know if what I am suggesting is any way near the truth, but this possibility made her even more real to me as a religious woman. Those of us who are vowed religious, today, in 2019, still struggle to integrate the active and contemplative dimensions of our religious commitment, to balance the realities of life with our ideals and vision for the future. All Mercy women and men are called to reflect on what it means to be Mercy in our time and place. I invite you to sit with this sketch yourselves sometime and see what emerges for you.

Fourth: Clare's legacy to our Mercy world and beyond

Clare was a Sister of Mercy for almost 5 of her 83 years, and for six months of that short time she was superior of the Bermondsey Community. This proved to be a difficult time for the Sisters as well as for Clare. I hope we don't define Clare by this perceived deficiency in leadership ability and sometimes erratic behaviour. In the scheme of things we are forever indebted to her for these sketches which give us a window into the business of the lives of the early Sisters of Mercy during 1838-39. We can use them in so many ways for personal reflection and as an educational, formation resource. However, as I came to know more about Clare as a person, I realized that her legacy is more than her sketches. In learning about her I learned more about myself too. I'd like to conclude by quoting from this book, from the final paragraph on p. 63:

Her legacy also lives on "to the extent that her story connects with our story – through the invitation given to each of us to look closely without becoming blinkered; to capture the essence without losing the context; to keep on searching in the face of doubt and failure; to find the appropriate balance between contemplation and action; to sketch or write or sing or abide in the stillness or engage with others as we find our place 'in the family of things'".

Thank you for being part of this opportunity to share aspects of Clare Agnew's story this morning.

Reference:

Schneider, A. (2019) ***A Lens on the Works of Mercy: Clare Agnew and her Legacy*** Mercy International Association, Dublin.