

THE SOCIETY – BEGINNINGS AND EARLY YEARS

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations



There had been in existence a Protestant Orphan Society for many years prior to the formation of the Society. It cared for orphans of various Protestant denominations but on condition that these children be brought up within the Church of Ireland. In 1864, in a letter to a Presbyterian monthly, Dr Frazer of Ormond Quay, Dublin started a timely debate about provision for Presbyterian orphan children. The debate was to lead to a call to action on behalf of Presbyterian children in need.

Murmurings and Meetings

The debate, involving a number of eminent philanthropic men was centred on the figures of Dr William Johnston, minister of Townsend Street Belfast and Dr Wilberforce Arnold, a medical doctor and member of Elmwood Belfast. Arnold wrote to local papers appealing for help on behalf of Presbyterian children. Johnston, who saw four children of parents who had died in his own area end up as street urchins, decided to help set up an organisation to address such need. On 14th December 1865 a meeting took place to examine what provision might be made for Presbyterian orphans. In subsequent meetings the matters addressed were the raising of money to fund the provision of care and the mechanisms to govern any organisation which might be formed. The inaugural meeting of the Society itself was held on Wednesday 2nd May 1866 in Linen Hall Street Church at one o'clock. The press of the time widely reported this Belfast event. A cursory glance of those same newspapers, however, also presents a picture of the casual brutality of the times. On the day of the inaugural meeting the Belfast Newsletter reported the finding of the dead body of a child in the River Lagan, the case of a small boy stabbing another boy, and the Northern Whig on the same day recorded that a seven month infant left to be minded by another child had been accidentally severely burned. It is apparent that in the midst of a growing Belfast affluence there was still poverty and destitution. The Society as a vehicle for caring for Presbyterian children arrived not a moment too soon.

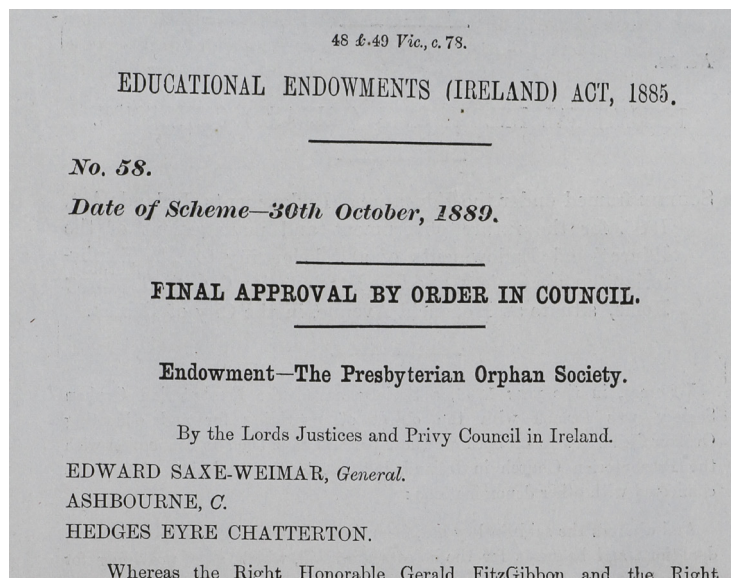
Applications and Annual Reports

The Society started with 175 children aided in 1866. The Society was to ensure that children were, in the words of Johnston's biographer, "comfortably nourished" and to receive "a fair start in life". Numbers helped were to fluctuate over the early years but by 1900 they had reached 2818. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the backgrounds of those helped but in the years to 1910, although there are a myriad of occupations represented, it will come as little surprise that those vulnerable to agricultural and industrial depressions such as labourers, farmers, weavers and those involved with the linen industry feature highly in those whose children were assisted by the Society. The stories of the lives, briefly glimpsed, are however an insight into the help given to Presbyterian children and their families in the early years of the Society. In those years there is a wealth of statistical information on numbers helped and commentary on economic crises and their effect on subscriptions. At times comments allude to the difficulty in meeting the increasing levels of need. Despite the challenges there is, however, an impression of Divine providence bestowed on work which is viewed as in accordance with God's plan for His people.



Founders signatures

In 1893 the Annual Report commented that “only those engaged in the office work of the Society can realise the warmth of interest and readiness of help that exists among Presbyterian people on behalf of the cause of the fatherless. No mere statistics can tabulate the quiet ministry of love to Christ and to His poor which this Society is the means of eliciting.” In 1899 as the century drew to a close the Annual Report alludes to Presbyterian appeals on behalf of the Indian Famine Fund and fund to help soldiers in the Boer War. There was a concern that the Society’s funds would suffer, but the report stated that “the figures about to be submitted reveal the gratifying fact that the total income for the year is the highest ever reached in the history of the Society.” Clearly the Society was establishing itself as an important means of meeting need with resources adequate to the task.



Scheme of Endowment, 1889.

Case Histories

The many who were helped by the Society in the nineteenth century were from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances. For example in 1866 three children aged 8, 5 and 3, were placed on the roll for help by the Society. They had no mother or father. They lived in County Antrim and the children’s father had been a labourer. The three children were supported and two became apprentices when they were 14 years of age when support ceased. A third child died of Typhoid fever aged just 11 years of age.

Another family helped was Jane and her two children Peter and John aged 6 and 5 respectively. Their father was a labourer in Dublin. The family were supported until the children reached the age of 14. A private donation was given to Peter to help him during an apprenticeship.

Finally there is a family from Donegal. Mary had four children, three boys and a girl. They were aged 10, 7, 5 and 2 when she was helped by the Society. The father had died and after his death they were in need of help. All the family were supported from 1881 until they emigrated in 1884.

These case histories highlight just some of the thousands of children helped by the turn of the century. The work progressed and Dr Johnston’s biographer drew this conclusion. “Certain it is, that with the rise of the Orphan Society, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland entered upon a new period of prosperity, and the progress of the Society is accurately registered by a corresponding progress in nearly all departments of her church life. Whilst multitudes of the dying poor have had their last hours consoled by the thought that after they were gone, their children would not be neglected, the whole Church has shared in the blessing of the Covenant – keeping God, who is a Father to the fatherless, and a Judge to the widow in His holy habitation.” The language may be a little archaic but perhaps it is only fanciful to the modern mind-set to think that the Church would not benefit overall from its concentration of resources on supporting the poor and those in need. What appears clear is that the founders of the Society were not just visionaries but people able to organise, administer, direct and deliver care and support both effectively and efficiently.