

LAUREL HILL: A FRENCH FOUNDATION

Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bengy was born on 21 September, 1781, in a beautiful chateau at Chateauroux, in northern France. When she was ten years old, the French Revolution caused the family to move hastily to the countryside. This meant a complete change of circumstances for the family as poverty and fear became the new order of the day. Her father, Chevalier de Bengy, was thrown into prison, but was eventually released and restored to his family. He gave shelter to the Abbé Claveau, who acted as chaplain in the home and also gave religious instruction to the children. Victoire became friendly with Mademoiselle de Rochfort and assisted her in charitable works among the poor and the sick.

When she was eighteen Victoire fell seriously ill but later recovered. As peace and tranquility returned to the life of the community, she began to enjoy herself and, like most other girls of her age, liked to go to dances, parties and the theatre. Her partly-arranged marriage, on 21 August, 1804, to Antoine Joseph de Bonnault d'Houet, former deputy of the nobility in the Etats de Berry, and Knight of St. Louis, was a happy one. However, less than a year later, on 1 July, 1805, he died. A son, Eugene, was born two months after his father's death.

As Victoire d'Houet devoted herself to rearing the child and to works of charity, she found herself gradually drawn to a new mission in her life. The year 1809 saw France at war again, and Spanish prisoners were crowded into the hospitals of Bourges, where they were decimated by typhus fever. Victoire disguised herself as a peasant and, unknown to her family, had herself accepted as a nurse to look after the unfortunate prisoners. Her secret was discovered when she caught the fever herself, and her four year old son was handed over to the care of her sister Angela. Despite the fever's toll, she was fortunate to make a complete recovery.

Four years later, after discussions with her confessor Abbé Gaudin, she entered the next and most decisive stage in her life. She made contact with the Jesuits, who, having just been re-established by Pope Pius VII, had opened a college at St. Acheul, near Amiens. She placed her son Eugene in this college for his further education.

On 20 March, 1820, after a period of

BY RICHARD AHERN



Marie Madeleine Victoire d'Houet.

indecision, Victoire d'Houet founded the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, (F.C.J.), in Amiens, when, with two young girls, she began by teaching seven poor children to read, write, pray and work. She chose this name for her order because she was deeply influenced by Mary Magdalen's devotion to Jesus.

More than three years later, in October, 1823, with six nuns, who set up

a second foundation at her birthplace, Chateauroux. Free classes from 7am to 7pm were begun and were well attended.

The new order quickly spread. Early French foundations followed one another in rapid succession; no sooner was one house established than another was opened elsewhere.

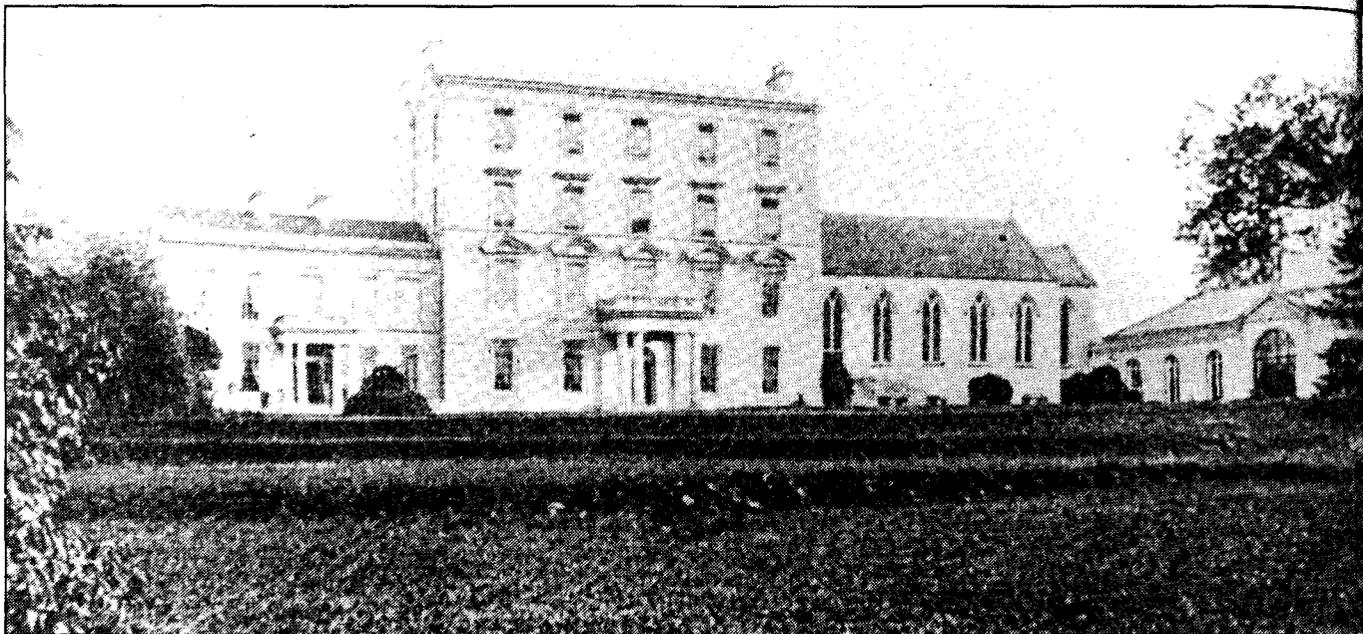
In 1826, she went to Rome for an audience with Pope Leo XII to seek his approval of her order, which he duly gave. In October that year, she was elected superior-general of the Society. Four years later, she and one of her companions travelled to London where, with the approval of the vicar apostolic, the Right Rev. J. Bramstone, a large school was handed over to her. Soon after, the Society rented a small house in Hampstead.

The superior-general then went to Geneva, Switzerland, where she established a poor school, an industrial school and two schools for the children of more affluent parents. King Charles Albert of Savoy (an area in south-east France, bordering on Italy, mainly in the Savoy Alps, then part of the kingdom of Sardina) invited her to open a college at Turin. In 1840, she purchased a prime property in Nice and established a select boarding-school there.

The following year, she returned to London and opened a similar school for Catholic girls in Gumley House, Isleworth - then on the outskirts of the city - in a Georgian mansion, surrounded by picturesque woods.



In 1820, in the shadow of Amiens Cathedral, Madame d'Houet opened her first school for poor children.



Laurel Hill Convent, completed in 1846.

In 1842, the parish priest of Oughterard, Co. Galway, Dr. Kirwan, visited London and was impressed by the nuns and their school. He pointed out that a school at Oughterard would serve the dual purpose of providing an Irish novitiate for the order and a school for local children. Victoire d'Houet readily agreed to bring the order to Ireland. The convent and novitiate at Oughterard were blessed by the Bishop of Galway, assisted by forty of his priests, on 2nd February, 1843.

On 20 March, 1844 Miss Mary Anne Connolly of Limerick, accompanied by her mother and Father William Bourke, (later to be administrator of St. John's Cathedral, Limerick,) presented herself at the novitiate at Oughterard. Fr. Bourke, who had heard much about the F.C.J.s from his friend, Brother Patrick Walsh, superior of the Christian Brothers' Schools, St. Michael's Place, Sexton

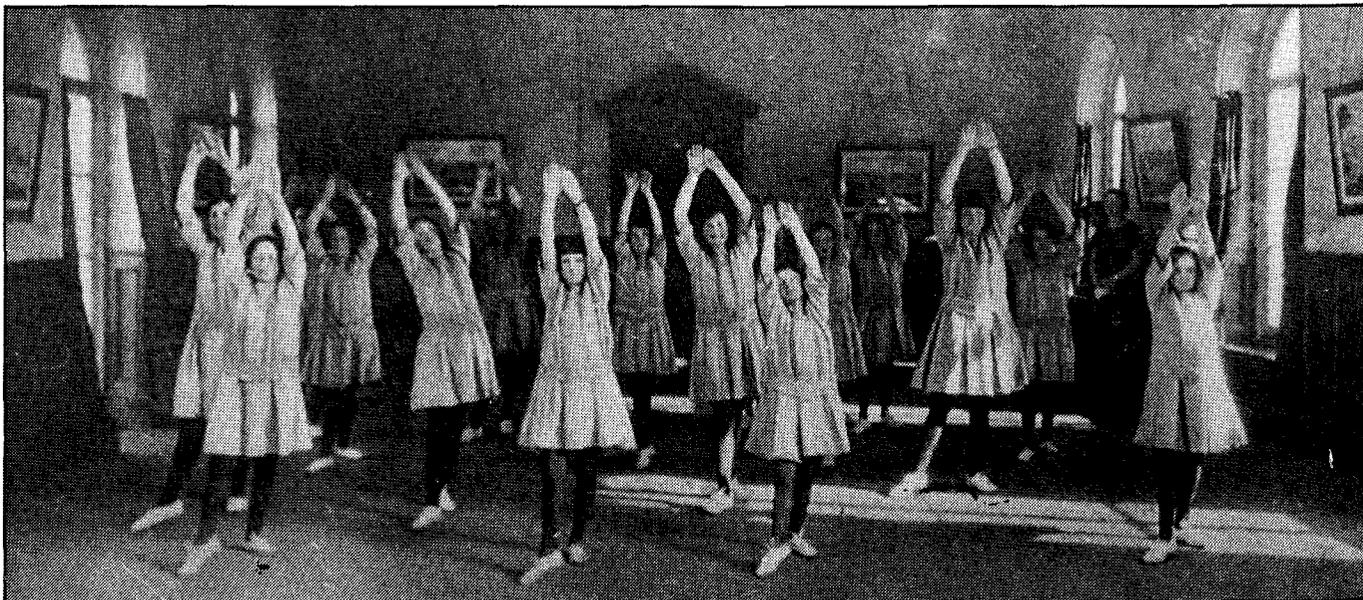
Street, Limerick, urged Victoire d'Houet - who received them herself - to set up a foundation in Limerick. Br. Walsh had already formed a friendship with the superior-general and her community when he was stationed in Wapping, London, some years earlier.

Limerick, at this period, was a place of high unemployment with the conditions of the working classes so extremely abject, that in a petition to parliament in favour of the Dublin and Cashel (Great Southern and Western) Railway, the Corporation claimed that there was more wretchedness among the poor of Limerick than among those of any other town of equal population in Ireland; that this arose from want of regular employment and that there were 1215 tradesmen (only 407 in regular employment) and 5000 labourers equally destitute.

On the other hand, despite this high

unemployment, there was considerable building activity in the city, and the new Potato Market of the Long Dock, next to Matthew Bridge, had just been constructed at a cost of £1,200. The building of Newtown Pery was continuing at a brisk rate. The Pery Square housing development was also being built as was St. Michael's Church, on the southern end of the Square. St. John's Church in John's Square was being re-constructed. Negotiations were in progress for the purchase of the Commercial Buildings, Rutland Street, by the Corporation for use as a Town Hall.

This, then, was part of the social and economic background of the Limerick to which Victoire d'Houet and her companion, Mère Julie Guillemet, came on 5 September, 1844. Having alighted from one of Bianconi's coaches, they were met at the Royal George Hotel, George's (now O'Connell) Street, by Br. Walsh and



The Junior Drill Form at Laurel Hill, circa 1930.

Fr. B.
dista
Mr. a
Mary
in O

Fr

time

Lime

was

fore

attit

for

who

expe

his

nun

the

follo

that

Day

pro

well

we

Sist

Nu

Me

for

wh

ma

the

As

cor

9,

the

As

M

oc

18

a

th

th

ne

A

th

o

p

H

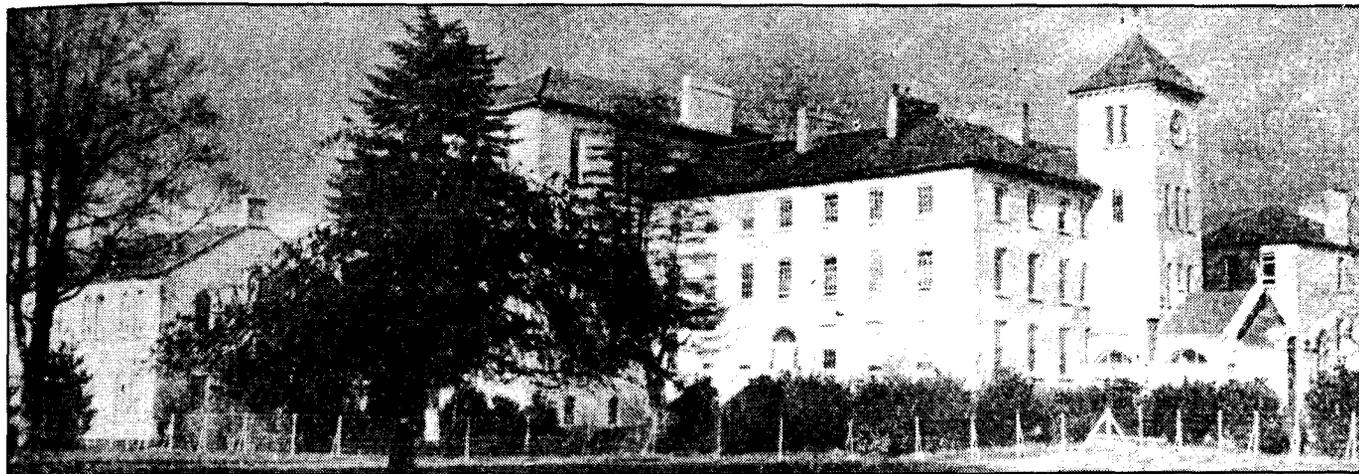
N

th

P

th

P



In 1856, Dean Robert Cussen brought the nuns to Bruff, Co. Limerick.

Fr. Bourke. The four walked the short distance to 3 Patrick Street, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Connolly, whose daughter, Mary Anne, had become an F.C.J. novice in Oughterard.

Fr. Bourke and Br. Walsh had, some time previously, spoken to the Bishop of Limerick, Dr. John Ryan, but his attitude was one of indifference to the nuns. They forewarned Victoire d'Houet of his attitude, and the next day they all set off for Kilkee, Co. Clare, to meet the bishop who was on holiday there. Contrary to expectations, Dr. Ryan gave the Society his approval, and insisted that the two nuns remain on in his Kilkee house for the rest of that day. They left on the following morning, after having agreed that they 'should open a Boarding and Day School in Limerick, in view of providing for the needs of the children of well-to-do parents'. (The poor of the city were already being catered for by the Sisters of Mercy and the Presentation Nuns.)

Victoire d'Houet and her companion, Mère Julie Guillmet, remained as guests for 10 weeks of the Connolly family, in whose home the bishop said Mass on many mornings during this time.

While still negotiating the purchase of the extensive property known as Ashbourne, the order started its community life on 1 November, 1844 at 9, Victoria Terrace, at the northern end of the South Circular Road, near the Ashbourne property. Fr. Theobald Matthew was to visit them there on one occasion.

A few months later on 26 January, 1845, the nuns moved a short distance to a large house in Richmond Place, and there a day-school was opened with thirty-three pupils. It then transpired that they had not been successful in their negotiations for the purchase of Ashbourne and, subsequently, through the efforts of Br. Walsh, Fr. Bourke and other friends, the quest for a suitable property ended in the purchase of Laurel Hill from the Limerick Quaker family of Newsome. There, on the 26 June, 1845, the boarding school opened with eleven pupils. These pupils were given 18 days'

holiday, at the beginning of August, to enable the nuns to make their annual retreat under the direction of Dean Cussen, vicar-general of the diocese. The Dean, a fluent French speaker, gave the exercise of the retreat alternately in French and in English. He served as spiritual director to the Laurel Hill community during those early years.

In October, 1845, the large central building, sixty feet high and fifty-four feet in length, was begun under the personal supervision of Victoire d'Houet, and the foundation stone was solemnly blessed by Dr. Ryan on 12 November. The building was completed in the autumn of 1846, just a year later, and opened to the public, who came from all parts to admire it, and to gaze on the beautiful, panoramic view of the River Shannon and the Clare Hills, from the fourth storey windows.

Under the foundation stone was placed a parchment on which was written the names of all the members of the community, and also medals and illustrations. There had been, fortunately, only one accident during the construction work, and the injured man was given a rosary beads by the nuns, who also sent him his wages each week until he recovered.

During the terrible Famine of 1847, the nuns tended to the hunger-stricken people who came to their convent door.

Some years later, in 1856, their spiritual director, Dean Robert Cussen brought the Society to Bruff, Co. Limerick, to look after the schools in his parish. He had first met Victoire d'Houet in Paris, where he had been pursuing his ecclesiastical studies. He could offer no school or convent, but only the shelter of his mother's home. Victoire d'Houet gladly accepted this offer, and her nuns took residence with Mrs. Cussen in Crawford's Lane.

St. Mary's boarding-school opened with a nucleus of twenty-five pupils. Growing numbers made it imperative to move into the corner house, (later known as 'The Medical Hall'). Soon the convent and schools, both primary and secondary, were begun. The site chosen

was just below the town on the left bank of the Morning Star River. Today this fine fourstoreyed building, which commands a view of the Galtie Mountains on the east, and the Ballyhouragh Hills on the south, is a landmark on the road to Kilmallock. Against a background of tall elm trees, lawns and flower-gardens, it forms a pleasant setting for a centre of education. This was the last foundation made during the life time of the foundress of the order.

On Tuesday, 5 April 1858, Madame d'Houet died in France and, two days later, her remains were laid to rest in the little cemetery of Gentilly. During the period of religious unrest in France in 1905, her relics were removed to the burial ground of the convent of the F.C.J.s at Upton Hall, Birkenhead.

In 1863, St. Philomena's kindergarten was opened by the Limerick Society, 'at a moment's notice', on 19 January, as a prohibition had been issued the previous day from the pulpit of each Catholic church in the city, forbidding parents to send their children to Protestant schools. This new faculty was referred to as an 'Academy', as the use of this term was considered more 'sophisticated'. In the same year, Bishop George Butler blessed the chapel.

In 1903, following the early death of her mother, a six year old child entered the school. This schoolgirl spent twelve years at Laurel Hill, and went on to become Limerick's finest novelist. Kate O'Brien wrote much about her native place, and her novel *The Land Of Spices*, vividly portrayed her old school, its pupils and, perhaps above all, its nuns.

In 1908, the day-school for senior day pupils was opened with accommodation for 80 girls, while St. Philomena's continued to cater for the junior pupils.

It is now one hundred and forty-five years since the F.C.J.'s came to Limerick and during that time 'Laurel Hill' has seen many changes in the social and economic life of Limerick. In the rapidly changing world of education, the school remains one of the finest of its kind in Ireland and an enduring monument to its French foundress.