

# St. Philomena's Preparatory School

by Sister Marie Hayes, FCJ.

**S**t. Philomena's Preparatory School, South Circular Road, Limerick which welcomed generations of children for one hundred and fifty years closed as a school on 7 June 2013. The school was opened on 19 January 1863. Just nineteen years previously in September 1844, the Foundress of the Congregation of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, Marie Madeline d'Houet, a French widow, had arrived in Limerick accompanied by Julie Guillemet, also a F.C.J. sister. Dr. Ryan, Bishop of Limerick, welcomed their intention of establishing a new foundation in the city. During the negotiations they stayed at Mrs. Connolly's house at 2, Patrick Street. On 27 October, Mother Maria Lenssens and some other members of the Order joined them. Anxious to form a new community, the Foundress rented a small house at 9, Victoria Terrace, which had the advantage of being close to the property she had hoped to purchase which was Ashbourne. Father William Burke, administrator of St. John's parish and the Superior of the Christian Brothers, Brother Walsh, gave them much support and advice. The sisters failed to secure the longed for property at Ashbourne, and since the house on Victoria Terrace was too small to accommodate classes, they took over a house at 16, The Crescent, the mansion of the late Lord Viscount Gort, which they moved to on 26 January 1845. A week later, the Bishop came and blessed the chapel. Here on 26 February 1845 the new school was opened with thirty three day pupils.

The Foundress left on 4 March and the small community continued its efforts to secure a property such as Madame d'Houet desired. Providentially in the summer of 1845, the property of Laurel Hill became available and was bought from the original owners, the Newsom family who also owned a hardware store in William Street. The community took up residence at Laurel Hill by July 1845 and established a boarding school. They continued to take day classes in the house at 16 The Crescent until negotiations had been completed. As soon as everything was sealed, a temporary chapel in Laurel Hill was blessed and eleven boarders were accepted.

On 16 January 1863, Bishop George Butler of Limerick and his clergy sent a deputation to the sisters at Laurel Hill, requesting the immediate opening of a new day school. The sisters did not have the accommodation for extra students at that time so the bishop set out on foot to find a suitable building for them. The reason for the urgency was understandable. The bishop and his priests had, from the altar at the Sunday Masses, denounced the practice of some parents in sending their children to Protestant schools. In today's ecumenical climate, all this sounds very discriminatory but both Ireland and Limerick of 1863 were very different and thankfully, those days are gone.

## LAUREL-HILL BOARDING SCHOOL FOR YOUNG LADIES.

### CONVENT

OF  
THE FAITHFUL COMPANIONS OF JESUS,  
UNDER THE IMMEDIATE PATRONAGE OF  
THE RIGHT REVEREND DOCTOR RYAN,  
BISHOP OF LIMERICK.

**T**HE Public is respectfully informed that the Religious of the above Order have established their BOARDING SCHOOL at LAUREL-HILL, which is most healthfully and agreeably situated, commanding a magnificent view of the Shannon and Mountains, and being at a most convenient distance from the city.

These Ladies conduct many similar Establishments in France, Italy, Switzerland; at Isleworth, near London, and one in Liverpool.

#### THE COURSE OF EDUCATION

Comprises English Grammar, Geography, Use of the Globes, Botany, Sacred and Profane History, Writing, Arithmetic, the Modern Languages—(French and Italian are taught by Natives of France and Italy)—every kind of Ornamental and useful Needle work.

#### TERMS, THIRTY GUINEAS A-YEAR.

The only extra charges are—

Music .. .. .	Six Guineas a-year.
Drawing .. .. .	Four Guineas a-year.
Dancing .. .. .	Four Guineas a-year.

Payments to be made Quarterly in advance.

The Day School, now held in the Mansion of the late Lord Viscount Gort, 16, Crescent, Limerick, is conducted by the same Ladies.

For further particulars, apply to the Religious of the Convent, Laurel-hill, and 16, Crescent, Limerick.



Madame d'Houet (1781-1858)



Under the circumstances all the sisters could promise was to hurry the necessary preparations as far as lay in their power. The response from the clergy was stern: "You must open at once. On the coming Sunday in every church Catholics will be forbidden to enrol their children in schools of other faiths and in order to make our prohibition effective we must be able to offer them a suitable alternative".

Under these very difficult circumstances, the nuns acquiesced. So, in a sense, Saint Philomena's was initiated out of an extreme emergency. The bishop discovered that the Jesuit Fathers had one more year left on a lease on a house they had just left and they were willing to let the sisters open their school there. It was announced on 18 January that a new Academy would open next day under the patronage of Saint Philomena and under the direction of the Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus. The school opened with thirty pupils but by the end of the year the number had risen to one hundred and thirty. Despite its pretentious name, St. Philomena's Academy was much blessed, perhaps because of its humble beginning and, perhaps, too because of the willingness of those first sisters to launch into a rather dubious venture.

From the time of its dramatic opening until 1902, St Philomena's continued to provide a broad education for both junior and senior students. In 1902 the senior pupils, eighty in number, were transferred to Laurel Hill, where a new purpose-built

extension had been constructed inside the main gates. It was probably at this time that St. Philomena's Academy became St Philomena's Preparatory School for Laurel Hill. It is unclear, however, when it became a private fee-paying school. With ever increasing numbers, some classes were accommodated in nearby Clareview House between Laurel Hill Avenue and the Redemptorist church, until part of the old building was demolished and in the early 1930's a new two-story building was erected on the site.

Naturally different needs arose and many changes took place over the years. However, the school that most people identify with was a junior private preparatory school accommodating boys and girls. Gaps in the history demand that, at times, one can only conjecture. One thing is certain Saint Philomena's School has been much appreciated by the people of Limerick and the surrounding countryside since 1863.

Sadly, in 1993 the F.C.Js decided that, because of circumstances, it was necessary for them to withdraw from the school. Sister Mary Gerard Hayes R.I.P. was the last F.C.J. Principal. To her fell the task of winding down the school, a task she accomplished with care as well as sadness. The proposal was to put the building on the market but a committee of parents and teachers, reluctant to see the school go, asked if they could buy it. An agreement was reached and new board of management was set up. Through the ups and downs of the following twenty

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years, to everybody's credit the school kept going and very successfully until 2013.

Due however, to the economic recession of the previous number of years, it had become increasingly difficult to maintain the school, especially since the enrolment had dropped disastrously low. So in 2013, one hundred and fifty years after its foundation, the school finally closed. Before closure it was fitting that the 150th anniversary of the school be honoured. Mrs. Sheila Sugrue, the last principal, with her teachers and helpers, planned a worthy celebration for 19 January 2013. The Mayor of Limerick, Mr. Gerard McLoughlin was happy to be invited. Parents and friends attended. Memories were recalled as well as interesting historic events, as the pupils remembered events, played their music and sang their songs. Posters and art work highlighting world events that occurred in January 1863 were mounted. Prayers of thanksgiving were offered. A birthday cake was shared and a tree was planted. Then in May, the pupils put on an excellent performance, including excerpts from the shows and concerts with which they had entertained audiences over the past several years. The final school day for St. Philomena's Private School was on 7 June 2013. It may be an ending but memories transcend conclusions. Therefore it is certain that there are many people far and near who have cherished memories of the little grey school on Limerick's South Circular Road.

**Sister Marie Hayes**, at one time Mary Anthony, is a retired teacher and a member of the Faithful Companions of Jesus. Originally from Cahirnorry, near Ballyneety, County Limerick, she taught in Rhode Island, U.S.A. for a number of years. On returning to her native Limerick in the late sixties, she taught in Laurel Hill. Her sister-Florence-Sister Mary Gerard who died in 2002, was the last F.C.J. Principal of Saint Philomena's, so she has a special interest in the school. She is interested in history and especially in local history. She now lives at 4 Laurel Hill Court, Summerville Avenue, Limerick.