

# *Ursula Frayne*

## *Features of the Foundation of the Sisters of Mercy Australian Chapter*

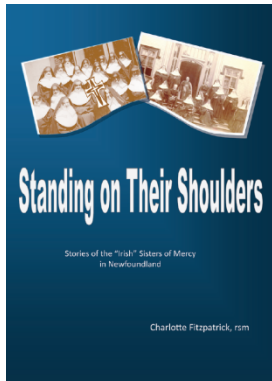


Name \_\_\_\_\_

Read Chapter One Clara Mary Frayne

“That we know little of Ursula Frayne’s childhood is a reflection of the historical circumstances into which she was born.”

p. 15



The following information is taken from Standing on their Shoulders written by Charlotte Fitzpatrick, rsm

### Sister Mary Ursula Frayne

Clara Mary Frayne was the youngest child of Bridget and Robert Frayne. She was born on October 15, but there is some question as to whether it was 1816 or 1817. Her father was a prosperous businessman with premises of his own, and the family enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle in their Dublin home on the Liffey waterfront. Clara’s biographer, Catherine Kovesi Killerby, relates that she had a privileged childhood, was highly-educated and was an accomplished pianist and embroiderer. In her book *Ursula Frayne*, Killerby suggests that

Clara may have been educated privately in Dublin, or like many of her contemporaries in comfortable circumstances, may have studied in one of the illustrious schools in France.

Although Clara’s oldest sister, Mary, joined the Sisters of Charity in Dublin, it was the newly-founded Sisters of Mercy who attracted Clara. She entered at Baggot Street on July 2, 1834 and was received into the novitiate by Catherine McAuley on January 20, 1835 as Sister Mary Ursula. Her novice mistress throughout her two years of novitiate was Catherine McAuley. When Sister Mary Ursula made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on January 25, 1837, she became the twenty-second member of the Order.

In April of that same year, the newly-professed Sister Mary Ursula went to Carlow in southeastern Ireland as a member of its founding community. According to her biographer, Sister M. Ursula suffered from frequent and debilitating attacks of a troubling illness. After a few months in Carlow, one of these bouts of illness made it necessary for her to move to St. Patrick’s Convent in Kingstown, a seaside town near Dublin, which had been opened by Catherine McAuley as a convalescent house for ailing sisters. When St. Patrick’s closed because of financial problems in 1838, Sister M. Ursula was assigned to the newlyestablished St. Anne’s Convent, Booterstown. This convalescent home for sick sisters, located on the coast quite near Dublin, operated as a branch house under Catherine McAuley’s personal direction. Although Sister M. Ursula was named superior, her responsibilities were mainly concerned with the invalid sisters from other convents who came there for care and rest.

Sister M. Ursula was a versifier, and she became well-known for her ability to respond to Catherine McAuley’s rhymes, depicting day-to-day events in the community and in her travels. There are a number of examples of verses she and Catherine McAuley sent back and forth to each other. One such is the playful greeting that Sister M. Ursula sent to Catherine on her feastday, April 30, 1839:

My dear Rev. Mother on this festive day  
Some words in your honour I gladly would say  
But vain the endeavour, in vain do I try  
My Muse is too humble for subjects so high.

In 1841 when Catherine McAuley’s health was seriously deteriorating, it seemed logical that Sister M. Ursula would be called back to Baggot Street to care for her. She had managed a convalescent convent for nearly four years and had developed skills in caring for the sick. Catherine’s words to Sister Mary Frances Warde in a letter dated October 4, 1841, make it evident that Sister Mary Ursula tended the ailing Catherine devotedly and efficiently:

My affectionate Sister Mary Ursula Frayne is my nurse  
and never ceases thinking of something for me.

On November 9, it was Sister M. Ursula who notified the superiors of all the houses of Catherine's worsening condition, and two days later, when Catherine died, it was she who notified them of her death. She is one of the sisters named in the codicil to Catherine's will, making her, in the words of Catherine Killerby "a true spiritual heir of Catherine McAuley."



Presumably, after Catherine McAuley's death, Sister M. Ursula remained at Baggot Street until she left for Newfoundland on May 2, 1843. She was the senior sister of the three members of the founding community, and her biographer attests that the Dublin had named her as superior of the Newfoundland foundation. However the page referred to in the original *Register*, preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland, does not mention Newfoundland. Despite all the assertions and all the questions, the identity of the actual superior of the Military Road Convent has continued to be a puzzling question.

Upon arrival in St. John's where the needs were so many and so drastic, Sister Mary Ursula's many talents were undoubtedly appreciated. When Our Lady of Mercy School opened in May of 1843, she would have been a welcome addition to the whole school, because of her excellent educational background and proficiencies in music and the arts. However, six months after the school opened, she and Sister Mary Rose set sail for Ireland, leaving Newfoundland and a Mercy mission that was still in its infancy. Both sisters returned to the convent in Baggot Street, where they remained until each was assigned a new mission.

In volunteering to come to Newfoundland, Sister Mary Ursula's heart must have harboured a dream of making a difference in the lives of the people of this far-flung mission, of responding in mercy to the great need she saw all around her, of making this mission a success. She had already been on two foundations and experienced the excitement and the challenge of being part of a new venture. In her seventeen months in St. John's, she had visited the sick and the poor, bringing comfort and assistance; she had helped prepare for the opening of school and had been called upon to share her many gifts with her students.

Sister Mary Ursula never lost her missionary zeal, as is evident in the work she undertook after her departure from Newfoundland. In all likelihood, her Newfoundland experience would have prepared her well for the demanding mission she was soon to lead. In September 1845, Bishop John Brady came to Baggot Street, pleading for a foundation of the Sisters of Mercy for Perth in Western Australia. Sister Mary Ursula volunteered for that far-off mission, and in September of that year, the new community of six, with Sister M. Ursula as superior, left for the long and arduous voyage to that distant land. She was not quite thirty years of age when she arrived in Perth, having already been part of several Mercy foundations spread across the world.

Sister M. Ursula was a prolific writer and her letters from Australia reveal her keen interest in people and places, her love of nature, her eye for detail, her sense of humour and her great practicality. In her many letters to Ireland from Australia, she only made three references to Newfoundland, none of which gives any idea about how she felt about the mission, the community or her departure.

There is no doubt that Sister M. Ursula was a woman of great determination, resourcefulness, courage and faith. Her work among the aboriginal people of Australia is legend, and in the field of education, she achieved marvels for the people she served. In November 1856 she and two other sisters established a foundation in Melbourne in the Australian state of Victoria, and it was there that she was to spend the rest of her life. Sister M. Ursula died in the Convent of Mercy at Melbourne on June 8, 1885 at the age of sixty-nine years. She had given nearly forty years of her life to the Mercy mission in Australia, and is remembered as an outstanding educator, a zealous missionary and a devoted woman of Mercy.

p.18-22 Available online at [http://www.mercyworld.org/uploads/ckpg/files/Standing\\_on\\_their\\_Shoulders.pdf](http://www.mercyworld.org/uploads/ckpg/files/Standing_on_their_Shoulders.pdf)

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Ursula Frayne (1816-1885), mother superior, was born on 5 October 1816 in Dublin, Ireland, daughter of Robert Frayne, a prosperous businessman, and his wife Bridget. In 1834 she entered the Institute of Mercy, founded in 1832 in Dublin by Mother Catherine McAuley, and took the name Ursula in place of her baptismal name Clara. In 1842 she was appointed Superior of the institute's first foreign mission foundation in Newfoundland and in 1845 went on foundation to Perth, Western Australia, at the request of the newly consecrated Bishop John Brady for Sisters to staff his proposed schools. She and her companions arrived in Perth on 8 January 1846.

From the outset the Sisters of Mercy experienced great hardship. So small was the Catholic population that government aid, granted to denominational schools in 1849, was insignificant and the bishop, who was close to bankruptcy, could not be relied on for support. Shocked by the conditions under which the Sisters worked in the first two years, the Dublin mother-house sent money for their return passages. This money Mother Ursula gratefully acknowledged but she refused to abandon the mission. However, she soon realized that the Sisters would have to supplement their meagre income. In 1849 she opened the first secondary school in Western Australia, a 'select' fee-paying school catering for an almost exclusively non-Catholic clientele; it brought much-needed security. Its success determined the pattern of future Mercy expansion, which was to establish, almost simultaneously and often within the same building, three separate schools: a 'select' fee-paying school, a primary school and an infants' school. By 1856, despite the impending withdrawal of government aid, the schools of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia were flourishing. Probably with some relief, having experienced the bitter Brady-Serra dispute over ecclesiastical jurisdiction and seen her countrymen recalled to Rome, Ursula Frayne responded to a request from Bishop James Goold for a Victorian foundation. A similar request came from Bishop Francis Murphy in Adelaide but she was already committed.

She arrived in Melbourne in March 1857 and within six weeks had raised loans to pay off the mortgage on her convent in Nicholson Street, Fitzroy. Rapid expansion followed. Large building programmes were undertaken for educational and social work, culminating in the erection of the first wing of the present 'Academy' in 1870 at a cost of £6000. The Sisters of Mercy were the first teaching nuns in Victoria and under the vigorous leadership of Mother Ursula their establishment included a boarding and day school for girls, together with two primary schools and a domestic training school for orphans. She also founded the St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage at South Melbourne and managed it until the Christian Brothers took over the boys' section, leaving the girls under the care of her Sisters. Although the 1872 Act caused temporary retrenchment in Catholic education, it resulted in expansion for the Nicholson Street community, and Sisters replaced lay teachers when salaries could not be met. Ursula Frayne's first Victorian country foundation was at Kilmore in 1875 and especially dear to her for its rural setting. She died at Nicholson Street on 9 June 1885.

Her letters give evidence of the qualities which distinguished her as a religious: intelligence, blended with shrewd, practical wisdom; tenacity and great powers of endurance; strict and loving observance of the Rule; and a keen Irish wit. A fine Gothic chapel was built by her successor as a memorial within the convent grounds at Nicholson Street. There her remains were interred in a vault flanked by a Celtic cross, reminiscent of her origin.

### Select Bibliography

- P. D. Tannock, *A History of Catholic Education in Western Australia, 1829-1929* (M.Ed. thesis, University of Western Australia, 1964)
- M. M. Frayne, *Sketches of Conventual Life in the Bush* (typescript, Convent of Mercy Archives, Perth)
- letters (Benedictine Abbey Archives, New Norcia, Western Australia)
- notes and letters (Convent of Mercy Archives, Dublin).

### Citation details

Imelda Palmer, 'Frayne, Ursula (1816–1885)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/frayne-ursula-3572/text5527>, published in hardcopy 1972, accessed online 10 March 2014.

**This article was first published in hardcopy in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 4, (MUP), 1972**

The following information is taken from the Mercy International Association website



Mother Ursula Frayne  
A biography written by Ursula Gilbert rsm



Born in Dublin, Ursula entered in Baggot Street in 1834 and was trained by the foundress Mother Catherine - who was always stressing that the sisters "preserve union and charity".

She was professed in 1837 and in the same year went on the foundation to Carlow with M. Frances Warde. Later, she came to this charge of the House at Booterstown, where the sisters cared for the sick including Catherine's nephews, Robert and James.

When Catherine herself became ill Ursula went back to Baggot Street to help M. Vincent Whitty in caring for Catherine. Hers was the sad task of informing the Sisters of her death.

Bishop Fleming of Newfoundland had sent Sr. Frances Creedon to be trained and Ursula was asked by M. de Pazzi to lead the foundation there in 1842. Sr. Rose Lynch went too and it was a very difficult time for many reasons. The wisest thing seemed to be that Rose and Ursula should return to Dublin.

Bishop Brady of Perth came pleading for the "thousands of little children" in his vast diocese so again Ursula set off, with five companions. They called at Liverpool and then went on to London Where Bishop Brady said Mass for them and they began their five-month journey.

Many curious people gathered to witness their arrival including several of the "natives" who, as Ursula wrote to M. Cecilia Marmion, were standing "as if they felt they were lords of the soil. They seemed remarkably intelligent."

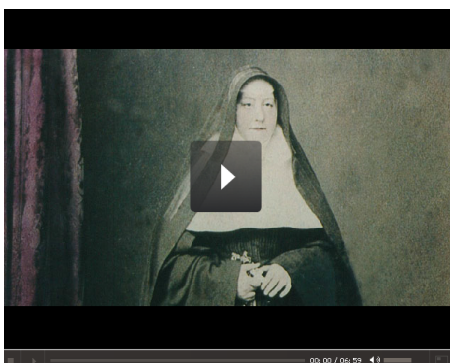
It was hard to learn that there was "nowhere to lay our heads" - but a kind Protestant woman gave the sisters shelter until they acquired a place of their own. Amidst all their difficulties they had to care for dear Sr. Catherine Gogarty who died a few months later. As for the "thousands of children" - there were at first only seven! But the sisters struggled on, doing their mercy work as best they could.

In 1850 Sr. Anne Xavier and Ursula returned to Ireland seeking supplies and more Sisters. They enjoyed meeting Florence Nightingale on the journey.

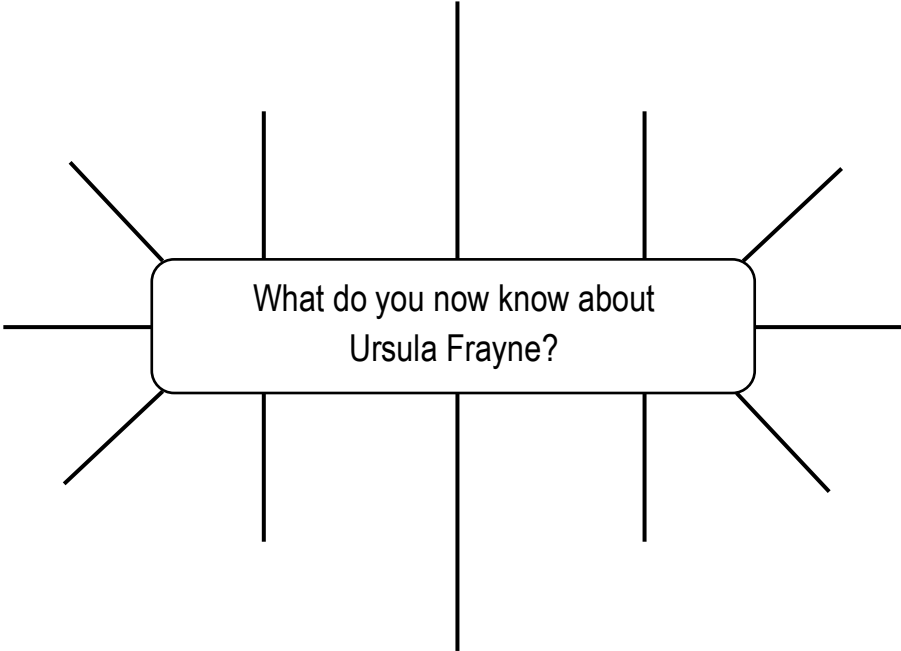
Their relationship with the Bishop continued to be strained and eventually, it seemed best for Ursula to accept the invitation of Bishop Goold to come to Melbourne - where they had further troubles of a different kind, including a mortgage of 2600 pounds on the house!

The sisters walked the streets, begging loans of 20 pounds. Fortunately, most made it a donation. The Bishop and Ursula had to struggle for justice for the many needs of the poor and for education. As the number of sisters increased, so did their works of mercy.

Go to the URL at the top of the page and watch the brief story of Ursula Frayne and the Sisters of Mercy who made the five month journey to Perth.



## Guided Inquiry

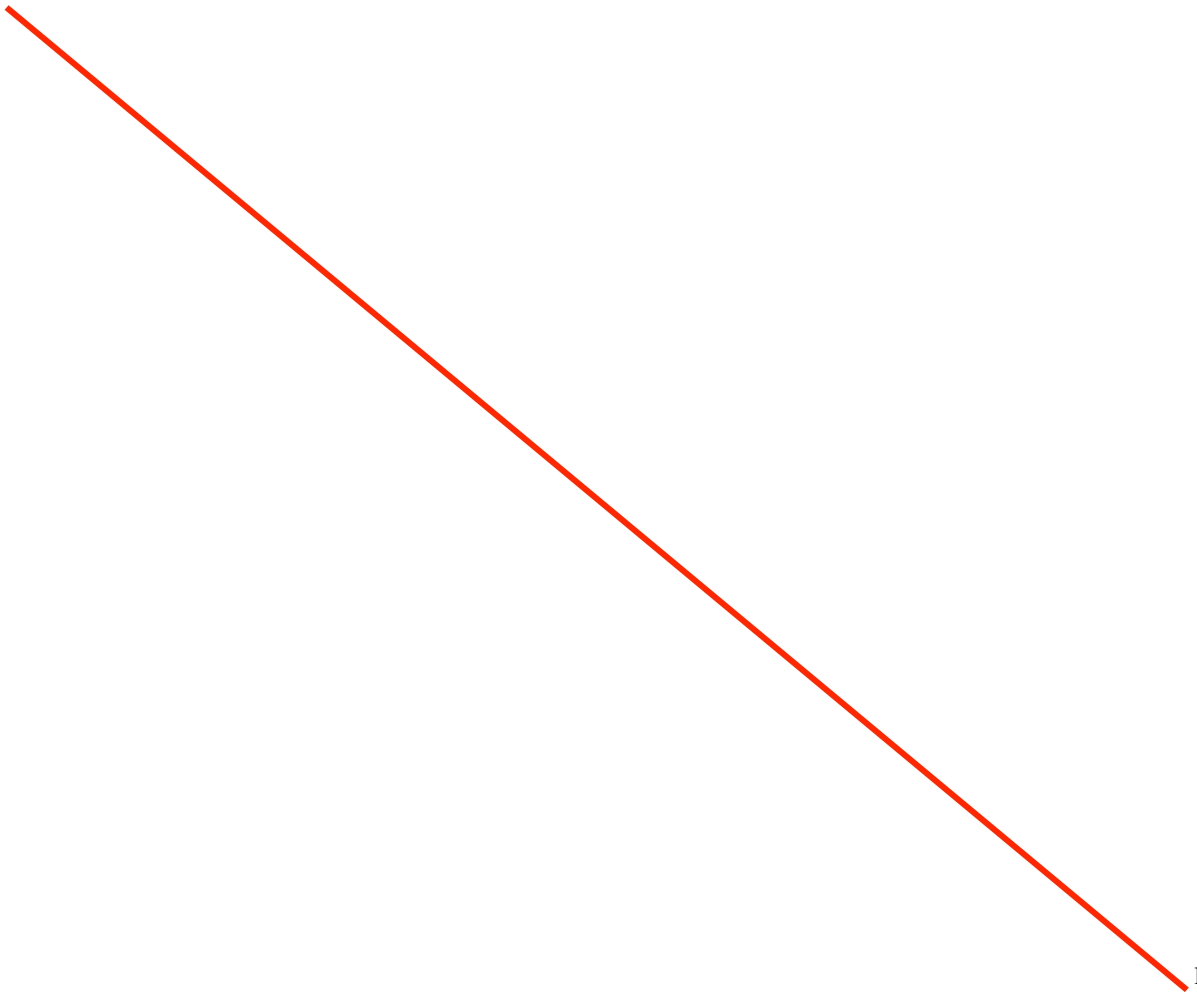


If you were asked to write about the influence Ursula Frayne has had on the identity and growth of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia, what might you include about her early life, vocation, religious life, struggles that she encountered, influence on society at the time, lasting impact on the society today.

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## Create a timeline of important events in the life of Ursula Frayne

1816 / 1817  
Born in Dublin,  
Ireland



1885  
Died in Melbourne,  
Australia

From your reading briefly explain the circumstances leading to Clara entering the Order of the Sisters of Mercy.

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Ursula Frayne was an extraordinary woman, list as many of qualities as you can.

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## Watch Ursula Frayne A Woman of Mercy

[available from the Catholic Education Library DVD 920 FRA and the College Mission Office]

*This is the story of a great love for a people in exile, of a woman who crossed the world to support the struggling minority of her Celtic clan and discovered another race more severely disposed than her own in newly colonised Australia. This is the story of an extraordinary woman; a pioneer educator, welfare reformer, advocate and policy maker and an astute business woman. She led a group of courageous Irish women committed in faith to the pursuit of justice and compassion. They were called Sisters of Mercy and they first set foot on Australian shores 150 years ago. Her name was Ursula Frayne.*



1. What skills and qualities do you consider necessary for people beginning a new venture?

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2. What do you think encouraged Ursula to make the journey to Australia?

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3. How important do you think Ursula's faith in God would have been when she first arrived in Australia?

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4. What had Ursula achieved in the Colony by the end of 1848 through hard work and with little money? In what ways could the presence of the Sisters of Mercy be considered an asset to the Colony?.

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5. Why would their achievements of Ursula and her companions be a source of inspiration and encouragement to other women in the colony

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6. What ministries did the Sisters undertake in the first 10 years in Australia



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7. Melbourne was a very different experience from Perth. Melbourne in 1857 was a reasonably sophisticated and elegant city in architecture and cultural refinement, reminiscent of the Dublin left behind 12 years earlier, rather than the impoverished Perth of their most recent experience. This being said, what were the hardships that the Sisters found before them? How did they respond?

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8. What did Ursula's evidence reveal in the 1870 Royal Commission into Charitable Institutions?

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9. What impact did the Education Act have on the Mercy Congregation in Australia?

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10. In the documentary Ursula's life was described as "the extraordinary story of an heroic woman's work in Australia". How would you summarise Ursula's life story?

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## Challenges

Consider the faith, vision, courage and commitment of Ursula Frayne as she embarked on the long, 25000 kilometre journey to Perth from England. A 27 year old woman charged with leading a group of religious women in the isolated Swan River Colony. Experienced in the foundation of the order in overseas endeavours, Ursula was suitably qualified to establish a convent in the Australian bush.

*"On a mission of this kind extraordinary efforts must be made or little good can be effected"*

Urusla Frayne to Cecilia Marmion

12 April 1847

Explain the challenges that Ursula faced in the first weeks and months in the Swan River Colony

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How important do you think Ursula's faith in God would have been when she first arrived in the Swan River Colony?

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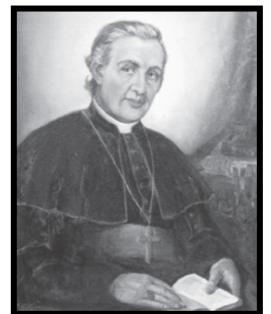
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### Challenged by Authority

*"Bishop Brady, initially the Sister's greatest supporter, began to prove a meddlesome critic. Writing to Cecilia Marmion on the Sunday after Easter 1849, Anne Xavier expressed her concern at Bishop Brady's changed behaviour towards the Sisters. Brady was suddenly interfering with decisions made by Ursula and the community. Further difficulties were revealed when in July Ursula wrote to Cecilia Marion and shared details of the absolute poverty of the Church in Perth and the bad management of church funds by Bishop Brady despite the Sisters' own careful money management."*

Walsh, A. A Woman of Mercy p.30



Extract from the article

The letters of Sr Ursula Frayne, one of the first group of Sisters of Mercy to come to Perth at Brady's request, are primary evidence and reveal something of Brady's character and also some of his (possibly cultural) idiosyncrasies.

An anthology of letters written by Sr Ursula and other Sisters of Mercy to the motherhouse in Ireland from 1845-1849, and compiled by Geraldine Byrne, offer glimpses of the controversial prelate.

Bishop Brady was the Sisters' Confessor and, as Sr Ursula narrates, was *"kind and attentive"* in helping them get their convent built.

In a letter written in April 1846, she wrote that Bishop Brady was *"all indulgence"* to them; in a letter dated November 1846, she related that that he visited them frequently. After a few months of this, however, he announced that he would be making a pastoral visit which – unbeknownst to the Sisters of Mercy – was to be an official visit with a protocol they were expected to follow as well.

*"About one o'clock, a procession was seen approaching the hall: first two students in soutane and surplice, one holding the Bishop's Crozier, the other a cross; next Fr Powell, also in soutane and surplice; then the Bishop in soutane, rachel, cape and an immense three-cornered black beaver hat with a black feather and a bunch of green satin ribbons at one side; lastly three or four little boys holding up the Bishop's train,"* Sr Ursula wrote in confidence to her Mother Superior.

*"Unaccustomed as we were to such visits, we did not know how to act,"* she wrote. The Community gathered, knelt for his blessing, joined in prayer, then sat up, listened to what he said and answered his questions, then when he left, they *"indulged in a hearty laugh"*. But the Bishop subsequently reproved them for not *"receiving him in due form"*. *"Such visits were not usual in Ireland though quite common in France and Italy,"* Sr Ursula wrote.

Sr Ursula wrote that Bishop Brady misconstrued their ignorance as *"disrespect, self-will and other motives unworthy of your poor children and unthought of by them"*.

For three months, Sr Ursula wrote that she was obliged to spend five to six hours every day with the Bishop.

*"He thought his visits gave us pleasure and that it was even necessary that he should be a good deal with us at first, but he knew little of how independent the Sisters of*

*Mercy are and that they have no needs outside their own Community for amusement or society,"* she wrote.

Later, in July 1849, another incident involving Sr Aloysius upset the Bishop who thought the Sisters of Mercy had wilfully and formally disobeyed his *"episcopal authority"*.

But Sr Ursula also wrote in August 1847 that Bishop Brady was – as Fr Cross asserts – a man of frugality, living in his belfry and in *"extreme poverty"*.

*"The poor Bishop is in a miserable state for want of a residence,"* she wrote. *"For several months after our arrival in this country, he lived in a little room adjoining the Church; it had no window nor any means of ventilation; he next occupied a larger room at the other side, but this latter he gave up for a school room at the time we came to reside in our present Convent."*

*"His third habitation was the belfry – a little wooden building, just like those boxes you may have seen at the bathing place, except the boards of which it was made are much fewer and farther apart; in fact, there is free access to the weather on all sides,"* she wrote. *"Indeed, he is generally obliged to have an umbrella spread to keep off the rain and, notwithstanding this precaution, he's often forced to abandon this room and take refuge in the church,"* she wrote.

Brady remained in his well-ventilated quarters until the winter rains compelled him to move into better lodgings. Fr Dowd and Mgr O'Loughlin agree Bishop Brady was, on a spiritual and pastoral level, a fine man, especially given the huge size of the Colony and diocese.

*"Under conditions of great difficulty and privation, at the pastoral, priestly level, he did very well,"* Fr Dowd says, adding that there was *"a lot of anti-Catholic feeling from the Protestant part that would have made life difficult too."*

But, as an administrator, Brady appears *"imprudent and incompetent,"* Fr Dowd says.

In an 1847 letter, Sr Ursula wrote that the Bishop revealed that funds of the Mission were exclusively derived from the Propagation of the Faith (PFC) which explained why he was living in a belfry: the funds were *"too small to admit of his allowing himself any other mode of living at present"*.

available online at

<http://www.therecord.com.au/blog/the-church-that-brady-built/>

### Extended Answer Questions

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- This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 28 horizontal blue or grey lines spaced evenly apart, typical of standard notebook paper. The lines extend across the entire width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There are no vertical lines, text, or other markings present.

2. 'Ursula Frayne sought to make decisions in the best interest of the whole of society'. Do you consider this statement to be true? Provide evidence from your research of her life to assist in your discussion,

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



**Ursula Frayne** was an extraordinary woman, a pioneer educator, welfare reformer, advocate and policy maker. She was a person who led a group of courageous Irish women committed in faith to the pursuit of justice and compassion.

Clara Mary Frayne was born in Dublin in 1817 and died in Melbourne in 1885. She was trained by Catherine McAuley and became a professed Sister of Mercy on 25 January 1837, taking the name of Sister Mary Ursula.

Ursula, at age 29, was the leader of the first group of Sisters of Mercy to arrive in Australia in January 1846. They came in response to the invitation of Bishop Brady of Perth, who had visited Ireland, seeking religious who were willing to make the hazardous journey by sailing ship, to offer education and support to women and children in the newly colonized Australia. Ursula and her companions sailed for Western Australia via the Cape of Good Hope on the ship 'Elizabeth'. The 113 day journey was no pleasure cruise. Their arrival in Perth was unexpected and no arrangements for sleeping quarters had been made.

To quote Mother Ursula Frayne:

*“We stood in the wilds of Australia on that mid-summer night, and we could truly say with our Divine Model, we have nowhere to rest our head.”*



Mother Ursula Frayne opened the first Mercy school in Australia on 2 February 1846 with planks, bricks and packing cases as the furniture. Instead of the 4,000 children Bishop Brady had promised them in Dublin, only one child turned up. However, this did not discourage them, and after a lot of work by 23 August 1846 they had 100 children.

Later the Sisters established a boarding house and in 1847 they built a convent. The building still stands today at Victoria Square, Perth.

Across the country, as more and more people settled on the goldfields in Victoria, Bishop Goold in Melbourne was anxious to establish a Mercy foundation to meet the growing needs of young women and children, especially with regard to education. In response to his personal invitation, Ursula and two sisters sailed 'east' in January 1857, arriving in Melbourne on March 6. In true mercy spirit, they immediately initiated a program of practical action in education and welfare to better the circumstances of many women and girls.



Yielding to the wishes of Bishop Goold, who, like Catherine McAuley, believed that a sound education for the rising middle class would help them obtain influence and respectability



in the community, Ursula established the first fee-paying school in Fitzroy. The Academy of Mary Immaculate opened in 1857, only 6 weeks after Ursula's arrival in Melbourne, offering young women an education in English, French, Music and Drawing. It remains the oldest Catholic girls school in Victoria and still exists on the original site. In 1889, a Memorial Chapel was added which houses Ursula's grave.

Ursula was also concerned with the care of neglected orphans and newly arrived immigrant girls. She opened schools for the desperately needy children in nearby streets and spent many hours walking the city in search of funds to assist her work. In 1860 she established a House of Mercy to provide a home for young unemployed and unprotected females and in 1861, took charge of the newly founded St Vincent de Paul Orphanage.

By 1863, the Fitzroy premises included a boarding and day school for young ladies, a middle school for children of poorer means, and an infant school. The philosophy behind this system was that fees provided by the 'young ladies' allowed the school to cater for the underprivileged, embodying the Mercy charism of connecting those who are rich with those who are poor.

**The legacy of Ursula Frayne continues today as thousands of Australian youth are offered educational programmes in the Mercy tradition. Young, vital and committed to the development of a better Australia, Ursula Frayne is an ideal example for all young Australians as women and men are encouraged to be resourceful and merciful followers of Christ in the world.**

1817 - 1885