

Memories of Cornelia's Maternal Love....

An excerpt from a small exhibition put together by Sr Helen Forshaw SHCJ from the Documentation for the Cause and photographs in the European Province Archives, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Venerable Cornelia Connelly, 8 January 1809. The exhibition focused on how children experienced Cornelia as Mother.

Memories of Cornelia's maternal love experienced by children confided to the care of the SHCJ at St Leonards, both boarding and day school, and at Mark Cross.

St. Leonards: boarding school

Kattie Bellasis (Mrs Katherine Bowring), b.1840, entered school 1855 (aged 15), left 1857

Kattie Bellasis was the third daughter of Mr Edward Bellasis, Serjeant-at-Law, staunch friend and trusted legal adviser to Cornelia Connelly. Kattie wrote her autobiography for her children, and her daughter, Clara Bowring, presented it to the Society when she herself was an old lady. Kattie had first been sent to the Sacred Heart School at Roehampton, but she was not happy there and her health suffered. When she was 14 she was taken out of school for a year and then went to St Leonards in April 1855. She left when she was 17 in 1857. Her autobiography shows her to have been a lively, and at times, rather unruly girl!

"I had been at home about a year when Mr. Hope Scott suggested it was time I went to school again, and as Roehampton had not agreed with my health, Father went down to St. Leonards to inspect the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus – recommended to him by Mr. Marshall the School Inspector – who spoke very highly of its educational advantages. The Order had been formed by a Mrs Connolly [*sic*] an American who had passed her Noviceship at the Sacred Heart Convent [*sic*] – She was an extremely clever woman, and having been married in early life, and had three children she knew something about the care of them....

Mother Connolly [*sic*] as I knew her was a very beautiful woman – she was Spanish looking and had splendid eyes and a pretty American brogue, not too pronounced – a quaint way of turning her phrases.

.... I must have changed very much in the year I had been at home, as I went to St. Leonards not desirous to win any ribbon of merit. Revd. Mother gave me a long rein, and when I used to meet her at the cloisters she would smile and shake her finger at me, and always called me her "scapegrace"! I was not strong, so I was allowed to learn my lessons in the garden in fine weather, and I used to sit on the top of a hay rick and read Walter Scott's novels – during recreations I learnt to milk one of the cows in an evening and had a cup of the warm milk....

There was a great mixture of Irish and English girls – and there were so many rows on St. George's Day and St. Patrick's that we were forbidden to sport red ribbons or roses or shamrocks on the feast day.

The biggest scrape I got into was buying red ribbon and distributing it for St. George's feast – it was asked in class who had done this mean and dishonorable thing – and I remember jumping up and saying "I did, but I never have done anything mean or dishonorable in my life."

Revd. Mother wisely put an end to the strife by making all the English girls invite the Irish girls to a feast on St. Patrick's Day, and they in their turn feasted us of St. George's!"

Mary Allies, b.1852, entered school 1859 (aged 7), no leaving date, d. 1926

Eldest daughter of Thomas William Allies 1813-1903, convert Anglican clergyman who was Secretary to the Catholic Poor Schools committee 1853 – 1890.

Mary was sent to board at St Leonards on 15th Sept. 1859 aged 7, to be followed in January 1860 by her younger sister Frances (1853 – n.d.) Mary wrote a 12 page account of her memories of Cornelia Connelly as she knew her as a child. The document is undated but was probably in response to requests for such reminiscences being made in the 1920's.

"....Whilst Rev. Mother Cornelia was building up her (spiritual) dynasty we enjoyed the delights of real monarchy. From the first I felt the impress of that hand and compelling personality. Pale, with perfect features, she had the most beautiful eyes, under delicately marked eyebrows. She began at once to be queen and mother to me.

Rev. Mother C. always called me "Meary", which was, I suppose, an Americanism. Her "Meary Allies" sounded very emphatic when uttered at a concert.

Another letter [of Cornelia's to her father] of Sept. 1859, bears on the same subject, Rev. Mother's motherhood. She wrote to my father,

"Your darling little Mary is winning all hearts. She had an overwhelming flood of tears when apparently thinking of home yesterday, though she only half acknowledged the cause but very stoutly denied that anybody or anything "at St Leonards made her cry", whereupon a letter to her darling Mama was proposed & sunshine soon returned. I have not heard whether the epistle is completed, but she is very bright & sunny."



(Mary Allies appears in this photo)

Lucy Mary Barrett, b.?, entered school 1863, left 1867

This extract from a memoir appeared in the special and last edition of *The Pylon*, pp.48-49. Lucy's name appears in the St Leonards' school register, but minus her date of birth and her mother's name. As she mentions, her mother had been dead for many years when her father also died in 1867. As she refers to Blessed Thomas More this was very probably written before the canonisation of Thomas More and John Fisher in 1935. The archivist has not yet discovered where the original memoir is now but the search continues...

"...St Leonards Convent. How beautiful it was, the flowers in the garden, the trees and shrubs in the grounds, the chapel served by Father (afterwards Canon) Searle, the polished floors, kept like glass ...the little white-curtained beds in the dormitories, the refectory with its simple and good meals, the dear nuns, and the mixture of peace and activity, above all – Mother Connelly.

I remember her as small, not very stately, with lovely brown eyes, full of humour, very like her photographs. She had a very beautiful voice and, low be it said – a slight American twang; but we all adored her, and when she came into the class-room, her influence was magnetic. All her family troubles had happened before this, and now she was immersed in her work of education.

...Mother Connelly's feast day was St. Thomas's day, Dec. 21st, and we were allowed to proffer three requests on that day, which were usually granted. Once one of the requests was that we should not have RICE PUDDING, but this was not granted, as we were told that rice was extremely good for us!

At recreation time, Mother Connelly would often come in, and if a child was at the piano playing a waltz, she would whisk one of the children round on the 'light fantastic toe', regardless of her voluminous habit. When Mother Connelly came back from a journey, we would all gather in the grounds, dressed in white, ringing little handbells, and would cluster round her carriage to greet and welcome her....

Often she would send for me to sing for her, for I was supposed to be a good amateur musician and had, so I was told, a sweet soprano voice.

.....How happy we were at school! We used to get up at 5 in the summer to go bathing, and sometimes, I'm afraid, came in late for 7 o'clock Mass!

For breakfast the little ones had porridge, with milk or treacle; the bigger ones had eggs and bacon, etc. For dinner we had the usual joint, vegetables and pudding, not always the hated rice! then we had afternoon tea, and for supper porridge again while the elders were regaled with more exciting dishes, stewed pears being a favourite one.

On Concert and Examination Days, extras were given for supper; and if they were not as they should be in the youngsters' eyes, the nuns heard of it – ahem!

On Holy Innocents' Day, we all appeared in the chapel in nun's garb – the habits in miniature were all properly made and I think when the Priest turned round for Dominus Vobiscum, he must have been surprised to see the fresh childish faces under the veils, instead of the more serious, thoughtful ones of the nuns. And we must all have looked like midgets or pigmies to him!

I wonder if they still have "Hidden breakfasts"? Our breakfasts (usually hot rolls fresh from the Convent bake-house) used to be hidden for fun, and we would have to search all over the place, sometimes even in the garden, for them! I think these days are too set and utilitarian for such simple amusements. Well, all good things come to an end, and my school days ended on my father's death; my Mother had been dead for many years...

I may mention that I have the honour of being a collateral descendant of Blessed Thomas More, as I am a cousin of the Eystons of East Hendred, who are descended from his eldest son."

Emma Tolhurst, b.1858, entered school 1869 (aged 11), went with CC to Toul 1875-6, then to Paris, rue de Grenelle, Jan 1877, left that summer

"I, with my two younger sisters, went to the Convent St. Leonards-on-Sea Sussex in the autumn of 1869. I was eleven years old.

Sometimes she would come to our night recreations & take part in them; a round game: "how do you like your neighbour" we did our best to get next to her. She taught us to play chess. When we danced Sir Roger de Coverley she would put spirit into it, clap her hands, etc. & make us enjoy the fun.

... in 1876 Mother Connelly decided to try to procure a house in or near Paris, but not finding what she wanted she took a small house in Grenelle in October. Here we saw a great deal of Mother Connelly; she taught us singing. The lesson came after tea time. Our refectory was next to the kitchen so we used to slip in when the Sister was absent to toast the back of our bread & butter; this meant we were not all ready, (we were only six boarders) for the lesson when Rev. Mother arrived; but two or three went to the parlour to begin the lesson & the rest joined when they had finished their tea. Rev. Mother never showed any displeasure, though of course she knew what we had been up to; she was always a Mother to us. (She had a lovely voice. We often begged her to sing for us, & this she never refused us.) For instance we used to polish the little floor of the chapel, if she saw us, she asked how long we had been at the work & would stop us if she judged it was not wise for us to continue. The polishing was done by attaching a brush to one of our boots & then jumping over the floor, this we rather enjoyed. She often came to us for a game in the evening; once (I think the game was Whist) my partner & I were playing against Rev. Mother; & I wanting the game to end made a sign to my partner to let Rev. Mother win; but no! she would play her best & so the game continued. I was vexed & took her to task for prolonging the game; she replied: "It is not good for Rev. Mother to always win." We knew Rev. Mother did like to win, for she was always thorough & interested in whatever she did, even in games."



(Emma Tolhurst at age 12 and in France in 1877)

Beatrice Parker, Retired Governess, b.1866, entered school 1874, left 1880, d. 1970

The record of her deposition about her knowledge of Cornelia Connelly, given to Fr. L. E. Whatmore on 23rd of October 1959 in her residential Home in Brighton, Sussex, makes fascinating and amusing reading. She emerges as a very bright and decisive woman, then in her 94th year. She went on to reach her 104th birthday just a week before she died in February 1970.

The session consisted of a series of formal questions, some of which are given below along with her answers. After giving her name, those of her parents, her status (single) and her former employment (governess), she is asked:

“What is your religion? *Catholic.*

Do you practise your religion? *Yes, I communicate twice a week.*

Are you related to the Servant of God in any way? *Not a bit.*

Have you ever been connected with the Servant of God in any way?

Only as a pupil at the Holy Child Convent, St Leonards where she was Reverend Mother. I was a pupil there from 1874 to 1880.

Have you any devotion to the Servant of God? *I only have a devotion when a saint is really canonised. Not even to the late Pope [Pius XII] have I any devotion. My devotions are few and far between, such as the Sacred Heart, the Rosary, and the Holy Souls.*

Why do you wish to see the Servant of God beatified? *I would wish to see her beatified because of all the good work she did, which still goes on all over the world. The order which she founded has a good social spirit and the nuns, unlike some, look so happy, although they are so good. Though in their lives and good works they give such a good example, they do this by meeting the world. They join in with you and make you do a good work by their example, even though you don't want to.*

Did you know the Servant of God personally? *Yes, because I used to go out with her in a little pony chaise and we used to have a little chat. I used to be glad to get out of lessons to go for the little pony ride.*

Did you ever see or hear her? *I can see her now in the bath chair, pulled by a little white circus pony with a long tail and a dislocated hip....*

Have you ever heard others talk about her? *Our step-mother, whom my father married in 1874, was a convert and did not get on with the nuns. The nuns used to get dreadful letters to say that our affection was being taken away. The more she went against the convent, the more we were for the nuns. We would not have them run down, as we went there motherless and they were so kind to us. We were all exceedingly happy; and when our father used to come to meet us at the station, we used to cry to go back to the convent. There were four of us pupils at the convent and not one with a vocation! When our own mother had just died, the nuns invited us to stay in the convent for a fortnight*

because our father was left with three at the convent and three at home. I was about 7 and my sister was about 5.....

Why were you sent there [to St Leonards]? I think it was our uncle Sir Stuart Knill, Lord Mayor of London who suggested to my father that he should send us to St Leonards. He had two relations, Mother Aloysia Ryan – (she was a saint if you like) – and Mother Magdalen Ryan at St Leonards. These Irish nuns do not mind leaving their home so much as their ponies, they are all so fond of riding.

What was your attitude to the Servant of God while you were a pupil there? I was happy as the day was long at the convent. I shall never forget my school days, we were so happy. We were free. they were not too strict, like foreign orders, though we were corrected and punished when necessary....

Are there any physical features of the Servant of God that you can remember? She was shortish. She had very nice eyes and a gracious manner. Her voice was twangey, rather American. She used to put her head through the schoolroom window and say: 'Now little Bee, would you like to come out for a ride with me?' I went out often with her in the grounds. I think I was chosen because I was the youngest child there and because I had lost my mother. I think she had pity on us.

Was she kind and good? Yes, and to be respected. But all the nuns we had to respect in those days. Also the nuns taught us to respect the clergy, more than nowadays. We were trained not to waste and properly brought up. We had a splendid education."



(Beatrice Parker's uncle)

St Leonards: St Michael's Day school (in the former Training College)

Margaret Clabaux, the day school register has not survived but as her birth date is known, 1867, and she was 'a little over 5 years,' when she went to school she must have started at the day school in 1872

Marguerite wrote 2 letters about her experience of Cornelia when she was at St Michael's school, St Leonards in the 1870's. Both were written from her home in Co. Cork, the first in 1946 when she was nearly 80 to Mother M. Xavier Gwynn, and the second to her grand-daughter, Pamela, in May 1949.

From the 1st letter

"Dear Mother M. Xavier [sic]

Needless to say your nice letter came as a great surprise to me, and it was wonderful Mrs O'Mahoney remembering to mention my having been at St Leonards, during the saintly Mother Foundress' time. It is quite true, & she was so good & sweet to me, always. My sister, 2 years older than me, was *[sic]* there for 5½ years.

I was the youngest in St Michael's school, (our names, Mary & Margaret Clabaux) My Mother, English, & my Father, French.

Rev^d Mother would constantly call for me, when out in her little pony chaise, and let me sit at her feet, and, on more than one occasion I was taken to her little room to recite to her. I was only a little over 5 years, & I think her motherly heart was drawn to me. Anyhow, she seemed to make a pet of me, & was always so sweet & kind to me, & I loved her very dearly.

I am sure she is a saint. I pray to her every day & night, anyway, as such. I was so sad when she died.”

From the 2nd letter

“My dearest Pamela

Daddy *[her son]* said you would like me to write a few lines about dear Rev^d Mother Connelly, who was alive when I first went, as a very small pupil, to St Leonards – and whom I knew personally & loved very dearly.

She was all that was Motherly & kind, & from the first day I went there, made a special pet of me – I am sure I don't know why, for my older sister Mary, was so much nicer & sweeter than me – However being so young, I was only 6 years of age, may have been the reason – Anyhow she took a lot of notice of me, & used to call for me, & take me out in a little pony chaise round the grounds, I sitting at her feet – on one occasion I went to her little room, to recite a piece of poetry for her – I remember she had a box of snowdrops in her window, so it must have been winter time. I am sure she was a saint, she was always so bright & cheerful, tho' now I know she suffered a lot, but never complained -”

Mark Cross School

Mary Elizabeth Widdowson, Sr Mary Austin I.H.M., b.1869, entered school 1876, left 1883/4 Sister Mary Austin made a formal deposition of her memories of Cornelia in January 1959 when she was in her 90th year. She had left Ireland in 1903 for California to join the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and was professed in 1905.

“I remember Mother Cornelia Connelly when she visited Mark Cross, where I was a boarder from 1876 to 1883-4. Whenever Mother Connelly came to the Convent, the bell was rung, and all we children went down to the front entrance to greet her. It was her custom to move amongst the

children, saying a little word here and there. On one occasion I happened to have a Holy Child badge (for good conduct) and she noticed it and said, "How did you manage to get that?" I said, "Sister gave it to me." Mother Connelly said, "Sister must have been half asleep."

Mother Connelly made a great impression on me as a child. I can remember seeing her in the Chapel at Mark Cross. She always looked as if she were in heaven – so saintly and holy.

I remember, too, as we prayed in Chapel, that she would lean over to the child at the end of the bench and whisper, "I want you to say a prayer for me – the 'Our Father'" or "I want you to say the prayer to our Blessed Lady 'My Queen and My Mother'".



(This was a thrilling find in an old album! It was in a separate clear-view folder of its own in my presentation. It shows CC in the chaise/bath-chair drawn by the white pony. The seated coachman will have driven her over from Mayfield. Notice the Lay Sister in white apron in the doorway.)

Mayfield

William Albert Rebbeck, 1872 – 1962

William was the son of the carpenter employed by the Convent at Mayfield before William was born on 31st March, 1872. Cornelia spent several months of convalescence at Mayfield from the summer of 1878 before she returned to St Leonards for Christmas, by which time it was clear that her strength was failing. That was her last visit to Mayfield before she died. William would have been all of 6 years old at the time.

"As a boy I went to the Catholic school conducted by the nuns at Mayfield. When Mother Connelly came to Mayfield the last time before her death I used after school to call at the front door of the convent and lead her round the grounds in a small pony and trap and to visit the farm. This was on about 30 to 40 occasions. My father was carpenter to the convent. Mother Connelly was then in

weak health and after she left Mayfield and returned to St. Leonards she died, but was brought back here to be buried. The coffin came to Ticehurst Road station. I have no recollection of any conversation with her save that she always passed the time of day. She bought me a blue velvet suit which I used to wear when conducting her. She would also give me 6d at the end of my services, which was a good sum for a boy in those days. At that period I lived in a cottage by the gatehouse, which is now pulled down. Mother Connelly was not a large lady. She was kind. I remember Mother Angelica Croft, her successor, and also Father Corney, who was the priest at the time of Mother Connelly's funeral, a big stout man. What is now the convent chapel was once a big barn. There were about 20 to 30 young ladies at the convent boarding school in those days, and they used to go to Ticehurst Road Station in wagons at the end of the term. This is a true statement as far as I can remember."



(William Albert Reddeck in later years.)