

## Exhumation 1935

The sisters were not allowed by Home Office Regulations to expose the coffin until just before the time appointed for raising it.

Present - Chancellor of the diocese of Southwark and a medical officer as well as Dr Long

Original burial - an inner casket of lead, then original casket of wood.

The new coffin was too small, too narrow, not deep enough.

Home office rules - an exhumation has to be over by mid-day

A Chapelle Ardente (the Postulants' room) had been prepared to receive the body where it would be for a week.

The exhumation was extended by six hours.

A new habit was laid on the body - over the original garments. They forgot to put on a new veil.

The body was buried in an inner elmwood coffin packed with sawdust; this coffin was sealed in a lead skin and the inner coffin with its lead skin was placed in a larger elmwood coffin.

The whole Society was represented at the gathering in 1935.

New coffin, polished elmwood. Bronze plate on the lid "Cornelia Augusta Connelly, Foundress and first Superior General of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Died April 18th, 1879. Interred in the Convent Cemetery Mayfield April 23rd, 1879. Reinterred in the crypt at Mayfield May 2nd 1935. In Pace."

The date May 2nd was not correct because of the change in procedure.

A large bronze cross was placed on the lid.

The coffin was bricked into the crypt. A stone slab was to be placed outside.

Newspaper clipping: Exhumation was a preliminary step toward desired introduction of her cause for beatification.

The Exhumation of Rev. Mother Foundress

On Wednesday April 24th, 1935, I arrived at Mayfield and went at once to see the chapelle ardente, prepared in the Choir Postulants room, in which the remains of "Mother Cornelia" were to rest for a week until the Rubrics permitted us to have a Requiem Mass celebrated. The walls of the room were hung with a cream-coloured silky material, tastefully decorated with sprays of greenery. On trestles, beneath a large crucifix, was the plain coffin of polished oak (it struck me as being very narrow) and one lovely wreath of white flowers, tied with the colours (pink and grey) of Rosemont College, a tribute from the student body.

Later, in the afternoon, we arranged details and practised procession from the grave to the chapelle ardente. The coffin containing the remains was to be carried by myself, the two Provincials (Rev. Mother Mary of Assisi Bethell and Rev. Mother Mary Felix Tighe) and Mother Mary Imelda Whitehead 4th. Assistant General.

At 5 p.m. Dr. Healy [J.], Chancellor of the Diocese of Southwark, arrived to preside in place of Bishop Amigo. It was arranged that Holy Mass would be at 6 a.m. the following morning and the exhumation at . . . . . The men had already dug out the grave to within a few feet of the coffin, but were not allowed by Home Office regulations to expose the coffin until just before the time appointed for raising it. Mother St. Aidan Smith and Mother Alexius O'Neil had been present at Mother Foundress' funeral in 1879 and the former declared she remembered seeing the coffin lying in a brick foundation.

Thursday April 25th. /35. dawned, cold and damp. At 5.30 a.m. I was in chapel when Revnd. Mother Provincial (Bethell) whispered to me: "They have found an enormous coffin! They think there must be another one inside it. Do come and have a look at it!"

We went to the cemetery and I saw a large coffin lying at a depth of . . . . . feet in a brick socket filled with water. It had no nameplate or handles and seemed to be an outer shell. After Mass and breakfast, the Superiors repaired to the cemetery while the other nuns waited in the Cloister to be called when the remains had been found. The scene of the operations was covered by a tent-like awning under which we sheltered from the biting N.E. wind. There was a primitive pulley on ropes for raising the coffin. The task was rendered exceedingly difficult by the weight of the coffin, the suction of the water-logged clay soil, the impossibility of getting a footing on each side of it owing to the brick structure, about  $\frac{1}{2}$  foot high in which the coffin lay. The ropes were finally fastened and secured to the pulley and the long and anxious work began while we all held our breath, fearing that the ropes, or the pulley, or both, might give way under the weight of the heavy burden. The men worked steadily and calmly, in true British fashion and we stood on the damp grass getting colder and colder while the atmosphere grew more and more tense. Finally, to the relief of all, the coffin was placed on the ground and the ropes removed. (Revnd. Mother Angelica's grave had been cleared of its stone coping and cross so that there was space for all to stand near the coffin. Planks were placed across the open grave to prevent accidents). It was suggested that the men should have rest and refreshment as they had been working since 3 a.m. Mr. Francis J. Tolhurst then stepped forward and said to me: "Revnd. Mother, if you and the nuns do not go indoors and get warm, there will be more than one candidate for this empty grave!" So we all adjourned, having agreed to re-assemble at . . . . . for the opening of the coffin.

We returned to the cemetery and I took up my position near to the head of the coffin. Beside me, was Dr. Healy, (the Chancellor), and Dr. William Long, M.D. and, at the opposite end, the young Medical Officer from Uckfield. The men stepped forward and removed the outer shell of . . . . . wood which came apart easily, being sodden with water, and an inner casket of lead stood revealed.

This was peeled off without difficulty and then we saw the original casket, also of wood, and everyone drew a deep breath knowing that therein rested the precious remains. Meanwhile, the new coffin had been placed ready to receive them. The head man asked if he should raise the lid and at an affirmative sign from me, he began to prise open the lid which came off whole and intact. The atmosphere grew more tense. I saw, first, a yellowish cover - the shroud, yellow with age - and when this was removed, I realised that the coffin was filled with sawdust in the midst of which was a raised patch of black material, evidently part of the habit.

(Note. It will be remembered that Mother Foundress died at St. Leonards of a complication of maladies, including dropsy, and that she was buried at Mayfield four days later. There was then no railway connection between the two places and no motor transport, so the body was conveyed by train to Ticehurst and taken the remaining six miles by a horse-drawn conveyance. This will explain the sawdust and the two coffins. Even nowadays, the undertaker told me, when a corpse is to be conveyed a long distance by rail or by road, the coffin is always packed with sawdust to avoid possible accidents.)

The sawdust was obviously sodden with water so the man plunged in a stick and then held it up saying: "Water, to this depth". Dr. Long, in white coat and rubber gloves, advanced and together with the men, began very carefully to remove the wet sawdust with garden trowels. As they did so, the outlines of a complete body were gradually revealed - the face covered with a cloth - in appearance very bulky and solid. Everyone gave a gasp of surprise and then waited in tense silence..... We had never visualised such a possibility, why I cannot say. The cap had perished and the veil somehow covered the face so that I did not see it. In freeing the sawdust, Dr. Long removed the veil which he put into a bucket. (It was afterwards rescued and washed in "Lux" by Mother Mary Boniface Bolten and was found to contain, in the part which had covered the head, a quantity of soft brown hair).

I still did not see the face, why, I cannot say since I was close to the coffin all the time. It may have been covered by the cape in the process of removing the sawdust. I think it probably was. I remember at one moment that Dr. Long tried to raise the body by lifting the head and as he did so, it became detached from the trunk.

The "black patch" to which I have referred was the sleeves of the habit in which the hands had been crossed and the prominence was due to the swollen state of the abdomen on which they were resting. Strange to say, the flesh on the arms and the hands had entirely perished, only the bones remaining, and as I touched the arms they became detached from the body and the fingers from the arm. Meanwhile Dr. Long had examined the body and turning to me said: "Hard as concrete!" It was in fact quite entire and in a "petrified" condition, though not a dead weight, as I noticed it seemed to float on the water when touched and was obviously not resting on the bottom of the coffin. This struck me as strange, considering its condition. The garments were intact and, at one moment when the men turned the body, I saw (the habit had evidently been slit before the corpse was clothed in it) distinctly the back and shoulders, almost down to the waist. They were firm and solid and I had the impression of pink flesh showing through the white tunic. Several of us, notably Rev. Mother Provincial Bethell, noticed this pink flesh colour.

The legs were shapely and the white cotton stockings quite intact. But as they moved the body, I saw the bones of the feet fall apart, though they were held in the foot of the stocking. Dr. Long said to me: "I advise you not to remove any of the garments in order to put on new ones. Though the body is apparently so solid, one cannot tell what may be the effect of exposure to the air. The limbs might become detached from the trunk and it would be distressing to all of you if anything like that should happen".

I realised that it would be best not to attempt to re-clothe the body, as we were prepared to do, under the existing conditions. It was now quite obvious to all

that the body would not fit into the new coffin, but the attempt was made..... in vain! The casket was too small, that is, too narrow and too shallow and the remains merely rested on top of it, so to speak, and even when placed sideways, they did not fit and the lid could not have been closed. There was silence for a few seconds. Then the Doctor said: "There is nothing for it, Reverend Mother, but to have another coffin made". I agreed. "How long will it take?" "About four hours, if we have the wood in stock", answered the foreman. (It was then about 10 a.m.) Hereupon the young Medical Officer stepped forward. He was new to his work and had never seen anything of the kind before and, consequently, was very meticulous about "regulations". All the time they were removing the wet sawdust he kept sprinkling quicklime on it! He now said he would allow four hours for the making of the coffin (according to Home Office rules, an exhumation has to be over by midday) but I asked for an extension, as Dr. Long could not be back from Tunbridge Wells till 4 p.m., and the M.O. finally consented to grant us six hours, i.e. till 4 p.m. when the body, he said, must be placed in the coffin and sealed up.

So we all left the cemetery feeling, I think, rather tense and harrowed by so unexpected a denouement. It was a shock to many to witness the process of trying to put the body into the coffin which was too small - others felt nervous at seeing the remains in such an unexpected state of preservation. In fact, for the majority, I think the whole proceeding had been an ordeal. Dr. Long told me before he left (he had to go back to Tunbridge Wells for his professional work) that he had uncovered a portion of the head so that those who wished might touch it with medals etc. but that he did not think it would be wise to touch or move anything else as he feared the possible disintegrating effect of exposure to the air. He gave me the impression all through the proceedings of being nervous lest anyone should have a painful impression as the result of seeing something unpleasant. The young Medical Officer, after having copiously sprinkled the remains with Lysol, asked to speak to Dr. Long and then came to me and said: "I would respectfully advise you not to keep the body, as arranged, for a week but to have the re-interment this afternoon. One cannot be sure what may be the result of exposure for six hours to the air, even though the weather is cold today. May I see where you propose to keep the remains?" I conducted him to the Chapelle Ardente. As soon as he had assured himself that it had a south aspect and central heating, he repeated his advice more emphatically. Dr. Long afterwards, said: "You had better fall in with his views. He is the one responsible to the authorities and if anything did go wrong, you would be blamed". So I decided to have the burial at 4 p.m. At first, we were disappointed but soon the wisdom of the change of plans was apparent. I think the strain of having the venerated remains in our midst after the warning of the doctor and M.O. would have been great. And the triumphant Missa de Trinitate in Thanksgiving, with white vestments, flowers and lights, which was celebrated the following week was a more consoling and fitting climax than would have been the Missa d Requiem with the Dies Irae and Absolutions. The coffin had been raised on tressles in the tent and all during the six hours the nuns took it in turn to keep guard and, in some cases, to investigate every detail. They discovered (i) that the outer shell had been originally covered with black cloth studded with nails and traces of the name-plate and of the handles were visible (ii) that the habit was intact, the material strong, the cape buttons tightly sewn, the tape at the tunic neck still tied in a bow, the veil undamaged with the galloon and bone, the pins in the veil unruined. All these details are given in the depositions of those who examined them closely. It struck us all as very remarkable that the clothing should have been preserved after so long an immersion in water, more especially in water whose chemical properties had affected the body.

I did not go down to the cemetery again till 3.30 p.m. by which time rain had begun to fall. I raised the sheet and looked into the coffin. I saw the top of the head of Mother Foundress covered with soft brown hair and the beautiful, calm brow with the characteristic "arch" in the left eyebrow which is always noticeable in her photographs. I touched the forehead - the flesh was firm and cold, not hard like marble but yielding a little to pressure as if it were a leather ball. The eyelids were not sunken and I had the impression that the eyeballs were there (so had others), but this was not the case. I did not examine any further as I was afraid I might see something unpleasant or, perhaps, cause damage. The doctor's warnings had made me a little nervous and, besides, I do not naturally like touching dead bodies. So I returned to the front hall to await Dr. Long's return as he had said he would put a new cap on the precious head before the body was removed to the new casket. Then someone came to say that he was waiting for me in the cemetery. I hurried down to find that the undertaker and bearers had arrived and were waiting, also the M.C. I requested the men to withdraw while the body was being placed in the coffin. They took shelter in the potting shed as the rain was by then falling fast. Dr. Long lifted the sheet and I saw to my astonishment the head of our Mother completely revealed. It resembled a plaster cast such as one sees in a studio, only not so dead-white in colour. The face was rounder and fuller than in her photographs but the absence of a cap would partly account for this, also the edema consequent on long immersion in water. The old nuns who remember Mother Foundress (e.g. Mother Philomena Poquet) say her face was round and full and not so oval as it appears in, for instance, the photograph taken in 1877, which appears as a frontispiece to the Life. I saw the cheeks, the mouth which was closed, with full lips not in the least sunken, the firm rounded chin. It seemed to me that there was a smile, half whimsical, half triumphant, on the face and I believe others had the same impression. I noticed the ears were missing and that only a little dark mark indicated where they had been. But their absence did not give any unpleasant impression - in fact the majority of us did not notice anything unusual. I cannot describe my feelings as I looked at the real "death mask" of Cornelia Connelly. I was, as it were, stunned and could not grasp its full significance. With Rev. Mother Mary Anthony Long, I helped Dr. Long to put a new cap on the venerable head and in doing so, I noticed that the neck had broken off unevenly, as one might see the neck of a china doll. Then, turning round, I saw the old and infirm nuns who had stationed themselves at the Infirmary windows which look on to the cemetery. I said to Dr. Long: "Oh, do hold up the head for the nuns to see"! He answered: "Would you like to hold it?" I felt I could not so, very reverently, he held it up and moved it from side to side just like a priest holding the Monstrance for the blessing. It was very impressive and all were deeply moved. I saw inside the skull which was quite hollow.

Then Dr. Long placed the head on a chair under the awning so that all who wished might file past and look upon our Mother's features. At this point, Rev. Mother Mary Imelda Whitehead who had her camera said to me: "Shall I take a photograph?" It seemed to me that a picture of the severed head taken in those surroundings might give a painful impression to those who had not actually seen it and so I answered: "Oh, no Mother, I think it might be gruesome and distressing". The tent was crowded, the light dim and it would have been necessary to take a time exposure to secure a successful result. I turned to Rev. Mother Mary Anthony and said: "Mother Mary Imelda wants to photograph the head and I have said No. What do you think?" She answered: "Oh! no - it might give quite a wrong impression". Afterwards, I regretted not having secured what would have been a unique record. Had I seen the head earlier in the day we could have arranged for it to be photographed suitably. As it was, I felt hurried and anxious that everything should be over quickly.

After the nuns had filed past the head - it looked so small and youthful - the men lifted the body into the new coffin in which had been placed a linen sheet. The garments were still damp and all we could do was to lay the new habit we had prepared on the body and to arrange it as neatly as possible. Then Dr. Long took the head and placed it in position. I remarked that the neck of the 'torso' was uneven where the head had broken off and I seemed to be looking into a hollow cast. The remains were sprinkled with holy water by Rev. Dr. Healy and the coffin was closed and screwed down. Only afterwards did we realise that we had not put on a veil! I cannot explain the omission since a new habit, cape, etc. were all ready to hand. The procession to the little vault (loculus) under the Memorial Chapel now started in the pouring rain. (It was, of course, quite impossible for the nuns to carry the coffin, as originally planned) Tall Dr. Healy was escorted by tall Mother Mary Benedict Gilton, the Novice Mistress, who held an umbrella over him. The choral singing was made difficult owing to the weather, but we managed to keep together and the "Laudate pueri Dominum" reminded us of Mother Foundress' joyful acceptance of God's Will in whatever form it came to her. As I looked at the procession of nuns muffled in shawls and cloaks and carrying dripping umbrellas, I felt that it was somehow in keeping with her life in which the unexpected had always so large a place and that what it lacked in dignity was more than made up in simplicity. We entered the cloister and the coffin was placed on the ground, near the door leading to "Paradise" and then the absolution was given by Dr. Healy. Then we stood outside in the rain while the venerable remains were laid in the 'loculus' the floor of which was thickly strewn with rosemary, thyme and lavender - a gift from her beloved St. Leonards and as the coffin crushed them, their scent rose, strong and penetrating, filling the air with fragrance. It seemed a symbol of the precious spikenard which she had poured on the feet of Jesus from the broken casket of her heart. And as we stood there, singing the final "Laudate pueri Dominum", the prophetic words were strangely significant: "He maketh the barren to dwell within a home, the joyful mother of many children". Our Mother's joy was shared with us, her children, for we all were conscious that a deep peace had descended on us. The tension of the preceding hours suddenly seemed to relax and in spite of the unforeseen happenings, the disappointments, the frustrated plans, we knew that "all manner of thing was well". During the days that followed, peace deepened into happiness as we realised that the Chapel, already so rich in sacred memories, would henceforth enshrine the mortal remains of her to whom, under God, we owe our great and precious heritage - the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

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Mother Mary Amadeus S.H.C.J.  
(Atchison)

Superior General.

[The following note appears in pencil  
at the end of the original:]

Note absence of odours.