

# Holy Ann

Markethill's forgotten female saint

by Mary McVeigh

Her life story remained in print for more than seventy years<sup>1</sup> and even today it can be accessed via the World Wide Web<sup>2</sup> yet Ann Preston never achieved any visible material success or position of importance throughout her long life. Her only claim to fame was her religious fervour and commitment, which, it would appear, made a lasting impression on those who came in contact with her. When she died in Toronto in 1906 at the age of 96 one of the pallbearers at her large funeral was the mayor of the city who was reported as saying “*I have had two honours this week. It has been my privilege to have an interview with the President of the United States. Then I have been pall bearer to Holy Ann, of the two honours I prize the latter most*”.<sup>3</sup>

## Life in Ballymacawley

‘Holy Ann’ is of particular interest to us because she was born in the townland of Ballymacawley just outside Markethill in 1810 and for the first thirty years of her life she lived in and around that area and Armagh city before crossing the Atlantic at a time when few people ventured beyond their own parishes. Her biography is more a moral tale intended to inspire and its author, Helen E. Bingham, relied solely on the memories of her subject when she was already in her nineties. Nevertheless it would seem to be largely accurate in recording Ann Preston’s early life. Much of it can be substantiated from other sources.

She described the Preston family home: “*We do not care to paint the house any prettier than it really was, or to dress it any way with poetic fancy. The thatched roof was just as sombre as that of any other cottage, and the usual stack of peat did not enhance the beauty of the landscape. Moreover, the pigpen was just in as close proximity to the back door as custom and convenience permitted an Irishman to have*

*it. In those days there were no haunting dreams of germs and microbes, and the grunt and squeal were not out of harmony with the usual music of the household. James Preston was a hard working man, at least he laboured long hours in his occupation as a herdsman. Then after the day’s toil it was necessary for him to spend the evening hours tilling the little potato patch attached to his cottage. Even the women had to keep their share of this kind of work in order to keep hunger from the door*”.<sup>4</sup>



Ann Preston in later life

It could well have been even bleaker than this bearing in mind that poverty was endemic in the early decades of nineteenth century Ireland, land was being

constantly sub-divided to cope with the escalating population and the potato was the only staple food for many. All the family, children included, had to work when they could get it. Armagh was the most densely populated county in Ireland and although the linen industry provided some additional revenue it was vulnerable to market forces, thus in times of slump those dependent upon it suffered. One of Ann’s strongest memories of her childhood

was getting a ‘whipping’ for going off to play with a pal when she should have been looking after cloth her mother had spread out for bleaching on a river bank. It was certainly a case of very much work and little play. Ann had to look after her younger siblings and when they no longer needed minding she was ‘hired to rock the cradle in a neighbour’s home’.<sup>5</sup> Education was not going to be Ann’s escape from the poverty trap! Her schooling was brief – indeed it lasted little more than a week. Apparently the teacher gave up on her after his patience was exhausted trying to

instil the first few letters of the alphabet into her. It is likely that she attended the old school at Brackley which was replaced in 1826 by a new building subsidised by the main landlords in the

area, Lords Gosford and Charlemont.<sup>6</sup> Like many in her economic and social circumstances she was hired out to a farmer and had to toil long hours in the fields, seven days a week. It was not all work and no play, however, because when the master and mistress of the household were absent the servants availed of the opportunity to make merry. These occasions apparently involved the consumption of copious amounts of whiskey, which caused some

consternation to poor Ann. At that time drunken-

ness among the lower orders was regarded as a serious problem, particularly by the various churches. From the 1820s onwards temperance movements came into being and interestingly one of the strongest was in the Markethill area.<sup>7</sup> Ann managed to resist temptation until she was held down and forced to partake of the demon liquor. After this on occasions she used to 'hunt for the hidden whiskey bottle of her master' when she was minding his cattle on Sundays but she never would venture into a tavern. There are several references throughout Bingham's book to the evils of alcohol as one would expect from what is essentially a religious tract but it would seem that Ann Preston's imbibing did not become a habit.

Early efforts to convert her to religion did not succeed. 'A good Methodist sister' tried to teach her the Lord's Prayer but to no avail. It would seem that one of the earliest Methodist societies was established at Ballymacawley as far back as 1770<sup>8</sup> but it is likely that Ann Preston was unaware of this because her family would appear to have had no connections with it or indeed any other church organisation.

Life took a downward trend for Ann after she left the farmer's employ and she was contemplating taking a job with a 'lowly saloonkeeper' when providence intervened. Instead she obtained a position with a 'Christian mistress', a Mrs. McKay who belonged to the Methodist community and who abhorred alcohol. Interestingly in his history of the

Armagh Methodist Circuit, Dr Lynn referred to a Mrs. William Kay who was a strong supporter of Methodism when he arrived in Markethill in 1831 to take up the post as Dispensary Doctor.<sup>9</sup> It is likely that she was Ann's employer and that the old woman got the name slightly wrong, bearing in mind her advanced age when she was reminiscing. This lady was determined to set Ann on the straight and narrow path but it was not until she

heard a Mr. Armstrong Halliday, who according to Dr Lynn was stationed at Markethill in 1835,<sup>10</sup>

***“At this time the Methodists were very much despised...”***

that she became converted. Bingham wrote: *“At this time the Methodists were very much despised and too poor to erect a place of worship; consequently meetings were held private homes. On this notable Sunday the parlour was crowded and Ann was glad to be out of range of the minister's eye”.*

Her conversion however, did not give her job security because she was dismissed from the household after she took out the ashes in a box one night and left it on the scullery floor instead of leaving them as per usual by the grate. By morning the box and part of the lid had been burned and whilst Ann saw this as evidence of God's care for her because the house was not burned down, her employer took a different view. Mr. Halliday came to her rescue, 'one of the best homes in his circuit needed a girl', and when informed of this her reply was, 'I will go anywhere, sir, where I can serve the Lord'.<sup>11</sup> When she took up this new employment with Dr Reid and his family in Armagh she saw it as a lasting commitment because she said that the minister has 'married' her to Mrs. Reid and even when she was sorely tried and ready to pack her bags she felt obliged to stay. The assumption can be made that this Dr Reid was the Henry Reid referred to by Lynn. In his listing of the 22 Methodist ministers from the Armagh circuit he named 'Henry Reid, 1840 (Canada)'.<sup>12</sup> Ann Preston was with the Reids for five years when they decided to emigrate to Canada. This would have been around 1840.

## Her departure for Canada

Ann decided to accompany them although Dr Reid offered to release her from her commitment and her own family entreated with her to stay. When she was returning to the Reid house after spending her last night with the family her parents accompanied her for part of the way along the road but when Ann turned around to address her father she discovered that he had disappeared because he could not bear to say goodbye. Her mother then broke down and cried and begged her not to go. Sadly this scene must have been repeated in many Irish homes in the 19th century particularly in the latter half, in the decades after the Great Famine of 1845-50, when many young women set off to seek a better life and to send money back home to help those left behind. Strangely Helen E. Bingham made no further mention of the parents and one is left to wonder if they survived the Famine years considering that according to census returns the population of Ballymacawley dropped from 534 to 423 between 1841 and 1851<sup>13</sup>. Those most adversely affected were usually at the lowest strata of society and it would seem that the Preston family were in that category. Certainly by 1864 when the first General Valuation of Ireland for the Armagh Poor Law Union District which included Ballymacawley was published there is no mention of the Preston name in it or adjoining townlands<sup>14</sup>. Ann's lack of schooling would have made it difficult to remain in communication with home and she would have been dependent on her employers to write on her behalf. There must have been some correspondence however, because when she learned that her brother was living a 'very sinful life'<sup>15</sup> she sent for him to come to Canada where she hoped he would make a better life for himself. He did not live up to her expectations despite her prayers and entreaties but his wife was 'wonderfully converted'.<sup>16</sup>

Her journey was most intriguing and indeed mind-boggling if we accept the Bingham version. She wrote: *“Ann took the ship at the river port of Moy. They were seven weeks on the water and it must be remembered*

*that in those early days not only was the voyage much longer, but the conveniences were not by any means such as to make an ocean trip enjoyable”.*<sup>17</sup>

An ocean-going vessel in full sail down the Blackwater and ending up in the Atlantic was undoubtedly beyond the realms of possibility and it would seem that Ann Preston left out some pertinent bits of her story in this instance. It is feasible, since the railway did not reach Armagh until 1848, that she left from Charlemont on a lighter which conveyed goods and passengers to Lough Neagh and then on to Belfast through the canal system where they would then have joined a ship bound for New York. At that time it was possible to go also to New Orleans or Philadelphia from Belfast.<sup>18</sup>

## The Atlantic voyage

The journey across the Atlantic was both hazardous and hard work for Ann. There were seven members of the Reid family plus two relatives and Ann was charged with looking after all of them. This included cooking their food on the ship's ranges. There were several severe storms and twice during the journey the passengers were fastened down below. Once she was sure that her end had come and that the boat was due to go down at any minute. On the one occasion that Mrs. Reid ventured up on deck the ship gave a sudden lurch and a deck hand who had been fixing the rigging lost his hold. The poor fellow fell, mangled and dead almost at her feet. The shock of this combined

with sea-sickness kept her to her berth for rest of the journey which added to Ann's duties.

They eventually reached New York and from there they travelled by stage-coach to Toronto. After a few months the family and Ann ended up in Thornhill, at that time a prosperous marketing town where the main industry was saw-milling. A decade or so after they arrived a new Methodist church was built but no mention of it was made by Helen E. Bingham<sup>19</sup>.

Religious practice if not belief would seem to have taken a back seat for Ann during her early years at Thornhill. Mrs. Reid was in constant attendance at Methodist meetings but Ann apparently could not be coaxed into going. Her household



*The view today of the Mourne Mountains from Ballymacawley*

duties may well have had something to do with it. These increased considerably when Mrs. Reid died five years after arriving in Canada and Ann was left in sole charge of the children and the running of the house. It would seem that the good doctor was not always as appreciative as he should have been even though he was a leading light in his church. An instance of this was when he pulled her hair. She was expected to look after his horse and buggy and attend to his robes. He was very particular that these should be brought out at the last minute from the stove so that they would be nice and warm for the journey. It was when he saw her coming back to the house some time before he expected to leave that he lost his temper. However, Ann gave as good as she got and more because she retaliated by throwing a large stick of wood at the doctor but luckily for both it missed its mark! Her hot temper was apparently a trial to her all her days. Ann Preston devoted a large part of her life to looking after the Reid family. After Dr Reid's death she remained in their home until all the children had moved on. They rewarded her care by buying her a little cottage when they gave up the homestead. It would seem that they all left the area. The two girls went to the 'far Western States, then just being opened' and two boys went southwards to New Orleans where one of them, died of a fever. Apparently Ann had a premonition of his death and was greatly upset by this. There is no mention in the book as to what became of any of the others or whether or not she remained in contact with them. She eventually left Thornhill and made her home in Toronto where stayed over the years with different friends including the family of her biographer, Helen E. Bingham.

## Her religious commitment

Before she left Thornhill she started to be recognised for her religious commitment. Much of Bingham's book, as might be expected, is given over to examples of it. Essentially Ann Preston trusted implicitly in her God, was confident that he would look after at all times and talked and

prayed to him constantly. There were times when her prayers were answered in what seemed to be miraculous ways. Once she was exhorted to pray that water would be found in a visibly dry well and by the very next day the well had filled up and did not go dry again. On another occasion, when she was unable to walk due to an ankle injury she doctor prescribed a fresh egg every day. Eggs however, were impossible to obtain but for three weeks a hen came to her house each day and provided the requisite egg.

She had virtually no schooling and could not read books or newspapers but it was claimed that she had no problems in understanding the Bible and she was not afraid to publicly challenge views that were contrary to her own. One example was when she interrupted a Catholic bishop during his sermon. She had happened to be in the cathedral accompanying a friend with whom she was visiting. The bishop was pointing out the difference between

Catholicism and the various Protestant denominations but she disagreed with his interpretation of Methodism and was not afraid to say so.<sup>20</sup>

She first got the name of 'Holy Ann' as a term of derision. 'Catholic boys' were blamed for scribbling on her door with chalk: "Holy Ann lives here. Go in and have a word of prayer".<sup>21</sup> The name stuck to her and even friends began to call her by it. Apparently she prayed that she could live up to it so that the children would not be guilty of telling lies.

Helen E. Bingham's book is brief and unfortunately there are no dates or references in it but nonetheless even with the obvious religious message she does manage to make her subject come alive for the reader. Ann Preston may or may not have been a 'saint' but she certainly lived a long and hard life in the service of others. ❖

## References

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- 12 LYNN, p197
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- 16 *ibid*, p.92
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- 19 <http://www.city.vaughan.on.ca/tourism/history/thornhill.cfm>
- 20 *ibid*, pp. 96-98
- 21 *ibid*, p.50