

serge from the mill. It was a system which catered for the needs of this Irish country town, as Ireland and Foxford with her emerged from the twilight of the unwanted imperial marriage, to mother her two children: national freedom and industrial enlightenment.

Foxford had been a designated "black potato" area; the blight came regularly and destroyed the crop. Land was poor and unfruitful, and the only possessions apart from poteen and talk was an abundance of turf and water. However, while nature would not provide comfortable living conditions, the Irish Sisters of Charity could. A decade before the turn of the century they came to this small village and they built their woollen factory on the river bank just below the Moy bridge, there the mill race fed the turbines with a swift flow of energy in bounteous supply. The waters as we knew them then tumbled and cascaded over half mile of rough riverbed below the bridge until, their vigour dissipated, they ran through the eel weirs and spread out to a deep flowing river. It ribboned its way down the Green and around a small island or two and then, as if it had a sense of intelligence in realising its energy was spent, it gathered itself in slow majesty to flow with easy grace and generous sweeps the ten miles to Ballina.

My grandfather, Frank Sherry, was a foreman in Mr. Smith's woollen mill in Tyrone — in a wee town called Caledon, and in 1891 he had been sent by that good man to be the manager of the new mill being built by the sisters in Foxford Co. Mayo. He died in 1949, but we discovered in his desk, notes and writings dating from 1891 until the year of his death. He vividly recalls his arrival in Foxford:

'When I left Tyrone, I left a fertile county where there was poverty enough, but not such poverty as can abound in an infertile region where there is no possible source of income but the unwilling soil. I was young and not interested in economic questions, possibly I did not attach much importance to the fact that the nuns were starting the mills to help the poor. I came to Foxford because Mr. Smith had offered my services, and I came ready to do my best at work which I knew and liked. Only by degrees did I come to see what a task had been undertaken.'

Mr. Smith had evidently appreciated all the circumstances, for from his first letter to Mother Morrough-Bernard, the superior, when she had written for advice and he had replied, 'Madam — are you aware that you have written to a Protestant and an Orangeman?' he then proceeded to point out the helplessness of the project. But he had somehow been won over to see the poor of Foxford as the nun saw them, and offered all the help in his power. Grandfather continued with his reminiscences:

'I was part of the help, and he brought me to Foxford himself.

We arrived at 2am, on a December morning, and I saw the west first as snow spread country, silent and lonely, set among high white hills. I wasted few glances on it for I was weary of the long journey. We went to a hotel and slept late that morning and breakfasted alone on good eggs and bacon.

I never recall that first morning in Foxford without smiling at a cryptic remark of Mr. Smith, a cat, attracted by the savoury odour of the bacon, jumped up on the table in close proximity to our breakfast rasher. "Hold on there, I'm from the north" said Mr Smith, as if a cat on the breakfast table was somewhat of a western custom of which he did not approve. I rather fancy the cat murmured "sorry" as he dropped to the floor at once.

After breakfast we ploughed our way through snow drifts to the mill, where the contractors were at work erecting a shed. To say that we came to the mill is putting it nicely — we really came to a place where, if God willed, there might one day be a mill. At the moment there was snow, slush, mud and one shed, plus the great spirit of a nun, backed by the approval of the Mother General of the order, and a deep unquestioning trust in divine providence. That was December 1891.

Perhaps some of you, reading this imagine that you know what the homes of the poor in the west of Ireland were like. You picture a humble cottage with crumbling walls and broken thatch, not believing perhaps that the mud cabin existed outside of tales of Irish peasant life. Believe me, those hills I view every day were studded with cairns of stones and heaps of earth, chimneyless, windowless, in which six or seven or nine or ten people lived in such poverty as can scarcely be imagined today. They existed in squalor — how could it be otherwise.

When the nuns started a school and few pupils came, some of the sisters went out to see why; the reason was simple — the children were half naked. Clothes had to be found, and then breakfasts, because starving children do not make apt pupils. I saw these things and saw them remedied and knew that the nuns in the humble convent, which was merely two cottages knocked together had very little themselves.

However, I was on loan from Caledon, and my task was merely to help in starting a woollen industry.....

Little had changed in the west of Ireland, since almost one hundred years before my grandfather came to Foxford, and Captain Jean Louis Jobet of the Second Battalion of Grenadiers in Humbert's army wrote:

'One thing that surprised us greatly at this time was the extreme poverty that we encountered everywhere we looked in