

Frances Taylor, *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts (1867)*, University College Dublin Press, 2013. ISSN: 1393-6883 (paperback), pp. xxxviii + 240.

Reviewed by: Kate Harper, University of York, July 2015

Between 1864 and 1867, Frances Taylor, an English Catholic convert, made a series of trips to Ireland to visit religious orders and observe their work. Her impressions of these visits formed the basis for a series of articles published in the Catholic magazine *The Lamp* (of which Taylor was proprietor) and later brought together in *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts* (1867). This facsimile edition of Frances Taylor's text, part of UCD Press's *Classics of Irish History* series, brings Taylor's previously obscure account to a new audience. It includes a useful introduction by Mary McAuliffe, which does much to contextualise the work both within Taylor's own story and within the wider historical and political landscape. The Foreword by Eithne Leonard SMG, offers a brief, affectionate portrait of Taylor which describes her as 'a great story teller' with an 'infectious sense of humour', qualities which Taylor brings to bear on her treatment of Irish religious institutions (p. ix).

Born in 1832, Frances Taylor was an Anglican convert to Catholicism, and in 1872 became the foundress of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God (SMG). Following her conversion, she became a prolific writer of novels, articles, short stories, poetry and children's fiction, writing in part to fund her philanthropic efforts, but also to contribute to a growing body of Catholic literature following the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. Taylor was strongly influenced by the Irish nuns and soldiers she encountered as a young nurse during the Crimean War, and the first edition of *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts* was dedicated 'to those who under strange skies and even stranger scenes of "Eastern Hospitals" first taught me the worth of Irish character, the warmth of Irish hearts and the depth of Irish faith'. Her first book, *Eastern Hospitals and English Nurses* (1856) offered both a detailed description of the Crimean war hospitals, and a critique of their management. On returning from the Crimea, where she had converted to Catholicism, she began to write, and also began a long period of spiritual exploration, trying her vocation with religious orders both in France and at home. McAuliffe situates the visits to Ireland which culminated in the production of *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts* as part of Taylor's search for 'a place within Catholicism for the expression of her spiritual aspirations' (p. xviii). Indeed one can see in this text, written a few years before Taylor's Poor Servants of the Mother of God was established, the writer beginning to map out the shape and purpose of her own order, identifying the models of practice she believed to be most effective.

Irish Homes and Irish Hearts describes Taylor's travels around Ireland, visiting (predominantly female) religious communities engaged in social and philanthropic work: the management of hospitals, workhouse infirmaries and lunatic asylums; the care of the elderly, infirm and disabled; the relief of poverty; the bringing up of orphans and lodging of factory girls; and the reformation of the 'fallen'. Her purpose, as she sets out on the first page of *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts*, is to bring to light for an English audience the 'marvellous net of religious institutions spread over the land, and of those deeds of charity, which in reality form a powerful element in Irish life' (p. 1). The book is structured as a

travelogue (McAuliffe's introduction offers a brief but useful discussion of the structure of the text, which does much to clarify matters for those not familiar with the geography of Ireland), bookended by discussions of Irish history and politics. From the outset, Taylor declares that an understanding of 'the religious and charitable institutions which have risen on Irish soil' is vital in developing 'a right understanding of the state of the country, the character of the people, and her prospects for the future' (ibid.). Taylor positions herself as sympathetic to Irish opposition to English rule, although this sympathy is not as uncomplicated as it first appears, and is undercut by her rather trenchant views on Fenianism. From the outset, Taylor insists that her book is neither travel memoir nor political treatise, declaring that

There is certainly no lack of books about Ireland. 'Tours' and 'Visits' to and 'Sketches' and 'Scenes' in, the Emerald Isle abound on all sides; and at the present time the subject of Ireland is in everybody's mouth, and her wants and their remedies, her shortcomings and difficulties, are discussed on all sides. I do not desire to follow in this beaten track, or to enter into a disquisition on these vexed questions. (ibid.)

However, in the final chapter of the text, Taylor does precisely what she set out not to do, and offers her perspective on the 'Irish Question'. Her central point is that Catholicism is a vital part of Irish identity, and England's attempts to change or suppress this reduce the Irish to 'a conquered people [...] not an independent part of a great empire' (p. 224). While she is not arguing for political independence from England, her wish for religious freedom could not be clearer. Throughout, Taylor finds it 'impossible to avoid' engaging with the subject of 'souperism' (the practice of offering food to poverty-stricken families on condition that they convert to Protestantism or send their children to Protestant schools), describing it as 'disgraceful', 'detestable' and diabolical' (pp. 95–6).

Between these historical and political bookends, Taylor's primary interest is in the charitable institutions run by female religious orders, and the domestic model of social care along which they are organised. The stories of how the homes came into being are recounted in detail, and well-known women religious such as Nano Nagle, Mary Aikenhead and Catherine MacCauley populate the book's pages. The Irish homes which receive her most favourable reviews are those run along domestic lines, with the superior positioned as the mother. Taylor is particularly taken with a lodging house for factory workers run by the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul, noting that,

I have rarely seen a charitable work which appealed more to my sympathy than this. It is so completely helping the poor to help themselves – keeping up in the girls a spirit of honest independence while giving them at the same time the protection and guidance they require at their age and in their position – guarding them from continual and terrible temptations to sin. (p. 115)

The 'factory girls' insist on calling the superior 'Mother', entrust her with their savings, and seek her advice on a variety of financial and personal matters (pp. 114–115). In microcosm, this is Taylor's ideal social project: the institution replicates the home, the poor attain self-sufficiency, and the vulnerable are protected from falling into sin by the motherly influence of the nuns. Another home which she singles out for particular praise is a Carmelite

orphanage in Sandymount, 'because it was more homely and simple than orphanages usually are' (p. 213). She does not, however, believe it to be in the children's best interest to aspire to rise above their station, and finds that 'the little discomforts and roughness they had to encounter would be an excellent preparation for their future life' (pp. 213–4). While always advocating for the poor to be treated well, Taylor notes that 'We are all of us as particular about our *castes* as any Indians that ever lived', and she does not expect or desire the poor to rise above the servant class (p. 132). The 'greatest fault', she notes, 'with the old orphanage management [...] is that it does not train orphan girls to be good servants', and she is approving of a system whereby the orphan is not 'brought up too tenderly' and rendered unfit for 'the petty injustices, thoughtlessness, and selfishness' of the world (pp. 102–3). Taylor's comments, which surely feel outmoded to a modern reader, are heavily influenced by the prevailing Victorian attitudes to both children and the poor, and offer a useful illustration of the development of nineteenth-century attitudes towards social care.

McAuliffe's introduction acknowledges that Taylor's portrayal of Irish institutions is 'sometimes uncritical and biased' (as the above description of her attitudes to the poor and issues of class demonstrates), but also points out that she is 'not, in fact, completely uncritical of the female religious orders, as Taylor did question some of the work and care practices in the institutions she visited' (p. xxxii). For example, Taylor is far from sure whether or not women should remain permanently in Magdalen asylums, but she lays out both sides of the debate. The scope of McAuliffe's introduction does not allow a detailed examination of the elements of the religious Orders' practices which may have been more worthy of criticism, and it will be interesting to see how historians locate this text within the wider exploration of some of the less gentle treatment of 'penitents'. Taylor was not, in fact, one to shy away from criticising the status quo when she saw fit (as *Eastern Hospitals and English Nurses* demonstrates), and she is highly critical of the (secular) workhouse at Galway, where she is 'dreadfully pained' by the condition of the girls in the workhouse school ('the uncared-for, wild aspect of these children was most terrible to behold'), and appalled to see them housed cheek by jowl with '*unmarried* mothers and their babies' (pp. 190–1). Her views on the workhouse system could not be plainer or more critical: 'How such things can be suffered to go on in a Christian country is a mystery; and how the rulers of a land can allow the prevalence of the workhouse system, calculated to demoralise a large portion of the population, is also extraordinary' (p. 191).

Taylor notes that, of the charitable institutions of Ireland, 'Few [...] of those conducted by nuns escaped my notice', and her account is indeed comprehensive (p. 208). Her description of the 'homes' is rooted in a domestic economy which prioritises the virtues of neatness, cleanliness, order and piety. The wards of a convalescent home run by the Sisters of Charity, for example, are described in detail, with domestic accoutrements painstakingly noted: 'comfortable beds, spotlessly clean and neat [...] easy chairs, tables on which stood lamps ready for lighting; books, games, dominoes to while away the tedious hours' (p. 24). Taylor comments that 'it would turn the brain of a workhouse guardian to see this establishment, and to find out that the Sisters think nothing too good for their beloved poor' (ibid). Similarly, the Limerick workhouse infirmary, superintended by the Sisters of Mercy, boasts 'floors clean and fresh, beds with spotless linen and white coverings; the medicines, books and little comforts the patients require close at their side; the Sisters of Mercy with

pleasant faces and kind words moving about in lieu of the "pauper nurses" (p. 136). Taylor contrasts this with impressions formed on her frequent visits to workhouse infirmaries in England, where patients suffer 'discomfort, dirt and neglect (to use the mildest words)' (ibid). The popular mistrust of the New Poor Law and the workhouse is here set against the Irish system. In seeking to resist the punitive model of the workhouse, Taylor reconfigures the idea of 'home' to encompass both the family and the religious institution.

As well as the attraction that this book will hold for those with an interest in Frances Taylor, the history of active religious orders, and social care in the Nineteenth Century, *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts* is an absorbing and enjoyable read. The most appealing element of the text is Taylor's idiosyncratic narrative voice, which is here at its most passionate, opinionated and entertaining. She is at her best when describing events which amused her, and the gentle humour with which she describes meeting a grubby Carmelite friar ('both dress and Brother were so dirty we thought he had come to the door by mistake') or a sweet-faced landlady with jackdaws in her chimney ('both for the jackdaws' comfort and our own we begged to have the fire put out') are genuinely entertaining (p. 67 and p. 164). Her joke about the towns of Kilsome, Kilmany and Kilthemall is almost certainly not original, but no less funny for it (p. 204). It is this readable style, highly rendered detail and engagement with contemporary political issues which make *Irish Homes and Irish Hearts* a fascinating snapshot of Irish religious life and social care in nineteenth-century Ireland.