



An extract on the 1918 Influenza Pandemic from

*Reminiscences of Mother Mary Joseph Aubert*

*Foundress of the Sisters of Compassion*

written by Sr Angela Möller, Suzanne Aubert's secretary in 1945

This outbreak coincided, in Wellington and Suburbs, with Armistice Day, November 11th, and it spread like a giant conflagration. Crowds had assembled in the Basin Reserve for the Armistice rejoicings, when the weather which had been sultry, suddenly changed to cold and rain. People were chilled, and so had little resistance against the infection which seemed to be everywhere at once. Next day (12th) the Mayor (Sir John Luke) called for volunteers to nurse the sick, and announced that a depot was being opened at the Town Hall for medical supplies, gratis. There was a dearth of doctors and nurses because of the 'Great War', but the Department of Health soon had a stock mixture of suitable medicine at the newly-opened depot.

Island Bay was the first suburb to feel the full force of the scourge, and it was also the first to have it under control. A remarkably efficient 'Vigilance Committee' was formed, under the chairmanship of Mr. C.C. Odlin, with Mr. Colley as his chief assistant, and a depot was opened at the Bowling Green. Everything was speedily available except medical and nursing service.

On November 13th, Sr Claver offered the Mayor (in response to his published appeal) eight Sisters from the Island Bay Home, and was referred to Mr. Odlin, who welcomed them gladly. Three motor cars (and drivers) were immediately placed at their

disposal and they set to work at once, Sr. Claver herself leading them that day. The Sisters were not known to Island Bay residents, though the Home of Compassion had been in their midst for eleven years. When the Sisters paid their first calls, they were shown into late parlours, as though they had merely come for a social call; Sr. Claver had to ask: "Where is the patient?" and then to persuade the people that she and her Sisters had come to nurse, not to talk. Very soon they were met with eagerness. The cases were so severe, that very thorough organisation was required to deal with them all. At the request of the Sisters, Dr. Fyffe, at great personal inconvenience, came out from the city to see the worst cases. He took Sr. Clotilde round in his car - for Sr. Claver had placed her in charge of the nursing Sisters, as she was a registered nurse with wide experience - and she pointed out the most seriously ill. The doctor came for a very few days, only once a day, for the shortest possible time. He instructed Sr. Clotilde that she was to act as an assistant physician, give strychnine injections at her discretion, and he gave here several blank orders to commit patients to hospital when she considered this necessary. Medical men were assigned zones within a few days, and Dr. Fyffe could no longer come to Island Bay, nor could any other doctor come by day. A member of the Public Hospital Staff, a Dr. Brown, came at 9 p.m. to the Depot, where Sr. Clotilde had left a written report for him, and he visited the worst cases then. By this time, (Friday, 15th), the Committee had assigned a motor-cyclist (with side-car) for Sr. Clotilde's service alone, for she had to visit all the cases and supervise the work of the Sisters - most of

whom were St. John's Ambulance medallists and quite competent to carry out her instructions. She had also a couple of Boy Scouts placed at her service, one of whom was always in attendance to carry her messages to the depot, or to her Sisters if she wanted the latter. The corps of Boys Scouts deserved the highest praises for speed and efficiency. They rose to the occasion splendidly and threw themselves whole-heartedly into the work with as much if not more ardour than any of the other workers.

Almost simultaneously with the outbreak, His Grace, Archbishop O'Shea had authorised all the Sisters who were nursing the victims, to go about alone. This was a great boon and saved much time, and probably, many lives. The trouble was everywhere at once, almost. At Island Bay, the Committee had everything in thorough order by the end of the first week, and the epidemic under control within ten days or so. But no sooner was order established at the Bay, than Berhampore was assailed badly. Here conditions were worse, the residents were much poorer on the whole, and the outbreak lasted longer. There was a strong anti-Catholic element there, and the Sisters were informed that they were outside their district and were not wanted. But Mr. P.C. Watt, the Chairman of the Berhampore Committee, very quickly put a stop to this, and so far from meeting with any opposition, the Committee and their helpers could not do enough for the Sisters. So much so that, when one day the weather changed and the Sisters had no waterproofs, a couple of Commercial Travellers who saw this, went off to the city and brought them mackintoshes, saying they must not get wet. Ware-

houses were closed at the time, but they managed to acquire the waterproofs all the same!

It should be mentioned that, at the very first, the shortage of nurses was so extreme, the Island Bay Committee requested the Sisters not to attempt any invalid cooking or domestic work - they would provide for all that, the Sisters were to confine their efforts to attendance on the sick alone. After a week or more, two or three retired nurses, who had married and had homes to look after, managed to arrange for the latter so that they could nurse the sick. It was well, for the nursing Sisters themselves contracted the disease.

Before this, in fact, on November 14th, the Rector of St. Patrick's College in the city (Very Rev. Fr. Gilbert, S.M.), who had been obliged to send the boys to their homes, offered the College to the Department of Health, as an Emergency Hospital, with the Sisters of Compassion as Nursing Staff. The offer was accepted, with the condition that either Sr. Clotilde or Sr. Genevieve should be Matron. Miss Hester McLean (then in charge of the Division of Nursing) made this stipulation, as she was too busy to supervise the Emergency Hospital herself, and she knew the two Nurses named and could trust them fully. She said she had no doubt the other Sisters were good Nurses, but she knew these two personally, and could answer for their competence. Sr Genevieve was appointed, as Sr. Clotilde was fully occupied at Island Bay and Berhampore - Sr. Frances was at the head of the Sisters at the latter place, but Sr. Clotilde kept in close touch with her and visited the worst cases.

By the time, that is ten days after the outbreak, that

control was effected at Island Bay, the nursing Sisters collapsed one by one. Sr Paula was the first affected. She was stricken on the 19th, others followed rapidly. The new Superior Sr. Cecilia arrived from Jerusalem next day, and had to take charge of the infirmary immediately. She began with six patients, and before long she had twenty-one! By Sunday, the 24th, fourteen were laid up, and had to be replaced. Jerusalem had not yet been attacked, so Srs. Veronica and Raphael came to help out at Island Bay. They were, in fact, sent for. Rumour was busy at Island Bay, where it was being circulated that the Sisters were all dying of the disease now! Patients, though most were convalescent by this time, were still in a somewhat critical state, ready for panic about anything. And, in spite of the fact that other Nurses were now available, they required tangible evidence that affairs at the Home of Compassion were not in such an alarming state after all. Mr. Odlin and Mr. Colley called at the Home one evening in the second week after the outbreak and pleaded earnestly for even one Sister to continue visiting Island Bay patients just to reassure them, otherwise the Committee feared some at least would relapse, or recovery would be seriously retarded. So Sr. Veronica was asked by the Superiors to come down immediately, which she did. She was just in time to take Sr. Clotilde's place when the latter was stricken, though not very severely. When Sr. Veronica had to go back to Jerusalem (for the scourge had occurred there), Sr. Anthony kept going at Island Bay until all risk was ended.

Confidence in the Sisters was carried to absurd lengths by some of the patients. Even when at length doctors were able

to attend at Island Bay, the said patients would not get up - and said so to the doctor - "until the Sister told them they could!" Fortunately, the Doctor in question was friend of the Sisters and he understood the situation. Then there was the case of the woman who wanted "the medicine the first Sisters brought", and not the stock "influenza mixture", which she said was no good. Investigation proved that she had dosed her children with "Stim. Lin." given for outward application only, for her infant! "Nothing did them so much good", she informed Sr. Veronica!

Another incident furnished entertainment at recreation for many a day - it occurred at Berhampore. The Nursing Sisters had a bag (for their equipment) with a bad catch, which would spring open unexpectedly. A notebook belonging to one of them fell out somewhere. She was using it for addresses, but it contained her "Retreat Resolutions" (taken in the September Retreat). After looking in vain for the missing book, as it was growing dusk when it was missed, the Sisters were stopped by a very courteous Anglican clergyman, with whom they were unacquainted, who handed them the notebook with a polite bow and the remark: "I think this must belong to you."

The fact that Sr. Clotilde's attack was not of the most severe kind, was providential, for Sr. Genevieve had collapsed at St. Patrick's College Hospital, and a Matron was needed there. Sr. Clotilde had to take charge when she could well have done with a few more days convalescing, but there was no option. Two other Sisters were seriously ill, but Sr. Genevieve was worst of the three at Buckle Street. Sr. Salome was the first

to suffer and Sr. Rosalie followed quickly. The first couple of days at the College were not only strenuous (as was to be expected) but the cases were mostly of the virulent type, and many were actually dying when brought in. Sr Genevieve had to protest to the Rector about filling the place up with hopeless cases when, if they could get them a little earlier they would have a better chance of nursing them well again. The Jubilee Number of "Blue and White", published in 1935, gives the following account of the work of the Emergency Hospital at that time:

"At mid-day on November 16th, within two days of the departure of the boys, the first patient was carried in. By nightfall the first ward of twenty-four beds was full."

(A second ward, on the first floor was speedily arranged, of about the same size as the first. It was filled just as quickly).

"The College served as an emergency hospital until December 16th. In that time, ninety-one patients were admitted. Of these thirty-seven died. The patients were of all classes and creeds (males only). The strenuous work of nursing was undertaken by five Sisters of Compassion assisted by Mrs. O'Leary. Three of these Sisters of Compassion caught the dreaded influenza but we are pleased to relate that all three recovered.

"A public appeal for voluntary helpers was made by Father Gilbert. The response was immediate and came irrespective of rank or religion. Wellington's debt to the military authorities during the epidemic must not be forgotten. The Defence Stores supplied the College with such of the bedding and hospital requisites, and the members of the Medical Corps were of great assistance in every way.

"Throughout all these trying days Father Gilbert remained at his post in the College, ably helped by Father McDonnell.

"So interested was Dr. Kingston Fyffe, M.D., in St. Patrick's College emergency hospital and so regular was his attendance that the hospital might well have been called 'Dr. Fyffe's Hospital' and I can offer no better

tribute to the work of Father Gilbert, the Sisters of Compassion (what Old Boy does not thrill with gratitude at the mention of those who were his devoted College nurses?) and to the voluntary helpers than to quote and extract from a letter from Dr. Fyffe to the Rector, dated December 17th, 1918:

'As the last patient has now left the hospital' (The last three were transferred to the Home for Incurables, and nursed back to health there), 'I should like to put on record the great help and kindness I invariable received at the hands of yourself and everyone in the institution. As far as I myself am concerned, my work at St. Patrick's has been a real pleasure, and it has been made so, largely by your co-operation and that of your incomparable Sisters. From the very beginning, when chaos was reigning in other places, your hospital was a model of good management and good nursing. It is impossible to speak too highly of the work done by your Sisters and their lay-helpers. I can truthfully say that they have saved many lives that, but for their devotion to duty, would have been lost.'

Dr. Fyffe, naturally did not mention - what he could not know - that the work of the emergency hospital for souls far exceeded what was done for the sick bodies. And for this, Fr. H. McDonnell was responsible in the main, as the Sisters said "He lived in the wards, and never seemed to leave them night or day." He was ably assisted by the other College Fathers - the Rector's time was chiefly taken up by administrative work, but when he could, he did everything possible for the sick souls as well as bodies. Others whose names are remembered, were Fathers Schaefer and A. Cullen. Some of the Fathers were just recovering from severe influenza themselves, and were not allowed in the wards. The first five Sisters on the nursing staff were: Srs. Genevieve, Salome, Jeanne, Louise (day duty) and Sr. Prisca (night duty). When Sr. Salome got ill, Sr. Aloysius replaced her. When the second ward was opened, others were required, mainly lay (voluntary) helpers. As the work at

the College decreased, and the Island Bay Sisters caught the infection, some of these ladies came out to assist at the Home of Compassion. Among these were Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. Fahy, but there were others. Mrs. Murphy was not a Catholic though her husband was. Another non-Catholic, a Mrs. Duncan, did invaluable work in the nursery all day for many days. they helped in the laundry and with the children, when the staff of the Homere was reduced to only eight Sisters! There had been a moment, after Sr. Claver became ill herself, when she was asked to withdraw all the nursing Sisters from Island Ba, and, later, even from the College Hospital. But, thank God, she did neither, though the thought of doing so was suggested by senior Sisters, and that fact in itself shows what the pressure was at the time.

Divine Providence helped as It always does. During the week 16th to 24th November, the Religious of the Sacred Heart sent daily to the Home of Compassion, a cooked dinner for twenty-four persons - there is some doubt as to whether they meant to provide for only fourteen, but they did it so liberally that there was enough for the greater number. Afterwards, when the sick Sisters were convalescing, Rev. Mother Biehler, insisted on taking them in groups, six or eight at a time, for some days to recuperate. As soon as the Island Bay residents heard the Sisters were ill, they simply poured dainties upon them. At first, the Sisters thought these were meant for distribution to the patients they visited, and that these broths, jellies, custards, etc., had been brought to the Home instead of to the depot by mistake. But they were speedily set right on the point and were told that they were to lack nothing for their own sick,

all this lavish generosity was a mark of gratitude from the Island Bay people. It could not fail to touch them deeply.

Among their helpers at this trying time special mention must be made of Colonel and Mrs. Hughes. The Colonel (a veteran of two wars) had not long been invalided home, but he became an active member of the Island Bay Vigilance Committee. His wife "mothered" the Sisters to the utmost of her power. She knew everybody in the Bay, and she telephoned several times a day to give information about new cases, and about those who were likely to be critical, or with whom much tact would be needed, so that the right Sisters should be sent to the right streets or houses, etc. Her hints were simply invaluable. She frequently said she had no qualms at all about the Sisters who were trained by Mother Aubert herself, but now Mother was far away, and she (Mrs. Hughes) knew that young and inexperienced Sisters (inexperienced in outside work at least) had to be sent, so she placed all her own social tact at their disposal. And in many other ways she helped them wonderfully.

The small girls at the Home also did their best to help, though the eldest was only eight years old! She amused the Sisters by putting a piece of blue material she found somewhere on her head, saying "I'm as Sister now", and she led the others to all the little tasks within their capacity and did the work surprisingly well. Even a toddler of three years, running with others of her age to meet a Sister who had care of them, and who had been visiting a dying relative, informed her: "You're late, Sister, but I'll put the babies to bed for you!" And she was as good as her word. To the Sister's astonishment, she

folded little clothes and tucked the smaller children in as nicely as her elders could do.

No mention has been yet made of the Sisters' nursing in the City of Wellington, though it was no small task in addition to the College Hospital work. It was during this time of stress they came in contact with Mr. Peter Fraser, then newly-elected Member of Parliament for their district, and a member also of Wellington City Council (now Prime Minister of New Zealand). He placed a motor car at the disposal of the Sisters, and Sr. Delores with Mrs. M. Gleeson (who acted as driver) went here, there and everywhere the need was urgent, working all day and often all night too. Mr. Fraser himself was indefatigable in caring for the poor. He found out innumerable cases for the Sisters, and overlooked no one in need. Other Sisters who nursed in the district too, but as a rule, nearer home, were Sr. Alphonsus (Acting-Superior), Sr. Jeanne and Sr. Aloysius, and probably others.

While Sr. Veronica and Sr. Anthony were looking after Island Bay, Sr. Lawrence had to take over Berhampore from Sr. Francis, who also caught the infection. Sr. Hedwige helped here too. To show how Providence aided the Sisters in what was to many an unaccustomed task, it may be mentioned that the Berhampore Committee were so well satisfied with Sr. Lawrence's work, that they asked (after the disease had abated) "Nurse Lawrence" to write a full report for them on the existing conditions in the district - housing, sanitary, etc., with a view to remedying them. This request was treated as a joke by the Community, but it was a very serious matter to Sr. Lawrence and

those who had nursed at Berhampore. How the difficulty was overcome is now forgotten, perhaps the Committee realised that time was wanting to the Sisters. At any rate, Sr. Lawrence, wrote no such report as had been asked and the subject lapsed without any embarrassment, and with nothing but most friendly relations remaining between members of the Committee and the Sisters - in fact, some lifelong friendships were then formed and still exist.

A list of the Sisters from the Home of Compassion who took part in the nursing at Island Bay and Berhampore, appears in a letter written to Mr. Odlin the following March. The names were supplied to him at the request of the Department of Health, or rather, he was asked by the Department to obtain them as the Government desired to remunerate voluntary nurses, and to have a record of their names. Needless to say, the letter mentioned expressly states that the Sisters' services were purely voluntary and they could not accept any form of recompense. The names were these:- Sr. M. Claver, Sr. M. Clotilde, Sr. M. Veronica, Sr. M. Anthony, Sr. M. Francis, Sr. M. Paula, Sr. M. Lawrence, Sr. M. Louise (afterwards transferred to the College Hospital), Sr. M. Delphina, Sr. M. Hedwige, Sr. M. Emmanuel, Sr. M. Monica, Sr. M. Ignatius, Sr. M. Marcelle. They seem to have been listed (with the exception of the first two) in the order (or time) they were so employed, rather than by seniority of profession.

The Committee behaved very generously, and refused to accept any payment for the quantity of even unopened drugs and goods (such as syringes, tabloids, cotton wool, etc.) which had

been purchased to the order of the Nursing Sisters for the sick of the District. Nor would they allow the latter to return anything to the wholesale chemists who had supplied them. In addition, each Committee sent most flattering letters of appreciation, accompanied by a cheque (five guineas from Island Bay, and three guineas from Berhampore). These letters are treasured in the archives of the Institute.

Our Lord was pleased to reward the work of the Sisters with the Cross. While Srs. Salome and Genevieve remained dangerously ill at the end of November, on December 3rd, Sr. Natalie the newly-elected Mistress of Novices) was attacked by the disease at Island Bay. She had not been allowed to go out nursing, but, with the two postulants, had taken over the care of the Nursery, which was practically isolated from the rest of the house for fear of any infection reaching it. Infection did reach it, however, through the admission of the infant niece of Fr. Mark Devoy. An exception was made for her for urgent reasons, but she brought the germ with her, and all the Big Babies (toddlers) caught it severely, entailing grave anxiety and much work - and the serious displeasure of Dr. Fyffe. However, as a brother of Sr. Natalie's was very seriously ill - it was thought without hope of recovery - she was allowed to visit him once. She caught the infection, and her brother recovered.

Dr. Mackin (who had kindly taken over the care of the Sisters, saw her on the date mentioned and thought little of the case. By the 5th, however, her temperature had risen dangerously, and could not be reduced in spite of the most skilled treatment. Dr. Mackin was not well and was thought to have

caught the disease, so Dr. Fyffe insisted on coming in his place. Drs. McEvedy and Gilmour also came, and, though not yet well, Dr. Mackin returned and was most constant in his attendance, but nothing could save the Sister. She had the disease in its most virulent form. She was brave and patient under incessant treatment (brandy packs were used) which tried her extremely. And, though she had slight delirium at times she was clear-headed at the last - asking the Night Sister to watch her face for the change and call Sister Claver in time as he wanted the Sisters around her at the last. She had been anointed and had taken her final vows on the 10th December. So Fr. J. Cullen gave her Holy Viaticum at 11.30 p.m. on the 12th, and she expired (as she had desired) in presence of the Community, at 12.40 a.m. on the 13th.

At that time, Island Bay belonged to St. Anne's Parish, at which Ven. Archdeacon Devoy was Parish Priest, with Rev. Father Kimbell as Senior Curate (there were two others). Sympathy with the Sisters ran high just then, and Fr. Kimbell determined that every honour should be paid the departed Sister. He arranged for a Solemn Requiem Mass to be celebrated on the 14th - a Saturday - no easy task considering how the clergy were being over-worked in those days of trial. Dean Holley was Celebrant, and His Grace, Archbishop O'Shea presided in the Sanctuary and pronounced the Last Blessing. There were thirteen priests present, nearly all of whom went out to the cemetery. The whole ceremony was very beautiful.

The evening before Sister Natalie died, Rev. Father Cullen (then Chaplain to the Home), consecrated the Home of Compassion

solemnly to the Sacred Heart. And, after Sister expired, he kindly gave Holy Communion to the Community, many of whom had hardly recovered from the epidemic themselves, and could certainly not have managed to fast until morning. It was the first time they had had this privilege, and every one of them valued it highly.

Whether owing to the Consecration, or to Sr. Natalie's intercession, the epidemic abated at the Island Bay Home almost from the moment she died. Though neither of the two Superiors were well for a long time.

The funeral passed along Buckle Street, and as it did, Sr. Genevieve was operated on (at the Creche) for empyema - a serious operation indeed in those days and under those conditions. She eventually made "a good recover", but never regained the same strength as before. Sr. Salome and Sr. Rosalie were also a long time - but not so long as Sr. Genevieve, of course - in regaining their normal health. Their rooms were on the ground floor of the "O'Meara Wing", to reach which one had to cross the yard. The place was clean, of course, but that was all that could be said in its favour. The outlook was dismal in the extreme. Dr. Fyffe was horrified when he saw the poverty of the place. He did not mince words either, and declared several times over that is anybody but Mother Aubert owned it the Department of Health would have pulled it down! Naturally, he and the other doctors who had come in contact with the Sisters of late, wanted them to build a new, large hospital at Buckle Street, and to take advantage of the wave of popularity - which was like a tidal wave in force and extent - then setting them ever

so high in the estimation of the public, to raise the necessary funds.

This action was utterly repugnant to the Sisters as well as their Superiors, who could not tolerate the idea of trading on the sorrows and trials of their neighbours. It savoured too much of commercialism, and, badly as they needed a hospital where the young Sisters could be trained, they thought it better to wait a year or two until emotionalism had died down, and Mother Mary Aubert herself had returned, before taking any action. Mother highly approved of this course when she heard of it ere long.



