

Biographical Note: Dr Margaret Merrick

Merrick House in Terenure is named for Dr Margaret Merrick (1896-1970), a General Practitioner who pioneered the provision of services for the elderly in Dublin in the 1950s.

Dr Merrick's father was William Bolton Merrick, a Methodist minister noted for his social conscience, of whom it was written, 'He was a man of marked personality and very pronounced views (many of them differing from those commonly held), yet of such transparent sincerity and brotherly spirit, that he was much beloved' ([Index](#)).

Margaret Merrick graduated in medicine in 1919 from Queen's University, Belfast, spent some time in Poland on post-war relief work, then moved to Dublin in the 1920s. One of a remarkable generation of women bereaved by World War I, she lived and practised at 12 Lower Rathmines Road. As an active member of the Irish Red Cross, she led it into a collaboration with [Trinity College](#) that enabled a Victorian charity set up by students to evolve into a flexible model of sheltered housing for older people. After her death in 1970, the well-known Trinity historian [T.W. Moody](#), nine years her junior, born in Belfast and himself a graduate of Queen's, wrote affectionately in *The Irish Times*:

Who that ever knew Margaret Merrick can forget her strong, good-looking face, her brave kind brown eyes, her dark hair, her rich homely cheerful voice, her well built energetic frame, her firm step, and the incessant purposeful activity of a doctor utterly devoted to the welfare of her fellow-men and finding complete happiness in that service....

Childhood

To bring variety in preaching to their congregations, Methodist ministers moved house frequently: every two to three years they packed up their families and set out for their next posting. The many uprootings of Margaret Merrick's family, and the foundations of her care for others, can be read in the [Index of Preachers](#) compiled by the Methodist History Society of Ireland, based in Belfast¹, and in [Census records](#) for 1901 and 1911.

Margaret Merrick was born in 1896 in Ballina, Co. Mayo, where her father was minister, 1894-97. We find her on Census night 1901, aged four, not yet able to read, in a 10-roomed house on Main Street, Borrisokane, Co. Tipperary, with her mother, two older brothers aged seven and ten, a governess and a maid. The Census records her father in Whitegate, Co. Clare, on the western side of Lough Derg, as a visitor in another Methodist household, headed by Archibald Elliott Honan, grocer, draper and farmer. Mary Margaret's birthplace is given as Co. Mayo; her eldest brother William Jeremiah was born in Queen's County (now Laois), probably in Portarlinton, Thomas Barker Merrick in Larne, Co. Antrim.

1 Sincere thanks to archivist Robin Roddie, for his great help.

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In 1911, aged 14, Margaret Merrick was herself in Co. Antrim. Methodist College, Belfast, better known as Methody, was founded in 1865 to educate the children of Methodist Ministers, and in 1891 opened a hall of residence for girls. She had been a boarder there since the age of 11, when her brothers were already boarding at Wesley College in Dublin. Her parents and brothers are recorded in another 10-roomed house in 1911, this time in Ballinamallard, Co. Fermanagh, but William, 20, was studying medicine at Trinity College Dublin, while Thomas, 17, was an undergraduate there.

Medical Studies and Bereavement

When war broke out in 1914, Margaret Merrick was beginning her own medical studies at Queen's. On 27 September 1915, however, when she was 19, her father died in Adare, Co. Limerick, aged 59. Her brother William ('Willie') had married in Dublin earlier that year. He practised medicine in Castleknock for some 35 years and died there on 22 May 1950 (*Irish Times*, 24 May 1950). Thomas became a captain in the British army (Machine-gun Corps, Infantry). He died on active service in France on 2 September 1918, aged 25, and was buried in Vis-en-Artois British Cemetery, [Haucourt](#).

Lower Rathmines Rd and the Rathmines Group

Margaret Merrick's mother was born Mary Martha Haskins Barker in Shillelagh, Co. Wicklow. Widowed at 55, she may have moved to Dublin when her daughter set up in practice, for she died at 30 Lower Rathmines Rd on 5 May 1938.

Following Independence in 1922, most of the large, hard-to-heat Victorian houses in Lower Rathmines were divided over time into flats and bedsits, many of whose tenants were Dr Merrick's patients. She became acutely aware of their vulnerable position, especially once they retired from work, and gathered a group of volunteers under the title 'Homes for the Aged', to visit them and offer help. In 1951 this became a local branch of the Irish Red Cross Old People's Committee. Its first concern was to provide skilled nursing care for elderly people in their homes. Members raised funds to employ a specialized geriatric nurse, paying her £6 a week, plus a petrol allowance. From 1954 they hired part-time home helps to light fires, cook, and clean for those no longer able to take care of themselves and their surroundings. Mostly women, the volunteers would visit old people in their homes and 'strive to help them with their problems and difficulties'. In winter they distributed bags of coal; sometimes they paid to have laundry done.

Twenty-one years later, the Red Cross Dublin Old People's Committee, Rathmines Group, appealed for funds to continue the provision of nursing services, fuel and food to old people living alone, especially in winter, and to care for residents in two dedicated buildings. This is how it described its work:

...This group of voluntary workers meets each month; its members are of every age, creed and occupation; their common aim is to help those who because of age are no longer able to help themselves. Most of them give up much time to visiting old people, whom they try to help with their problems and difficulties. (1972 Appeal)

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Following Dr Merrick's death in 1970, the Group changed its name to 'The Margaret Merrick Old People's Committee'.

**Co-operation with Trinity Social Services:
Auburn House and Merrick House**

Dr Merrick's Rathmines Group had been in existence for only two years when it joined forces with the Trinity College Social Services (Tenements) Company in 1953. Together, in 1954, they opened Auburn House at 266 Harold's Cross Road as sheltered accommodation for older people who could no longer afford the cost of private rented accommodation (Comerford). This enterprise expanded in July 1970, when the new, purpose-built facility opened in Eaton Road, Terenure. As it neared completion, shortly before her own death, Dr Merrick reluctantly allowed it to be called Merrick House.

Angela Bourke, Rathmines, October 2017

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See also 'History of Merrick House' on www.merrickhouse.ie