

History of Merrick House

Merrick House, which provides assisted living in Terenure, Dublin, had its origins at the end of the 19th century in a social-service initiative by students and academic staff of Trinity College. This provided housing for people in need, and led to a partnership in the 1950s with the inspirational pioneer of services for the elderly in Dublin, [Dr Margaret Merrick](#), a GP in Rathmines, and the Irish Red Cross.

Merrick House DAC, a registered charity, continues the work of that partnership. It has the distinction of being one of the oldest companies in Ireland, but no longer has any formal connection with TCD or with the Irish Red Cross. The following is a brief history of the company and its work.

Poverty and Social Work in 19th-Century Dublin

When the Act of Union of 1800 moved Ireland's parliamentary business—and the fashionable social life that went with it—to London, the upper classes gradually abandoned their elegant Georgian town houses in Dublin. Entrepreneurs who bought them rented them as tenements, housing more and more people as the buildings deteriorated and individual rents fell. The result, by the end of the century, was an overcrowded population of the very poor, living in dangerously insanitary conditions in the inner city.

Sanitation, housing and public health were by then major public concerns across Europe, as epidemics of typhoid and cholera, spread by steam travel, ravaged crowded cities. The 1875 Public Health Act for England and Wales was followed by the Public Health (Ireland) Act of 1878, laying down rules for the provision of clean water, the maintenance of sewers, the paving of streets, and the prevention of overcrowding.

1895: An Inspiring Lecture by our First Chairman, Charles Eason Jr

In December 1895, Charles Eason Jr (1853-1941) read a [paper](#) at the weekly meeting of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (SSISI), on 'The Tenement Homes of Dublin: Their Condition and Regulation'. Dublin at that time was said to have the worst slums in Europe: the prosperous 'townships' of Pembroke (most of Dublin 4) and Rathmines (most of Dublin 6), lay outside the city's boundary.

Charles Eason had taken over as Managing Director of Eason and Son, the thriving Dublin book and stationery business, on his father's death in 1889. The incisive survey of reports and bye-laws that he presented on 13 December was one of his many contributions to SSISI, a society set up in 1847 during the Great Famine to conduct and publish empirical research on social questions. Eason drew comparisons with London, Aberdeen and Glasgow, concluding:

The extension of the city boundary to include the adjacent townships would give increased power and additional facilities for the improvement of the condition of the city. The well-to-do people who live in these townships escape at present their due share of responsibility. The question is not one to be settled simply by a reference to the effect upon the rates.

The present boundary is purely artificial. The people on both sides of it are, in fact, one community, and all should be willing to co-operate in the task of grappling with the social problems of the city. There is nothing new in this paper; the evils pointed out, their causes and the possible remedies, have been brought before the public time after time. There is no royal road to their removal. An improvement can only come from personal effort and self-denial on the part of the citizens of Greater Dublin.¹

When a group of students and staff of TCD took up his challenge, Charles Eason became first chairman of the Social Services (Tenements) Company, which they founded in 1900. According to Professor T.W. Moody, a later chairman, for almost 40 years he seldom missed a directors' meeting.

Social Work in Dublin

Opposition to state welfare was widespread at the end of the 19th century, especially among the better off, who might be expected to finance it through taxation: the Great Famine had left many landlords bankrupt. Within a few years, however, a number of groups had taken up Eason's challenge to personal effort and self-denial. Past pupils of the all-female Alexandra College founded the Alexandra Guild, which raised capital in shares of £5 each, and on 4 July 1898 set up the Alexandra Guild Tenements Company, Ltd. The Association for the Housing of the Very Poor, Ltd, was set up in December of the same year, headed by L.H. Ormsby, President of the Royal College of Surgeons ([Lawson, 237-42](#)).

In 1899 the Alexandra Guild Company sent Miss Mary (or Marie) Bagley to London to train with [Octavia Hill](#), who had been operating social housing schemes in Marylebone since 1864. It bought and refurbished property and by 1909 owned and operated five tenement houses on Summerhill and on Grenville Street nearby, off Mountjoy Square. Mary Bagley, described as 'the first modern social worker employed in Ireland', collected rents weekly, as laid down by Hill, and became a friend and mentor to many tenants (Kearney and Skehill, 14, 52).

R.M. Gwynn and the Social Services (Tenements) Company, Trinity College

About 1899, a small group of male TCD students (Trinity did not admit women until 1904) set up the Dublin University Social Service Society. Their leader was 22-year-old Robert Malcolm (['Robin' Gwynn](#)), a recent graduate, from a distinguished family long associated with Trinity. His father, the Reverend John

¹ Charles Eason, 'The Tenement Homes of Dublin: their Condition and Regulation', JSSISI, X (1898-99) Part 79, 383-398. See <http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/7261>.

Gwynn, had been Regius Professor of Divinity there since 1888; his older brother Edward was a Fellow; his maternal grandfather was William Smith O'Brien of Co. Limerick, whose statue stands in O'Connell Street, Dublin.

The Social Service Society held meetings and heard papers delivered, but interest waned for lack of contact with real social problems, until a speaker (perhaps Miss Bagley) set out Octavia Hill's approach in detail:

...The owner of the house must do his share; the tenants must equally do theirs. Rents must be charged which would cover the necessary repairs and rates and allow for a moderate profit. Rent collectors, trained by Miss Hill herself, must insist on regular payments, never allowing arrears to mount up, and on the other hand provide for the prompt execution of all repairs necessary to keep the house healthy and clean.... Miss Hill was firm in expecting the tenants to understand that self-respect demanded that they should pay their way....

It was suggested that ...students, without imposing controversial questions of religion on charitable benevolence, might come into close touch with the lives of their fellow citizens, and listen at first hand to the difficulties with which they had to cope. Without in any way pauperising the tenants it should be possible by help in time of illness and providing wholesome recreation to make real friends among them and their children. (1953 Typescript, 2-3)

R.M. Gwynn, who may be the author of the typescript quoted here, was ordained a priest in the Church of Ireland in 1908 and later became Trinity's Professor of Biblical Greek. At a seminar held in his memory in Rathfarnham, Dublin, in 2013, the Reverend Patrick Comerford underlined the complexity of Gwynn's social commitment, noting that while he shared a platform with James Connolly and Jim Larkin during the 1913 Dublin Lockout, 'he was also a leading member of Trinity's OTC, and served briefly during World War I as an army chaplain'. [Comerford](#) noted that:

[f]rom his rooms he could see the ugly face of the slums of Dublin, with their appalling housing and their high rates of infant mortality. He not only visited the slums, but went and lived in the slums for weeks and months on end, so that he not only preached but practised social service long before the welfare state was conceived.

Following some significant donations and offers of help, the Society decided to form a limited-liability company to own and operate 'good' tenement houses. On 21 December 1900, R.M. Gwynn's brother Edward was one of eight men who signed Articles of Association to set up the Social Services (Tenements) Company Ltd. The company's main object was to be 'the relief and care of persons suffering from poverty or destitution or being otherwise in need'. It would own and manage houses on the model set up by Octavia Hill in London, and lately in

Dublin by the Alexandra Guild Company. Like them, as an index of sustainability, it would pay its investors (most of them Trinity graduates), a modest dividend, not to exceed 4%. In fact it never paid more than 2.5%, and no dividends were paid after 1907.

The Social Services (Tenements) Company bought two houses on Grenville Street, near those owned by the Alexandra Guild Company. By 1909 it owned and operated seven houses (numbers 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 24 and 25), housing 256 people; it later acquired two more. A paid resident superintendent lived with his wife in one of the houses, but volunteer members of the student society, whose committee reported annually in writing to the board of directors, carried out all administration, including rent collection. R.M. Gwynn continued to be the driving force (Lawson, 239-40; Comerford; 1953 Typescript).

The Irish Red Cross (Rathmines) Old People's Committee

Usually called 'the Rathmines Group', this gathering of voluntary workers was started in Rathmines by Dr Margaret Merrick as 'Homes for the Aged' in the years after World War II. The Irish Red Cross Society was turning its attention to geriatric issues at that time also: it invited Dr Merrick and her associates to become founder members of its Old People's Committee, from which local groups were formed.

The Rathmines Group began work in 1951, meeting every month. According to its records, members were 'of every age, occupation and creed', their common aim 'to help those who, because of their age, [were] no longer able to help themselves.' Most, if not all, members were women. Among them are a number of surnames of well known men, a reminder that married women were excluded from most paid employment at that time, and that many were active in voluntary work. The first president was 'Mrs Felix Hackett', vice-chairman of the Irish Red Cross, described as having 'a lifetime of experience of social work in Dublin'. Mary E. Hackett had also been a member of the Tribunal of Inquiry on the tragic fire at St Joseph's Orphanage in Cavan on 23 February 1943, which caused the deaths of 35 girls and an elderly woman, trapped in the dormitories. Mrs Hackett's husband was Professor Felix Hackett (1882-1970), who retired in 1952 from the UCD chair of physics and electrical engineering.

Dr Merrick chaired the Rathmines Group, whose first concern was to provide skilled nursing care for elderly people in their homes. They raised funds to employ a specialized geriatric nurse, paying her £6 a week, plus a petrol allowance. From 1954—long before Local Authorities did anything of the kind—they hired home helps whom they dispatched to light fires and do cooking and cleaning for those no longer able to take care of themselves. Members would visit old people in their homes and 'strive to help them with their problems and difficulties'. In winter the Group distributed bags of coal; sometimes it paid for laundry to be done.

The 1950s: Auburn House

By 1951, when Dr Merrick started the Red Cross Rathmines Group, to cater to the needs of vulnerable elderly people in the area, the Social Service Company was

fifty years old and Ireland was a 26-county republic. Unemployment and poverty were rampant.

Social questions had come into public focus again with the ending of World War II (known in Ireland as 'The Emergency'). In 1946, in what was still the Irish Free State, the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act had created dedicated cabinet positions for a Minister for Health and a Minister for Social Welfare. Trinity had been offering a Diploma in Social Studies since 1934 (Kearney and Skehill, 22). Its students—women—gained first-hand experience working as volunteers for the Social Service Company, but their skills came too late to bring its practices fully up to date (1953 Typescript).

All the original directors of the Social Services Company (see Appendix, below) were dead by 1951, and the students who had set up the Social Services Society were in their seventies. Repair costs for the Company's 200-year-old buildings continued to rise, while rents often went unpaid. The board now found itself financially unable to bring its buildings into line with new health regulations. Requesting Dublin Corporation to take over the houses, it considered how best to continue to fulfill its mission with the modest cash reserve that remained.

The Company planned at first to build cottages, to house a number of elderly people living in tenement rooms. However, despite much effort, it failed to secure a suitable site. It was on the point of winding up its affairs when Dr Merrick approached some of its members. T.W. Moody's [words](#) following her death in 1970 have the authority of personal acquaintance:

She was shrewd, good humoured, amusing and an excellent judge of character. She was a bonny fighter for causes she served, but also a master of the art of cutting through red tape. She was nothing if not strong-minded, and once she had decided that you were called upon to undertake some good work you usually found yourself doing it.

Moody had moved to Trinity from Queen's in 1939, when he became Erasmus Smith's Professor of Modern History, a position he held until his retirement in 1977. He was treasurer of the Social Service Company from 1942, and became its chairman in 1953. (He was still chairman on 1 September 1969, and his wife Margaret was secretary, when they launched a successful appeal to build Merrick House.)

Living with his family in Healthfield Road, Terenure, well within Dr Merrick's area of operation, 'Theo' Moody became her staunch ally. With her colleagues in the Rathmines Group, she identified Auburn House, at 266 Harold's Cross Road, directly across the street from the church of Our Lady of the Rosary, as a building close to all services, which could be made suitable to house a number of elderly people at modest rents, and provide them with a hot meal daily. She herself would be available to provide GP care; a resident nurse would provide continuity and oversight, and her Red Cross group would manage the building, visiting and befriending residents and fundraising to make up the shortfall in running costs.

The Dublin University Social Service (Tenements) Company bought Auburn House for £1,300, and paid for the necessary extension and refurbishment. Auburn House opened in 1954 with twelve elderly tenants: men, women and married couples. The Red Cross nurse lived in one of the rooms, and the Rathmines Group remained closely involved in the running of the house.

Dr Merrick and the Social Service Company did not rest on the success of Auburn House. Many elderly people remained in inadequate housing and for years Dr Merrick urged the need for a second building. The Company launched an appeal for funds, and in 1969, commenced building on land granted by the then Dublin Health Authority. Dr Merrick, already in poor health, consented to the use of her name for Merrick House.

The 1970s: Fundraising and Expansion,

Another appeal for funds was launched successfully in 1972, two years after Dr Merrick's death. This financed the purchase of a nearby house at 25A Eaton Square, where 'six ladies [were] comfortably settled' by Christmas 1975. Further fundraising was carried out in 1976. As it no longer owned tenement houses, but through its directors retained a strong connection with TCD, the Company changed its name in 1979 to The Social Service Company (Trinity College) Ltd.

The Red Cross Rathmines Group continued its involvement with the houses for many years. In documents dated October 1977, its official name appears as 'the Margaret Merrick Old People's Committee'.

1990s-present

In the mid-1990s, Merrick House was extended from 12 to 18 residents' rooms, giving each one a private bathroom and a sitting area. It also acquired a room for a live-in staff member, and another for occasional guests. The Eaton Square house was sold in 1995 and its six occupants moved into Merrick House.

In 2011, as the Company's board of directors no longer included any representatives of Trinity College, it changed its name to Merrick House Ltd. On 28 June 2016, in accordance with the Companies Act, 2014, Merrick House Ltd became Merrick House DAC (Designated Activity Company).

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Appendix

The First Board of the Social Services (Tenements) Company:

a piece of Dublin's history

When the new company was set up in 1900, two of its unpaid directors were Trinity graduates with special knowledge of the living conditions of Dublin's poor:

- Charles Eason Jr, described as a 'book-seller', living at Ardnachree, Dalkey, whose paper, 'The Tenement Homes of Dublin' inspired the students' action, agreed to become chairman and gave 'inestimable guidance in the purchase and management of the houses' (1953 Typescript, 4);
- Richard Dancer Purefoy (1847–1919), obstetrician and gynaecologist, was Master of the Rotunda Hospital, at the heart of some of Dublin's poorest areas. A leading member of the Church of Ireland, he lived at 62 Merrion Square, and died unmarried (DIB). He may be the 'well known Dublin doctor who approved the idea of bringing students into first-hand contact with the conditions under which the Dublin poor were forced to pass their lives in a lot so different from our own', and thus inspired the students to set up a limited-liability company (1953 Typescript, 4);

The other six directors were fellows and/or professors of Trinity:

- Edward John Gwynn (1868–1941), R.M. Gwynn's older brother, was a noted Celtic scholar; and expert on the medieval Monastery of Tallaght; he became Provost of TCD in 1927;
- Charles Francis Bastable (1855–1945), of 6 Trevelyan Terrace, Brighton Road, Rathgar, gave his occupation as 'Barrister-at-Law'. He was also a distinguished economist, with professorial appointments at TCD and at Queen's College, Galway. Son of a Church of Ireland rector from Charleville, Co. Cork, he was vice-president of SSISI, which regularly published articles on living conditions in Dublin, including Charles Eason's, quoted above;
- John Joly (1857–1933), of 17 Northbrook Road, Ranelagh, was a rector's son from Co. Offaly, then called King's County. A brilliant scientist and committed educationist, he studied engineering, moved into physics and in 1897 became Professor of Geology at TCD, pioneering the study of radioactivity in relation to geology;
- M. W. J. Fry (1863-1943), born in Co. Clare, was a Fellow of TCD from 1889 and Tutor in Mathematics. Deeply committed to Trinity, he compiled the *University of Dublin War List 1922*, and left his library to the Dublin University Mathematical Society (Obituary);
- Louis Claude Purser (1854–1932), classicist and brother of the artist Sarah Purser, was from Dungarvan, Co. Waterford. Described in the DIB as 'A genial and sociable character who was immensely popular', he was

Professor of Latin at TCD from 1898 to 1904, when he resigned his chair to devote himself to university administration;

- William Edward Thrift (1870–1942), of 80 Grosvenor Square, Rathmines, was born in Yorkshire, grew up in Dublin and attended the High School and TCD, where he became Fellow in Mathematics and Experimental science, and later Erasmus Smith's Professor of Physics. More effective as a committeeman than as a scientist, he was Independent TD for Dublin University from 1922 until university representation was abolished in 1937, and served as Provost of Trinity from then until his death. A noted cyclist in his youth, he was grandfather of the Olympic athlete Maeve Kyle.

Sources, including abbreviations used in text:

1953 Typescript: Copy of an unsigned 7-page typescript, with corrections, title ('The Social Service Tenements Company') and date, '1953' in manuscript, possibly the work of R.M. Gwynn

1972 Appeal: A single-page memo from the Dublin Old People's Committee of the Irish Red Cross Society/Cumann Croise Deirge na hÉireann, dated October 1972, appealing for volunteers and for funds to continue its work

1976 Appeal: A single-page memo dated October 1976, similar in layout to the 1972 document, appealing for funds to make up a shortfall in the cost of refurbishing 25A Eaton Square, near Merrick House, where six ladies have been settled since Christmas 1975

Census: National Archives of Ireland, Census of Ireland, 1901, 1911: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>, accessed repeatedly, 2012-16

Comerford: Patrick Comerford, 'The Revd Professor RM Gwynn (1877-1962): Priest', address delivered at RM Gwynn Commemoration and Seminar, Whitechurch Parish, Rathfarnham, Dublin 16, 8 pm, 19 September 2013, blogged as <http://www.patrickcomerford.com/2013/09/the-revd-professor-rm-gwynn-1877-1962.html>, accessed July 2016.

Daly: Mary E. Daly, *The Spirit of Earnest Inquiry: the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland 1847-1997* (1997)

DIB: James McGuire and James Quinn, eds, *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), print and web

Eason: Charles Eason, 'The Tenement Homes of Dublin: their Condition and Regulation', JSSISI, X (1898-99) Part 79, 383-398: <http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/7261>

Index: Methodist History Society of Ireland, *Index of Preachers*, entry on William Bolton Merrick, (methodisthistoryireland.org). Thanks to archivist Robin Roddie, who kindly provided a copy of the entry.

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Kearney and Skehill: Noreen Kearney and Caroline Skehill, eds, *Social Work in Ireland: Historical Perspectives* (Dublin: Insitute of Public Administration, 2005).

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Moody: T[heodore] W[illiam] M[oody], 'Dr Margaret Merrick, 1896-1970: An Appreciation'. Printed single sheet (q.v.);

Obituary: 'Matthew Wyatt Joseph Fry', *Journal of the London Mathematical Society* (1945) s1-20 (1): 57-58);

SSISI: *The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*;

War Graves: Website of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission:
(<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx?cpage=1>, accessed 2016.0713).