

## **Mrs. Jas. Sadlier**

### **Canadian Apostle of Catholic Literature**

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Mary Anne Madden, the subject of this paper, daughter of Francis Madden, a merchant of some means, was born on the last day of the year 1880, in Cootehill, Co. Caven, Ireland.

Although she was a mere girl of nine years when the thundering of the mighty O'Connell forced the Catholic Emancipation Bill through the British parliaments, she must have been uncommonly well educated. Her father fostered his daughter's literary talent. At sixteen she was already a contributor to *La Belle Assemblee*, a London magazine of which little is known except that it enjoyed the patronage of no less lowly a personage than an English duchess.

In 1844 she came to Montreal. Within two years we find her in New York and being married, November 1886, to Jas. Sadlier, partner with his brother of the publishing house of D. & J. Sadlier, Barclay Street, New York, and manager of the Montreal branch, then at the corner of Notre Dame and St. Francis Xavier Streets.

For the next fourteen years the Sadliers lived in Montreal. They then settled in New York. Left a widow in 1869 Mrs. Sadlier and her growing family remained in New York until 1880, when she returned and took up permanent residence in this city.

She died twenty three years later, April 5, 1903. The funeral was held in New York at the Jesuit church of St. Ignatius. Archbishop (afterwards Cardinal) Farley presided at the solemn Libera. The chief mourners were her son, James, three daughters, and her sons-in-law, Charles Leblanc, Montreal, and Frank Chadwick, Ottawa. Two other sons had predeceased her.

Mrs. Sadlier was buried beside her husband in Calvary Cemetery, New York. The impressive length of the list of her more than sixty volumes, and the variety of this literary output are an enduring testimony to her rich gifts of mind, her devotion to the faith, her love of souls, and to the astonishing industry that marked her long life.

What with rearing a family – she was a widow after twenty-three years of married life – sharing in the management of an incipient publishing business, doing something like justice to the social duties of her position, taking a foremost part in the creation and organization of agencies of welfare

of various kinds, and remaining all the while unhalting in her labors, her accomplishments were nothing short of prodigious.

A sizable part of her writings is strictly devotional. Many of these are in the original but not a few are translations. Mrs. Sadlier possessed an excellent knowledge of French and translated easily from the German and Italian. Everywhere she proves herself widely read in prose and poetry alike. At the request of Archbishop Hughes, of New York, she published in English the abbé Orsini's famous *Life of the Blessed Virgin: Later De Ligny's Life of Christ*. A volume entitled "Purgatory" is packed full of excerpts that have to do with the doctrinal, historical, and poetical side of the comforting dogma of the Poor Souls. For these varied and choice specimens of Catholic authorship the writer wandered far afield from the early Church Fathers to most of the already recognized lay and ecclesiastical writers, in prose and poetry, among the French, German, Spanish and Italian authors of many centuries. Some rare testimonials are introduced, too, from distinguished non-Catholic sources. This bulky volume, published in 1885, is lovingly dedicated by the author-mother to the gracious memory of her young Jesuit son, Francis Xavier, called by death soon after his ordination to the priesthood.

Among others, "Purgatory" carries the majestic "Requiem Aeternam" of Thos. D'Arcy McGee, her brilliant fellow countryman as well as collaborator in a number of literary activities. A footnote informs that the gifted poet met his tragic death exactly one month after penning the beautiful Requiem on the occasion of the passing away of an intimate Montreal friend. McGee's death ended a long and valued friendship. Later she compiled a volume of his poems. She was associated, as well with many other prominent persons, of whom two of the most notable were Orestes Brownson, eminent American convert, writer, orator and philosopher, and the scholarly Dr. Ives, also a convert, and formerly Episcopalian bishop of North Carolina.

Together they founded "Sadlier's Tablet." For years Mrs. Sadlier supplied column after column to the editor's page of this weekly which was published solely in the interests of her coreligionists. An honored figure, she played a conspicuous part in the circles in which the brightest lights, lay and clerical moved. All of them were giving of their best in the cause particularly of Catholic education and the general uplift of Catholics.

*Tales of the Olden Times*, a volume of short, pleasantly written sketches and legends, with a background of Montreal and Lower Canada, as the east of the then non-existent Dominion was called, came out of her stay in this city.

She wrote a number of Irish historical novels of the semi-romantic type. "The Confederate Chieftains," "McCarty More" and "Lights of Galway" are the three for which she had the fondest liking herself. The action in the first of these works is set in the desperately distressed, Ireland of the 15th century.

Each illustrates the author's first-hand knowledge of general Irish history, the centuries-old legends of that country, familiarity with the historians of the period, and a happy at-homeness with the great and near great of the Older poets. It is easy to imagine how eagerly these books were sought and devoured by the men and women of the first and second generation of Irish Americans and Canadians, nearly all immigrants. These absorbing volumes served their purpose then, little as they attract now, unknown, in fact, in our day and age. They satisfied the profound religious and patriotic feelings of their readers. They helped far more than we perhaps realize now to strengthen the faith of the simple minded and encouraged the dutiful practice of it in the strange and often hostile surroundings of new and still alien America.

Fiction, for its own sake, offered no appeal to Mrs. Sadlier. Her own words give point to the statement. "I cannot afford" she writes in one of her Prefaces, "to waste time pandering merely to the imagination, or fostering that maudlin sentimentality which is the ruin of our youth, both male and female."

On the other hand, she possessed in abundant measure the practical common sense that made her not unsympathetic to what she knew to be the surest and shortest cut to the mind of the masses. The following long quotation reflects her judgement on the question of purely fiction books as contrasted with books of devotion. "I have never been of the opinion of some good, pious people, who are entirely opposed to work of fiction for the very good reason that I have found moral or didactic stories doing more good and exercising a more marked influence on the mind of ordinary people than works of either instruction or devotion. This being so, it only remains for us to reach those who will not read pious or devotional books in what way we can and to foil the spirit of the age with his own weapon . . . I still have confidence in the final results."

And it was as a writer of fiction, of simple stories with the human interest paramount in the unfolding of the tale, dealing with a topic of close racial and religious concern to the reader, that this talented lady served, as, maybe, no other Catholic writer in America's scene has since served the members of her Church and race. Often, documented facts, attested as to date and place in footnotes, are cleverly woven into the texture of her fiction books. Invariably, too, the story carries a moral within itself. At times, indeed, the moral is given separate treatment of several pages, rounding out and in a way condensing the already ended story. The author is taking no chance that the moral of the book, the whole reason for its creation, be lost on a possible unalert reader.

Here I may be allowed to digress. It is a stepping off the level road of this narration but it thrusts itself naturally into my theme.

To understand at all the motive that moved Mrs. Sadlier to the composi-

tion of almost every one of her tales, particularly in the fiction part of her work, and to evaluate the enormous weight of this writer's influence on several generations of Catholics, it is necessary to recall the circumstances under which practically all her stories were written.

The backdrop of most of Mrs. Sadlier's labors as an author is the New York picture of a century ago. The period I have in mind would open about twenty-five years before she and her family became residents of that city. It would end with about ten years after the Civil war.

The times were troublous for the Church and Catholics. Within the household of the faith was the evil that was Trusteeism, weakening the confidence of the laity and undermining ecclesiastical authority. Without was all that was meant by Know-nothingism, the thing itself as well as its auxiliaries and subsidiaries. The infamous "Maria Monk" was continuing to be the Best Seller of the day. It is not generally known that this notorious Canadian herself died in the old Toombs in New York city, September, 1849, while serving time for various thefts.

Over in Ireland the most terrible famine in Erin's long and sorrowful history was draining the country of its life blood. All who could manage to leave the dead and dying to the fate that seemed inescapable were emigrating. For the most part they came to the United States, the land of golden hope and glittering promise. New York was the popular port of landing for these exiles, the displaced persons, the "D.P's" of those days. Some moved on: many stayed and unhappily, were scarcely able to prevent themselves from being drawn into and absorbed in the great pell mel stream of city life. The social and religious problems that the ever augmenting population created were enough to make the church authorities despair.

We think, in this year of grace, 1947, of the long established preeminent status of the present day archdiocese of New York, with its numbers, strength, power and prestige; its practically unlimited material resources, and the imposing array of benevolent agencies within its vast orbit, so prepared as to be unafraid of the challenge of no matter what kind of human emergency. How utterly unlike the New York that Mrs. Sadlier and her family settled in fourteen years after her marriage! It seems incredible, in face of the New York we know, but here are the facts. . .

Two extracts from Farley's *Life of the First American Cardinal*, the incomparable McCloskey, reveal just what was the state of the diocese so far as money is concerned . . . "When Bishop Hughes took over the reins of power in August 1839, he saw the necessity of a personal appeal to the charity of Europe . . . On October 16th of that year, he set sail for Vienna, seeking aid from the Leopoldine Association, which had already sent in the previous decade considerable alms to the Church in America" . . .

And again, farther on – "Pursuing his policy for aid in the upbuilding of this diocese, Bishop McCloskey sailed for Europe on October 1st 1851"

...

Catholic America, it will have to be admitted, has paid back and with the hundred fold that the Scriptures speak of, whatever charities Europe showed the struggling Church and the poor Catholics of the days of Hughes and McCloskey.

This was the New York of the early Irish newcomers, poor, guileless. Their race and their creed made them unwanted Everywhere they encountered bigotry, open and hidden. Proselytism, not the least ugly of the whole unlovely brood begotten of bigotry, was rife. The souls of the children especially were at stake. The parents, bewildered by the new conditions of living, lost all too often in the fastness of the maze of narrow, winding streets, surrounded by families as poverty stricken as themselves, were bound to be visited in their shabby homes by the smooth tongued, kind, detestable Bible women of one of the organizations so seemingly charitable. The technique was uniformly the same. In exchange for the huddled quarters, there would be offered to the children the nice public refuge and school, clothes, food and everything else. At times they came in the name of the law to take away the young delinquent boy, generally, who had in some small way run afoul of it. In another sphere the docks were not always safe for the immigrant young women and girls. Here the danger was of being greeted and proffered a helping hand by the harpies, the brazen women of the nefarious trade that would ruin both the body and soul of these innocent new arrivals.

Episcopal authority, priests, nuns, brothers, lay committees, all the human instruments that the Church presses into service to do her Christ-like work, were inadequate to cope with so tremendous a situation. What they did achieve was miraculous.

Mrs. Sadlier was active during the whole length of her residence in New York in the founding of institutions destined to relieve one lamentable situation after another. She assisted in bringing into existence a Home for Friendless Girls, a Foundling Asylum, A Home for the Aged, A Night Refuge, a Working Girl's Home, and many other similar establishments. This side of her life must be known to account for the theme in so many of her novels. She wrote without apology or excuse what now are called propaganda books. Almost always some sociological problem was involved; the interests of her coreligionists were in some manner at stake.

In many instances the subject of a book suggested by some in high places, to expose the grievances of Catholics in an especially deplorable case. Mrs. Sadlier wrote to interest Catholics themselves, to inform public opinion, and with the one aim of effecting a remedy. "Aunt Honor's Keepsake" was written because Dr. Ives, of whom mention has been made, requested a tale that would show up in all their meanness, the despicable methods of those who were engaged in spiriting away the hapless children of the poor. The first Catholic Protectory in New York, and with Dr. Ives as the President,

was the final answer to this particularly hideous situation.

It was one of the most conspicuous priests converts of America, Father Hecker, founder of the Paulists, who asked her for such a story as is "Bessy Conway" in which Mrs. Sadlier tells the sinister tale of the open, and the concealed, dangers inherent to the domestic service advocacy of so many young immigrant girls. "Blakes and Flanagans," an exceptionally well told story, states the case of the parochial schools versus the public school in the education of young Catholics. The junior Blakes were sent to the latter; their faith was lost and all pride of race rubbed out. The Flanagans entered their boys and girls in St. Peter's. There they received a first class schooling, were trained to meet life on its own level, married happily within the circle of their Catholic friends, and gave one son to the priesthood.

Generally in her fiction books she dealt with facts so true that the source material of "Aunt Honor's Keepsake" was the official Report of 1865 of the State Refuge for Juvenile Delinquents. Often the footnotes to a particularly hateful sort of incident supply the date and the place of the occurrence. Such a fact as the refusal of the head of the institution to summon a priest that heroic Charlie O'Grady, an orphan and immigrant eleven years of age and dying, was calling for, and the lad's last words "I'm dying a Catholic anyhow," is a shameful indictment of the lengths that bigotry would go to in its dealing with children. They used to farm them out to the far West after actually changing their Irish names. For years, in collaboration with Dr. Ives and Orestes Brownson, and the fearless Irish Bostonian, Patrick Donoghue, founder and first editor of the Boston Pilot, Mrs. Sadlier uncovered and pilloried the conditions that made possible the odious happenings of which the Charlie O'Grady incident was a sample. She had deep admiration for the general fair-mindedness of the American people. Frequently in her newspaper articles she expresses the keen sense of justice and the great generosity that she noted in them. And no one could add to her personal knowledge of the old bad "souperism" days in Ireland.

Hence, the constant flow of the stream of her books. In her labors, indeed, was personalized the truth of the slogan so familiar to writers – "of the making of books there is no end." Almost to her death she kept sending out book after book, all the while working at her weekly Sadlier's Tablet, and contributing all over the country to the many smaller Catholic newspapers and periodicals. It takes only a stroke of a pen or its equivalent to tell of her uninterrupted literary toil to safeguard those of her race.

But this does not hint at the drudgery involved in the life long assignment that this ageing, cultured, saintly woman took upon herself and with which she kept faith for nearly three score years and ten. No more than any other author could this one lightly toss off volume after volume. It meant for the greater part of the long period, working under an unrelieved heavy strain, and as it seems generally to be the way in God's dealings with those

who aim at great holiness, the crosses she carried so resignedly were little apart.

She was a widow before her fiftieth year. For long the almost full burden of the rearing of her family was on her shoulders. They received the fall college and convent education that befitted the prominence of the honored name they bore. The publishing house of which her husband was a partner, considering the small market for the sale of Catholic printed matter, was always in a precarious financial condition. The climatic crash came when, through poor management, partly, and false friends as well, the House of Sadlier hardly saved itself from going to the wall. Her own personal interest in it was in great part squandered. The plates of her books were handed over without her knowledge for a very inadequate sum. Thus she was suddenly dispossessed of the monetary fruit of her colossal labor, and the only resources she depended on for the maintenance of her family. When the blow fell the Sadliers were living in a modest but dignified state on Sherbrooke Street, near the corner of Bleury. There she and her well bred daughters used to receive the visitors of both languages who belonged to their set. Following the money disaster they were forced to move to a humbler section of the City. Mrs. Sadlier actually died at No. 96 Burnside St. And there were intimate sacred griefs that again manifested the identity of this valiant Christian woman's lot with what is the general way of God with His saints. Her son, Joseph, was blind.

The unexpected death of her Jesuit priest son must have been an unforgettable sorrow as most surely it was an occasion of great sacrifice and grace. Fr. Francis Xavier Sadlier, SJ. arrived home from Europe where he had been studying in various houses of the Society. Among his confreres of many nationalities in these different Jesuit seats of learning he was known as the "American Saint." Gentle and always delicate he refused the permission offered him of coming to Montreal to celebrate one of his first Masses and impart to his venerable mother the blessing that she had so eagerly waited for during the many years of the lengthy Jesuit preparation for the holy priesthood. In the spirit of self-denial the newly ordained priest declined the permission. The next day he left for his "obedience" at Holy Cross College, Worchester, Mass. Three months after he was dead of pneumonia. His mother arrived too late to see him alive. She saw her newly ordained son for the first time when she looked down on him dead in his coffin.

The spectre of poverty haunted her old age. Yet, as the years invaded and she began to slow down she never gave over her love for and interest in the written word. In 1895 Notre Dame University awarded her the Lætare Medal for her distinguished service to the Church and her coreligionists. The ceremony of bestowal of this token of recognition and appreciation, a kind of official approval of all that she had done,, took place on Monday, April

3rd in the grand salon of the évêché in this city. The elite of Montreal, French and English speaking were gathered there. Sir William Hingston, dear friend of the venerated lady, was spokesman on the occasion. Very Rev. H. A. McGarry, C.S.C., President of St. Laurent College, acting in the name of the President of Notre Dame University, bestowed the Medal.

Dr. Hingston spoke partly as follows: – Graciously citing her “as one of the pioneers of Catholic Literature in America, she wrote” he continued, “not to indulge her own aesthetic tastes, not to win wealth, but to profit souls and to advance the interests of the Church.” “And if,” he added, “the writings of an author are to be measured by their influence upon the public, or a section of the public mind, then the works of Mrs. Sadlier have been of incalculable advantage in making virtues more attractive and vice more hideous and loathsome.”

Mrs. Sadlier was then in her seventy-fifth year. Her name was a household word wherever a group of English speaking Catholics was to be found. “Sadlier’s Library,” a collection of volumes comprising fiction, books of devotion, historical writings and a Catechism of the Sacred Scripture, was the stock in trade in every parish library in the country. Her story books were handed out as prizes to two generations, maybe three, of Catholic scholars. She practically furnished thousands of tales to such periodicals as the New York Messenger and similar Catholic weeklies. She was prime mover in the establishing of a local Centre for our English speaking Canadian League, and she contributed stories to the Canadian Messenger as long as she could hold a pen.

Consoling as was the Lætare Medal, it was the only tangible token this most deserving daughter of the Church ever received for the endless toil of a whole gloriously useful lifetime. Through a Sadlier Testimonial Fund, sincerely intentioned but weakly organized in Canada and for a short while in the United States, the paltry sum of \$1,300.00 was raised and presented to her. Small as it was and so enormously out of proportion with the worthiness of the aged and needy authoress, the gift was gracefully acknowledged. The years were levying their toll. At the age of 83 Mrs. Sadlier died. It was Palm Sunday morning, April 5, 1903. Fr. Turgeon, SJ. and her friend of long standing, Sir William Hingston, were with her at the end. This paper which I have the honor to read at the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, is not intended to be a review or critical estimate of the genuine literary talent of a noted mid-nineteenth century Catholic writer.

The Montreal True Witness, the week after her death, placed her as an exponent of the Irish character in the same category as Gerald Griffin and the Bannims.

Mrs. Sadlier knew her limitations as an author. Nor did she forget ever that the frontiers of her reader’s minds were not widely apart. She wrote for simple folks. She developed her own formula of writing; she had fashioned

her own pattern. She seldom went far from its somewhat restricted area.

Dickens was the vogue during a great part of the period that Mrs. Sadlier was at her best. She never imagined herself a Dickens, nor a George Eliot, the woman writer of an earlier date who had put feminine authorship in the forefront of letters. Mrs. Sadlier used her gifts in the manner she judged would do the most good. So it is that I try to picture her in these sketchy pages as one of our race and faith entirely self dedicated to the Apostolate of good writing and, inferentially, good reading. The scriptural trinity, Faith, Hope and Charity, were incarnate in her. She wrote in the interests of the faith she loved passionately and practised to a degree that melted into holiness. She wrote out of her love of souls, especially, the souls of children and teen age Catholics because she believed that they bore on them the indelible stamp of another Child.

And she never lost the fond hope that her books would be instruments of grace. Like her brilliant literary contemporary, Brother Azarias, she believed that a good book is itself a "visible grace." She felt that the influence of them would be, somehow, fair and fruitful and precious. Maybe it was God's way that there should exist so large discrepancy between the material compensation that her labors brought her and the rich, enduring recompense to her spirit.

In her advocacy of good writing, Mrs. Sadlier anticipated by a century and avidly took upon herself some of the responsibilities that present day Catholic Action imposes on the laity. Her whole life's labor was a consecration of her able pen; her work was a mission, a crusade, an apostolate.

Nor was its accomplishment made less arduous by the fact that the demands on her as an author and a social worker had to be met within the framework of the continually mounting duties of her greater vocation as wife and mother. We have her own words that hers was a career rooted in the faith that she loved above all else and the loss of which by anyone was to her an unthinkable evil.

So it is that I have attempted to make this paper more an affectionate tribute, however belated, a modest acknowledgement of a debt of gratitude that Catholics of the English tongue owe this gifted, cultured, saintly lady, who in her own way guided three generations of them and guarded and prayed for them in the days when those of our creed and race were so sorely tested and so severely tried. Perhaps, too, it will serve to introduce Mrs. Sadlier to some of our own day, or to reintroduce her as a real person to so many to whom she is little more than a faded memory.