

Thomas Finigan

We tend to think of the Christian missionary as someone who disappears into the heart of Africa or South America, a Bible in one hand and a hand-drawn map in the other. This was certainly a common enough enterprise in the 19th Century, when the Christian churches felt duty-bound to take their message to places untouched by the Gospels.

But not all the heathen lived in far-away places. The ministers and priests who administered to the cities of Victorian England were all too aware that darkness and ignorance, as they saw it, lay just around the corner. A stone's throw from the hymn singing on a Sunday morning there were families who had not once set foot in a church, and had never opened a Bible because they didn't need it, or couldn't read it.

It was in such circumstances that the urban missionary was born. Destined to plod the streets like a travelling-salesman, the urban missionary took his tracts and his Bibles, his words and his consolation, down into the back streets. In Birmingham it was the nonconformist churches in particular that sent out missionaries, and established missions in Hurst Street, Allison Street and elsewhere.

The Congregational Town Mission at Carrs Lane initially appointed three missionary agents in 1837, and allocated to each a group of streets, roughly 20 in number. Inevitably, of course, the courts behind most Birmingham streets added considerably to the size of the district. One agent's 21 streets also included 40 back-to-back courts. The first appointees were Edwin Derrington, who was allocated streets around the Garrison Lane chapel where he already worked, Peter Sibree from Tamworth, who was based in Legge Street, and Mr Clay, who was allocated the Livery Street neighbourhood.

Each kept a journal of his daily round, which was then submitted to the church elders for approval. For all the Poor Law enquiries and medical reports drawn up in Victorian Birmingham, these missionary diaries contain the most vivid descriptions of the living conditions of Birmingham's poor to be handed down to us.

By the summer of 1837 another missionary was added to the team. His name was Thomas Augustine Finigan, and his designated patch was the poorest and darkest of all.

Finigan's diary, now preserved in Birmingham Archives & Heritage in the Central Library, has recently been transcribed and published by the Birmingham Irish Heritage Group. (Copies are available from the Irish Centre on Deritend.) Having read through the missionary diaries myself, I know how much work that means !

Thomas Finigan came over from Ireland in July 1837 he received as his area the district around Lichfield Street. It may be that Finigan's familiarity with Gaelic recommended him to the area, for it had a large Irish population. But it was more poverty than ethnicity that united the area. Lichfield Street itself contained the parish workhouse, and the streets around it - the Gullett, John Street, London-Prentice Street and Thomas Street - had a reputation for prostitution, petty crime, poor health and acute deprivation. These streets were poor at the best of times; in the late 1830s they were destitute. As Finigan himself said of one visit in August 1837:

“Among the persons whom I met in the caravanserais of John Street were beggars, showmen, music grinders, pedlers and impostures of different grades and different nations, lodging in wretched harmony, filthy vileness and disgusting dirt to the number of from 15 to 20 or more in one house.”

Finigan and his colleagues were given very fixed rules on what they could and could not do. Their work was meant to be evangelical, and not a substitute for charity or the Poor Law. Yet it would be a hard-hearted man indeed who could turn a blind eye to the social deprivation in Birmingham’s poorest courts.

Of one visit Finigan wrote:

“In one court called Dog and Duck Yard there was a family named Bloor. The father was a gun barrel maker, but out of employment for more than nine months. The husband and wife could not bear the idea of separation from each other, nor from their children, which would be the case, they considered, if they went into the workhouse, and they preferred accepting two or three shillings in a week and remain as outdoor poor. This, they tell me, was at last denied them. I found the woman stretched on a sort of bedstead. Bed or blanket there was none, fire or candle there was none, nor was there a morsel of food in the house for thirty hours before my visit. And then the little that was procured was by the sale of three plates, a tea pot and an old chair for one shilling.”

Inevitably, perhaps, Finigan found himself drawn into a battle of politics and poverty. He wrote to newspapers, sent reports to the Statistical Society, and campaigned against the discrimination faced by the Irish in the distribution of poor relief.

And that, I’m afraid, was all too much for the directors of the Town Mission, and Finigan was “let go”, less than a year after his arrival.

Yet in his ten months in the town Thomas Finigan had learnt more about the lives of the poor than many politicians who had spent their whole lives here. Thank goodness he set it down on paper.