

# M. Dame Columban



*The Irish Nuns  
at Ypres: An Episode  
of the War*

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# PREFACE

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The following narrative was originally intended, as a record of the events it relates, for the use of the Community only. But, shortly after the arrival of the Mother Prioress in England, the manuscript was placed in my hands. I soon formed the opinion that it deserved a larger circulation. My friend Reginald Smith shared this view, and so the story has come before the public.

It is in truth a human document of thrilling interest, and will, I believe, make an abiding contribution to the history of this world-wide war. D. M. C., though a novice in literary work, describes with graphic force the transactions in which she and her Sisters played so conspicuous and so courageous a part. The moving pictures, which pass before our eyes in her pages, are full of touching realism, and throw curious sidelights on the manifold aspects of the titanic struggle which comes home to everyone and everything.

The heroism, the self-devotion, the religious faith, the Christian zeal and charity of those Irish nuns at Ypres, in a terrible crisis in the history of their Order, will, I venture to say, command universal respect and admiration, mingled with pity for their fate, and an earnest desire, among all generous souls, to help them in retrieving their fortunes.

A Note by the Prioress, and an Introduction by Mr. Redmond, who, amid his many onerous occupations, is not unmindful of the duty which Irishmen owe to the historic

little Community of Irish Nuns at Ypres, form a foreword to a narrative which belongs to the history of the times.

The illustration on the cover is a reproduction of the remnant (still preserved in the Convent) of one of the flags captured by the Irish Brigade at the battle of Ramillies. On this subject I have added a Note in the text.

There are names in Belgium which revive memories that Irishmen cannot forget. Fontenoy and Landen are household words. Ypres, too, brings back recollections associated with deeds which mark the devotion of the Irish people to Faith and Fatherland.

R. BARRY O'BRIEN.

100 SINCLAIR ROAD,  
KENSINGTON, W.  
May 1915.

# NOTE BY prioress

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These simple notes, destined at first for the intimacy of our Abbey, we now publish through the intervention of Mr. Barry O'Brien to satisfy the numerous demands of friends, who, owing to the horrors of the fighting round Ypres, have shown great interest in our welfare.

Owing, also, to the numerous articles about us, appearing daily in the newspapers—and which, to say the least, are often very exaggerated—I have charged Dame M. Columban to give a detailed account of all that has befallen the Community, since the coming of the Germans to Ypres till our safe arrival at Oulton Abbey. I can therefore certify that all that is in this little book, taken from the notes which several of the nuns had kept, is perfectly true, and only a simple narrative of our own personal experiences of the War.

May this account, to which Mr. Redmond has done us the honour of writing an introduction at the request of Dame Teresa, his niece, bring us some little help towards the rebuilding of our beloved and historic monastery, which, this very year, should celebrate its 250th anniversary.

M. MAURA, O.S.B.,  
*Prioress.*

*April 1915.*

# INTRODUCTION

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I have been asked to write an introduction to this book, but I feel that I can add little to its intense dramatic interest.

Ypres has been one of the chief centres of the terrible struggle which is now proceeding on the Continent, and it is well known that this same old Flemish town has figured again and again in the bloody contests of the past.

It may, perhaps, be well to explain, in a few words, how the tide of war has once more rolled to this old-world city.

On Sunday, June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and his wife, the Duchess of Hohenberg, were assassinated. Although it was known throughout Europe that there was in existence in Serbia an anti-Austrian conspiracy (not of a very formidable character), and although suspicion pointed towards the assassinations being due in some way to the influence of this conspiracy, no one dreamt for a moment that the tragedy which had occurred would have serious European consequences; and, as a matter of fact, it was not until July 23 that the Austro-Hungarian Government presented an ultimatum to Serbia. On that day, however, a note of a most extraordinary and menacing character was delivered to the Serbian Government by Austria-Hungary. It contained no less than ten separate demands, including the suppression of newspapers and literature; the disappearance of all nationalist societies; the reorganisation of Government schools; wholesale dismissal of officers from the army; and an extraordinary demand that Austro-

Hungarian officials should have a share in all judicial proceedings in Serbia; besides the arrest of certain specified men, and the prevention of all traffic in arms.

It at once became evident to the whole world that no nation could possibly agree to these demands and maintain a semblance of national independence; and, when it was found that the ultimatum required a reply within forty-eight hours, it became clear that the whole of Europe was on the brink of a volcano.

Great Britain, through Sir Edward Grey, had already urged Serbia to show moderation and conciliation in her attitude towards Austria-Hungary; and, when the ultimatum was submitted to her, Great Britain and Russia both urged upon her the necessity of a moderate and conciliatory answer.

As a matter of fact, Serbia agreed to every one of the demands in the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum, with only two reservations, and on these she proposed to submit the questions in dispute to The Hague. Serbia received no reply from Austria-Hungary; and, immediately on the expiration of the forty-eight hours, the Austro-Hungarian Minister quitted Belgrade. During those forty-eight hours, Great Britain and Russia had urged (1) that the time-limit for the ultimatum should be extended, and that Germany should join in this demand; but Germany refused. Sir Edward Grey then proposed (2) that Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy should act together, both in Austria-Hungary and in Russia, in favour of peace. Italy agreed; France agreed; Russia agreed; but Germany again held back. Sir Edward Grey then proposed (3) that the German, Italian, and French



Ambassadors should meet him in London. Italy and France agreed; Russia raised no objection; but Germany refused.

On July 29, the German Imperial Chancellor made to the British Ambassador in Berlin the extraordinary and historic proposal that Great Britain should remain neutral, provided that Germany undertook not to invade Holland, and to content herself with seizing the colonies of France, and further promised that, if Belgium remained passive and allowed German troops to violate her neutrality by marching through Belgium into France, no territory would be taken from her. The only possible answer was returned by Great Britain in the rejection of what Mr. Asquith called 'an infamous proposal.'

On July 31, the British Government demanded from the German and French Governments an undertaking, in accordance with treaty obligations, to respect Belgium's neutrality, and demanded from the Belgian Government an undertaking to uphold it. France at once gave the necessary undertaking, as did Belgium. Germany made no reply whatever, and from that moment war was inevitable.

On Monday, August 3, the solemn treaty, guaranteeing the neutrality of Belgium, signed by Germany as well as by France and Great Britain, was treated as 'a scrap of paper,' to be thrown into the waste-paper basket by Germany; Belgian territory was invaded by German troops; and, on the next day, Tuesday, August 4, German troops attacked Liège. From August 4 to August 15, Liège, under its heroic commander, General Leman, barred the advance of the German armies, and, in all human probability, saved Paris and France and the liberties of Europe.

On August 17, the Belgian Government withdrew from Brussels to Antwerp. On August 20, Brussels was occupied by the Germans. On August 24, Namur was stormed. On August 25, Louvain was destroyed, and, after weeks of bloody warfare, after the retreat from Mons to the Marne, and the victorious counter-attack which drove the Germans back across the Aisne and to their present line of defence, Antwerp was occupied by the Germans on the 9th of October. On October 11, what may be called the battle of Ypres began in real earnest; but the town, defended by the Allies, held heroically out; and by November 20, the utter failure of the attempt of the Germans to break through towards Calais by the Ypres route was acknowledged by everyone.

During the interval, Ypres was probably the centre of the most terrible fighting in the War. This delightful old Flemish town, with its magnificent cathedral and its unique Cloth Hall, probably the finest specimen of Gothic architecture in Europe, was wantonly bombarded day and night. The Germans have failed to capture the old city; but they have laid it in ruins.

The following pages show the sufferings and heroism of the present members of a little community of Irish nuns, which

‘The world forgetting, by the world forgot,’

has existed in Ypres since the days, some two hundred and fifty years ago, when their Royal Abbey was first established. It is true that, during those centuries, Ypres has more than once been subjected to bombardment and attack, and, more than once, Les Dames Irlandaises of the

Royal Benedictine Abbey of Ypres have been subjected to suffering and danger. But never before were they driven from their home and shelter.

Why, it may be asked, is there a little community of Irish Benedictine nuns at Ypres? During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, three English ladies—Lady Percy, with Lady Montague, Lady Fortescue and others—wishing to become Religious, and being unable to do so in their own country, assembled at Brussels and founded an English House of the ancient Order of St. Benedict. Their numbers increasing, they made affiliations at Ghent, Dunkerque, and Pontoise.

In the year 1665, the Vicar-General of Ghent was made the Bishop of Ypres, and he founded there a Benedictine Abbey, with the Lady Marina Beaumont as its first Lady Abbess. In the year 1682, on the death of the first Lady Abbess, Lady Flavia Cary was chosen as the first Irish Lady Abbess of what was intended to be at that date, and what has remained down to the present day, an Irish community. At that time, the Irish had no other place for Religious in Flanders. A legal donation and concession of the house of Ypres was made in favour of the Irish nation, and was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception under the title of 'Gratia Dei.' Irish nuns from other houses were sent to Ypres to form the first Irish community. From that day to this, there have been only two Lady Abbesses of Ypres who have not been Irish, and the community has always been, so far as the vast majority of its members are concerned, composed of Irish ladies.

Its history,[\[1\]](#) which has recently been published, contains the names of the various Lady Abbesses. They are,

practically, all Irish, with the familiar names Butler, O'Bryan, Ryan, Mandeville, Dalton, Lynch, and so on.

In 1687, James II of England desired the Lady Abbess of the day, Lady Joseph Butler, to come over from Ypres to Dublin and to found an Abbey there under the denomination of 'His Majesty's Chief Royal Abbey.' In 1688, the Lady Abbess, accompanied by some others of the community at Ypres, arrived in Dublin, and established the Abbey in Big Ship Street, leaving the House at Ypres in the charge of other members of the community. It is recorded that, when passing through London, she was received by the Queen, at Whitehall, in the habit of her Order, which had not been seen there since the Reformation. In Dublin, James II received her, and granted her a Royal Patent, giving the community 'house, rent, postage' free, and an annuity of £100. This Royal Patent, with the Great Seal of the Kingdom, was in the custody of the nuns at Ypres when this War began. It was dated June 5, 1689.

When William III arrived in Dublin, in 1690, he gave permission to the Lady Abbess, Lady Butler, to remain. But she and her nuns refused, saying 'they would not live under a usurper.' William then gave her a pass to Flanders, and this particular letter was also amongst the treasures at Ypres when the War broke out.

Notwithstanding William's free pass, the Irish Abbey in Dublin was broken into and pillaged by the soldiery, and it was with difficulty that the Sisters and the Lady Abbess made their way, after long and perilous journeys, home to their House at Ypres. They brought with them many relics from Dublin, including some old oak furniture, which was

used in the Abbey at Ypres up to the recent flight of the community.

And so the Irish Abbey at Ypres has held its ground, with varying fortunes. In January, 1793, forty or fifty armed soldiers broke into the Abbey; but the Lady Abbess of the day went to Tournai to seek aid from the General-in-Chief, who was an Irishman. He withdrew the troops from the Convent. The following year, however, Ypres was besieged by the French; but, although the city was damaged, the Convent, almost miraculously, escaped without injury.

An order for the suppression of Convents was issued in the very height of the Revolution. The heroic Lady Abbess Lynch died. She was succeeded by her sister, Dame Bernard Lynch, and the Community were ordered to leave. They were, however, prevented from so doing by a violent storm which broke over the town, and next day there was a change of government, and the Irish Dames and the Irish Abbey were allowed to remain, and, for several years the Irish Abbey was the only Convent of any Order existing in the Low Countries.[\[2\]](#)

So it has remained on to the present day, from the year 1682 down to 1915, when, for the first time during that long period, this little Irish community has been driven from Ypres and its Convent laid in ruins.

Amongst the other relics and antiquities treasured by the Community at Ypres, at the opening of this war, was the famous flag, so often spoken of in song and story, captured by the Irish Brigade in the service of France at the battle of Ramillies; a voluminous correspondence with James II; a large border of lace worked by Mary Stuart; a large painted

portrait of James II, presented by him to the Abbey; a church vestment made of gold horse-trappings of James II; another vestment made from the dress of the Duchess Isabella, representing the King of Spain in the Netherlands; and a number of other most valuable relics of the past.

All these particulars can be verified by reference to the Rev. Dom Patrick Nolan's valuable history.

This little community is now in exile in England. Their Abbey and beautiful church are in ruins. Some of their precious relics are believed to be in places of safety. But most of their property has been destroyed. They escaped, it is true, with their lives. But what is their future to be? Surely Irishmen, to whom the subject especially appeals, and English sympathisers who appreciate courage and fortitude, will sincerely desire to help those devoted and heroic nuns to go back to Ypres—the home of the Community for over two centuries—to rebuild their Abbey and reopen their schools, to continue in their honourable mission of charity and benevolence, and to resume that work of education in which their Order has been so long and so successfully engaged.

JOHN E. REDMOND.

*April 1915.*

[1] *The Irish Dames of Ypres.* By the Rev. Dom Patrick Nolan, O.S.B.

[2] At the time of the Revolution, the nuns of Brussels and Dunkerque (to which Pontoise had been united) and Ghent fled to England, and these three Houses are now represented by Bergholt Abbey (Brussels), Teignmouth (Dunkerque), and Oulton Abbey (Ghent).

