

The Story of Edmund Rice

SPIRIT
ALIVE

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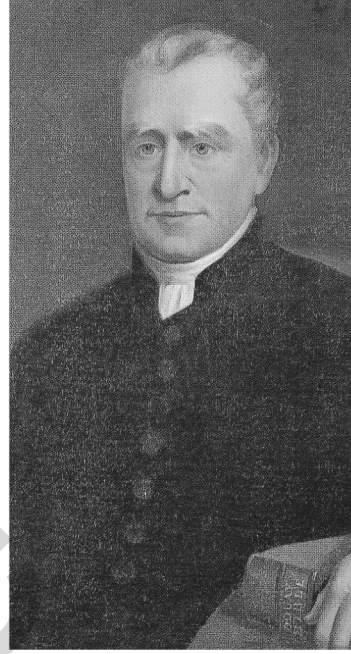
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Portrait of Edmund Rice

Contents

1	<i>The Boy From Callan</i>	5
2	<i>The Wealthy Merchant</i>	10
3	<i>The Mission Begins</i>	16
4	<i>Mount Sion</i>	22
5	<i>Establishing the Congregation</i>	27
6	<i>The Work Spreads</i>	33
7	<i>The Walking Saint</i>	38
8	<i>Across The Seas</i>	44
9	<i>A Life of Mission</i>	50
10	<i>Spirit Alive</i>	56
	<i>Index</i>	62

The founder's original home in Callan



*'I came so that
everyone would
have life, and
have it in its
fullest.'*

John 10:10

1

The Boy From Callan

The story of Edmund Rice is the story of a man with a dream and the conviction to make it come true in a time of hardship and suffering in Ireland during the 18th century.

Edmund began his life at a time when Catholics were *discriminated* against because of their religion. Born on 1 June 1762, in the family home of Westcourt in Callan, Ireland, Edmund was the fourth of seven sons of Robert and Margaret Rice.

discrimination:
Where a group or individual is treated unflavourably based on prejudice (e.g. race, religion, etc.).

The Rices were a well-known Catholic family in Callan. Edmund's father leased over 160 acres of farmland in this region. His mother, Margaret Tierney also came from a well-respected family.



The kitchen in the founder's original home

From 1691 to 1746, a set of Penal Laws against Catholics had been enforced by the Protestant government of England which ruled Ireland at the time. These Laws were designed to keep the Irish Catholics in a state of poverty and so exclude them from all positions of importance in society. They could not be members of Parliament; they could not hold professional positions, and they were not allowed to trade nor to own property.

To limit their rights in society, and to keep the Catholic population ignorant and powerless, Catholics were forbidden to have their own schools. With Catholics making up almost 80 per cent of the population of Ireland at the time, this lack of education meant they lived in poverty and suffered in society. While the *Protestants* held all power and privilege in the country, the Catholics lived in terrible conditions. The Irish Catholic was virtually reduced to being a peasant slave.

At the time of Edmund Rice's birth, the *Penal Laws* were showing signs of being relaxed. This allowed a small number of Catholics to improve their position in society. This saw a new Catholic middle class emerging in Ireland.

Protestant:

A Christian religion begun in the 16th century which rejects the authority of the Pope in favour of the authority of the bible. It values the importance of the individual faith.

Penal Laws:

Laws that prohibit certain acts and impose a penalty if broken.

Through these difficulties, the Rice family was able to survive. Edmund's grandfather, also named Edmund, was an established farmer and respected citizen of Callan, a farming town situated in county Kilkenny, 140 kilometres south west of Dublin. When he died in 1757, his large tenant farm was managed by his son, Robert. Edmund's mother, Margaret, a widow of a local farmer, had two daughters, Joan and Jane, before marrying Robert Rice. A strong and loving woman, her marriage to Robert brought together two of the most successful and influential families of Callan. A hard working family, they lived in a spacious house and were quite successful farmers. They were able to maintain a reasonably high standard of living and enjoyed a reputation for honesty and justice in the local community.

At an early age, Edmund Rice would have been aware of the poor conditions that Catholics were forced to suffer. Edmund's parents were aware that it was important for their children to receive a good education, which was denied to most Catholics. Years before Edmund's birth (under the Penal Laws) many Catholic children were taught in secret – usually by a travelling teacher who would go from farm to farm and teach beside a river or behind a hedge. These '*hedge schools*' were particularly important for those parents who could not afford to pay fees.

For Edmund Rice, his first education, like that of his brothers and sisters, was received in his own home – being taught by his mother. Obviously, living on a farm,

Hedge Schools:
Catholic primary schools that began by priests wandering the country side, secretly teaching religion to young children. Later, teaching was in buildings but still referred to as hedge school.

Edmund was required to complete duties to help his father. Each of the children would have to work in the fields or care for the animals.

Augustinian Friar:

A Catholic religious group that originated from the 5th century hermits in North Africa who followed the Rule of St Augustine. They travelled throughout the countryside, teaching religion.

Pattern days:

A feast day in honour of a patron saint in Ireland.

The Rice children were also fortunate to live in a district which was served by three priests and a small community of *Augustinian friars*. These religious men were a positive influence on Edmund and his family and provided the basis of his Catholic education. The visits by the friars to the Rice home obviously had a significant impact on Edmund's younger brother, John, as he later joined the Augustinians to become a priest.

Edmund was also fortunate to have been taught by Father Patrick Grace. The 'little grey friar', as Father Grace was known, was an Augustinian who travelled the countryside teaching the Catholic children. However, Edmund's first formal education was received in Callan at the hedge school in Moate Lane. Here, he would have studied subjects like penmanship, reading and memory work. Apparently, as a young boy Edmund was an excellent student and gained the respect of the other students. He became a leader among them and often took the poorer children home to Westcourt where his mother would give them food and he would instruct them in religion.

Being devout Catholics, the Rices would attend Mass whenever it was possible and would have enjoyed local fairs and pattern days. *Pattern days* were annual events where local patron saints were honoured and celebrated. Times were tough so it was important to join in the

The Brothers' house, Callan and the present vegetable garden was once part of the Rice family property.

social activities of music, song and dance when the opportunities arose. Sport too would have been important, with the game of *hurling* being the most popular at the time.

Having completed his primary schooling in Callan (receiving instruction in the 3R's) Edmund's parents decided to continue his education at a commercial secondary school in Kilkenny – approximately 40 kilometres north of Callan. Moving to Kilkenny in 1777, he lived with his cousin and, in later years, would recall with fondness and gratitude the example he was given by his religious teacher at the school.

As no records were allowed to be kept, little is known of Edmund's schooling but it is believed that he spent two years at the Kilkenny school and would have been taught subjects including navigation, mathematics and book-keeping all of which would prove extremely useful to him in later life.

As few career choices were open to Catholics, Edmund was encouraged to enter the world of trade. Therefore, having completed his schooling, he was sent to live and work with his uncle, Michael, who operated a *merchant* business in the town of Waterford in the south west corner of the country.

Few could have imagined the extent to which this move to Waterford would change Edmund and how it would form the foundation of the remainder of his life.

Hurling:

An Irish ball game played between two teams of fifteen players. (Similar to mixing hockey and lacrosse.)

3R's:

A slang term for reading, writing and arithmetic.

Merchant:

A person who trades – buys and sells goods for profit.