

UNsung HEROES



Steadfast in the shadow

Eliza Nangle endured both physical and emotional challenges and travails during her life on Achill Island

ÁINE RYAN

aineryan@mayonews.ie



PROSELYTISING missionary Edward Nangle's name may still be a controversial one in Achill Island's historical narrative, but what of his first wife, Eliza?

She may not be an unsung hero in the classical sense; she may not have carried out some remarkable deed that has faded in the mists of time but there is much courage displayed in her relatively short life. She stood steadfast and often silently by her husband as he zealously established the Achill Colony in his mission to repress 'Popery' and save the souls of the impoverished islanders. By his own account, she encouraged him to ensure the schoolchildren were fed during the famine years. That deed that may be construed as controversial in light of the practise of 'soup-ism', but in Eliza's case, one can conjecture, it was a sentiment steeped in her strong maternal nature and simple faith.

Edward Nangle had a huge impact on the island – building the Colony, its schools with its scriptural education, its reclaimed land, its medical services. Despite this, he couldn't control the fate of his own family. It is Eliza's headstone and that of six of their children – five of whom predeceased her – that lies in the Sean Reilig at St Thomas's Church, on the slopes of Slievemore.

Eliza died in Dublin on June 19, 1850, aged 47, after a long and painful illness. Poignantly, her remains were removed to Achill, where, according to Edward, 'her funeral was attended by a large concourse of people of all classes; few indeed have been followed to the grave by a larger company of sincere mourners'.

Meanwhile, Edward Nangle is interred on the other side of the country. His headstone has toppled over and lies amid overgrown foliage in Deansgrange Cemetery, Dublin.

SELFLESS SUPPORT

THE first time Eliza Nangle set foot on Achill she was pregnant with her second child. She had travelled aboard the Nottingham through stormy seas with characteristic determination, single-mindedness and selflessness to accompany and support her husband in his latest manic quest. If Edward Nangle was alive today, he would undoubtedly be diagnosed with bipolar disorder, his bouts of depression see-sawing with his fre-



▲ **LOVING CARE** Eliza Nangle with her daughters Francis and Henrietta (courtesy the Nangle family).

netic proselytising projects.

It was July 1831 and famine and cholera were sweeping through the congested districts of the west of Ireland, where a population explosion was largely down to the discovery of the Con-nacht Lumpur potato and a medieval landlord system.

When this young couple had married three years earlier, it was into a refined world of privilege at Elm Cottage in the leafy Dublin suburb of Monkstown, where evenings were filled with classical music and drawing-room chatter.

This would be a short-lived period in their married life, as Eliza Warner Nangle followed her husband on an untamed island on the wild west coast in his quest to convert the native population and educate them in the salvation of their souls.

ARRIVAL IN ACHILL

ON August 1, 1834, Edward and Eliza Nangle arrived again on Achill, now with their three young daughters, Frances, Henie and Baby Tilly. Once again, Eliza was pregnant, this time with a

boy, who died two days after his birth in 1835. Indeed, a second son survived just a few weeks the following year, whilst a third lived for a month in 1837.

In all, this young woman experienced eleven pregnancies, with the final two ending in one infant mortality and one stillbirth as the Great Famine raged along the devastated western seaboard in 1846 and 1847.

She endured these physical and undoubtedly emotional challenges and travails during the 1830s and '40s, while the Achill Mission grew



▲ **SLIEVEMORE** The location of the Achill Mission Colony.

► **IN MEMORY** A plaque erected to remember the life of Eliza Nangle at St Thomas's Church in Dugort.

EXTRAORDINARY MAYO PEOPLE YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD OF

dows

Slievemore resting place

PATRICIA BYRNE

ONE hundred and seventy-five years ago, on March 10, 1846, as snow storms descended on Achill Island, Eliza Nangle gave birth to a daughter at the family home in Dugort. The child died within hours. She was the tenth child of Eliza and Edward Nangle and the fourth to have died in infancy.

The baby girl would be interred with her siblings at the family grave on the slopes of Slievemore in the month that saw the first reported deaths from starvation as the Great Famine gripped the country.

Edward Nangle, who had founded the Achill Mission Colony over a decade earlier, had been absent from the family home for several months. It was his custom to undertake extensive travel each year on fundraising and preaching tours in Ireland and England. On this occasion his absence had been even longer due to the recurrence of a bout of physical and mental illness while on his travels.

Edward and Eliza Nangle arrived at Dugort, north Achill, in 1834 with their three young daughters to establish the Achill Mission Colony. Edward's vision was to bring the bible, education and improved living conditions to the people of the island, and to establish 'an oasis of civilisation in the midst of superstition and squalor'.

From the beginning, their life was marked by sectarian conflict, difficult living conditions and Edward's long absences. The rival schools established on the island by the Achill Mission and Archbishop John MacHale caused particular acrimony.

Against this background, Eliza toiled to raise her family and contribute to the Colony's work by teaching in its schools, helping in the orphanage and keeping the books of account. When Lady Jane Franklin visited the Colony with her husband in 1835 and met Eliza, she described a gentle and zealous woman who had renounced the luxury of her earlier life and devoted her energies unselfishly to her husband's mission.

Within a few years Eliza's



▲ **RESTING PLACE**
Sean Reilig, Slievemore,
burial place of Eliza Nangle
and her children.

health was beginning to crumble. In December 1937, after enduring the death of another child, she wrote a letter to her sister Grace. In contrast to the voluminous verbal output of her husband in the pages of the Achill Herald, and in sermons with a torrent of polemic and theological argument, the letter is the only record of Eliza's written words that survived. She appears broken in spirit: "I often find my heart swelling with sorrow, and my eyes filling with tears that I cannot restrain ... Edward has been much spared in this owing to his absence from home."

Eliza Nangle died in Dublin on June 19, 1850, aged 47 years. Edward's obituary referred to his wife's virtues of faith, kindness and perseverance, and acknowledged that her wellbeing was affected by the volatility of his personality, his own ill health and his frequent absences. He wrote: "Another trial to which the faith and fortitude of this excellent woman was exposed originated in the necessity which required the writer frequently to leave Achill for the purpose of collecting funds to carry on the Mission."

Following Eliza's death, her sister - Grace Warner - was there to support the younger

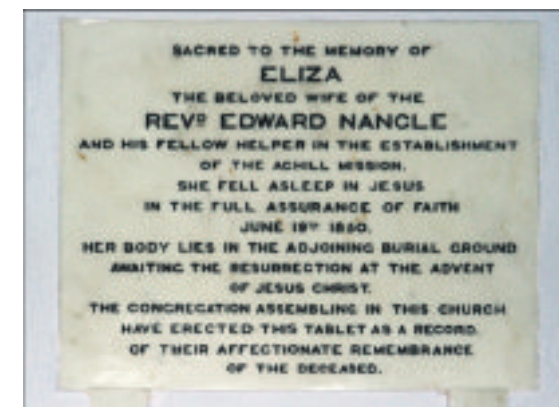
Nangle children, in particular the delicate George, the youngest child of Eliza and Edward. He suffered continuous poor health and mental illness as a youth and young man. It appears that her delicate, sensitive nephew became the main focus of Grace's attentions for the rest of her life.

Eliza Nangle's remains were taken from Dublin to Achill for burial on the slopes of Slievemore next to her deceased children. "The funeral [was] attended by a large concourse of people of all classes; few indeed have been followed to the grave by a larger concourse of sincere mourners," her husband wrote.

Edward's final resting place, together that of with his second wife, is over 200 miles away, far from the roar of the ocean, in Deansgrange Cemetery, Dublin, where his headstone has toppled to the ground from its stone base.

MORE

For more on this story, see Patricia Byrne's book, 'The Preacher and The Prelate - The Achill Mission Colony and the Battle for Souls in Famine Ireland', published by Merrion Press and available in local bookshops and www.patriciabyrneauthor.com.



amid all sorts of controversies and her husband was regularly absent, raising further funds for his pet project.

Writing Eliza's obituary in The Achill Herald, her widower wrote about how her account-keeping skills had saved the Mission the expense of paying a bookkeeper over many years. He also wrote - tellingly of these patriarchal days - that Eliza was 'in every respect a woman of masculine understanding' who, while devoting all her energies to the Mission, shrank 'from notoriety under the shadow of her husband's name'.

Few indeed have been followed to the grave by a larger concourse of sincere mourners