



## Edmund Rice

1762 - 1844

**Businessman, Husband, Father, Widower, Teacher, Founder, Friend of the Poor**  
**A man for our times – 250 years after his birth**

### Early Life

Edmund Rice, the fourth of seven sons of tenant farmers, was born at Westcourt in Callan, Ireland, in 1762. Under the English Penal Laws of the time, Catholics were restricted in the practice of their religion, ownership of land and the education of their children. However, despite witnessing the poverty, suffering and persecution of fellow Catholics, Edmund was able to receive a good education. At the age of 17 he was apprenticed to his uncle, Michael Rice, a wealthy merchant supplying provisions and equipment to trading vessels in the port city of Waterford. Edmund was talented and energetic and prospered. On the death of his uncle, Edmund inherited the thriving business which he expanded successfully.



Westcourt, Callan

### Husband, Father & Single Parent

As a young man in his early 20s Edmund was well established in a prosperous business and enjoying an active social life. He attended church regularly and was generous in his support of charities that cared for the poor. He became influential and highly respected and a man of means who moved easily among the social elite. At the age of 25 he married Mary Elliott. Sadly, only two years into their marriage Mary died in childbirth leaving Edmund alone with a disabled daughter, also named Mary. His dream of a happy married family life was shattered. The death of Mary Rice and the disability of his daughter Mary had a profound influence on Edmund and radically altered the course of his life.

### The Christian Brothers

In this period of loss and grief Edmund continued to manage his business while deepening his spirituality, attending church daily, reading the Bible and reflecting and praying regularly. He became increasingly aware of the plight of the poor, visited the Waterford slums and helped form an association that provided food, clothing and shelter. He visited prisons and accompanied condemned men to the scaffold. In particular, Edmund became aware that the poor children of Waterford would remain illiterate, hungry, rebellious and powerless unless they could access an education that would enable them to become employable.

In 1802, at the age of 40, this distinguished and wealthy businessman moved out of his elegant home into a converted two-storey stable where he set up a school for the 'quay kids' of Waterford and set about teaching them to read and write and understand basic arithmetic, while giving them a sense of worth and knowledge of the Christian faith. This was the initial phase of Edmund's decision to devote his considerable fortune and the

remaining years of his life to the most neglected children of his day. His business acquaintances were dumbfounded and his friends shocked. With more than 100 boys crowded into the stable Edmund employed teachers but they lasted only a few weeks. Nevertheless, he persevered and soon several others joined him as volunteers. Edmund also set up a bakery to provide bread and a tailor to provide warm clothing for the boys. In 1803 Edmund and his companions moved to their first permanent school, which he named Mt Sion.

Edmund and his small group of like-minded companions began to live in community and follow a life of regular prayer and service. His reputation and work for the neglected boys of Waterford became well known and others joined. In response to invitations more schools were established in Ireland and England. Eventually, the rule of life of Edmund and his companions was approved by the Catholic Church and the Congregation of Christian Brothers was established. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Christian Brothers had become established in Australia, North America, South Africa and India.

### **The Australian Scene**

Three Brothers arrived in Sydney in 1843 but following a dispute with the local Bishop who wanted them to transfer to the Benedictine order, they returned to Ireland in 1847. The next group of four arrived in Melbourne in 1868 under the leadership of the charismatic Irishman, Br Patrick Ambrose Treacy. Having arrived penniless, they began, after school, collecting money for schools. During holiday periods they visited the Irish in rural areas, especially in the Victorian goldfields where the response was truly remarkable. In January 1869 they began teaching in the school hall at the back of St Francis' Church in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne. The Brothers' first permanent Australian school was Parade College, which opened in Victoria Parade, East Melbourne in January 1871. In subsequent years, Treacy established more schools in Victoria followed by Brisbane (1875), New Zealand (1876), Adelaide (1879), Sydney (1887) and Perth (1894). In the early decades Brothers came from Ireland, 190 in all. Eventually, Australians, New Zealanders and later after 1950 Papua New Guineans joined the congregation. Over a 140 year period Christian Brothers taught in 35 dioceses across Oceania in more than 170 schools. Today, Edmund Rice Education Australia, essentially a lay entity, continues the work of what were formerly Christian Brothers' schools.

### **The Brothers Today**

Edmund Rice was a man with an expansive heart, creative vision, practical wisdom and energetic know-how, a man who was able to read the signs of his times and who had the courage and vision to set in place strategies to meet those needs. Today, the Christian Brothers are extensively involved in education, health and community development projects and programs in a number of developing countries, particularly in Africa, South America, East Timor, Papua New Guinea, Philippines and poor rural areas of India. Programs supported in Australia include the work of Edmund Rice Camps, which provide social learning opportunities through residential camps and recreational experiences for children and youth (7 to 16) and families across Australia, who are socially and financially disadvantaged. The Camps are a vibrant, youthful expression of the Edmund Rice spirit and provide personal development opportunities for young adults in leadership, social

understanding and social consciousness by empowering them to assist those in need in their communities. Camping programs now include children's camps, family camps and camps for indigenous and refugee children and families. From their origins in Melbourne in 1981 at Parade College (Patrick Ambrose Treacy's first Australian foundation), for Vietnamese refugee children, ERCs now operate in all Australian states and overseas in England, India, Ireland, Kenya, New Zealand, South Africa and Tanzania.