



*The Life & Legacy of*

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# URSULA FRAYNE

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1817 - 1885

**Ursula Frayne** was an extraordinary woman, a pioneer educator, welfare reformer, advocate and policy maker. She was a person who led a group of courageous Irish women committed in faith to the pursuit of justice and compassion.

**Clara Mary Frayne** was born in Dublin in 1817 and died in Melbourne in 1885. She was trained by Catherine McAuley and became a professed Sister of Mercy on 25 January 1837, taking the name of Sister Mary Ursula.

Ursula, at age 29, was the leader of the first group of Sisters of Mercy to arrive in Australia in January 1846. They came in response to the invitation of Bishop Brady of Perth, who had visited Ireland seeking religious who were willing to make the hazardous journey by sailing ship to offer education and support to women and children in the newly colonised Australia. Ursula and her companions sailed for Western Australia via the Cape of Good Hope on the ship 'Elizabeth'. The 113 day journey was no pleasure cruise. Their arrival in Perth was unexpected and no arrangements for sleeping quarters had been made.

To quote Mother Ursula Frayne:

*“We stood in the wilds of Australia on that mid-summer night, and we could truly say with our Divine Model, we have nowhere to rest our head.”*



Mother Ursula Frayne opened the first Mercy school in Australia on 2 February 1846 with planks, bricks and packing cases as the furniture. Instead of the 4,000 children Bishop Brady had promised them in Dublin, only one child turned up. However, this did not discourage them, and after a lot of work by 23 August 1846 they had 100 children.

Australia's oldest Mercy school, Mercedes College, still operates today from the historic site at Victoria Square, Perth.

Across the country, as more and more people settled on the goldfields in Victoria, Bishop Goold in Melbourne was anxious to establish a Mercy foundation to meet the growing needs of young women and children, especially with regard to education. In response to his personal invitation, Ursula and two sisters sailed 'east' in January 1857, arriving in Melbourne on March 6. In true Mercy spirit, they immediately initiated a program of practical action in education and welfare to better the circumstances of many women and girls.



Yielding to the wishes of Bishop Goold, who, like Catherine McAuley, believed that a sound education for the rising middle class would help them obtain influence and respectability



in the community, Ursula established the first fee paying school in Fitzroy. The Academy of Mary Immaculate opened in 1857, only 6 weeks after Ursula's arrival in Melbourne, offering young women an education in English, French, Music and Drawing. It remains the oldest Catholic girl's school in Victoria and still exists on the original site. In 1889, a Memorial Chapel was added which houses Ursula's grave.

Ursula was also concerned with the care of neglected orphans and newly arrived immigrant girls. She opened schools for the desperately needy children in nearby streets and spent many hours walking the city in search of funds to assist her work. In 1860 she established a House of Mercy to provide a home for young unemployed and unprotected females and in 1861, took charge of the newly founded St Vincent de Paul Orphanage.

By 1863, the Fitzroy premises included a boarding and day school for young ladies, a middle school for children of poorer means and an infant school. The philosophy behind this system was that fees provided by the 'young ladies' allowed the school to cater for the underprivileged, embodying the Mercy charism of connecting those who are rich with those who are poor.

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**The legacy of Ursula Frayne continues today as thousands of Australian youth are offered educational programmes in the Mercy tradition. Young, vital and committed to the development of a better Australia, Ursula Frayne is an ideal example for all young Australians as women and men are encouraged to be resourceful and merciful followers of Christ in the world.**

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For more information about Ursula Frayne  
and the Sisters of Mercy visit the institute of Sisters of Mercy of  
Australia and Papua New Guinea (ISMAPNG) website:

[www.mercy.org.au](http://www.mercy.org.au)

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