

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



MARGARET BYERS (1832–1912)

Pioneer of women's education

Margaret Morrow was the daughter of Andrew Morrow, of Windsor Hall, Rathfriland, owner of a flax mill and Elder of the Presbyterian Church. He died when she was eight, and she was sent to be looked after by her uncles in Stoke on Trent. She was educated at the Ladies' College, Nottingham.

In 1852 she married the Reverend John Byers of Tullyallen, Co. Armagh, but he died in New York while they were on their way to the mission field in Shanghai. Margaret then returned to Ireland and taught in a girls' school in Cookstown. She later opened her own school in Belfast, which was based on advanced ideas (the girls were taught current affairs and dancing as well as subjects like French and needlework) and which, in the Jubilee Year of 1887, became Victoria College.

An energetic woman, she also devoted herself to the welfare of families and the poor, temperance, prisons and hospitals. She founded the Victoria orphans' homes at Ligoniel, which survived until the 1950's. She was a supporter of women's suffrage, but disapproved of the violent tactics of some suffragettes. Her honorary degree of Ll. D. from Trinity College, Dublin (1905) made her the first Ulsterwoman to be awarded an honorary degree from any university. She is buried in the City cemetery on Falls Road.

Patrick Devlin