

“A Practitioner in the Tonsorial Art”

by Marjorie Halligan

There are twenty-three hairdressers listed in the current *Yellow Pages* for Armagh City. Many of them trade under catchy names connected with their craft. It is unlikely that the phrase “tonsorial art” would have appealed to any of them as a trading logo. Yet, this phrase was used in the *Armagh Guardian* obituary of the hairdresser, Henry Sling (1835-1909) of Upper English Street. Henry had died in a private hospital in Dublin whilst undergoing an operation. He was buried in the family grave in St. Patrick’s Protestant Cathedral. His obituary showed that he had followed his father and uncle as “Barbers”. The family had been hairdressers since the beginning of the nineteenth century. In T.G.F. Paterson’s notes recording the inscriptions on gravestones in St. Patrick’s Protestant Cathedral, Henry’s family is traced back to a William Sling who had died in 1797, aged thirty-two. In *Bradshaw’s Directory* (1819) John Sling and Henry Sling are named as hairdressers in Thomas Street. Henry was colloquially known as ‘Harry the Shaver’. This nickname for him appeared in a contemporary piece of Orange Order doggerel. He was Deputy District Master of the Orange Order for Armagh City and as such became involved in disputes within the order over procedures. These led to his expulsion by the Grand Lodge in Dublin, in 1817 (Flynn 215-216). Thomas Seaver, grand Secretary for County Armagh, was expelled with him. Ironically, the Orange Order was to ac-

cept later the changes in procedure that Seaver and Sling advocated.

Sling’s Entry and other property

These developments did not deflect the family from their chosen trade. *Slater’s Directory* (1846) listed the following Slings as “Hair Cutters”; Henry of Ogle Street, John of English Street, William of Irish Street and William Henry of Scotch Street. This suggests an expansion in



the family business. With this came the acquisition of property. The 1833 *Valuation* of Armagh names John Sling as the landlord of two properties in “Sling’s Entry” which was located as a short entry off Chapel Lane containing two slated two storied dwellings with small back yards. They were

occupied by John McNally and Patrick Murray respectively and were valued at three pounds and ten shilling each. Sling’s Entry is mentioned in the recently published *Historic Atlas of Armagh* (12). *Griffith’s Valuation* shows the family occupying property in Ogle Street, Scotch Street and Upper English Street. The *1901 Census*, however, has only one clear entry for Sling. The entries for Ogle Street are hard to read, nonetheless, no record of their surname is legible. Their surname is absent from both Scotch Street and Irish Street Census records.

The legible entry is for Henry Sling of 19 Upper English Street, head of the household, unmarried and of the “Irish Church” aged forty. Less clear is his occupation. It appears to be “Perfumer” with what might be an abbreviation for “Hairdresser”. On Form B of the Census return there is no mystery about his occupation as his building is listed as a hairdressing salon. The other occupant of this household was his housekeeper Mary Murphy; a widow aged fifty who originated from County Louth. She was a Roman Catholic who spoke both Irish and English.

The mystery of the vanishing years?

A mystery is suggested with the discrepancy in age between the seventy-four year old Henry of the obituary and the forty year old Henry of the 1901 census. For each their address is Upper English Street. The death notice in *The Ulster Gazette* gives the death of the seventy-four year old Henry as January 20, at a private hospital in Dublin. This notice informed that the funeral would be on the Friday, 22, timed to the arrival of the train from Dublin. Anglican burial records have an entry for the burial of Henry Sling on January 22, 1909 aged seventy-four. This entry is supported by the inscription on the family tombstone in St. Patrick’s Cathedral which refers to “Henry who died on 20th January aged 74 years” (TGF Paterson). Yet as far as can be discerned only one unmarried Henry Sling lived and worked at Upper

English Street as a hairdresser.

Who was the forty year old Henry? Was there confusion with another namesake? As with most families certain Christian names were handed down. Henry, John and William recurred amongst the Sling family. In St. Marks' Parish Records, the last baptism date for a Henry Sling is for Charles Henry Sling baptised in 1842 and the nearest death record with a Christian name link is for William Henry who died in 1868 aged fifty-seven. There are no further entries in church records for any member of the family after the entry for January 22, 1909. These records, therefore, do not shed any light on the mystery. Closer examination of the obituary makes no mention of surviving family members amongst the mourners. The remains went directly from the railway station to the Cathedral.

Mary Murphy solves the mystery

The will of Henry Sling who died in January 1909, aged seventy-four years may solve the identity crisis, if there is one with Mrs. Mary Murphy, his housekeeper providing the solution. She is named in the census and in Henry's will. This will was made in 1903 and Mrs. Mary Murphy named as his housekeeper was a beneficiary. She was to be paid twenty pounds on his death and twenty pounds thereafter annually for her life. These bequests were to be funded from charges on his property in Armagh. Murphy was granted the right to occupy free of all rent and taxes one of the houses Sling had bought recently in Ogle Street, at that time occupied by Mary Daly. After Murphy's death the house was to revert to his nephew William J. Sling, his main beneficiary. It would seem then that the housekeeper Murphy is the unifying link between the Census entry and Henry Sling's will made in 1903. She was the housekeeper of Henry Sling who died in 1909 aged seventy-four who for an unknown reason declared his age as forty in the 1901 Census.

The scattered family

The whereabouts of surviving relatives of Henry are made clear by the remainder of his bequests. The only relative residing in Armagh mentioned in the will was his cousin Miss Matilda Gass who lived in the Shiels Institution. To her he left one thousand pounds. Further bequests for smaller sums of money were made to family members: his cousin, Mrs. Hannah Falconer of Belfast; his niece, Mrs. Martha Amelia Allen, London; his second cousin, Mrs. Minnie Nicholson of Belfast and a distant relative, Mrs. Margaret Barton of Manchester. Only two items of personal property were mentioned in the bequests. His gold watch with the white face was left to Henry Falconer, son of his cousin Hannah. His other gold watch was left to his nephew, William J. Sling together with the residue of his estate. William J. Sling was the son of his deceased brother John and the brother of Mrs. Martha Allen. He lived in New York. Henry ended the will with a plea to William J. to return to Armagh to take up his inheritance and carry on his business in the premises in English Street which he, Henry "had occupied" (Will of Henry Sling PRONI). This suggests that William J. was also a hairdresser. There was no bequest to a younger Henry Sling. In the *Armagh Guardian* of 1919, Sling's premises were remembered as being occupied by Barnes' sweetshop. So it seems unlikely that William J. Sling returned to Armagh between 1909 and 1919.

From this evidence it would seem that Henry Sling aged seventy-four was the only surviving member of his family to have carried on the family hairdressing business in English Street in Armagh. His brothers John and Thomas had predeceased him. The figures recording his age as forty in the census are very legible. It may have been a genuine mistake, but his will gives the impression of one who was a stickler for detail. The touch of vanity or perhaps the sense of history which led him to describe his occupation as "Perfumer" may also have led him to tamper with his age in the census return.

Henry the professional hairdresser

In conclusion what is known of Henry Sling as the practitioner of the "tonsorial art"?

I found no advertisements for his business in the local press. Advertisements for hair care were confined mainly to those extolling proprietary brands of hair tonics or treatments for removing dandruff and nits from children. T. Zwecker of English Street, however, had an advertisement in 1909 offering a selection of the "newest pads for the latest style of hairdressing". Without any expertise in this matter, this advertisement suggests ladies' hairdressing.

Sling's business was described in the press as being extensive (*Armagh Guardian* 1909). His business was well placed being situated opposite what is now the Trian, but what was then Belfast Bank and in close proximity to the County Club. He and his brother were listed amongst the mourners at Sir Capel Molyneux's funeral (*Armagh Guardian* 1879). His property on death was valued at three thousand nine hundred and seventy-seven pounds. In one of the series of articles in the *Armagh Guardian* entitled 'Here And There' in 1919, there are some illuminating anecdotes about being a client of Sling. Apparently he prided himself on the level of debate and discussion in his salon. As a hairdresser he must often have heard the most personal details of a client's life with very little prompting. The anecdote related showed that Sling had met his match in this respect when this particular client sat down in his chair. All Sling's leading questions failed to draw the man who as an income tax inspector valued reticence. After a number of visits Sling made the direct approach and asked the client his business. The client divulged that he was a traveller. This surprised Sling who probed further. The traveller replied that he travelled for Hicks Beach & Co. Sir Michael Hicks Beach was the Chancellor of the Exchequer at that time. Sling was unfamiliar with the

company's name, so enquired if it was a big company. The reply came smoothly that it was the biggest in the land. Sling was nonplussed as he had never heard of it. To satisfy his curiosity he asked what they traded in. The tax inspector replied "Brass" that they traded in millions of it every year; the trim being completed, the inspector left. The anecdote ends with the comment that if Sling had known the Yorkshire interpretation of "brass" he would not have regaled his other clients with his knowledge of this large company trading in "brass".

Henry the benefactor

A trifle naïve, somewhat vain, the practitioner of a style of hairdressing that has passed, however, Henry Sling 1835-

1909, has left a lasting legacy. It is not in the name place Sling's Entry which is no longer viable; it is in his bequests to the Sunday Schools of Armagh. To each of the following "Sabbath Schools" he left fifty pounds: St Mark's; the Presbyterian Church of the Rev. R.J. Paterson; the Presbyterian Church of the Rev. Joseph Corkey and to the Treasurer of the Methodist Church in Abbey Street for the benefit of its Sabbath School. His quirky personality is visible again when he declares that he wished to promote the well being of the Sabbath School of the Presbyterian Church led by the Rev. David Millar just as much as the aforementioned schools but was aware that the church was supported by wealthy gentleman and had no need of assistance (Henry Sling's will PRONI).

Acknowledgements

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A couple of adverts from an Armagh street directory produced by The Ulster Gazette 1937.

