

Elise Anne Sandes

A biography by Adrian Sandes

Elizabeth (Elise) Anne (0204) was born in Tralee, Co. Kerry, on 19 February 1851. As a small child she often played with Horatio Herbert Kitchener, a year her senior, who was born at the home of her cousin Robert Wren Sandes (0316), and long afterwards to become world famous as Field Marshal Earl Kitchener of Khartoum and Broom. Elise was small, delicate, thoughtful and introspective, and at an early age became very religious. Though also full of fun, she was quite satisfied with country life in her quiet home on her father's small estate, but at thirteen she was sent to a boarding school in Bray, run by a Frenchwoman, Mme de Mailly. Four years later, when she left school in 1868, she became keenly interested in welfare work among the soldiers of the British garrison in Tralee, which was sponsored by a friend named Marie Fry. Her father having died, she visited the local barracks with her mother in August 1870, and invited some of the drummer boys of the 89th Regiment of Foot to their house, Oak Villa, for tea and games, with the object of weaning them from the temptations of drink and bad company. They came, they brought one or two soldiers, and a semi-religious meeting place was thus established in a room of the house. Later, as numbers grew, she rented a room in the town and so began in earnest what was to be her philanthropic life-work.

The 89th Foot was soon transferred from Tralee to Cork, so Elise rented an entire house there in King Street as a 'Soldiers Home', and later another at Phoenix Park in Dublin. Gradually, financed by public subscription and helped by many devoted workers, her organisation began to spread through southern Ireland and then northwards. But by 1882 Elise faced a financial crisis so serious that she decided to seek further funds in England, where she spent six weeks in London appealing for money. She managed to raise three quarters of the £4000 needed for a new home in Cork, but her real target was £140,000 to set up homes not only in Ireland but in India and elsewhere. A Sandes Soldiers Home was opened in 1890 in Royal Avenue, Belfast, and as the organisation spread northwards Elise moved her headquarters from Cork to the Curragh west of Dublin, where there was a garrison of three brigades. The Sandes Homes for the Army now rivalled the Agnes Weston Homes for the Royal Navy.

Two helpers, Miss Schofield and Miss Ashe, were prominent in starting Sandes Homes in India. One was opened at Rawalpindi in 1895 and another at Murree in the hills nearby. At Quetta on the North West Frontier a third home was started in 1898, and others followed at Ranikhet and Meerut in 1901, Chakrata in 1902, Lucknow in 1906, and Ambala in 1907. Later there was further expansion to garrison towns further south. When my father was stationed at Meerut in 1908 he was invited to open a new home there, but declined being only a junior officer.

By 1914, before the First World War, Elise controlled no less than thirty homes in England, Ireland and India, and another in Jamaica, working from the Curragh. When war started most of the regular Army moved to France, and Elise shifted to Ballykinlar, but the Curragh Home continued to serve volunteers of Kitchener's Army and others that followed them. The Homes at Cahir in Tipperary, in Dublin and Belfast, and at Catterick in Yorkshire continued to flourish, but the bitter fighting of the Irish Troubles of 1918-1922 led to the loss of many. Those at Cork, Limerick, Waterford, and six other southern Irish towns had to be abandoned, and the headquarters had to move to Northern

Ireland. But that at Queenstown stayed on while there was a British garrison, two others were made over to the Irish Free State, and the Dublin home survived by opening its doors to British and Irish Free State troops who seemed to get on quite well together!

Elise died on 19 August 1934, and her work for soldiers was signally honoured. She had already been appointed CBE, and her funeral at Ballykinlar Camp was truly impressive. Many officers from the Northern Command attended, and the 2nd Battalion The North Staffordshire Regiment paraded and lined the path to the grave. The coffin was covered by a Union Jack and bore a wreath sent by the War Office on behalf of the whole Army. Eight soldiers carried the coffin, a salute was fired and the Last Post sounded. Even the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland was present. Apart from Royalty, few women have been buried with greater honours. General Sir Ian Hamilton wrote of Elise in 1934 'Miss Sandes has exercised upon the Army during her 66 years of actual service a more powerful and beneficent influence than many highly placed Generals'.

The Sandes Homes in India closed when the British left in 1947; for some years they had been taking in airmen, and had been known as Soldiers' and Airmen's Homes. A beautiful home was established in Singapore in 1948, and others were provided in Jamaica, Borneo, Iceland, and at several ports in England. With the contraction of the British Empire, the organisation has necessarily shrunk to a fraction of its former size, but it still provides centres in Army camps and RAF Stations in the UK, working from Belfast, and publishes a twice yearly magazine 'Forward' with the aim of leading servicemen and women and their families to trust in Christ for salvation; of building up believers to Christian maturity; and of offering friendship and counsel in the warmth of Christian homes.

Elise told her own story in her book 'Enlisted - My Story' published in 1915 by S W Partridge & Co., London. M Helen Jeffrey's book, 'The Trumpet Call Obey', published by Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, London, 1968, gives a wider view.