

Bewley, Victor Ernest Henry

by Frank Cullen

Bewley, Victor Ernest Henry (1912–2000), quaker businessman and philanthropist, was born on 24 May 1912, at Danum, the family estate in Rathgar, one of five children to Ernest Bewley (qv) and Susan Emily Bewley (née Clarke) from Doncaster. Ernest, the founder of Bewley's Oriental Cafés in Dublin, was married previously to Bertha Ann Clark, a first cousin of Susan's, who died in 1908 leaving no children. Victor's mother Susan, the daughter of missionary parents in Madagascar, spent most of her childhood in that country before returning to England and subsequently becoming a psychiatric nurse. She was a practical and tolerant woman whose concern for marginalised minority groups had a great influence on her shy and quietly-spoken son, who inherited similar qualities. Brought up in a spiritual household where bible readings were practiced twice daily, he came to love the sanctity of nature to be found among the wooded walks of the thirty-acre Danum estate. In later years he recalled a wonderful memory of life at Danum where he and his siblings spent a long cold winter in front of the fire watching their father carve a ship from a single block of wood. Aged seven he attended the quaker-founded Rathgar Junior School, Grosvenor Road, before being sent to Bootham, a quaker boarding school in York aged twelve.

From an early age Bewley harboured ideas of following the career path of his grandparents by becoming an overseas missionary. His mother often spoke about her childhood in Madagascar and he found her stories fascinating. If not a missionary, Bewley aspired towards a career in music or art, and while possessing considerable talent in both spheres, he lacked the confidence to pursue either professionally. Within the family there had always been the unspoken understanding that he would succeed his father in taking over the family firm. In 1929 he finished his schooling in York and within three years found himself at the helm of the family business following the death of his father in 1932. As a young man with a passion for the arts, a fondness of nature and an express dislike of city life, Bewley 'resented' (Murdoch, *Memoirs*, 58) the responsibility that fell upon his shoulders, but in time came to view it as a gift which enabled him to help others.

In 1930 Bewley became reacquainted with an old childhood friend by the name of Mary Winifred (Winnie) Burne, the daughter of a hardware merchant from Terenure. The friendship was rekindled following the death of Winnie's father when Bewley began calling to her home. They were both active members of the Dublin Young Friends Group and attended weekly meetings at Eustace Street. Much of their free time was spent together playing tennis and enjoying long walks in the countryside. Eventually, following the death of Bewley's father, they began a lengthy courtship which resulted in their marriage on 9 June 1937 in Churchtown Meeting House.

On taking charge of the family business in 1932, Bewley inherited a company in significant debt, resulting from the opening of a third café on Grafton Street in 1927 (there were two others on Westmoreland Street and South Great George's Street). To address this problem he extended the catering aspect of the business from café and bakery to full restaurant. Prices were kept affordable and the cafés were made accessible to a wider section of the public, thus reflecting Bewley's personal values of inclusivity and fair-mindedness. Although a reluctant boss, he accepted his responsibilities towards staff and public and set about identifying ways to use his influence for the benefit of those less fortunate. During the war years he visited tenement buildings in the city and provided food and clothing for the slum dwellers. He also gave over the Westmoreland Street restaurant for the purpose of preparing hot meals for the children of the slums, and as a result of this and other similar work, the Bewley name became synonymous with charity and benevolence in mid-twentieth century Dublin.

Bewley's life, although privileged, was not without difficulty. On reaching his thirties he faced personal challenges when forced to confront the reality that his shyness, a burden he carried throughout his life, was possibly a symptom of a deeper-lying problem. In his own words, he felt he was 'slipping in the top storey' (Murdoch, *Memoirs*, 101). Perhaps the pressures of work and fatherhood brought the issue to the fore, but in 1939 he sought help from Basil Rákóczi (qv), an artist friend of his, who introduced him to psychoanalysis. In his memoirs Bewley describes this period of his life as an 'undiluted hell' (Murdoch, *Memoirs*, 101), a powerful phrase suggestive of great inward mental struggle, which conflicts with the outward persona of calmness and gentility projected to those around him.

In 1964 Bewley became involved with the travelling community in Ireland, which, over a twenty-five year period, would cement his reputation as an immensely charitable man. Following a visit to a halting site in Cherry Orchard, Dublin, he, along with Lady Eleanor Grace Butler (qv) and Vincent Crowley (qv), helped to establish the Dublin Committee for Travelling People in 1965. Four years later this became the National Council for Travelling People with Bewley as Secretary. The council's initial objectives were to campaign for suitable accommodation and education for travellers, and to tackle discrimination against the community. Anti-traveller protests in Clondalkin, following Bewley's offer to house travellers on his own farmlands, led to national press coverage in 1974, and in response he was appointed special advisor on the government's programme for the settlement of travelling people. In his new post he expended much energy, visiting every county in Ireland to see first-hand the situations of travellers, and speaking at numerous public meetings on behalf of the community. It was a cause that he cared deeply about and dedicated much of his life towards. Similarly during the period of the troubles in Northern Ireland Bewley became involved in attempts to bridge the sectarian divide by meeting with members of both loyalist and nationalist paramilitary organisations. He was particularly impressed with the IRA chief of staff, Joe Cahill (qv), who in a rare moment of insight shared with him his love of nature and the outdoors.

Bewley's tenure in charge of the family business spanned five decades, during which he was largely responsible for cultivating a deep sense of loyalty and trust between staff and employer. Dressed in his traditional tweeds and smoking the occasional pipe, he became a familiar figure around the three cafés, spending time getting to know and taking an interest in the people who worked there. His unique humanistic approach to management was embodied with the establishment in 1972 of the Bewley Community Trust, of which he was most proud. The brainchild of Bewley and his brothers Alfred and Joe, the trust allowed long-term staff members to become part shareholders in the company. Sums paid out in dividends were matched by an equal sum raised by the company to be put aside for the benefit of under-privileged communities. A brave and perhaps somewhat credulous experiment, the trust failed from a financial perspective and was disbanded in 1981. However its idealistic aspirations, do capture the true spirit of altruism by which Bewley attempted to live his life.

Outside of work he was a great family man who enjoyed holidays in the countryside with his wife and three daughters. On such occasions he liked to take his easel into the fields and paint the natural surroundings. He also spent time on his farm where he took great pleasure from tending his herd of dairy cows. In July 1976 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from TCD for his work on behalf of travellers. On his retirement from Bewley's in 1977, he committed himself more fully to his government role as special advisor for travellers, from which he eventually retired in 1988.

Ten years after his retirement Bewley was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and moved from his home in Brittas, Co. Wicklow to New Lodge, a quaker nursing home in Donnybrook. It was there that he died one year later on 19 May 1999. A special memorial meeting was held at Churchtown Meeting House three days after his death and it was attended by many, including former Bewley's staff and travellers whose lives Bewley had helped to improve. Having donated his body to TCD for medical research (his last great charitable act), it was more than one year before his remains were laid to rest on 11 July 2000 at Temple Hill burial ground, Blackrock, Co. Dublin.

GRO (birth, death and marriage registers); Victor E. H. Bewley, 'Discrimination', *Christianity in Action* (pamphlet series), no. 9, (Veritas, 1972); *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 6 June 1975; *Ir. Times*, 20 Sept. 1975; *Ir. Press*, 20 May 1977; Katherine Butler, 'Friends in Dublin', *Dublin Historical Record*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 34–46; *Sunday Independent*, 23 May 1999; Fiona Murdoch, *Victor Bewley's memoirs* (2002); Richard S. Harrison, *A biographical dictionary of Irish Quakers* (2008)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Wed Jan 27 12:18:25 UTC 2021 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2021 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.