

casualties, but death came during the hot summer months from a disease known as 'the summer complaint'. It seems to have been accepted with a sense of inevitability and resignation, but it brought grief and an aching sense of loss. Children as young as two or three, and sometimes even babies, were brought out from England; they may have been among the more fortunate, accepted with joy to fill a gap in the family rather than for their future labour potential.

Although 1872 started with a tragedy it was to be an extraordinarily productive year for Annie. Just after her return to England Annie received a letter from Ellen Bilborough dated January 1872 telling of the fire that burnt Marchmont to the ground.

It is indeed difficult to begin a letter to you, when you always open our letters sure of good news. And yet this one brings you the best you ever had. Spared lives, I trust, saved to work more than ever for Him who has done such great things for us. . . . Our beautiful Home lies in ruins, only the walls standing, and there is one little grave dug by Benjamin Stanley containing the ashes of little Robbie Gray . . . I hardly know how to begin, it still seems so terrible and real. I awoke thinking it was daylight - I jumped up, and oh! the feeling when I saw the house full of dense white smoke, I knew well what it must be.¹²

Two boys, Phillips and Keen, who had remained to help in the home were sent to get the children out while Miss Bilborough roused the other members of the household. Her letter continues:

The flames were coming on with frightful rapidity; it was blowing a perfect hurricane and the whole was enveloped in smoke and ashes. I ran back half way upstairs to see if I could get a dress, or my cash box, or watch, but I was too much suffocated and had to get back to the front door.

Your Scotch cloak was hanging up and I put that round me and seized Mr Thom's great coat and ran out. I found poor Miss Moore in her thin cotton nightdress in the snow and threw the coat over her; the snow was up to the knees. I saw Mr Thom and called to him to search again with Phillips for the children. The intense cold in the snow seemed almost worse to bear than the fire. Poor Mrs Wade had got her hands frozen in even that short time. Mrs Baylis's nightdress was ice to the waist.

When the names of the children were called over little Robbie was found to be missing. The boy Phillips said that he had lifted him out and he had seen him running across the snow with the other children. It was thought that blinded by the smoke the child had run back into the house.

It was all over in a few minutes, all around fearfully bright and lurid. The engine came, but of course was too late, the fire spread with such fearful rapidity. We sat, almost stunned with fright and cold. Soon the Shearings and the Elliots came bringing clothes, and we went to dear Mrs Elliott's house in a sleigh. It was not four am and the fire was almost out, burning round the verandah and the window sills.

As soon as it was daylight I went with Mr Thom to see the ruins. All around the melted snow had frozen like iron; the thermometer which hung on the verandah was found uninjured; nothing was sound, but a table and one stove; all gone - books, papers, clothes, everything, but there in the blackened ruin lay distinctly the charred frame of little Robbie. His history in our book is very touching: 'Robert Gray, aged six, a happy little man who can say little or nothing about himself.' The rest of the page is blank, as he had never been away from Marchmont.

Considering the severity of the fire and the narrowness of their escape it is slightly puzzling that the record books survived, but survive they did for they are now in the Barnardo archive.

The local inhabitants reacted with generosity and practical help. The children were taken in by different families and less than a month later Miss Bilborough was writing to let Annie know that the people of Belleville were determined that they should not move from the area and that another substantial house had been found on the Kingston Road with five or six sitting-rooms and twelve bedrooms.¹³ The Council again agreed to pay the rent and taxes for three years and the people of Belleville insisted on paying all the bills for furnishing the new Marchmont. Ellen Bilborough was able to assure Annie that all would be ready in May for the first party of children.

James Palmer was one of the boys in that party. Described as an orphan, he was accepted by Annie Macpherson, following his father's death in the workhouse, and sent to Canada with a particularly glowing character reference. Described as 'a nice boy, good scholar, most obliging, grateful, affectionate and obedient boy, a treasure to anyone', no other details are given,