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Sharing Shared Learning

Since smaller U3As may find it difficult to motivate enough participants for a research project, there is much to be gained from working together in a Shared Learning Project involving several U3As and this was the case with the Vere Foster project.

For this the participants are drawn from four U3As: Downe, East Antrim, North Down & Ards, and Armagh. The project is linked to the Public Records Office in Northern Ireland and has international links with Active Retirement Ireland.

The topic of the project is Vere Foster. You have probably never heard of him, though older members will have been taught handwriting or 'penmanship' using Vere Foster copy books. He is a largely unsung hero in many respects. Vere was the grandson of 'Lady Bess' Foster, later the Duchess of Devonshire. He was a rich Anglo-Irishman who saw the difficulties faced by Ireland and the Irish in the mid-19th century and who took action to solve the problems.

For a short-term solution he saw that too many people were trying to derive a living from small farms and he encouraged and funded 25,000 girls to emigrate to America.

Recognising that it must have been a frightening prospect for those brought up in the remote west of Ireland to take off for the unknown, Vere Foster travelled all over America and produced a booklet called *The Emigrant's Penny Guide to Emigration*, a fascinating early travel guide which sold across the British Isles in hundreds of thousands.

In the course of his travels he met characters ranging from Abraham Lincoln to the Indian chief Ocoela. He marvelled at the elevated railway in New York and the transport system along the Mississippi. He studied schools and soup kitchens.

The story of his travels:

<http://verefoster.info/travels-in-america/>

reads like a 19th century version of Alistair Cook's *Letters From America*.

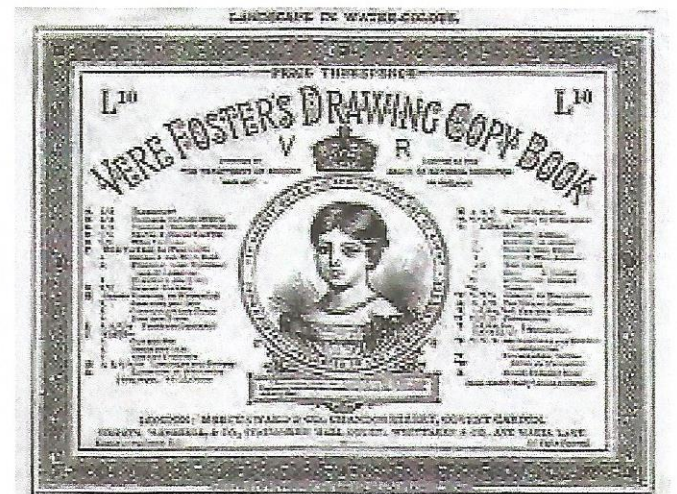
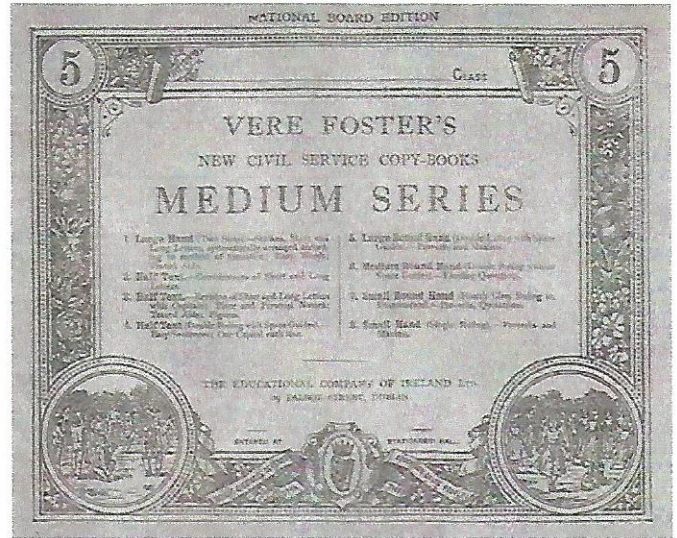
For a longer term solution, better education was needed and he set about reforming the Irish education system, improving or building more than 2,000 schools, raising the status of teachers and the facilities at their disposal. He funded much of this by the production of the Vere Foster Copy Books, sold in millions to Education Authorities across the English speaking world and used until the 1930s.

Not content with that, he raised funds for the Royal Hospital in Belfast where, having spent all his personal funds on these good deeds, he died penniless in 1900.

To share what we have learned we have had periodic meetings and also pooled our information and comments through a website we created at <http://verefoster.info> (thanks to skills learned from attending a Website Group in Newry U3A).

We have given talks to other U3As, have written to newspapers and contacted U3As and newspapers across the English-speaking countries that used the Vere Foster copy books. When we spoke to Armagh U3A we found a man whose wife's grandfather had won a Vere Foster prize for good handwriting and who had an interesting story to tell.

No Shared Learning Project subject can be taken in isolation and this is true with Vere Foster.



Causeway U3A is carrying out an SLP involving the Earl Bishop Hervey who was the grandfather of Vere Foster. One of the characters whom Vere met in the course of his travels in America was John Boyle O'Reilly, a man with a life story stretching from Dublin to Australia as a convict; from Australia to America as an escapee; then in Boston as a newspaper editor.

Throughout the process he wrote poetry which we have shared with our poetry groups. Although John Boyle O'Reilly created a good life for himself in America, he opposed Vere Foster's assisted emigration scheme, seeing it as an attempt to clear the Irish from Ireland.

A Shared Learning Project should have an objective, a beginning and an end. The objective in this case was to publicise the deeds of the man. However it is difficult to draw an end to the project. We still look for opportunities to spread the word; continue to search through second-hand bookshops for Vere Foster books; go through the multitude of papers held by the Public Records Office in Belfast; talk to people about their memories of the Vere Foster Copy Books; and follow up on the aspects of history we learned in the process.

However perhaps the real output from the project has been the pleasure which the participants have derived from the research, the Eureka moments and the contacts made.