

The Coming of the Sisters to Yass

The town of Yass was a rising centre of Pastoral industry in 1875. It was situated in the Goulburn Diocese. Dr. Lanigan, the Bishop, ever zealous for the cause of education, had commissioned Dr. McAlroy, his Vicar General, who was travelling to Ireland, to endeavour to obtain Religious who would volunteer for this distant mission. He interested the Sisters of Mercy at Rochfort Bridge in the object of his journey, and so enthusiastic were they in the matter that the Superior, Mother M. Paul Fielding, and several of the Sisters, volunteered on the spot.

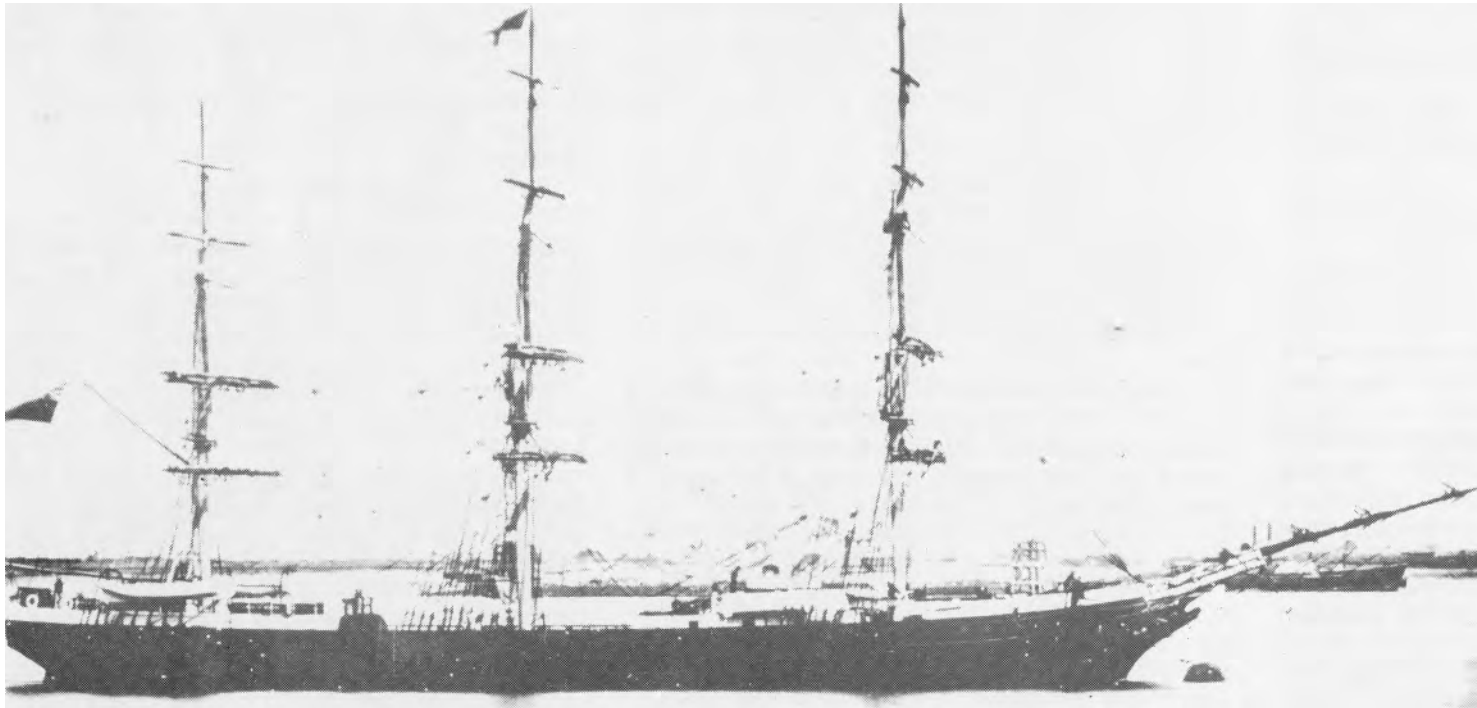
The Bishop of Meath agreed to allow the band of volunteers to go to Australia, and preparations were immediately begun.

The arrival of the Sisters in Dublin and their crossing to Holyhead passed off with safety for such inexperienced travellers; but when London was reached difficulties began in earnest. Other "collectors" of bands of Religious had been busy also; hence the accommodation on board the "Gainsborough" was greatly overtaxed by the addition of a band of young girls destined for the Religious Life in the Bathurst Diocese.

Five priests, among them Rev. Fr. T. Long, for the Goulburn Diocese, accompanied them. The Captain, Tarter by name, did his best to make the voyage less uncomfortable; but, were it not for Mother M. Paul's foresight in purchasing bedding destined for the Yass convent, and providing provisions in case of emergency, the trip would have entailed some discomfort.

THE GAINSBOROUGH

The Sisters, however, were prepared for these things. Their successors in the Yass Convent were entertained for many a year by the accounts of the happy days spent on the "Gainsborough". They rejoiced at hearing five masses each morning. They quelled the frequent storms by singing hymns to Our Lady, "Star of the Sea", after being appealed to for prayers on more than one occasion by the somewhat atheistic Captain, when the navigation of the boat became perilous. After a long voyage their glistening eyes beheld, in the early dawn of the feast of the Immaculate Conception, 8th December, 1875, the beauties of Sydney Harbour and the field of their future labours. On the day of their arrival in Sydney, Dr. Lanigan, Bishop of Goulburn, received them in the city where he had prepared comfortable accommodation for them. Next day they left by coach for Goulburn, where they were hospitably entertained by the Sisters of Mercy for three weeks, after which they proceeded to Yass, their future home,



The "Gainsborough"



Dr. O'Connor's home

A Cavalcade of the Yass people came miles along the road to meet them, and as they approached the town, the citizens turned out in large numbers and escorted the party to St. Augustine's Church. A decision had to be made whether the house the Sisters inhabited would be a cottage formerly occupied by Dr. Morgan O'Connor, or to use the presbytery until the new Convent would be completed. The latter was decided upon and Rev. Dean O'Keefe vacated the presbytery which was then prepared for the nuns.

The arrival in Yass took place on the 29th December, and on that day His Lordship, Bishop Lanigan, appointed Mother M. Paul Fielding Superioress, and M. M. Alacoque, Assistant and Mistress of Novices.

When the Sisters were first received by the Yass people in 1875 a crowd of Aborigines assembled at the rear of the crowd in the church grounds. After the Bishop's address and the speeches of the notables the Queen of the Aborigines, dressed in white, stepped forward, and in well spoken English, and a clear soft voice, welcomed the "Sacred Ladies" on behalf of her people.

The "Sacred Ladies" who had come across the great waters, had the same religion as their Dean O'Keefe; and that was the aborigines' religion too. Many of the men were swathed in blankets. their arms and legs bare. Subsequently the Sisters took a special and

kindly interest in those dark-skinned Australians. They visited them in their humble huts, encouraged them to bring their children for Baptism, instructed and prepared them for the Sacraments. In the early eighties, the State Department of Education issued instructions to the Sisters about their schools, forbidding the admission of aboriginal children among the white pupils. So the aboriginal children of the Yass schools had to be turned away. Then Dean O'Keefe gathered these little ones and brought them to the convent. A separate school was selected for them and a Sister selected as their teacher. For a time Rev. M. M. Alacoque had charge of them. In later years, this missionary school was carried on in St. Augustine's former Boys' School. Many amusing, as well as pathetic, stories have been recorded. Sr. M. Loretto followed by Mother Xavier carried on the work of teaching.

Later, the mission was moved to a new site, when houses had been erected for the various aboriginal families. The late Monsignor Leonard there built a church so that the spiritual needs of those adults and children could more easily be attended to. This settlement was known as "Hollywood".

After Hollywood Reserve was established, a local school and teacher were provided by the Education Department. In 1952, however, the teacher was withdrawn and the Catholic aboriginal children were then admitted to the Convent School.



Yass in the '70's

(1) BLESSING AND OPENING OF THE CONVENT OF OUR LADY OF MERCY. YASS COURIER, FEB., 5th, 1878.

"The solemn ceremony of Blessing the newly erected Convent of Mount Carmel at Yass took place on Sunday with considerable eclat.

His Lordship the Rt. Rev. Dr. Lanigan arrived at Yass on Friday morning and on Saturday evening the Rt. Rev. Dr. Quinn Bishop of Bathurst, with his Chaplain, arrived in town. This last prelate was met at the station by Rev. Fathers O'Keefe and O'Dwyer.

The following clergy arrived in town during the week. Rev. P. Dunne, Gundagai, Rev. H. M. Finnegan of Young, Revs. T. Long, Burrowa, J. Doyle Bathurst, P. Burke and A. T. O'Dwyer Goulburn.

The Sisters arrived in Yass on Wednesday, December 29th, 1875, and they then took up residence in the priest's house, who vacated it for the convenience of the religious. The ceremony of Blessing and Laying the foundation stone, of the present edifice, which is now the home of these holy ladies was performed by Dr. Lanigan on Sunday, July 16th, 1876.

The Convent is built of blue stone rubble work, each course well defined. The various openings being surrounded by ornamented brick work, neatly pointed. The frontage occupies 72ft. and faces Meehan Street. The front entrance is formed by a handsomely designed half glass door, which gives entrance to a hall 7 ft. wide. On the right is the reception room, 14 X 16 and the left the refectory, which is of similar dimension.

The latter apartment has a door leading to the corridor, which runs nearly the whole length of the building at the rear, and this will prove a convenient entrance for servants, the kitchen 16x15 being only a few steps distant and joining the lower storey, as a sort of wing, to the main building and yet part and parcel of it. Passing along the corridor on the ground floor it leads to another front room 16x14 at the rear of which, is the oratory 12 X 11, which has an arched opening of 8 ft. conveniently connected with the church on the right side of the altar, and which is roofed and so arranged that the Sisters of Mercy can participate in the religious services being conducted in St. Augustine's without the necessity of leaving the convent.

At the other end of the building is a handsome well lighted apartment 16 X 20 occupied as the school room for high school pupils. It is not entered from the Convent, the only door which affords admission being placed at the side of the building and near the Day School, also conducted by the Sisters of Mercy.

In the upper storey the ceilings are 11ft. high over the kitchen. There is a music room, and servants' quarters and 10 dormitors or rooms. All partitions throughout the building are brick, except in two instances on the upper floor, where the divisions are of a temporary nature and by removal the space can be formed into a handsome apartment.

The corridor 5 ft. wide on the upper floor extends the full length of the building, and from it, the cells are entered. The whole of the inner walls are plastered, and the fittings are handsome and constructed of the best cedar.

A very large tank, has been constructed at the rear of the building, a considerable portion of which, is cut out of solid rock; by means of earthenware pipes, a connection is formed with the main building. The roof is covered with galvanised iron and has a clean and neat appearance. Every care has been take to secure ventilation and arrange for necessary convenience and comfort, and advantage is taken by a fall in the ground to allow a ceiling 13 ft. high in the select school room.

Nearly the entire cost of this handsome structure, has been subscribed for by Catholic and other residents of the Yass Parish. The venerable Bishop has taken a very great interest in, the undertaking, and we believe we are correct in stating that the entire superintending, of the various description of work; an onerous and laborious duty it must have proved, has fallen upon Father O'Keefe, who devoted every spare moment not required in the performance of his clerical duties to ensure the satisfactory completion of the important undertaking. A consummation on which his whole energies appear to have been employed, and which we are glad to say has now been brought to a happy and successful termination.

Visitors were present from Sydney, Bathurst, Goulburn, Wagga, Jugiong, Gundagai, Burrowa, Binalong, Gininderra, Gunning, Gondaroo and other places, so that the attendance during Mass in a large tent which Father O'Keefe had erected for the occasion must have numbered nearly 1000 people.

The Choir had Mrs. Fitzgerald at the harmonica. Other members were Hon. M. Fitzgerald. member for the District. Mr. H. Agnew, J. H. Quiry, Miss Fitzgerald, Miss M. Fitzgerald, Mr. J. Smith, Mr. J. Fitzgerald, Miss Naughton and M. M. Reid.

No eulogy of ours could in anyway be a sufficient compliment to the merits of Rev. P. J. O'Keefe for causing February 3rd, 1878 to be so memorable a day for the Catholics of Yass. The sermon was preached by Rev. Pere Le Menant Des Chesnois.

It was also stated there were three sittings for lunch that day. The lunch was in control of some ladies from Bowning, Yass and elsewhere."



Convent of Mercy, Yass

LAYING THE FOUNDATION STONE OF THE CONVENT OF MERCY, YASS

In the "Yass Courier" was an account of the ceremony which marked the laying of the foundation stone for the Convent of Mercy on the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, 16th July, 1876.

Assembled in St. Augustine's Church was a large congregation including many Catholics from neighbouring towns as well as several persons connected with other religious denominations. The Right Rev. Dr. Lanigan, the Bishop of the Diocese, was present at Mass which was celebrated by the Rev. P. J. O'Keefe, the respected clergyman of the district. Rev. Father Dillon of Camden delivered the sermon, using as his text the words of Christ

"If thou wilt be perfect sell all thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come follow me" (Matt. XIX, 21).

COMING OF THE SISTERS

Father Dillon began by saying how pleasing it was to celebrate the furtherance of the wonderful work done in the Diocese of Goulburn. He knew the congregation was already conscious of what an amazing thing it was that young women, at the call of the Bishop, would leave for ever their native land which honoured them and was familiar to them to travel to a strange land "where many knew them not. This they did "that they might bless and sanctify and save it, that your children may reap all the benign holy influences that surrounded your own infancy in Ireland ... and that the faith of your fathers may continue in your exile the heirloom of your blood". As a result of their brave decision, a building was being erected "where sanctified inmates by lives of poverty, penance, purity and prayer may bring the blessings of heaven upon all this neighbourhood".

AN OUTSTANDING HELPER

These sisters worked in unison with parishioners in performing acts of charity for the sick and afflicted. What was even more heartening was the way in which those of the community who were not Catholics joined in to help. An outstanding example of this was Thomas Laidlaw, a Protestant and Scottish scholar who "though he had love in his heart, had honour and probity in soul, and he had, if ever man had, that keenness of perception, that business talent, that power of discriminating between the reality and the sham, which enabled him to become the architect of a great fortune, and the father, I may say, of this town and district". So impressed was he with the work the nuns did that he contributed generously to every convent in Australia. "He desired a

convent in Yass because he loved Yass and consequently he desired a permanent endowment for all the needs of Yass, where charity may soonest and safest and with the least danger of waste reach the objects deserving of it, and be administered by willing, holy hands, that would not permit a crumb of it to go astray". It was a sad thing that Mr. Laidlaw, having realised his hope, was not present as he had only recently died after being received into the Church he had helped so much.

Father concluded by saying that it was no wonder that men like Thomas Laidlaw had found so much to admire and congratulate the congregation on having gained such a precious gift for the town of Yass.

In 1875, when Dean O'Keefe vacated the Presbytery at Yass, in order to give the Sisters accommodation, he commenced the main part of the fine building of Mt. Carmel, the nucleus of the group of Convent buildings existing today.

The local blue limestone, relieved by light free-stone, made a substantial and handsome beginning, giving ample scope for future developments. There was already a Boys' school, under the care of a master, and this arrangement was allowed to continue for some years until the Sisters took over the boys. St. Augustine's Boys School as it was called — after the change-over is still honoured in the memory of the past students who, as the Catholic men of the district and earnest auxiliaries of the Sisters, bear eloquent testimony to the valued services rendered by St. Augustine's School

Early boys school

