

## History of the Catholic Church in Yass

The Catholic Church was not a feature of the early days of Australian history because the Church of England was naturally the official religious body and for quite a few years it seemed likely there would be no other. Gradually, however, recognition grew of the need for the care of a large Catholic laity and approval was given for two priests to be appointed to Australia.

REV. PHILLIP CONNOLLY  
& JOHN JOSEPH TERRY

In the year 1820, the Reverends Phillip Connolly and John Joseph Terry arrived to fulfil their official duties. The former went to Van Dieman's Land where he died in 1839. The Reverend Mr. Terry settled in Sydney and the real history of the Church in this part of the Colony began. In spite of the fact that his parish was virtually the whole of mainland Australia, a thought which would have overcome most people, Father Terry threw himself with energy into the task. Besides overcoming

the disapproval of Governor Macquarie to such an extent that he officially laid the first stone of the Cathedral of St. Mary's on 29th October, 1821. Father Terry also journeyed tirelessly into the "remote" regions. His diary shows he made a visitation to the Yass district in 1833. The names he mentions are Hume, O'Brien, Davies, Kelly Manton and Davis.

DR. POLDING

The first Bishop, Dr. Polding, arrived in 1835 as the Vicar Apostolic of New Holland and Van Dieman's Land. At this stage the Catholic population on the mainland was 21,898 and he began forming parishes wherever settlement was springing up outside Sydney. In 1838, two priests, Fathers Michael Brennan and John Fitzpatrick were appointed to Yass. They took charge of the Southern District called at the time "the New Country", extending from Goulburn to Port Phillip (Melbourne), an area 400 miles long and 120 miles



Church before the Convent was built



Rev. John Joseph Terry



Dr. Polding

wide. Between these two outposts was no town or village. Where Albury now stands was one building, the Hume Inn at the Crossing Place. The first house was not erected in Wagga until 1847. In Yass itself, there was of course, no church building and one of the priests would preach each alternate Sunday in the old Court House, sharing this building with the Protestant clergy and congregation.

In early 1837, a collection was organised to begin building a Catholic Church in Yass and it says much for the generosity of the people of those times that many of those who contributed were non-Catholics. This can be substantiated by a list of subscribers which is available: C. O'Brien, Hardwick, twenty pounds; H. O'Brien, Doure, twenty pounds; E. Ryan, Galong, twenty poundr; Hamilton Hume, five pounds; W. H. Broughton, five pounds; W. Dutton, ten pounds; J. Moses, ten pounds. Father Therry, five pounds. A letter from the Colonial Secretary to the Survey-General dated 10th August, 1837 read "Dr. Polding have stated in his letter of the 16th ultimate that a subscription has been raised for building a Roman Catholic Chapei at Yass, I am directed by his Excellency the Governor to request that you will communicate with Mr. Henry O'Brien on the subject and fix upon and report on the site. On March 31st, 1838, a site in Meehan Street, containing two acres for church, presbytery and school was fixed upon and surveyed by Assistant-Surveyor Thomas Townsend.

On 11th September, 1838, Bishop Polding consecrated a piece of ground for Roman Catholic burials after laying the foundation stone of a church at Yass on 27th August, "the first thing of the kind ever before performed in this part of Her Majesty's dominion."

#### FIRST PRESBYTERY

The "Yass Courier" of 19th May, 1891, reports that the first presbytery was erected in 1839 and Fathers Brennan and Fitzpatrick had plans prepared for the Church in 1840. The "Australian Chronicle" of 15th



Presbytery, Yass, built in 1838



Father Brennan

November, 1842, called tenders for the building. By March, 1844, it was recorded in the "Sydney Gazette" that "there is a good R.C. Chapel in the principal Street and the Priests' house is very pretty."

#### FATHER BRENNAN

Father Brennan later built the first Catholic Church and school at Goulburn. When in 1864, he died in Parramatta after years of apostolic work there and in the adjacent district, he was so much loved that non-Catholics as well as Catholics subscribed for a monument to him. The children, even those who were not of his Faith, went round with note-books collecting pennies for it. The monument stands in the church grounds at Pen rith.

#### FATHER FITZPATRICK

Father Fitzpatrick was later Monsignor and Vicar-General of what he saw grow to be the great Archdiocese of Melbourne, and he was responsible for the building of St. Patrick's Cathedral, where his body lies.

Although these two priests began the movement towards the building of the church of St. Augustine, they transferred their activities to Goulburn and their work in this field was completed by their successor, Father Lovat, afterwards Dean Lovat who arrived in 1839. While he was a man of great learning - he had been professor of Physics and Moral Theology in the Jesuit College at Stonyhurst in England — he also had the necessary vitality and tenacity for his new work. In the first three weeks in his new parish, he travelled 518

miles on horseback to attend to his scattered congregations and all this in the hottest and driest summer in a century. He evidently too was a man of persuasive powers for when he wished to proceed with the building of St. Augustine's he found fourteen hundred aborigines of the Woolabalooa tribe camped on the site permanently but Father Lovat managed to induce their leader, Jacky King, to lead his tribe away at the expense of a few blankets.

#### FATHER LOVAT

Yass is indebted to Father Lovat for St. Augustine's Church, now the Sisters' Chapel and the old school house now demolished, but said to have been built with his own money and valuable grounds. As well as being earnest in the discharge of his duties, he also took part in community activity, being a member of the first Hospital Board elected in 1849. When he left Yass for Liverpool, the people of Yass made a collection to erect a bell in his memory. It was finally completed in 1868 and was reputed to be of such clear and beautiful tone that it could be heard in Bowning. This bell was cracked when it was rung joyfully at the close of World War 1, but when repaired it was placed in the tower of the new St. Augustine's. Dean Lovat died in St. Vincent's Hospital on 20th June, 1858 after a life of generous service.



Pioneer Priest on horseback



Rev. Patrick Magennis

#### REV. PATRICK MAGENNIS

Until 1857, the parish was administered by the Reverend Patrick Magennis who still has several relatives in the district — the Magennises of Jeir, the Julians of Bookham, the Roches of Yass and the Sheahans of Jugiong. He was a man of striking appearance — a tall man of great strength and an abundance of black hair. As well he proved to possess a ready wit and great energy. He prepared for the building of churches at Boorowa and Tumut and was the first priest to say Mass at Wagga in 1851. When a great flood rushed through Gundagai in 1852, it was thought at first that Father Magennis was among the more than 80 people who drowned in one night but he survived to be glad that he had managed to bring the Sacraments to these victims of the disaster on the previous Sunday. In 1857, a jubilee year in Australia, he worked so enthusiastically that there was nearly perfect attendance at Mass in each parish he visited. When Father Magennis was transferred to Goulburn, a generous testimonial was presented to him by the people who appreciated his efforts.

#### ST. AUGUSTINE'S—THE MOTHER CHURCH

With the arrival in 1857 of Father McAlroy and Patrick Bermingham began a period of superb activity which made St. Augustine's the Mother Church in fact as well as name of all that vast extent of country from Gunning to the Victorian border, from the mountains east of Tumut to the Lanchlan. The parish of Yass which was given into their care consisted of the greater part of the present diocese of Goulburn — part of the diocese of Wilcannia — Forbes and the whole of what is now the diocese of Wagga except a strip along this Murray which was the parish of Albury. The settled Catholics numbered at least 5,000 scattered over all types of country. As well there were many hundreds who led a nomadic life.



Father McAlroy



Father Bermingham  
(History of the Catholic Church)

#### MEN OF ACTION

Father McAlroy has been described as the man of action — an architect and builder while Father Bermingham was the orator, the scholar and the theologian. Together they formed a wonderful team. In less than four years churches were built in what were then "outlying parts" — Gunning, Binalong, Jugiong, Gundagai, Tumut and Wagga, the latter a village of less than 100 inhabitants. The priests attended these districts once every month and, of course, on horseback. From these out-stations of the parish of Yass have sprung 41 parishes with 132 churches.

In the town of Yass itself Fathers McAlroy and Bermingham opened a Literary Institute which consisted of a library, with reference books, maps and newspapers from England and all over Australia. They were also responsible for the introduction of a Young Men's Club to which was attached a Debating Society. Another innovation of theirs was the Academy for Girls a secondary school in the charge of the Misses Moon. It is very difficult for us, living in an age in which diverse cultural activities are available, to realise the advanced attitude of these priests and how unusual it was for such facilities to be offered in this then-remote town.

As well St. Augustine's was considerably enlarged as can be evidenced by this excerpt from "A Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Yass Mission" — "St. Augustine's Church is built on a hill, of moderate elevation, in the centre of the town of Yass. A portion of it was erected about 20 years ago by the late Very Rev. Dean Lovat. Since the 12th May, 1857 — at which time the Revs. Messrs. McAlroy and Bermingham were appointed to minister in the Yass Ecclesiastical District — it has been thoroughly renovated and enlarged by the addition of thirty-seven feet. A very massive and beautiful tower and a spire as also a chancel, have likewise been added. St. Augustine's is now in height twenty-seven, in width twenty-six feet inside measurement and in length, including the chancel, ninety feet. It is built of stone and stuccoed on the outside and inside. The ceiling is of polished cedar and the sanctuary is very richly and chastely decorated. There is a very powerful and sweetly-toned harmonium on the gallery, which is of polished cedar. Indeed all the interior fittings, including seats, have been tastefully got up and no expense has been spared to make St. Augustine's what it is, the most beautiful church outside the metropolis. On 9th September, 1859, St. Augustine's was opened and blessed by Father McAlroy assisted by Fathers Kavanagh and Bermingham. The late improvements costs about two thousand five hundred pounds, of which sum not one shilling was received from the State."

The people of Yass were indeed generous with money at this time for fourteen thousand pounds had been subscribed by the ecclesiastical district of Yass for the erection of churches and for education. Besides this they supported their two priests, sent money to Ireland to assist the people of Donegal and contributed a large amount to the fund for establishing the Catholic College, St. John's attached to the University of Sydney.

In 1861, Father Bermingham returned to Ireland taking with him twelve boys whose parents wanted them educated for the priesthood. He accompanied them to Carlow College where he became a Professor of Theology. Evidently though the boys, known as "the Twelve Apostles" achieved no such high status for their youthful colonial exuberance proved rather overwhelming to the other students and teachers and they eventually returned (not ordained) to Australia. Some of the names are familiar ones — Thomas and John O'Mara, John Downing, John Kelly. Phillip and Michael Sheahan, Thomas Garry, Michael Fitzgerald, Thomas Sullivan, Hilly of Yass and James Connell.



Dean Hanley  
Parish Priest  
of Queensland,  
Pastor of Yass

Father McAlroy was made Vicar General and took up residence in Albury. After he left, a number of priests were appointed to Yass for relatively brief periods. In 1861, the Reverend Hanley and Reverend Mr. O'Neil arrived but the latter was transferred to Wagga Wagga early in 1863 when he was replaced by the Reverend Mr. Garrett. It was at about this time that the question arose of where additional Episcopal Sees would be established outside Sydney. The Archbishop of Sydney favoured Yass as it was well-equipped with ecclesiastical property and gave promise of future importance as a town but the choice of Holy See fell upon Goulburn.

In February, 1868, the Reverend Richard Duigan and Rev. William O'Brien came to Yass as pastors. Father Duigan died at Yass on 26th June, 1870, and is buried in what was the church yard and is now the grounds of the Convent Chapel.

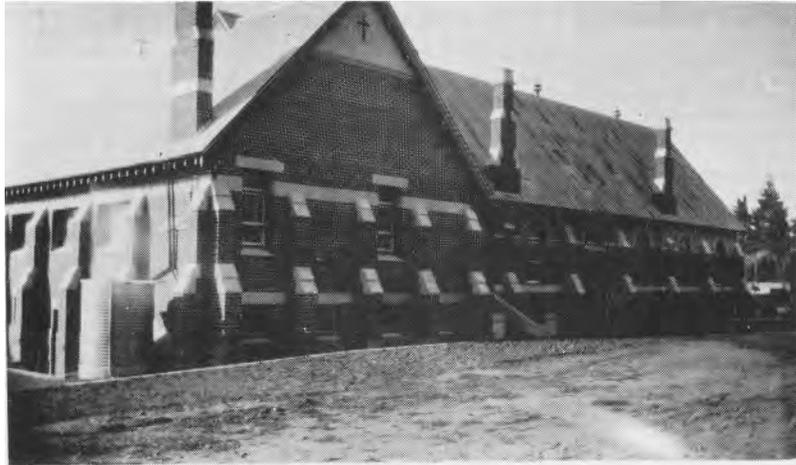
There were other priests here during the period 1869-71, including Fathers McCarthy, Coffey and O'Farrell. In 1872 Yass was fortunate in having that fluent speaker Father Gallagher, later the Bishop of Goulburn. Of this man, who was closely related to the Julian family, it is said he was the greatest Greek scholar of his time in the southern hemisphere. He spent two years of his early priesthood in Yass before going to St. Patrick's College, Goulburn, where he for some eleven years as principal worked to place that fine school on a sound financial basis before the Brothers took over.

DEAN O'KEEFE

In 1874 there came to Yass Father (later Dean) O'Keefe, a priest who was to serve here for forty-two years and make many additions to the Church property. Perhaps the most important new building was the Convent of Mount Carmel for when the Sisters arrived in 1875, they lived in the Presbytery which Father O'Keefe vacated till the convent was completed two years later. Money was very generously contributed by the whole community for the building of the convent and all the donations and expenses were published in the local paper. While the Right Rev. Dr. Lanigan and Dean O'Keefe's brother were among those who contributed most, others of the community also proved most charitable as was attested by Dean O'Keefe who, in his financial account, includes this note — (1) Special thanks to "my brethern the Protestants for their generosity . ." Thomas Laidlaw, Frank Hume, Henry Brown and Thomas Barber. Of Thomas Barber he said: "he took my poor hand in his, and in his wanted, big-hearted and warm hearted manner told me unhesitatingly to take from his property, without money and without price the material necessary for the building of the home for the poor Sisters of Mercy."



1st Church between Sydney and Melbourne  
"Church of St. Augustine"



**Sacred Heart  
Girls' School**

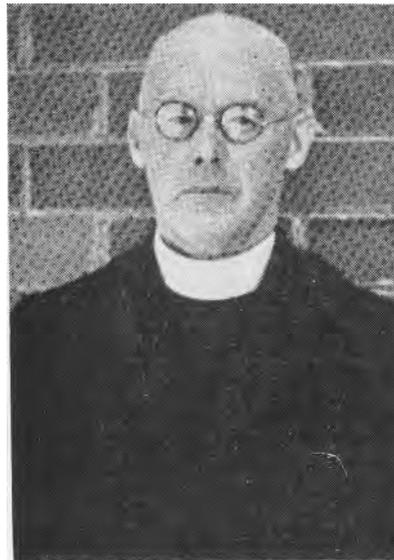
### **SACRED HEART SCHOOL**

Dean O'Keefe was also responsible for the building of the Sacred Heart Girls' School, now St. Augustine's Hall and additions to the Church. In 1888, the walls of the Church were raised several feet while a vestry, chancel and convent chapel were added. Several stained glass windows and a new marble altar purchased in Europe by Dean O'Keefe further beautified the building; while its shingle roof was replaced with slate. In 1890, the priest prepared plans for the extension of the church tower by 14 feet and the renovation of the Presbytery. As well as being responsible for an extensive building programme, Dean O'Keefe kept a watchful eye on the progress of the school. It was said that he usually managed to do things with a flourish and one flourish in particular brought him a measure of publicity that was almost fame. Because of some complaints made by the townspeople, the children of the local aborigines were refused admittance to the State schools. Dean O'Keefe immediately set aside some rooms behind the Convent and arranged with the Sisters to teach the children and the congregation to supply them with food. This was the first school of its kind in Australia and "The Bulletin" took up the story with enthusiasm publishing cartoons and verse about it.

### **MONSIGNOR J. F. LEONARD**

The Rev. O'Keefe left for Rome in 1906 and was replaced by Rev. J. F. Leonard, who remained here until his death in 1948 at the age of 76. Shortly after his arrival he saw the need for a larger Girls' School and the

residents of Yass gladly co-operated with him in the enlarging of the Sacred Heart Girls' Primary School. A few years later St. Augustine's Boys' School began to take shape and in the space of a few years, Yass could boast a very well-equipped boys' and girls' school. Throughout the parish, he was responsible for the erection of churches at Hall and Bowning. As well churches



**Rt. Rev. Monsignor J. F. Leonard**

were built at upper and lower Burrinjuck and he showed a great care for the aborigines on the local reserve where a church was built at Hollywood. The girls of Mt. Carmel loved him. Whether it was to teach them French in the Primary School, to play tennis or merely to talk, he was always ready to be their confidante and guide.

### **ARCHBISHOP YOUNG**

From 1948 until 1954 the parish was under the care of Bishop Guildford Young who was then appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Hobart. He was an eloquent speaker, a man who uplifted the parish. While he was here, he was the founder and leading figure of the Catholic Dinner Club which was very popular for some years, having many illustrious speakers of the day to address its members. One of these was the then Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, who spoke to a group of five hundred people. This club comprised members of all denominations, thus anticipating the eucuminal movement of our day. Mr. John Julian of Bookham was President of the Club for its existence, during which speakers of the calibre and fame of Mr. Santamaria, Allan Reid, Harry Hopman, Eric Baume and many others were persuaded to address its members.

Bishop Young also planned and commenced the building of the new Church on land donated by William Grogan and the Bishop was responsible for commissioning Tom Bass, who was not so famous then, to do much of the sculpturing.

### **FATHER McCUSKER**

Father McCusker endeared himself to the people of Yass while he was Administrator for Monsignor Leonard and to the children as Inspector of Schools. It was typical of the courageous spirit of this scholarly Priest that he gave his life in an attempt to rescue two of his altar boys from drowning.

### **FATHER BUGLER**

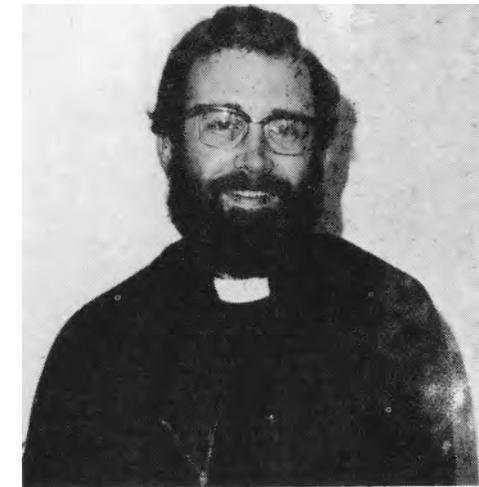
Father Bugler is remembered as the Priest with the motor bike which he used to good effect in zealously spreading the good news.



Father Michael Casey

#### FATHER O'HURLEY

Father O'Hurley, our present Parish priest, arrived here after spending nine years in the parish of Juglong. One of the most obvious achievements of Father O'Hurley's time is the setting up of a Parish Council, a body which consists of members of the laity who can thus represent the whole congregation in taking an active part in the running of their Church. Father is a popular figure with Catholics and non-Catholics alike in Yass, where his ready wit is greatly appreciated. They enjoy his strong and readily admitted interest in horses and horse-racing and also appreciate his frequent visitations to the sick in hospital and to those who need help or comfort. His service as a chaplain in the Army equipped him to communicate readily with men but he also shows a great interest in the children of the town and their welfare. Open to public notice is his readiness to help with Alcoholics Anonymous but less public is the quiet work he does for many a lonely or troubled person. In Father O'Hurley's time here, the Church Hall has been renovated and the Presbytery has had interior improvements made. Yass has indeed been lucky in its Parish Priests.



Father Nickle

#### FATHER CASEY

In 1954, Father Casey came to Yass. He remained until 1969 in which year he was transferred to Gunning. He was a man of great intellectual ability and worked hard and successfully to reduce the debt on the church.

During Father Casey's time here, he had a very likeable curate in Reverend Father Paterson.

#### FATHER PATERSON

He was admired by all, as evidenced by the support he was given by Catholics and non-Catholics alike in building the Church at Wee Jasper.

#### FATHER GREENE

Father Greene was Parish Priest for one year after Father Casey left; but he then retired to the Mercy Hospital at Cootamundra. While here, he endeared himself to all by his generosity to the under privileged, and magnanimous spirit.



Father O'Hurley

#### FATHERS NICKLE & PIGRAM

Mention too should be made of the present curate, Father Nickle and his predecessor, Father Pigram, who worked with Fathers Casey, Greene and O'Hurley. Both have been familiar and respected members of the Yass 'community.

While working happily with their superiors, they have both achieved their own successes. Father Nickle has extended the spirit of the Parish Council by including the laity in the actual ceremonies of the Church and his Weekly Bulletin sheets are growing in artistic merit with the passing of the weeks.

This chapter can do little more than state very sketchily the achievements of the various Priests who have served Yass. Their very dominant and interesting personalities cannot be revealed in such a short space but even this outline should prove that Yass has indeed been blessed by God in its pastors.