

BENEDICT SCORTECHINI

Pioneer Priest and Botanist

Fr Patrick J. Tynan

At the start of 1983 I was appointed as the first Parish Priest of Nerang, a new Parish carved out of two neighbouring parishes of Southport and Surfers Paradise. A brick Church, built in 1979, by the parent Parish of Southport was already in use for four years. I had only been at Nerang a short time when I heard some of the longer-settled parishioners talking about the old Church. I became interested in finding out more about the old church which had been demolished to make way for the present one. The more questions I asked, the more interested I became to find out how long ago the old church had been built and also something about its history. I entered on a voyage of historical discovery which by a strange twist of fate has landed me here in front of you, six years later, talking about my illustrious predecessor, one of the most interesting of our nineteenth century priests.

My researches led me to discover that the original St Brigid's Nerang, had been erected in the time of Fr Benedict Scortechini, probably in the early 1880's, as one of the Station Churches of the Logan Mission, which he was in charge of between the close of 1874 and the start of 1884. But that is to anticipate.

Before I go any further, I feel I need to make an 'Apologia Pro Vita Mea', as it were - an apology for the biography of Scortechini, which will be published in the first half of next year. The apology is necessary I feel, as I have written a book about a man who only spent a third of his life in this country, without myself having travelled at all to other countries where he was born, or where he spent his final years of his short life. The research for my first attempt at biography would have been much more thorough if I had taken the time to travel to Italy, Malaysia and Calcutta, but such was not to be.

Much correspondence and local Italian priests helped to fill out the Italian part of the story; 19th Century newspapers in the National Library of Canberra filled in much of the last few years of the story of this remarkable priest's life.

The Italian verb 'scorticare', means to skin or peel. Scortechini, in English would probably be written "Skinner". The story, if you like, is about Father Benedict Skinner. He was born in Cupramontana, near the Adriatic coastal port of Ancona, in the year 1845. The years 1845 to 1870, the year he came to Queensland, are a remarkable period in Italian history; historians call it the making of Modern Italy. It saw the final dissolution of the Papal States which had lasted since the Middle Ages. Cupramontana was in the Papal States.

Nothing is known of Scortechini's family, except the entry in the Baptismal Register, which was entered up on the same day he was born, February 17th, 1845. It was, and still is, the parish church of St. Leonard. His parents are given as Antonio and Giuditta Svegliati. We do know he had a brother, Peter, who later followed him to Australia. Cupramontana is a medieval walled town, which has a long history, going back to Roman times. It has its fair share of notable sons and daughters in the Services and the Arts.

Cupramontana is a parish in the diocese of Iesi, and the Metropolitan See is the port of Ancona. Two other Italian priests accompanied Scortechini to Australia, and were fellow students with him in Rome. One of them, Jerome Davadi, came from nearby Monte Carotta, Ancona; the other Constantino Rossolini, was a Count by birth. The three of them were among the best men recruited by Bishop James Quinn, when he visited Rome for the first Vatican Council and combined his attendance of the Council with a recruiting drive for his far-flung Diocese which embraced the whole of the colony of Queensland.

It seems fairly certain that Scortechini studied at the University of Rome, although I have uncovered no documentary evidence to prove that assumption beyond doubt. The long association of the Sapienza with Botanical Studies, would indicate that this was the place where Scortechini first obtained his initial interest in that branch of natural science. The Sapienza also issued degrees in Civil and Canon Law, and Scortechini had a Degree in Law, which is written as LL.B.

The city of Rome fell to the invading Italian Army on September 20th, 1870, and the Vatican Council was abruptly ended. Pius IX calmed his nerves on that fatal morning by composing a Charade! One of the people who tried to save the Pope and Rome was probably Joseph Augustine Canali, a member of the Papal Zouaves, who also came to Brisbane shortly afterwards, and helped to finish the Cathedral, before himself

studying for the priesthood.

The ship which carried Scortechini and his fellow countrymen to Australia, was the clipper, "The Storm King". After leaving London in November 1870, it arrived in Brisbane on March 1st 1871, a voyage of three months. The following Sunday the newcomers were welcomed at a High Mass in the tiny St. Stephen's Church, next to the half-built Cathedral.

Scortechini was posted to Warwick, meeting Robert Dunne on the way, in Toowoomba. He worked as an assistant, not always harmoniously to the Irishman, Father Stephen McDonough. Warwick, one of the towns of the Darling Downs Mission, was growing rapidly. The discovery of tin in Stanthorpe in 1872 meant a large rush of miners to the district. Scortechini saw put into operation in Stanthorpe a Pastoral Plan which he used effectively later on the Logan Mission. Mass was celebrated in a hotel dining room, or a store prior to the building and opening of a church for the district. This was the case in Stanthorpe and the first church was opened in December 1872. Davadi would follow Scortechini to Stanthorpe in 1874, and would be remembered as the first Parish Priest and Father of the Fruit Industry, dying in 1900, at the age of 53.

Scortechini would visit Stanthorpe later in 1882, with Henry Tryon, a fellow member of the Royal Society of Queensland, in search of Botanical specimens. His name will always be linked botanically with Stanthorpe because of the several plants found there which have been given his name: *Stehanthemun Scortechinii*; *Bossiaea Scortechinii*; *Grevillia Scortechinii*.

The clergy retreat of May 1873, saw the usual transfers which accompanied those annual events. Scortechini was posted to Gympie in June 1873.

Fr Mat Horan had already been in the new mining town of Gympie for several years when his new Italian curate arrived. Much of the time while Scortechini was there, Horan was roaming Queensland collecting for the new Cathedral, on behalf of his Uncle, Bishop James Quinn.

The Cathedral was finally opened on May 17th, 1874, and a large contingent travelled from Gympie to celebrate that event, although it would appear Scortechini was not among them; he had to content himself by reading verbose accounts of the opening in the columns of *The Gympie Times* and other newspapers. *The Times* described Archbishop Vaughan of Sydney as the 'lion of the day'! Several of the visiting Bishops visited both Maryborough and Gympie before returning to their own Dioceses.

One of the people who collected for the new Cathedral in 1873 in Gympie, was the

Rev. J.E. Tenison Woods, and this may have been the first time that he and Scortechini met. Ten years later they would go to the Straits Settlements as fellow natural scientists.

The last entry in the Gympie Baptismal Register under Scortechini's name is dated October 18th, 1874. He travelled by the Steamer "Culgoa" from Tewantin - an overnight trip.

His next, and best known appointment, was a priest-in-charge of the so-called Logan Mission. He was not the first priest to work in the district, but was certainly the first to reside there. Those who went before him, like Father Hely, had attended the Stations from Brisbane.

The Logan Mission bordered Brisbane City on the north, extended as far as Peak Mountain on the north-west and Mt.Lindsay on the south-west, to the Tweed River on the south, and of course, the sea was its eastern boundary. It also included the inhabited islands of Moreton Bay.

The first Church in the area seems to have been erected at Logan Reserve in 1865, by some of the Irish immigrants brought to Queensland under Bishop Quinn's Immigration Scheme. It was called the Church of the Assumption. Scortechini seems to have arrived in late December 1874 - the first entry in the Beaudesert Baptismal-Register is dated 28th December, 1874. He was twenty-nine years of age. He took up residence in Logan Village, renting a house from Captain O'Mahony. He named his house "Cupravale", no doubt after his birthplace, Cupramontana, in faraway Italy. He also took out a lease on 858 acres across the road from his home, no doubt for the purpose of running stock. The population of Logan Village in 1876, so Balliere's Gazateer informs us, was 50 persons. There was one church in the village, belonging to the Congregationalists. Logan Village was reached from Brisbane, 26 miles away by saddle-horse, Cobb and Co. Coach, or Steamboat up the Logan River. The Logan and Albert Rivers were crossed by ferry or punt - but they weren't always crossable - in February 1875, Beenleigh had 34 inches of rain and the rivers rose higher than anyone could ever remember, because they were all new settlers.

Despite the floods Scortechini got on with the job of opening up the Mission. St. Patrick's night that year brought a soiree and banquet - with over two hundred tickets being sold in aid of the Roman Catholic Parsonage.

There is considerable evidence of lay initiative in the development of the Logan Mission in the decade 1874-1884. In April 1875, the Catholics of Coopers' Plains advertised in *The Queenslander* Newspaper of their intention to build a chapel. As

was often the case, land was given by local Catholics, in this case by J. Freshey J.P. the district surveyor. In this ten years, eight churches were erected on the Logan Mission, all of these new buildings, except the one at Yatala, which was converted from a Masonic Hall. For the record the Churches were:

Coopers' Plains	(St. Patrick's) 1875
Yatala	(Immaculate Conception) 1875
Veresdale	(St. Joseph's) 1876
Cleveland	(Star of the Sea) 1877
Tallebudgera	(All Saints) 1877
Southport	(Guardian Angels) 1882
Nerang	(St. Brigid's) probably 1882; and
Kerry	(St. Columba's) 1883.

When one estimates the distances between some of the Stations and the fact that most of them could only be served by the priest every three months or so, one quickly realises that they could never have come about without local lay initiative.

It was worth noting too, which of the eight churches are still in use. The Yatala Church is now part of the Parish complex at Beenleigh, and is used as a hall.

There are accounts extant of the opening of two of these churches and they were certainly grandiose occasions. When one considers that transport was either by River Steamer or Cobb & Co. coach, it was no mean feat to bring some of the choir from the Cathedral and St. Patrick's Churches in the city, and sing the whole of Mozart's 12th Mass for the opening of the Yatala Church. The opening of the Cleveland Church saw a contingent travel down the river from Brisbane on the steamer "Tinonee", for a whole day's outing. Once again, St. Stephen's Choir attended.

Very many nineteenth century Irish immigrants were unable to read or write. Many of the early entries in the Beaudesert Marriage Registers are signed with an "X". For these people their Parish Priest was also often their Solicitor and their Advisor, on a whole host of issues. We have already noted that Scortechini had a law degree. An event which happened in 1879 may have led him to wish he was not so qualified, as

it almost cost him his life. He was asked to draw up a Will for one of his Parishoners, Patrick McGoldrick, Licensee of the Union Hotel, Logan Bridge. McGoldrick's brother, Samuel, followed him to Queensland, from their native Ireland. *The Logan Witness* later described Sam McGoldrick, as "having rather a vacant expression in the face".

Patrick McGoldrick died and his brother got the notion into his head, that Scortechini was responsible for excluding him from the Will. He came to Cupravale, asked to see his Parish Priest, and then lunged at him with a knife he had concealed on his person. He was wounded between the fifth and sixth ribs on the left side and was out of action, as a result of the wound, for a few months. McGoldrick was quickly apprehended and finally sentenced in the new Brisbane Supreme Court, which had just been built a few years before.

Samuel McGoldrick was sentenced to fourteen years, to be served on notorious St. Helena Island prison in Moreton Bay. The irony of the matter was that Scortechini was also Chaplain to the prison.

Scortechini's parishoners showed their support and sympathy for his close shave with death by taking up a collection and presenting him with an address of loyalty. The collection came to 57 sovereigns - and Bishop O'Quinn's name headed the list of subscribers.

The unfortunate McGoldrick was on St. Helena by the month of August, 1879. He had to endure the humiliation of visits to the Island by his Parish Priest. Subsequent correspondence by McGoldrick with the Colonial Secretary, makes it clear that he was of unstable mind. In one letter for example, he accuses Scortechini of turning the prison staff against him; eventually, on Doctor's advice in 1889, he was sent back to the Brisbane prison, because his ravings were disturbing the sleep of the other prisoners.

That wouldn't be hard to do. If you have visited St. Helena, which is now restored as a tourist venue through a Bicentennial Grant, you would have seen how close to one another the poor inmates were locked up at night - you could reach out and touch the bunk of the man next to you.

Scortechini visited this hell-hole, like the rest of his Stations, every two or three months, probably travelling by the Government Yacht "Kate". Worse than St. Helena was the prison hulk "Proserpine", moored in the Brisbane River not far from the island-prison. In addition to these "Dickensian"- like institutions, there was also a Boys' Reformatory at Lytton, which was also visited.

His visits were usually advertised through the secular newspaper, *The Logan Witness*, and Bishop O'Quinn's Catholic paper, *The Australian*, a couple of months in advance. For example, his timetable for Lent and Eastertide 1881 was as follows:

March 27th	Waterford
April 3rd	Coopers' Plains
April 4th	Tingalpa
April 8th	Boys' Reformatory
April 9th	Lytton
April 10th	Cleveland
April 17th	Lytton
April 25th	Yatala
April 26th	Coomera
April 28th	Southport
April 29th	Tallebudgera
April 30th	Mudgeeraba
May 1st	Nerang Creek
May 8th	Veresdale
May 9th	Teviot Bridge
May 10th	Coochin
May 11th	Teviotville
May 15th	Tambourine
May 22nd	Waterford

May 25th	Lytton Reformatory
May 26th	Lytton
May 27th	Dunwich
May 28th	Cleveland

The other 'Station' on Moreton Bay was the Benevolent Institution at Dunwich, on Stradbroke Island. It seems to have been a place, for any people, apart from prisoners, who could not fit into normal society - from people with mental illness - to the poor and aged. Many of these people, indeed most of them, would have died without the comfort of priest or sacraments - there are 6000 unmarked graves in Dunwich cemetery. Probably, they would mostly have also been buried without any priest being present; it would have been impossible for chaplains who came on Government Yacht's to time their visits with the visit of "Death" who came when least expected. There may be a lesson in this for us who are becoming increasingly pre-occupied with the so-called shortage of priests!

Margaret McLay, in her biography of James Quinn, points out how successful Scortechini was in pastoring his almost totally Irish Parishioners. He joined with them in celebrating their national Saint's birthday. Many of the churches he saw built, bore, and still bear, the names of Irish saints. It was only to be expected that after the Irish famine of the late 1870's a branch of the Irish Land League would be set up on the Logan Mission as in other places throughout "Quinn'sland". Money was collected through this League and forwarded to Ireland. *The Australian* newspaper reported in full the long speech that Scortechini gave when a branch of the League was established in his district after a well-attended meeting at Cupravale. The speech clearly shows how well he grasped the situation of the Irish peasants, and how he was able to compare their plight with the peasants of his native country, who were so much better off.

The last public meeting that Bishop Quinn attended before his death, was as Chairman of the Irish Land League in Brisbane. When he died in 1882, there were twenty-nine priests in the diocese - mostly Irish. In the voting for temporary administration of the Diocese, following Quinn's death, Scortechini's popularity among his fellow clergy was shown by the fact, that he received the third highest number of votes - the two who received more were both of Quinn's nephews, James and Andrew Horan.

Robert Dunne was appointed to succeed Quinn and Scortechini welcomed him at

Cupravale in January 1883, for the Sacrament of Confirmation. Neither of them knew, at this time, that in just one year's time, Scortechini would leave Australia with Dunne's approval, never to return, to act as Botanist for the Government of Perak. In June 1883, along with the other priests of the Diocese, Scortechini made his last Retreat in Australia at St. Kilian's College, South Brisbane.

His interest in and skill as a Botanist was steadily growing after he took up his appointment on the Logan. It must be obvious after reading his Pastoral Timetable that such an interest must have been an excellent hobby as well as a useful one. Most of the plants which he forwarded to the Queensland Herbarium are undated, however the *Logan Witness* Newspaper, in May 1880, noted that he had sent several plants to the Museum, the previous month.

He was admitted to membership of the prestigious Linnaean Society of New South Wales, in 1880, and to its parent body in London, the following year. No doubt, his friendship with Julian Tenison Woods at that time President of the New South Wales Branch of the Society, helped his nomination.

Between 1881 and 1884, he was very active writing Botanical articles, ten articles appeared in *The Logan Witness* newspaper at this time, and four papers of his were published by the Linnaean Society of New South Wales on the Flora of South East Queensland, mainly the area South of Brisbane, as far as Tweed. It is not clear whether or not he travelled to Sydney to read these papers at their meetings, as the Society's records for this period have been lost.

He associated himself with the well-known Botanist, Ferdinand Von Mueller, in his Botanical research and also with Frederick Manson Bailey, the Colonial Botanist of Queensland. It was only to be expected therefore that when the Royal Society of Queensland was established late in 1883 that Scortechini was invited to become a founding member.

By the beginning of 1884 he had to hand in his resignation, as he accepted the offer of a position to accompany Tenison Woods to Perak, in the employ of the Government - Scortechini as Botanist, and Woods as Geologist. Scortechini was thirty-nine, Woods was in his fifties. Only their enthusiasm for their chosen sciences could have sustained them over the next few years, in the hardships associated with travelling and collecting in Tropical Perak. As it was, the bouts of "jungle fever" (no doubt, our malaria) which Scortechini suffered in Perak, were to eventually cost him his life at the early age of 42.

He had travelled to Calcutta in October 1884, planning to meet up with Sir George King, the Curator of the Botanical Gardens there, before going on to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, in London. Within a few days arrival in Calcutta he was struck down with another attack of 'jungle fever' and died at the Howrah General Hospital, on November 4th. His old friend George King named one of the lakes in the Calcutta Botanical Gardens in his honour - Scortechini Lake.

He was eulogised in both church and scientific circles. Tenison Woods said of him in a paper given at the Linnaean Society - "Personally amiable, generous and self-sacrificing, he was an invaluable companion to me in my explorations. He was indeed an instance of the 'man able to do all things well' whose loss was equally great to friendship and to fame". The specimens that he collected today are to be found in Herbaria as far apart as Brisbane, Calcutta, Kew and the British Museum, Berlin, Florence and Perak.

(Fr Patrick Tynan was ordained for Brisbane in 1961. He is the author of *Pioneer Priest and Botanist - Benedict Scortechini* (C.A.S., T'ba 1989) and is now working on the life of Fr Joseph Augustine Canali.)