

THE SHIP DIARIES OF FATHER ROBERT DUNNE: THE JOURNEY OF A SOUL

Fr Neil J. Byrne

In 1961 Don Loris Capovilla was in the process of editing a collection of the Pope John XIII's writings and speeches, which three years later, we would come to know as "The Journal of a Soul". The question arose whether Capovilla might include material from the pope's very personal notebooks and diaries. John XIII eventually overcame his initial reluctance and consented. He said:

I am well aware that people want to know everything about a Pope, and everything may be useful to historians. But they are a more intimate part of me than anything else I have written; my soul is in these pages.

The ship diaries of Father Robert Dunne (1830-1917) are of this kind. Certainly, they contain descriptions of interesting people and significant events - which make them a rich source for the social historian - but, more importantly, Dunne's soul is in their yellowing pages. They offer a rare glimpse of the spiritual life of a nineteenth century Queensland priest and therefore will be of special interest to those exploring the history of Australian spirituality.

Editing Difficulties

Unravelling the diary entries was difficult. Within the same volume, there are mixed diary entries from three different voyages: Dunne's voyage out to Australia on the *Great Victoria* in September-November 1863, his return to Ireland on the *Aconcagua* in March-April 1881, and his return voyage from London to Brisbane on the *Junna* in March-May 1890. By this time Dunne had become the Archbishop of Brisbane. The reason for his 1890 voyage was to canvass for priests and religious in Ireland and to make his first (and only) *ad limina* visit to Rome. This diary will not be examined in the following paper.

Grouping the diary entries into their respective voyages presented the first difficulty to the researcher. What became evident is that much of the diaries have been lost. Virtually nothing of the *Jumna* diary survives. Pages have been torn out either by Dunne's or some later hand. I first found a reference to the existence of the diaries in a short biography of Dunne prepared by Archbishop Duhig. Was he the first editor or censor of the diaries? The volume containing the diaries was discovered among some of Duhig's papers at *Wynberg*. It is now located in the Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives.

While Duhig's censorship of the diaries may have been excessive, at least he prevented the complete destruction of the volume which would have been Dunne's explicit command. The ailing Archbishop instructed his relatives to destroy any letters they had received from him during his thirty-five year episcopate. As Dunne's coadjutor, Duhig took control of the Brisbane Archdiocese from 1912 until Dunne's death in 1917. He was not a book-burner and mercifully Dunne's papers survived.

Select diary entries

What follows is a selection of diary entries each accompanied by a brief explanatory note.

A. *11 September 1863 ("Great Victoria")*

[I]t really did not feel to me that I would not be back - though I did feel qualms passing the house of my mother & sister... Matt called me forward. - He said of me a few words begging me to impress on James the absolute necessity of not having any rows out there that would compromise his position at home. That it would not do to have Dr Cullen hearing those things, and that it left Matt most unpleasantly circumstanced towards Dr C... He promised... to have the accounts finished and that he would forward them to me in Sydney - that I might if I wished make no one the wiser but that I had them with me through the whole voyage - that he had written to James by last post that I was bringing out the accounts in the "Great Victoria". He finally added that... he would keep on hands money to send me to bring me home anytime I might wish to come.

Comment

The *Great Victoria* sailed from Victoria on 11 September 1863 and arrived in Melbourne on 26 November. Dunne was ferried to the ship as it passed Cork. This first diary entry reflects a mood of uncertainty. Dunne is disillusioned with his nine years in Dublin teaching at St Lawrence's Seminary from 1854 to 1863. The college had been established in the early 1850s by Dr James Quinn who some years later

relinquished the rectorship to become the first Bishop of Brisbane. The college never received the kind of public or ecclesiastical support which Quinn had anticipated and its continuation was always a matter of concern to teaching staff. In addition to these work-related anxieties, Dunne's years in Dublin were unsettled by family problems. A serious rift had occurred between his mother, Ellen, and his elder brother, David, over the latter's decision to abandon studies for the priesthood and marry. Father Matthew Quinn's advice concerning the 'rows' in Brisbane would have unsettled Robert Dunne even further. Was he escaping domestic feuds only to plunge himself into ecclesiastical conflict? Matthew Quinn had taken over the rectorship of St Laurence's and was also acting as Bishop James Quinn's Vicar General. The accounts referred to were those relating to the operation of Bishop Quinn's Queensland Immigration Society which he had set up to attract Irish Catholics to his diocese.

B. 13 October 1863

As someone should propose the Captain's health and I did not like to come forward, I asked Mr Wood to do so. He assented... Captain returned thanks and proposed mine, alluding to his delay at Cork and how happy he was now of it. I returned thanks in an awkward speech of a couple of minutes and sat down. Capt. hinted to me to propose the officers of the ship. I drew off from it but Captain urged it - so I did just a little better than the last...

Comment

The saloon passengers are celebrating Captain James Price's birthday. After witnessing the social ease of James Quinn, when he brought the bishop and his party out on the *Donald McKay* in 1860, Price would have been struck by Dunne's reticence. As a priest and later as a bishop, Dunne would always find public speaking an onerous duty.

C. 14 October 1863

This day I spent a good bit copying for Mrs Wood the 'Huntingtower' Scotch music...

Comment

Two things are interesting about this short entry. Firstly, Dunne was at ease in the company of non-Catholics. Mr and Mrs Wood, with whom he was spending a good deal of his time, were Anglicans. Secondly, Dunne was musical. Although he would claim later that he could not sing a note, nevertheless he displays here a more than adequate knowledge of music. Dunne's mother and brother were musicians and he obviously had mastered enough theory to be able to copy parts from a musical score.

D. 18 October 1863

Heard by chance this evening regulation for service on the "G. Britain" was - C. of E. service first - all clear' d out - then R. Catholic in the saloon - Rows about noise on deck.

Comment

This is the only reference to liturgical matters in the 1863 diary. It is safe to presume that Dunne appealed to the precedent set during the *Great Britain's* voyage to Australia in 1862 that Catholics would be permitted to celebrate a public Mass in the saloon each Sunday. Dunne would fight for the same right on board the *Aconcagua* in 1881.

E. 6 November 1863

Awoke about four, strong wind blowing and dosed (sic) on till near 8. I got up - dressed and went on deck, - the post sheet of the foresail had given way - iron hook breaking - and was flapping backwards and forwards... 30 or 35 men lying along the yard trying to clew it up. For a while it appeared uncertain whether they should succeed so strong was it blowing... (about 9 p.m.) We have had such a day!... I stayed on deck till lunch - walking forward once to the forecabin to get a view of her sailing. It was really grand all the lofty seas about her as we looked back on her from the high position and she looked so small - then the poop used to ride so and seem as if springing up from the foam. But when she began to let in one or two seas or rather sank right across a rolling surf the sea dashing its spray on both sides - we (Holden, McMichael and I) returned... I met Holden in the porch... terror was in his face... he told me that the rudder was lost... he had just met the Captain and... he was the very picture of terror. I got out much against Holden's will and found them cutting down the doors and getting up the planks to get at the tiller... I did feel frightened... but luckily they had enough purchase still remaining on the tiller to fit ropes... Many a tableau presented itself... for a painting. Holden was really terrified and so were many others. All the time the Captain was sitting in the wheel house and watching those two sails... the sailors were to a great extent taking in the fore top sail and bracing round the others... we had ladies fainting all about the saloon, crying... I had brought Miss P. to the ladies' cabin to... console her by shewing her the waves - but they... only startled her the more.

11 November 1863

Nothing for taking away nervousness like going on deck and seeing what is going on. One goes down with a feel that he has been absurdly afraid and this better than two hours reasoning.

Comment

The account of the storm encountered by the *Great Victoria* on the fifty-sixth day of the voyage is the highlight of the 1863 diary. At the time the ship was situated just north of Crozet Island at latitude 41.42, Longitude 54.25. Dunne's feeling of exhilaration during the storm is shared by his fellow passengers, James Holden and Hugh McMichael, until the situation becomes more life-threatening. This episode reveals several life-long traits in Dunne's character. In a crisis he was unflappable; he relied on his own dispassionate assessment of any situation before deciding on a course of action; when he decided what to do he was resolute and courageous. His concern during the storm was for the welfare of all and he demonstrated a capacity for effective leadership in calming the panic stricken passengers - even though his strategy in the case of Miss Posnett backfired. Dunne's entry during a second storm on 11 November offers a plausible strategy for conquering fear.

F. 29 November 1863

A beautiful still day! Quite tranquil. I am sitting at my desk writing - with a full view of the country to the south of the Yarra out towards the B. Gardens. When a sound breaks the silence it is the Sandgate train rumbling over the wooden bridge - and when I look up - the first thing I see is the river running in strong current under the white bridge - (there goes the train again). All through this beautiful clear Australian atmosphere looks so cut out and marked... We have just come in from half an hour's walk, Mrs Wood, Mr Wood and I... After getting back... Mr and Mrs Wood disappeared - not coming back at once I had a notion they wished to read evening service... Up later than I meant; stayed watching the sun go round from East to North, struck first time by the newness. My window faces south and as the rising sun first lit the western edge of the blind, I counted on its soon covering all - but it disappointed and went behind. It was the first time I noticed the change.

Comment

Dunne's first impression of the Australian landscape is particularly interesting. Unlike many European immigrants who found their new surroundings inadequate in every way, Dunne has an immediate and optimistic reaction. Even though he possessed a great love for both the Irish and Italian countrysides, he resonates immediately with the tranquillity, stillness, beauty, clarity and precision of the Australian landscape. A love for the land itself and its possibilities would enable Dunne to overcome the many set-backs and frustrations which lay ahead of him during the next seventeen years.

The second of Dunne's ship diaries was written aboard the *Aconcagua* which sailed from Sydney on 11 March 1881 and arrived at Plymouth, via Suez, on 28 April. As in the case of the *Great Victoria* voyage eighteen years earlier, Dunne faces an uncertain future. His stubborn refusal to implement a number of Bishop James Quinn's policies, which Dunne believed to be ill-advised, had led to his being replaced as Vicar General and finally removed from the parish of Toowoomba where he had been pastor since 1868. Quinn had offered him no subsequent appointment and advised him to return to Ireland. The two former colleagues and friends had met for the last time on the deck of the *Wotonga* in Sydney Harbour on 12 February 1881.

A 12 March 1881 (Saturday evening)

Ship still rolling a great deal... I did not get up this morning till near ten, did not have any breakfast, and ordered a cup of arrowroot at ten; felt very poorly and... thought of going back overland from Melbourne to Sydney; Goodness knows how it will be yet. - I am doing what I was advised by James Episcopus and F. Fouhey (Father Denis Fouhy) and others-: and, if I am to go home at all these are the best circumstances: viz. good ship - passage all thro' to Plymouth and London - good time of year, and, if left to me, cabin all to myself, which I hope will be left so. - and yet my heart is constantly failing at the trip - I would be glad of a decent excuse to forfeit my passage money and turn back.

Comment

Dunne had come to Sydney to discuss his future with Archbishop Vaughan. Vaughan was at that time expanding his Catholic education system and was keen to avail himself of Dunne's expertise, particularly in the area of higher education for boys. Yet Dunne's heart was in Queensland. In this second entry of the *Aconcagua* diary, he continues to hope in vain for a reinstatement. He knew from experience that the ailing and cranky Bishop Quinn was capable of reversing decisions at a moment's notice. In the meantime, Dunne would return as ordered to Ireland and console himself with solitude.

B. 14 March 1881

I spent the day at the Melbourne Exhibition... Admired the Italian jewellery which is near the entrance, then the statuary which is, to my eye, only second rate, - then went up with Mr Curley and Mr Anaviti to see the Gallery Courts and got immediately into the painting halls. The French was unpleasant to pass through owing to the frequency of undraped figures. The Italian and Belgian were much better, - At the end of this long stretch of courts I was about to turn back... when a lady... remarked to me don't go back, the best... is behind that porch... I passed on and on entering, beheld a room beautifully fitted up as a chapel by Mayes of Munich... Curley... came up.

He looked about a little, and soon his eyes filled up, and I could see his handkerchief out, and he trying to keep his face turned from me. The whole atmosphere created by the religious objects and their judicious selection and location affected him. He remarked some of our old sinners if they dropped in here, would do some good for themselves.

Comment

T. Curley, a Sydney businessman, and Julius Anavitti, an artist and friend of Father Benedict Scortechini in Queensland, had become acolytes for Father Dunne's daily Mass in his cabin. They succeeded in persuading him to come with them to the Melbourne International Exhibition (1880-1881). Here Dunne reveals some competence as an art critic but also an excessive degree of prudishness - even by nineteenth century standards. More interesting is his sensitivity to the layman Curley's spiritual and emotional response to German religious art.

C. 21 March 1881 (10.a.m. Monday)

Got into chat with one of the stewards who told me that there were... including officers a total of 119 hands... I asked him what his pay was and he said 4 pounds per month. I remarked that it must take a great deal to pay them all; 'Yes', he said. 'Still on the other hand', I rejoined, '... 60 times 70 pounds makes 4200 pounds - for the saloon alone.' Yes he said but figure to yourself what a lot it takes to feed them. - The profit on the liquor sale feeds them - I answered. You have the drink duty free... I asked him about his own prospects. He told me that he was now 15 years in the sea service... I ask(ed) what age are you, and he answered 27. Do you mean to continue long at it, I don't know, I might get promoted... or I might get into a good hotel in the colonies.

Comment

A stint as Bishop's Secretary followed by fourteen years as a parish priest had given Dunne a head for business. He was just as keen to see people get on in this life as helping them find their reward in the next. He urged all immigrants to settle on the land. The steward's intention to settle in Australia and making his living from the liquor trade would not have enjoyed Dunne's warmest support. Nevertheless, the fact that Dunne devotes two full pages of his diary to recording his chance conversation with the bar steward reflects the genuine interest he took in the concerns and aspirations of ordinary people. He took seriously what they had to say and this, in part, accounted for his great popularity as a pastor.

D 26 March 1881

In the evening played along game of chess with the Russian and won.

30 March 1881

Just finished a game of chess with Russian Count in which I got beaten and quickly too. He has a way of stripping the board of his adversaries pieces that puts about and discourages.

Comment

At the same time Dunne was at ease in the company of the social elite. Count Anrep was a widely-travelled Russian dilettante who had recently completed an overland trip from Rockhampton to Brisbane. Over the chessboard they discussed rural settlement, the rise of Islam in north-east China, the pastoral strategies of the Catholic clergy and that Church's difficulty in holding its male adherents.

E. 2 April 1881

Had a walk with the Captain, and asked him some questions on the application of some of Maury's theories to the sea around us: viz. that whether he found that the evaporation from the equatorial seas is much greater than from those of the temperate zones, and hence the former much saltier and denser than the later...

Comment

Captain G.F. Dixon was a thirty year old product of scientific liberalism with little interest in religion yet he was attracted by Dunne's extensive knowledge of the secular sciences. Together they discussed the latest theories on hydrography advanced by the American Matthew Maury.

F. 2 April 1881

Had a word or two with F. (Father) Kenny after seven o' clock on deck re his saying Mass in the steerage tomorrow, or in the bath room. I told him I would "not give him the vestments to say Mass in the steerage or in the bath room." ... He said: "if you refuse to give me the vestments I'll make you answer for it:" ... It displeased me to think that after all my trouble to secure Mass in the first saloon for the decorum of the Mass, he should go off behind my back... and ask the captain to let him have Mass in the steerage or the bath room.

3 April 1881 (Sunday)

Rose early this morning... meaning to see F. Kenny about Mass; saw him so before he rose but he was a wake. Said he saw the captain after I left last

night, Capt. said we could have the saloon till noon; so, he added, I can say Mass after you, and that will be best, and I'm very sorry for what happened last night.

Comment

Dunne was not the only priest aboard the *Aconcagua*. Returning home from a fund raising tour for the new Yorkshire cathedral was Father William Kenny. Dunne did not care for such ecclesiastical fund raisers and the two did not get on. It seemed odd to Dunne that a priest committed to building a magnificent cathedral so that liturgy might be celebrated with full Tridentine grandeur might at the same time be content to celebrate the same Mass in a steerage bathroom. In the battle of wills Dunne got his way and the steerage passengers were brought up to the first class saloon to attend Mass.

G. 4 April 1881

Piano fetched up on deck this evening in order to have dance there, Pedal broken in fetching it up the stairs. I came down from such dance to write a bit of diary - Style of waltzing! Eh ho! - Useless to go to bed till near eleven, as there will be no chance of sleeping between the screw below and the dancing above.

Comment

Dunne's disapproval of the dancing was more on aesthetic than moral grounds. Australians danced badly. Journalist Richard Twopenny observed in 1883: 'With all the universal love of dancing which permeates even the strictest Puritans amongst the young colonials, there is very little good dancing to be met with... To dance is pleasant, but it would be a waste of time to take trouble to learn to dance well'. (*Town Life in Australia*, 1863 & 1973, po.220). It was during an earlier hymn singing lesson round the piano that Dunne noticed the singing relieved by 'chat and giglings, peut etre, flirtings'.

H. 6 April 1881

Awoke the second time in the midst of a most sad dream, that Maria D. was dead, and that June Moloney (Mrs Ahearn) and Elly and some more were come to see and console me over it. I seemed to be very miserable:- and it was for myself I was so. Maria as she lay dead appeared very beautiful and happy.

Comment

This is the only time in the entire Dunne correspondence that he describes a dream. The concentration is on Dunne's own deep unhappiness and not on the death of his sister Maria whose release from this world has brought her beauty and happiness. The other women were relatives or friends either living or dead. 'Elly' may have been his mother, Ellen, who died in 1864 or his sister, Ellen, (Sister Mary Ignatius) who died of tuberculosis in 1866. Dunne relied a great deal on family relationships, particularly those with female relatives, for his emotional support. His most regular correspondent since 1863 had been Maria whom he supported financially.

I. 10 April 1881 (In the Gulf of Aden)

When have I spent a Palm Sunday like this before? - Last Sunday, do you remember, the old church now in ashes, going down so seriously and nicely dispensing the palm among the people... How changed all has been to me like an earthquake, like a destruction of Pompeii, - Oh like almost nothing as much as itself... Along from Aden to Perim there are lofty mountains in view... then a lower range nearer the sea, and then a sandy low ground to the water's edge. But oh so sandy, and so dreary, a brown plain and browner hills, not a trace of verdure, not a sign of a tree.. A temptation came over me that such a country inspires the thought of a Personal God such as the Pentateuch describes:- The Eastern Religions are all such as these hills, terror and blasting and smiting, just as the religious economy of Homer is G. ecian.

Comment

Again Dunne describes his unhappy emotional state. He is tempted to see the destruction of his Toowoomba church by fire as on 12 June 1880, which resulted ultimately in his being exiled from his parishioners, as the work of a vengeful God like the God of the Pentateuch.

J. 14 April 1881

Were watching the Sinai Ranges all day... Had a chat with some two or three of the gentlemen on "the one thing, as I thought, to populate Arabia": There is said the Chinese bursting through their empire... won't be admitted into Australia, and they are being driven out of California. Open Arabia to them. Give them the land for nothing, let them irrigate, dam up, plant trees, and they will soon change the climate and grow coffee, spices etc. etc. etc. It will be good for them and good for the owner of the country.

Comment

Here Dunne's agrarian ideology leads him to absurd conclusions. His success in settling poor Irish immigrants on Queensland's fertile Darling Downs had convinced him that there was virtually no immigrant problem that could not be solved by rural settlement - even in the Sinai desert!

K. 24 April 1881 (*Off the south coast of Spain*)

[Letter written to Mrs Daniel Canon Macgroarty]

Our voyage is drawing to a close. Some scenes in it I shall never forget. The parting sight of Australia off Cape Leeuwin... the day off Aden and Perim Island; And the night we spent in the desert, on the Suez Canal. It was Good Friday night; we had travelled half-way thro' the canal; and as we were not allowed to travel at night through it, we were fully moored for the night at sundown. It was ... a rich moonlight,... and some played the piano and sang on deck; some went up or down the canal to bathe. Some went ashore and rambled about through the sandy desert. Do you remember a very pretty piece of Longfellow's in the fourth (or third) book... called 'Address to the red sand in an Hour Glass' - where he speaks of the B.V.M's flight through the desert to Egypt across the Suez sands, with Our Lord and St Joseph. Well, where we were rambling was just the spot of the old track, thro' the desert, from Syria and Judea to Egypt; and certainly... within the circle of that moon-lit horizon, the weary fugitives of eighteen long centuries ago will have rested... Was it not strange that all should have come so together, the scene with its memories, the Good Friday night, the bright full moon, and the ship moored at the bank... so that we could go ashore. I got back... on the steamer. All was silent by this time for it was between one and two... I got out of my cabin a pocket Testament (which by the way we often used on Toowoomba's Altar) and, after a word of passing excuse to the quarter master, on guard at the gangway, I went back to the sand and sitting down in the desert read the two (2) first chapters of St Matthew's Gospel under the bright Egyptian moonlight. In the morning it was "Mr Dunne we hear that you have been carrying on some Fenian-looking movements all night. There is great nervousness on board over it, Please explain etc. etc."

Comment

Although not forming part of the diary, this letter deserves inclusion here since it was written to a close friend during the voyage, and recalls possibly the most significant spiritual experience of Dunne's life to that point. This 'desert experience' had a profound effect. Dunne sees in the flight of the Holy Family from the perils of Judea to the safety of Egypt his own flight from the world to monasticism.

L. 17 April 1881 (Easter Monday)

During the afternoon we sailed along the island of Candia (Crete) seeing the Mount Ida in the distance covered with snow... and we are now off the glorious... Peloponessus (Peloponnisos), the spot immortalized in Thucidides.

20 April 1881

Passed this afternoon, before dinner, through the beautiful straights(sic) of Messina and after dinner hurried up... to see the volcano of Stromboli... the western sun shone out beautifully on the Calabrian coast... Coming up the coast could not help how poor a struggle the Bourbon made for the land.

Comment

The references to the Greek historian Thucydides and the loss of the Kingdom of Naples claimed by Don Carlos of Bourbon in 1738 and later lost to republican forces reveal Dunne's comprehensive knowledge of classical and recent European history. It also betrays his political leanings towards monarchy.

M. 26 April 1881

A raw brisk morning. Every preparation being made for getting to port. Man up in the crosstrees of the poop mast painting same. Mind taking the droppings of the paint all around the quarterdeck - passenger taking refuge under the bit of awning... Wrote letter today to Dr James Quinn, not much substance in it, but note full to five pages.

Comment

Even as his ship was nearing Plymouth and what he thought might be a new life as a Cistercian monk at Mt Mellary Abbey, Dunne still thought it worthwhile to write a five page letter to his Bishop in the hope of a reinstatement. He would return to Brisbane, not as one of Quinn's priests but as his episcopal successor.

In summary, the 1863 diary reveals Dunne as an intelligent but reticent and somewhat troubled young priest given to self doubt and feelings of uncertainty about his future. Nevertheless, in a crisis he demonstrated a natural capacity for leadership. He was fearless, unflappable, resolute and compassionate. On arrival in his new country, he immediately saw its beauty and possibilities and thereafter would never be discouraged by pessimists. The virtues of fortitude and hope were the real sustainers of Dunne's spirituality and it took an uprooting from his homeland and near loss of life to clear away his superficial leanings towards self-doubt.

When Dunne is returning to Europe in 1881, we discover in his writing a man who understands suffering and the pain of rejection. He is defeated but not crushed. He does not blame Australia for his misery or even his bishop and former close friend who caused much of it. Dunne chooses to see his present unhappiness as an opportunity for spiritual growth, a chance to explore the path of monastic contemplation and solitude. He had taken the advice of St Bernard of Clairvaux to his Cistercian monks of the twelfth century:

Turn aside from troubled and anxious reflection on your own progress, and escape to the easier paths of remembering the good things, which God has done; in this way instead of becoming upset by thinking about yourself, you will find relief by turning your attention to God... less the heart should become hardened by too much sadness and so perish through despair.

(Sermons on the "Song of Songs", 11.2)

Robert Dunne was never destined to wear the cowl, but his monastic spirituality would continue to nourish him. When he returned to Brisbane in 1882 to accept the mitre, Queensland Catholics acquired a genuinely spiritual leader, a man who like Christ, had made his own journey from life through death to resurrection.

Rev Neil J. Byrne B.D., Ph.D.

Neil Byrne is currently Academic Dean of Pius XII Seminary, Banyo, where he has lectured in Church History since 1979. He also teaches at the Australian Catholic University Queensland and is President of the Brisbane Catholic Historical Society. His biography *Robert Dunne* was published by the University of Queensland Press in 1991.