

PAPER II

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF BISHOP QUINN IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

I would like to thank the Historical Society for its kind invitation to address you tonight. The advantage of my diary is that it makes me do things I would not otherwise do. Once an appointment is fixed in the book it approaches inexorably with a sure and steady tread, that allows no escape, short of death. So it was with this one tonight.

However, I am pleased to be invited to talk on the subject of Far North Queensland, because it allows me to focus on an area very dear to my heart, that I described in a conversation with the Pope in 1988 as the most beautiful part of Australia, and that he repeated later to the assembled Australian Bishops at lunch. As he was seated at the time I wondered about the authority of his statement. I will leave it to the Canon Lawyers to decide whether it was *ex cathedra* or not.

Far North Queensland is not only the most beautiful part of Australia, but historically one of the most interesting as well.

I went there in 1986 with very little knowledge of the area or its history. I was to learn more, partly from my travels around the Peninsula, partly from the reminiscences of the Priests and lay people, but mainly from an excellent history of the area written in 1988 by Father Michael Endicott, O.S.A. entitled "*The Augustinians in Far North Queensland, 1883 - 1941*".

During my six years as Bishop of Cairns I travelled the area extensively, and although I ran out of time for doing all the things I wished to do, such as exploring the tin mining areas west of Dimbulah, and walking the old pathway to Hells Gate near Cooktown, nevertheless I managed to organise trips both to the abandoned Palmer River and Hodgkinson gold fields before my departure in 1992.

On one occasion I walked Robson's old packing track from the Mulgrave River to the top of the Range, and did so in the knowledge that Tenison Woods had travelled that very same track before me. Looking back, the view of the Mulgrave River seemed every bit as beautiful and fresh as when he had described 100 years earlier.

On another occasion on a trip to Forsayth, south of Georgetown, with Father John Butcher, I experienced one of those key moments that shape our lives. Father Butcher took me, after a great deal of searching, to a lonely cemetery in the middle of the bush. It had earlier served some gold mining town close by that had appeared overnight and then vanished just as quickly, leaving hardly a trace.

One large tombstone carrying an Irish name caught my attention. Judging from its size it must have belonged to a person of importance, but try as I might with my enquiries I could discover nothing about that person. I realised that in one hundred years time my tombstone too will probably be subject to similar scrutiny, with a similar result. The thought of being unremembered and unknown was a depressing experience until I realised that there is One who remembers, the same One who numbers the hairs of our head, and sees the lowly sparrow fall from the sky, and that person is God.

That realisation lifted an enormous weight from my spirit. Almost as if for the first time I realised that we play our role and move on and someone else takes our place in the work of God's Kingdom. What we do, is not as important as the way that we do it. Our poor efforts are fitted into the mosaic of God's marvellous plan and produce results beyond our wildest imagining.

I will always be deeply grateful for that lonely cemetery near Forsayth that provided me with an experience that was so significant for my life and faith.

Later the abandoned mining towns of North Queensland were to reinforce that earlier experience in the bush near Forsayth.

However I have digressed slightly and I would like to go back to a little of the history of Far North Queensland as a backdrop for my later words.

In 1859 a separate colony of Queensland was established by the British Government. The Diocese of Brisbane, coextensive with the colony of Queensland, was established two years later with James Quinn as its first Bishop.

Nine years later, with the discovery of gold on the Etheridge River in far North Queensland, Father Patrick McGuinness was sent almost 2,000 miles to Georgetown as its first Parish Priest. He is described by James Horan as “*good and big hearted*”.

He awaited the arrival of a Curate, Father Peter Capra, a Italian Priest, later to become Parish Priest of Roma, whose presence is still indicated there by the olive trees planted behind the old Presbytery.

The port for Georgetown was over 200 miles away at Cardwell on Rockingham Bay, surely one of the most beautiful locations in Australia and very much in the news at the moment because of a proposed tourist development there.

After its discovery in 1870 a great deal of gold was won from the Etheridge. However in 1873 as it diminished, a young courageous Irishman named James Venture Mulligan, of County Down, struck north in the footsteps of Ludwig Leichhardt, Edmond Kennedy, and William Hann in search of fresh fields.

Mulligan, surely one of the most significant figures in the history of far North Queensland, lies now near Mt. Molloy in a humble grave that gives no indication of the fame he achieved in his lifetime, nor the honour in which he was held by his contemporaries.

Mulligan had certainly heard of the gold discovered a year earlier by William Hann and his party, on a river that he called the Palmer, after the Chief Secretary of Queensland, Sir Arthur Palmer. Hann’s grazing background did not equip him well to understand what he had discovered. He thought the find insignificant, which is surely one of the great understatements of Australian mineral exploration.

Following in his footsteps, Mulligan must have marvelled at his good fortune. Excellent alluvial gold was there for the taking, and when that news broke on the Etheridge, miners and station hands packed whatever they could and rushed north. In 1954 when Mulligan was commemorated by a memorial outside Mareeba, an old lady, Mary Ann Finn, was present who had accompanied her parents with Mulligan on that mad rush north. She recalled how, when the camp was threatened by bushfire her mother had driven a bullock wagon loaded with dynamite into the dry bed of the Walsh River.

Her mother was typical of those remarkable women who accompanied their men to the goldfields and are remembered too rarely in the development of Far North Queensland.

Soon thousands of miners were swarming over the Palmer and its tributaries, and Cooktown on the coast, famous as the beaching place of the Endeavour 100 years earlier, became a thriving port for thousands of Europeans and Chinese miners. They set out from there on the 150 mile trek to the new goldfield, often not without tragedy.

Soon Maytown on the Palmer became the centre of a population that at one time was estimated at twenty thousand people. It was a remarkable goldfield, producing first alluvial gold and then reef gold. Within a few years £5 1/2 million sterling had been won from that field and its tributaries.

A small booklet, written by J. H. Binnie entitled "*My Life on a Tropic Goldfield*" gives a remarkable picture of those early days and the hardships that were involved. Binnie's father, a mining engineer, stitched his own wounds and extracted his own teeth, while his wife bore her children there in the loneliness of her bark hut without medical assistance.

I would like to know more about Father Patrick McGuinness. I imagine that he followed the miners north from Georgetown and then travelled on to Cooktown, leaving Peter Capra behind in his former Parish. These are matters about which some of you later may be able to enlighten me.

Certainly McGuinness seems to have been in Cooktown upon the arrival of Father McDonagh in 1876.

Gradually however the field diminished and the remarkable Mulligan then ventured further south discovering payable gold on the Hodgkinson River. That discovery almost cost him his life when disappointed miners turned on him, but with typical Irish bravery, he bluffed the lynching mob with his pistol and escaped.

The goldfield that then sprang up around Thornborough and Kingsborough needed an outlet as well, giving birth to the village of Cairns on the mudflats of Trinity Inlet. No one could possibly have foreseen the magnificent City that would eventually develop there in those impossible surroundings. However as Cairns thrived, Cooktown diminished, and it was no surprise that as the Palmer gold petered out Cooktown became virtually a ghost town.

In 1877, partly out of a desire to evangelise the Aborigines and partly out of a desire to care for the spiritual needs of the miners, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith formed the Vicariate of Queensland based on Cooktown, and appointed Father Adolph Lecaille, a Belgian Priest of Western

Australia, as Pro-Vicar Apostolic. Lecaille never arrived and eventually his appointment was cancelled.

However three Italian missionaries, who were to work with him, Tarquino Tanganelli, Luigi Fabris, and Cherubino de Romanis did arrive, and Tanganelli was appointed as the new Apostolic Pro-Vicar. A year later, in 1878, after a scandal involving servant girls, Tanganelli and his companions were withdrawn and Father John Cani of Brisbane was appointed as Pro-Vicar Apostolic.

Canis loved the Aborigines and had that enormous energy needed for the Vicariate, on one occasion riding from Point Douglas to Normanton. He also visited Thursday Island and the Southern coast of New Guinea. He seemed the ideal Pastor for the rigours of Far North Queensland but just as he was consolidating the Church presence in the area Bishop Quinn died in Brisbane and he was recalled, never to return. He was eventually appointed the first Bishop of Rockhampton in 1882.

Eventually in 1881 another Italian, Father Paul Fortini, was appointed as Pro-Vicar Apostolic. Michael Endicott describes him *“as probably the most inept and bizarre ecclesiastical administrator in Australian Church history.”* He placed Herberton under interdict in 1882 and was then removed from office. He returned to Italy where James Duhig met him in later years as he touchingly said *“teaching languages and preparing to meet his Maker.”*

Eventually on Pentecost Sunday, in 1884, the Vicariate was handed over to the Irish Augustinians, and flourished under their strong direction. In 1904 the centre of the Vicariate shifted from Cooktown to Cairns. In 1948 it was handed back to secular control with the arrival of Bishop Thomas Cahill.

That briefly is the history of the area to which Bishop Quinn was drawn before the Italian missionaries and the Irish Augustinians ever arrived there.

He was present on three occasions: in 1872 to visit Georgetown, his most northern Parish and to travel on to Charters Towers; in 1874 to visit the recently opened Palmer River goldfields; and then in 1876 to celebrate a marriage in the Bank of New South Wales Chambers at Cardwell. I believe there were later visits to Townsville and Charters Towers, possibly in 1879 and 1880, but I do not know a great deal about those.

Bishop Quinn must have considered that Cardwell had a future, because in 1873 he bought 18 blocks of land in the town area. His 1872 visit there is quite

well known because of a fine account in the Bazaar Gazette published in Warwick in 1904. They are largely the reminiscences of the Rev. James Horan, the Parish Priest of Warwick and nephew of Bishop Quinn.

James Horan was an interesting character. Born at Gormanstown in County Kildare in 1846, he attended St. Laurence's Seminary, Dublin, before completing his study at Versailles. In 1868 he was ordained at the tender age of twenty-two. The same year he set sail for Brisbane on the Zealandia with Mother Mary Patrick Potter and five Sisters of Mercy destined for Brisbane.

Like many young preachers, and not a few older ones, he was so carried away with his first sermon on Good Friday that he preached, as he said, "*the greater part of the afternoon*". I'm sure the good Sisters must have greeted their arrival in Brisbane with a great sense of relief for more reasons than one. James Horan was welcomed there by his brother, Matthew Horan, Parish Priest of Gympie, Dr. Dunne, the Bishop's Secretary, and Dr. Cani, the last two carrying riding injuries.

His first appointment was to his old French teacher, Dean Murlay, in Rockhampton, before he returned to Brisbane as Parish Priest at St. Patrick's Church, Fortitude Valley. In March 1871 he was transferred as Assistant to Dean Tissot, Parish Priest of Maryborough, and then became the first Parish Priest of Mt. Perry.

He was then appointed Parish Priest of Clermont and Copperfield. His predecessor, Father Healy, had been tragically killed by a local constable after being mistaken for a bushranger. There must be a moral in that story somewhere but I am not brave enough to suggest one. In August 1872 James Horan set out from Clermont to meet Bishop Quinn in Mackay and then to travel on to Cardwell. There they found Father Peter Capra waiting to travel to the Etheridge.

After buying up with horses and stocking up with provisions, mainly salt beef and sardines, the group set out on the 237 mile trip inland. Along the way they recited the Breviary on horseback, and the Rosary and Litany three times a day. At Georgetown Father Patrick McGuinness had organised a welcoming party from the different Churches who met them seven miles along the track, and then escorted them back to the town, that rises like an oasis in the midst of that dry and dusty terrain.

On one occasion I walked the Dalrymple track behind Cardwell, where Bishop Quinn and his party would have commenced their journey 120 years earlier.

As I climbed over the still well made but long abandoned track, I wondered to myself if the Rosary had ever been recited there since. At one place Father John McGrath and I wandered off the track and found the rocky mound of an old grave. Sandy Hubinger of Cardwell suggested that it may have belonged to a man who had been drowned there many years earlier but we were not able to confirm that story.

The grave was a reminder of those hundreds who perished from sickness, exhaustion, or conflict, along the early mining tracks. Most of them are still lying there, their location long since lost. John McGrath and I whispered a silent Hail Mary for that unknown traveller before we returned to Cardwell.

On many occasions I drove the steep and rocky road to Georgetown and marvelled at the stamina of these classically trained gentlemen who rode and walked those slopes and camped beneath the stars, in a country so terribly different from anything they had ever experienced.

After leaving Peter Capra at Georgetown, Bishop Quinn's small party then moved on to the Charters Towers goldfields. They arrived shortly before the miner's rioted over meat prices. Bishop Quinn played a significant role in addressing a lynch mob and diffusing a very dangerous situation. The local butcher, a Mr. Trevethan, had raised the price of meat. When he refused to lower his prices the miners pulled down one of his shops, and then tried to release the miners who were imprisoned as a result.

Trevethan appeared, was jostled by the miners, and fired a shot wounding two of them. Bishop Quinn showed a great deal of courage in fronting the mob and convincing them to allow Father Horan and himself to escort Trevethan into police custody. They agreed and Trevethan's life was saved.

After Charters Towers, James Horan returned to Clermont to await the arrival of the Josephite Sisters and Father Tenison Woods. He was then appointed Secretary to his uncle and accompanied him on another trip in 1874 to the Palmer River goldfields. He eventually became Parish Priest of Warwick. Father Stephen McDonagh, the previous Parish Priest, had rather foolishly suggested to the Bishop that he needed a change. Whether he was really thinking about Cooktown, two thousand miles away, I very much doubt.

Nevertheless that is where he was appointed and Father James Horan, I imagine much to his delight, became Parish Priest of Warwick. There he remained, not always in the best of health, until his death in 1905. He is interred in St.

Mary's Church, Warwick. The present Presbytery remains as a memorial to his presence and energy.

Bishop Quinn's second trip to the far North occurred in August 1874. With James Horan, he arrived in Cooktown on the 14th August, 1874 and celebrated Mass in the Court House. They were given an escort, Harry, Chief Inspector Harris's blacktracker, and set out on the road to the Palmer, using the short route through the infamous Hells Gate, where so many miners had been killed by the Aborigines.

By day-time they travelled in the midst of hostile tribes and then listened in fright at night to the loud calls of the Aborigines from the darkness. On such occasions a rifle was discharged into the night sky to frighten them away. That animosity between whites and blacks had been fuelled by the wholesale slaughter of the tribes that in reality was akin to genocide.

It was no wonder that the Aborigines responded with a number of tragic pay-back killings. It augured poorly for any future Catholic ministry towards the Aborigines that was partly the reason for the establishment of the Vicariate.

There is a quaint description in the *Bazaar Gazette* of an incident on the journey near the Normanby River. It states:

"The Bishop camped that night near a little watering place whither the white men from the districts around had come to meet His Lordship. Here, seated on a log, the Bishop discoursed with a grace and force which held his hearers as if mesmerised. Varlous questions were answered, and the little group declared that they would rather one such chat than many sermons in the Church."

I imagine that if the good Bishop's sermons lasted as long as his nephew's, one could well understand the miners' preference for sitting around a campfire.

Nevertheless the *Gazette* also records that a wealthy Victorian listener, by name Mr. Trochmorton, was so impressed by the Bishop's words that he was baptised at Stoney Creek, recited his profession of faith at Mass under a rough bush shade and became a Catholic. The Bishop and his nephew then travelled on to the Palmer and remained there for two months before returning to Brisbane for the Christmas ceremonies.

One of the great experiences of my life was travelling into the Palmer River over the old Laura-Maytown coach track in four wheel drives with Father Len

Bibo and Louie Komsic, mine host of the Palmer River Roadhouse. It was not exactly the same route that Bishop Quinn had travelled. Nevertheless I was very conscious of his earlier presence when we arrived at our destination.

Louie is a remarkable character, a retired crocodile shooter who had lived with the Aborigines in far North Queensland and shot 14,000 crocodiles before he settled down at the Roadhouse on the Palmer. The trip into those ghostly goldfields was extraordinary. I would never have imagined that motor vehicles could successfully negotiate the tracks that lay ahead. One section of the track is cut into a cliff face and descends about one thousand feet to the valley below.

One hundred years earlier bullock teams loaded with heavy machinery had negotiated that track. Their wheel ruts were cut deeply into the rocky roadway, while holes in the rock face, indicated how poles were inserted through the spokes of the wheels to steady the drays and wagons as they descended, or to allow them to rest as they strained upwards. One should spare a thought for the thousands of horses and bullock without which the Palmer goldfields could never have been established.

At the foot of the Conglomerate range the flagstone floor of Folders Inn is a mute reminder of the coaching days. Behind it in a deep gully lay hundreds of century-old bottles piled high, half of them broken, but the rest somewhat protected by the inaccessibility of the location. I was conscious that Bishop Quinn may have been there and celebrated Eucharist. If not Quinn, then some visiting Priest must certainly have done so during the short history of the goldfields.

It was a most remarkable feeling bumping along that track over which thousands and thousands of Australian and Chinese miners had travelled, and yet nowadays seeing not a single person. Rusting, abandoned mine machinery lay everywhere as well as Chinese trinkets scattered over the ground. Huge mullock heaps rose untidily around us. Often an unidentified grave covered with stones would appear beside the track, leaving us wondering who lay there and why they had died.

At Maytown itself the cemetery was well preserved, the tombstones carrying some of the better known names from the history of the area. During the two days that we explored the fields, we camped beside the Palmer. I was disturbed one night by noises in the bush not far from my sleeping bag. I enquired from Louie the next morning whether there might be crocodiles nearby. He offered me little comfort by indicating that the noises were probably made by wild pigs.

Louie carried a huge esky on the back of his utility filled with every delight, including cold beer. Each morning he would wake me at six with a tin mug of rum. I imagine the ghosts of Mulligan and Hann must have been appalled at the softness of modern explorers.

During our short visit I was conscious that the Church had been there a hundred years before me and I ached to know more about the Priests and lay people of those times. I knew that Tenison Woods had been both at the Palmer and the Hodgkinson and had preached missions in those remote localities. However most of my questions will have to wait until we meet these remarkable characters one day, hopefully in Heaven.

I would like to talk more about the Hodgkinson field but it is a little outside the scope of this talk. When I did travel there I was delighted to see the Tyeconnel mine that provided both joy and sorrow to Archbishop Duhig in later years.

What I would like to say in conclusion is that although Bishop James Quinn has had a fairly bad press over the years, and will probably have even worse as we approach the marvellous beatification of Mary MacKillop, nevertheless he must have been a remarkable man. Despite significant difficulties, he preached the Gospel in the most trying circumstances. We can only guess at what he thought as he slept beneath the stars on the bush tracks to Georgetown and listened to Aboriginal calls on the track to the Palmer.

His discomfort must have been intense, as clad in black clericals he dragged his horse behind him up the Conglomerate ranges or tramped through the rivers and creeks that crossed the bush tracks. At night-time he would have been tortured by the mosquitoes, while in day-time there would have been no relief from the flies. As well he was probably filled with that real Irish anxiety about snakes and death adders.

He was a man of courage and needed plenty of it to travel into the hostile territory of the Palmer where violence that was a normal part of life, or to oppose the angry miners at Charters Towers. He was autocratic, but in that he was probably a child of his age. Judging from his few brief trips to the Far North, his love of power did not prevent him from gathering with the miners around their camp fires, and sharing both their food and the harshness of their daily lives while he was with them.

He died on the 18th August, 1881, mourned by many. Perhaps the tears shed at his funeral by the non-Catholic Premier of the State may be a good

indication of the warm humanity that was experienced by those close to him. In his short time in Queensland he travelled far and touched the lives of many. God has already judged him as he will judge each one of us one day.

May he and all those men and women who carried the faith to the Palmer, Etheridge, and Hodgkinson, be granted everlasting rest and peace.

Archbishop John Bathersby DD

Dr Bathersby was appointed Archbishop of Brisbane in 1991. Before that he was Bishop of Cairns for six years, after many years on the staff of Pius XII Regional Seminary at Banyo. He is a native of Stanthorpe and was ordained for the Diocese of Toowoomba.