

PAPER III

THOMAS HENRY FITZGERALD **- A VISIONARY PIONEER (1824-1888)**

Ray Fitzgerald 6-2-1996

It is very much my pleasure to be with you this evening and to share with you some of my knowledge of the life and work of my grandfather, Thomas Henry Fitzgerald - described by one writer as 'an ebullient Irishman', accused by another (Captain John Mackay) of being 'an adventurer', assessed by most of his critics as being ambitious, restless to the point of being at times impulsive, but certainly a man of great drive and organising ability. He was a leader, a loving husband and caring father. The list is far from complete. Perhaps I should leave you to judge the man for yourselves.

He was born on 1 December, 1824, in the small country town Carrickmacross, which is in County Monaghan about fifty miles north of Dublin and some ten miles from the border with Northern Ireland at Crossmaglen. He was the youngest of four surviving children of Patrick Henry Fitzgerald and Anne Dunoyer. Patrick Henry had been a Surveyor in Excise in Dundalk and then at Carrickmacross where he engaged also in farming on several tracts of land leased from an Anglican clergyman named Porter. Anne Dunoyer was of French descent and the daughter of a Dublin linen draper.

During the 1830s the family moved to Dublin, residing at Rathmines. I know precious little of the children's education. The only reference I could find to T.H.'s schooling was a statement in the *Johnstone River Advocate* by T.H. Jnr. that his father had a brilliant college career. However, his elder brother, John Patrick, studied medicine at Co. Meath Hospital in Dublin and then graduated M.D. from Glasgow University in 1838 where he won a prestigious award for Ophthalmic Surgery. On 15 September, 1839, he sailed as ship's surgeon on the *Oriental*, one of five ships carrying immigrants to Wellington. On arrival he was appointed as Colonial Surgeon by the Lieut. Governor, Captain William Hobson.

On 16 June, 1842, Thomas Henry and one of his sisters, Emily, sailed in the *George Fyfe* to join Dr John. With them was Dr John's fiancée, Eliza Sarah Christian, daughter of a Dublin solicitor. All three were paying passengers. Dr John and Eliza were married a week after the arrival of the *George Fyfe* and T.H., not yet eighteen years of age, was appointed as an assistant surveyor, probably to serve some sort of cadetship under experienced surveyors. In this early period he seems to have acquired some further qualifications as a civil engineer and an architect. Like so many of our pioneers he gained his knowledge the practical way. It was here, then, in Wellington Province that he spent the next eleven years, gaining experience and mixing generally in the social life of the infant colony. Right from the start Dr John and T.H. had identified themselves with the Catholic section of the new settlement. Dr John had been appointed as Catechist in 1840 by Bishop Pompallier, pending the arrival of the first Catholic priest, a Capuchin, Father O'Reilly, in 1843. Both men were deeply devoted to the Church and were early financial benefactors to the struggling infant diocese.

It wasn't long before T.H. became a landowner for in 1844 he purchased a block of sixteen acres at Khandallah in the hills overlooking Wellington. It was here he built his first home, *Woodlands*, where he resided with Emily until 1847 on her marriage to Robert Tyser. On 1 July, 1851, he brought his young bride, Jessie Wilson, then a mere eighteen years old, to live at *Woodlands*. Jessie had arrived in Wellington at the same time as Dr John but on a sister ship to his, the *Bengal Merchant*. The Wilson family had migrated from Ayr in Scotland. T.H. and Jessie were destined to have only a couple of years at *Woodlands* before moving on to a fresh challenge in the Hawkes Bay area.

On 14 April, 1853, Mary, the first of their eleven children was born in Wellington and shortly afterwards all three moved to Napier where new land was opening up for settlement. T.H. was sent there with other surveyors to begin the survey of the new Hawkes Bay area. It was here in Napier that he and Jessie were to spend the next decade. Four more children were born to them in this period, all boys.

His work as a surveyor gave T.H. the opportunity to select many blocks for himself and Jessie and from here on he turned from surveying to diverse business interests. He operated a general store at Waipara under the name Dunoyer and Coy. On one block at Napier he erected a steam flour mill. According to notices in the *Hawkes Bay Herald* he was a cash buyer of wheat, he operated another store in Waghorne Street selling rum, brandy, sugar, soap etc. He was the local agent for the *Wonga Wonga*, a coastal trading schooner, he was an insurance agent and a buyer of wool. It seems he turned his hand to almost everything, though he never seems to have been involved directly with sheep, the mainstay of the new colony.

In 1856 he donated a block of land to the Catholic mission and this enabled Father Forrest to build the first presbytery and school. T.H. actually designed both and supervised the building.

He was by now somewhat prosperous and a leading figure in the community, so it seemed inevitable that his attention should turn to politics. In 1857 he joined his father-in-law in the Wellington Provincial Council, representing Hawkes Bay along with one other member. James Wilson was one of the representatives for Wanganui. As a result of the efforts of T.H. and his fellow member, Hawkes Bay was declared a separate province in 1858, and at the subsequent elections for the first Provincial Council for Hawkes Bay, T.H. was elected as a member after topping the poll. At the first Council meeting he was elected as the first Superintendent of the Hawkes Bay Province, a position he held from 1859 to 1861. In addition, in 1860 he was elected as a representative of the Hawkes Bay Province in the General Assembly which met in Auckland.

However, towards the end of 1861 his many business interests began to fail and early in 1862 he was declared bankrupt. Perhaps by this time he had begun to lose faith in New Zealand for he now resolved to move to Australia to make a fresh start. His brother had already left in 1854 in rather controversial circumstances and had followed Sir George Grey to South Africa. Also, their sister Emily had died late in 1861 leaving two orphaned children. She had come to live in Napier following the death of her husband in 1855. T.H. and Jessie assumed the responsibility for rearing her daughter Bessie who was the same age as Mary. Strangely, both girls were left behind in Wellington in the care of the Sisters of Mercy and did not rejoin the family until 1869 in Mackay.

By 1862 Sir George Grey had returned to New Zealand for his second term as Governor. Thus when T.H. left for Melbourne about mid 1862, he carried a letter of introduction from the Governor to Gavan Duffy, then Minister for Lands in the Victorian Parliament. On the latter's recommendation he decided to move to the new State of Queensland where he obtained a position as surveyor with the Queensland Government, possibly through the influence of Gavan Duffy.

During a brief stop in Brisbane he visited Ormiston and studied Captain Louis Hope's experiment at growing sugar cane. Thus began his strong association with the sugar industry in this State. Towards the end of 1862 he began a survey of a telegraph line from Rockhampton to Port Mackay. This was completed in early 1863 and later that year he was assigned the task of laying out the street plan for Mackay. By the end of 1864 whilst engaged in general surveying round the Mackay area he was able once again to acquire substantial land holdings for himself, family

members and friends. The original block he chose for himself was on a two mile river frontage and south to the Nebo Road and was named *Alexandra*. In time he added to this by buying more blocks from other settlers. With the planting of cane and subsequent crushings his newly acquired prosperity was firmly assured. It was said that when he made his second fortune he paid back all his debts in New Zealand.

In the meantime Jessie and the family had settled at Parramatta where a second daughter was born in 1863. This was followed by a stint in Rockhampton where another son was born in 1865. It was here also that Jessie made her decision to become a Catholic. She had been brought up a strict Presbyterian and one family story has it that on occasions she was wont to be throwing T.H.'s 'wee goddies' out the window. It has also been said that one of T.H.'s reasons for moving to Australia was to get her away from the religious influence of her family,

Towards the end of 1865 Jessie sailed with the family from Rockhampton to Mackay to join T.H. in the new home he had built for them at *The Palms* some seven miles out along the Nebo Road. It was here that the last four of their eleven children were born.

T.H. planted his first cane in 1866 near the present site of St Mary's Catholic Church and the nearby St Patrick's Senior School. For this he used seed cane purchased from John Spiller. The latter is credited with growing the first cane in Mackay whilst T.H. has the distinction of growing the first cane of any quantity. In 1866 also the first Catholic Church was built in Mackay on land donated by T.H. whilst my grandmother gave the land and a house to the Sisters of St Joseph who left Mackay some time later, handing over to the Sisters of Mercy.

In February 1867, his financial position was further cemented when John Ewen Davidson acquired a half interest in *Alexandra* and brought to the partnership a keen business acumen. With their cane now flourishing the first mill, 'Alexandra Mill', was built ready for the first crushing which began on 15 September, 1868, producing 230 tons of sugar. At this stage 79 men operated the plantation of whom 25 were whites and the rest Islanders.

Exhilarated by this success T.H. now struck out on his own in several other ventures. In 1869 he began a second plantation at *Meadowlands*. Then came *Te Kowai* and finally *Peri* in 1872 where he installed his nephew, John Francis Fitzgerald, as manager. The latter had left his father in South Africa to seek a new career in Australia.

It wasn't long after his arrival in Mackay that he turned again to political affairs. For a brief period in 1867 he was a member of the third Queensland Parliament but was unseated following a protest on some technicality. Undeterred, he was back in the fourth Parliament by the end of the year. He served from September 1867, to June 1869 in this Parliament and again in the seventh Parliament from November 1873 to May 1875.

Generally, he was a champion of the smaller settlers in his Parliamentary efforts, just as he had been in Hawkes Bay. During the fourth Parliament he teamed with Archer in an unsuccessful attempt to establish in Queensland Provincial Councils like those in New Zealand. Later, they forced the McKenzie ministry to resign and T.H. himself was invited to form a ministry. He lacked the necessary support, however, and subsequently served as Colonial Treasurer under Sir Charles Lilley. On one other occasion he moved in Parliament, again unsuccessfully, for the introduction for cheap Indian labour in the cane fields.

In April and May 1875, torrential rain brought rust to most of the cane in the Mackay area. The loss to the district was more than £80,000, and sad to relate, T.H. was the outstanding casualty. One by one, his plantations were relinquished to his creditors and he was once more declared bankrupt - this on 4 March 1876, the day after the birth of my father, the youngest of the eleven children.

Once again the family had to move on, this time to Brisbane, where they lived on Gregory Terrace and later at Teneriffe. Again T.H. was forced to fall back on his surveying, especially in the general south-west of the State, round Surat and Chinchilla. This time he had with him his eldest son, Joseph Bernard, now a qualified surveyor himself. It was during this period that Mary, the oldest of the eleven, made her decision to enter All Hallows' Community where she eventually became known as Mother Audeon. I have copies of a couple of T.H.'s letters to Jessie and to Mary concerning Mary's decision that are quite intimate and touching, revealing his deep spiritual convictions.

But T.H. was ever the visionary and those wider horizons were beckoning still. Within three years his vision of another El Dorado had returned, enchanted to the point of excitement on reading George Dalrymple's report of his explorations of the northern rivers. Of special interest was his enthusiastic description of the land he had seen from the Basilisk Range. T.H. was now in his mid-fifties, an age perhaps when he should have been considering opting for a more comfortable life style. But his restless nature had surfaced once more and he resolved to embark on yet another pioneering venture. On 4 October 1879, he sailed to the Daintree area which he explored with two companions. He then teamed up with four others,

all experienced bushmen, and explored nearly all the coastal rivers south to the Johnstone. Here he spent a fortnight exploring and surveying both arms of the river from a base camp on Banana Island. He then retraced his steps to the Russell and Mulgrave Rivers where he suffered his first severe bout of the tropical fever which was to contribute to his untimely death in 1888. The party then returned to Cairns and thence to Brisbane, arriving back on 4 December.

By this he was wildly enthusiastic about the prospects of growing sugar cane on his pick of the area, the Johnstone River. There was much publicity about his proposal and even criticism. Ultimately, he was able to find a financial backer in Bishop Quinn who saw an opportunity for financial benefit to the Church, at that stage struggling to establish itself with costly schools, churches, hospitals etc. He found another ready backer in Miss Florence O'Reilly, a close friend of the Sisters of Mercy with whom she and a few other ladies lived.

A Company, Fitzgerald & Coy., was formed with T.H. its chief executive. On 2 February 1880, he made application for eight original selections in the area of 1280 acres each, one for himself, one each to three of his sons and one to each of four Sisters of Mercy. Since it was his prerogative to allot these blocks, it is hardly surprising to learn that family members and personal friends had some priority. One such friend was the Irish patriot, Dr Kevin Izod O'Doherty.

From January 1880, to April of that year he was busy organising his settlement party and purchasing the necessary stores and equipment. It speaks much for his organising ability that all was ready by 17 April. On that date the original party of eleven Europeans, including T.H. Junior, and twenty Islanders sailed from Brisbane in the coastal steamer *S.S. Corea*, arriving at the mouth of the Johnstone River towards evening of 22 April. Next morning the first settlement was established at Flying Fish Point which became the site of their head quarters.

The next six weeks were spent consolidating the camp site and on 15 June 1880, the first clearing work for planting began. This was at what is now the suburb of Innisfail Estate, just across the river from the present hospital. The eldest son, Joseph Bernard, arrived shortly afterwards to begin the initial survey, later officially acknowledged by Government surveyors in 1881.

From the outset T.H. was beset with all sorts of difficulties, a prime one being lack of communication with the outside world. The nearest point of contact was the Telegraph Station at Cardwell, some 50 miles south by boat. The only alternative was to row out and hail the weekly coastal steamer which plied between Townsville and Cairns. There was always the constant fear of hostile Aborigines but perhaps

the greatest setback was illness from tropical fevers. There was a further problem in acquiring good seed cane for the initial planting. Eventually T.H. had to go personally to Mackay to purchase a reliable supply from some old friends there. At times there were problems with the Islanders, especially when the latter discovered that other Islanders working for cedar cutters in the hills were paid higher wages. The original twenty were added to and by mid 1881 over 100 Kanakas were employed. All round they contributed greatly to the ultimate prosperity of Innisfail.

By the end of 1880 some progress had been made and in August 1881, construction of the new mill began with the first crushing beginning on 9 November 1881. It yielded only 40 tons of sugar instead of the budgeted 200 tones. However, T.H. continued on in 1882 with his usual optimism which was to prove in the long run somewhat misplaced. A cyclone wrecked havoc in 1882 and generally the weather proved exceptionally unreliable.

From this point on nothing seemed to go right for Fitzgerald & Coy. T.H. was involved in two more annual crushings, neither proving as successful as hoped. Gradually bigger financial interests like the C.S.R. became involved in the area and while they were laying firm foundations, T.H.'s grand dreams seemed destined to fade quietly away. Illness caused him much concern and 30 June 1885, he was forced to sever his connection with the Company in favour of Miss O'Reilly. He returned to Jessie and his family at Teneriffe where he lived quietly until his death three years later on 10 November 1888.

The Innisfail venture can be said to have been both a success and a failure. T.H.'s contribution certainly demonstrated the enormous potential of the area and subsequent development has more than justified his vision and the faith he placed in the venture. It was unfortunate that he never had access to large reserves of cash like the C.S.R. and other big companies had. This could have tided him over those first few crushings. The death of Bishop Quinn in August 1881, was a severe blow as it occurred just as the first crushing was starting and it left no one in Brisbane to make vital decisions until Bishop Dunne was appointed in 1882.

In retrospect, it appears T.H.'s life was marked by cycles of highs and lows, maybe an example of 'what might have been, if only....' Like most of our pioneers he spent his life looking for the pot of gold beyond the rainbow's end. I feel he came closest to realising his dream in Mackay. By 1874 he had established what was virtually a family empire. Indeed the family lived well in the large home at *The Palms*. They even had a tutor for the younger children living with them - the future Father Canali. Their home was a centre for the Catholic community with a

section of the house set aside as a Chapel housing the Blessed Sacrament. Indeed, I feel it was T.H.'s strong faith that sustained him through all his adversity.

There have been many tributes to him over the years from various authors. Most agree that he had the stuff of which pioneers were made. They applaud his vision, his drive and organising ability, and above all, his faith in his ventures. All agree that his place in the history of Queensland is firmly established as one of the founders of our sugar industry.

In conclusion, I would like to quote here these lines, written by Mabel Forrest, a well known poet of former times, as a tribute to him. They sound like an epitaph, but they are not inscribed on his tomb:

To T.H. Fitzgerald

He came,

Out of the jungle's blackness, when the land
Lay in sleep of primal unstirred things;
To wake its winters to fair vernal springs,
To plant the cane where vine to tree trunk clings,
His was the planning brain - the master hand;
We for his epitaph can carve no less,
'The brave attempt - the well-deserved success.'