

**PAPER VI**

***OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT, OUT OF THE  
HOUSE OF SLAVERY:***

***THE FATE OF BISHOP QUINN'S DEPARTING  
CLERGY OF 1867 (Pt I)***

Fr Neil Byrne 3-12-96

On 9 March 1867, six young Queensland priests were aboard the *City of Brisbane*. They sailed as Jacob's sons 'out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (Exodus 20:2). This exodus was a tragic and unnecessary episode in the early history of the Brisbane Archdiocese. No local church could hope to survive the loss of one third of its presbyterate in a single day. The issue was one of a sustainable rate of development in a new diocese. Toowoomba's Michael Renehan and his assistants William Mason Walsh and James McGahan, Warwick's Thaddeus Hogan and Dalby's Matthew Devitt had all come to the conclusion that Bishop James Quinn's grandiose expectations of a conspicuously Catholic Darling Downs had placed an impossible burden on the shoulders of the country priests and people who were struggling with the effects of severe drought, a depressed rural economy and the bank crash of 1866. In Brisbane, Patrick Sheehan sympathised with Renehan's group and joined the walk out. The first port of call was Sydney where advice was sought from Quinn's most outspoken critic, his former secretary, the Rev, Dr Thomas Keating. Keating's public justification of this latest and largest of the Queensland clerical departures saw him too branded as one of Quinn's 'renegades'. He too would be forced to leave the Australian mission.

Only one of the seven priests of 1867 would ever return. William Mason Walsh now lies in the church which he was instrumental in building, the Sacred Heart Cathedral, Townsville. Vilified and then forgotten, these able pastors were the victims of a monarchical ecclesiology in which a bishop confused legitimate disagreement with disloyalty and insubordination. The great contribution which

they made subsequently in the rapidly expanding American dioceses of Albany and Newark needs to be recorded in the annals of this Archdiocese because it is a concrete vindication of their worth as pastors and men and a reminder that without genuine collaborative leadership great pastoral talents and insights will always be lost to the local church

### ***PART ONE: THE ALBANY QUARTET***

Thomas Keating, Matthew Devitt, Patrick Sheehan and Michael Renehan

Dr Thomas Keating(e) 1838-77

Thomas Keating was a very promising youth from Killaloe whom James Quinn discovered at All Hallows College. He did not sail with Quinn's party in 1860 but remained in Dublin at St Lawrence's O'Toole's Seminary to act as Brisbane diocesan business agent and to pursue postgraduate studies. In 1862 he was awarded a Licentiate in Theology from Newman's Catholic University after impressing Archbishop Cullen and other high ecclesiastical dignitaries at a public defence. The Rev. Dr Keating then sailed for Australia as chaplain on the immigrant ship the *Beejapore* bringing with him his sister, Mary Mahony and her husband John and family.

During 1863-64, Keating worked on the St Stephen's Cathedral staff with Frs Michael Renehan, Robert Dunne and James Connolly. He held the position of Chancellor and Bishop's Secretary which entitled him to accompany Quinn to important civic functions such as the laying of the foundation stone of the Brisbane Town Hall on 18 January 1864. Yet the exchange of pleasantries on such occasions for the benefit of Brisbane's 13,000 Catholics and the society at large merely masked a growing estrangement between the bishop and his secretary. Keating disagreed with Quinn on many issues especially the financial operation of the Immigration Society. By August 1864 he had negotiated a temporary transfer to the Bathurst diocese headed by Quinn's brother, Matthew.

However, Keating could not refrain from adverse commentary on Brisbane diocesan affairs. In 1865 he wrote a long letter of complaint about James Quinn to Archbishop Polding which the latter duly forwarded to Rome. Realising that this would mean the end of his welcome in Bathurst, Polding offered Keating the recently vacated Chair of Theology at Lyndhurst College in Sydney.

St Mary's College, Lyndhurst, had been established by the Benedictines in 1851 as both a seminary and engine of Catholic ascendancy. It prepared boys from eight to twenty-three for the priesthood or entrance to the Sydney University.

Built on the pattern of the stately homes of England, the College buildings would have reminded Keating of his days in the Georgian splendour of St Lawrence O'Toole's in Harcourt Street. Under Headmaster Quirk, Lyndhurst had reached its elitist zenith with exorbitant fees, a one to five teacher-student ratio, a rigidly classical curriculum and the compulsory playing of the gentleman's game of cricket.

Keating's Theology class was conducted in Latin and was attended by three Benedictine novices and one secular student. Since none of the students had any background in scholasticism Keating devoted the first quarter of an hour of each lecture to the mysteries of scholasticism before proceeding to questions of Dogmatic and Moral Theology. The students struggled with Latin and began to complain. Their teacher produced a letter from Archbishop Polding expressing his approbation for his method. Keating's reputation as an educator began to spread and he was invited to deliver a public lecture on 'Christian Education' to establish a scholarship fund at Lyndhurst. His lecture was a great success; the hall was crowded and the response enthusiastic.

About the same time a rumour began to circulate that Keating was to be offered the Vicar Generalship of the Diocese of Maitland. The Benedictine Journal entry of 8 November 1866 expressed the community's dismay at the consequences of Keating's departure.

*It will be a sad disappointment to his students at Lyndhurst, as we could not reasonably hope in all respects to meet with his qualifications in his successors, so well is he liked not only for his abilities as a Professor but for his amicability of disposition.*

The Maitland rumour proved to be false but Keating's time at Lyndhurst was coming to an end.

In March 1867, six Brisbane priests arrived on his doorstep hoping to follow his example of relocating to the Sydney Archdiocese. Unlike Keating, they had left the diocese without Bishop Quinn's knowledge or permission. This proved a little awkward for Archbishop Polding since Quinn was himself a guest in his diocese at the time. Keating publicly supported the exodus, but by doing so, rendered himself subject to ecclesiastical censure. The press spoke of a misunderstanding between Keating and Sydney's Vicar General, Fr Austin, which would require the former to plead his case in Rome. It referred to Keating's 'numerous friends' in Sydney who hoped for a resolution of the matter and the priest's speedy return to the colony. Without receiving the hoped for faculties to work in Sydney, Keating's six Brisbane colleagues were advised to make a new

start in America. Keating would leave Sydney forever aboard the *Dunbar Castle* on 23 June 1867.

In January 1868 Keating was in Dublin. Archbishop Polding had urged him again to put his views about the Brisbane diocese on paper for Rome's benefit. Archbishop Cullen observed that if he went to Rome, it should not be for politics but to pursue further studies. The counsel he finally accepted was that of the Right Rev. John J. Conroy D.D., Bishop of Albany, who was at that time scouting for Irish priests for his rapidly expanding rural diocese in central New York State. He offered Keating the parish of St John's, Newport.

After the American War of Independence, a colony of Irish farmers had established themselves in the Kunahoorra Valley near Little Falls. One of the founders of 'Irish Settlement' was Patrick Martin whose will of 1834 dedicated fifty-six acres of his estate to the Church. He also directed that a society be formed and trustees be appointed to ensure that the rent from the land was used for the erection of a church and cemetery. St Patrick's 'on the hill' was duly built in Irish Settlement. However, with continued settlement the need arose for a more centrally located church in the Newport area. The Methodists and Presbyterians were persuaded to part with a red brick church on Main Street which became the parish church of St John's.

Thomas Keating was the first resident priest in Newport. He informed Conroy of his initial impressions.

*I arrived here on the 14 (November 1868) and ascertained the following state of affairs. There is no residence for the pastor. The church is in a most dilapidated condition without an altar with scarcely any furniture. The old 'Lay Trustee' system, the curse of the American Church, is in full blast here now and has been for the past thirty years. The congregation is divided, demoralised and contumacious against Church authority. In the whole district committed to my charge Catholics old and young number only about 600 and they are scattered over an area of about 300 square miles. However although the prospect is disheartening, with God's assistance I shall do my duty. On further enquiries I find that the church is in debt \$700 on which no interest has been paid for the past four years!! There is also an indefinite number of other little nasty debts. I have to take up lodgings in a miserable tavern until such time as I can procure a suitable residence. I hope I shall manage to eke out a subsistence but I fear it is likely to be rather apostolic judging from present appearances. (St John's, Newport, Copy, Thomas Keating 16 November, 1868 Memorandum)*

Keating's fears of a life of 'apostolic poverty' were unfounded. A month before his arrival the trustees had resolved to pay a resident clergyman an annual salary of two hundred dollars. Still it was a sobering lifestyle after the elegant ease of Lyndhurst. After a year of tavern dwelling, the trustees relented and agreed to Keating's proposal to sell off old St. Patrick's to acquire a suitable rectory. The Griswalds on East Street were persuaded to give up their home for \$2000 and there was still enough left over for the tasteful refurbishment of St John's. Keating arranged for the church's dedication on 2 December 1871.

One of Keating's chief dissatisfactions with James Quinn was his autocratic style manifested in a vice-like grip on all the diocesan cheque books. It is ironic that in the modest parish of Newport Keating would experience a similar frustration and powerlessness at the hands of lay trustees. Trusteeism was a method of legally owning and holding parish property which involved a board of lay trustees acting as a unit. Although the board was only an agent for the moral person in question, i.e. the parish, it alone could act legally for that moral person. In other words, Keating's trustees, calling themselves the St Patrick's Roman Catholic Society of Newport and Schuyler, functioned like a guardian over an adopted child. Many early nineteenth century American immigrant communities had developed the Newport practice of first acquiring property, building their church, and then petitioning their bishop for a resident priest. Obviously Keating rejected the role of 'priest as employee of the parish'. He did not intend to become a mere functionary at the periphery of the parish's decision-making processes. For three years Keating would again play the schoolmaster dedicating himself to the re-education of the Newport congregation to a more traditional understanding of the pastor-people relationship.

In January 1872 he was given the pastorate of one of the senior posts of the diocese, St Mary's, Hudson. The *Catholic Review* (12 May 1877) spoke of Keating's understandable embarrassment at the appointment. Eyebrows were raised when the much-prized Hudson was given to a thirty-two year old with just three years' experience in the diocese and that in one of Albany's most obscure parishes. Keating was to replace the revered but ailing James O'Sullivan, a man thirty years his senior who was very well connected with the Catholic elite of New York. Before emigrating, O'Sullivan's father had been the physician to the family of the Irish patriot, Daniel O'Connell. Yet Bishop Conroy knew of O'Sullivan's weaknesses. In his eighteen years at Hudson, he had shown himself to be a rigid and doctrinaire man, a poor administrator and the cause of much sectarian bitterness in the wider community. Keating's task would be that of peace-maker and consolidator.

Hudson had been developed in the 1780s by Dutch New England whalers seeking more sheltered harbours and more fertile land than could be found along the stormy Atlantic coastline. Its wealth derived from shipbuilding, sailmaking, oil and candle works, tanneries, fruit growing and later brick works, woollen and cotton mills and iron foundries. Thus there were good opportunities for employment for many of the Irish immigrants who from the 1840s were making their way up river from New York by steamboat or rail.

When Keating arrived in Hudson in 1872, the horse manure was still so deep in Central Square that it was hard to tell the street was paved. The grimy commercial and industrial port was in the slow process of transforming itself to a respectable New England town. Nevertheless, St Mary's, the first Roman Catholic church to be built in Columbia County, was an impressive tribute to the vitality of Hudson's Irish community. It could already accommodate 600 but Keating would choose to add transepts and galleries so that the original building would present itself in a proper cruciform shape. A solid core of committed parishioners could be found in the Holy Name Society, Sacred Heart Society and the Young Men's Catholic Association and a Father Mathew Catholic Total Abstinence Benevolent Society had held its first meeting on 2 March 1871. Keating became aware of the needs of his non-urban parishioners and during the summer months of each year, would station his two assistant priests in the outlying settlements of Chatham Corners and Copake. Highly committed to Catholic education, he rejuvenated and actively promoted the parish school. In 1874 he placed it under the management of the Sisters of St Joseph of Carondelet.

In the 1870s half the American nation was attending church regularly. Hudson prided itself on its large Sunday congregations in all ten churches: Reformed, Baptist, Quakers, Methodist Episcopal, Black Methodist Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, German Lutheran, Universalist and Roman Catholic. There was also a high expectation on the part of these congregations that the Word of God would be ably preached to them. Dr John M'Clelland Holmes called for the formation of a local ministers' association for prayer, mutual support, study and the honing of homiletic skills. He wrote:

*the clergy of the present day need to be cultured men. The time has gone by when the Sacred office constituted an effectual screen for the drivelling ignoramus. Utterances essentially shallow and tame are no longer permissible... our congregations alike in the city and the country, are intelligent and thoughtful men and women. In a measure at least, they keep pace with the intellectual progress of the age. And hence, whoever attempts to edify their souls, must first be qualified to instruct their minds.*

*A high order of natural talent and a good degree of acquired culture are indispensably requisite to ministerial efficiency and success.*

Besides attending to the content of their sermons, there were many pastoral questions which needed a response in Hudson: the impact of the newest wave of revivalism on the mainline churches, the admission of women to the pulpit in the wake of the women's rights movement, the damage to the clergy's credibility after one minister's well-publicised seduction of several young Sunday School ladies of St Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church, Baltimore; the danger to Christian faith and morals by those espousing spiritualism, divorce and free love; the offence to public decency, health and safety posed by Hudson's infamous North Second Street brothels; the church's social response to the depression of 1875 which again highlighted America's unequal distribution of income and sentenced an army of itinerant beggars to tramp their way through a New England winter.

The Protestant-Catholic divide was still too great for the Rev. Dr Keating to be offered or to accept membership of the ministers' association but he found an easy acceptance in Hudson since he could meet all the societal expectations of a clergyman. He possessed the natural talent, theological learning and culture declared by Dr M'Clelland Holmes to be so indispensable for pastoral success. He suited Hudson and Hudson suited him.

On Sunday, 27 April 1877, the Rev. Dr Keating died of an embolism of the heart. He was thirty-eight and had been the pastor of St Mary's for five years. The Protestant voice of the county, the *Hudson Evening Register*, announced the sudden death with genuine regret. Thomas Keating's pastorate had been of a pleasant nature, and he was liked and revered by his people. The Catholic press conceded that Keating had 'just begun to enjoy the fruits of his labours in seeing a united congregation seconding him in every undertaking'. When his body was placed in the church on the eve of his funeral, it was viewed by citizens of all denominations. His features appeared to be so life-like that many wondered if the youthful priest was dead or sleeping. After the Requiem, Keating's remains were escorted to the train by Bishop Conroy and sixty priests, members of the Father Mathew T.A.B. Society, the Young Men's Temperance and Literary Society, the Young Ladies' Sodality and an immense concourse of parishioners. He now lies in St Agnes Diocesan Cemetery, Albany.

At the conclusion of Keating's requiem, a slightly built priest quietly made his way to the pulpit. He delivered a brief, simple, but touchingly eloquent tribute to the priest who for so many years had been his very close friend and companion.

The speaker was the pastor of Cooperstown and one of the Brisbane septet - Fr Matthew Charles Devitt.

### ***MATTHEW CHARLES DEVITT (1841-1879)***

Matthew Devitt was born in 1841 and was a native of Ballina, County Mayo. Both of his parents died while he was still a child and he was raised by his eldest sister. She encouraged his leaning towards the priesthood, but after four years at Maynooth he began to doubt his vocation and considered a career in medicine. However, at the age of twenty his health began to fail and he was advised to try the warmer climate of Australia. He arrived in Melbourne in 1862. After a short time there his thoughts returned to priestly ministry and he resumed his studies at St Patrick's College. Again poor health stood in his way. He moved north to Queensland.

Bishop Quinn appointed Devitt headmaster of a small Catholic school being conducted in a cottage and annexe beside the original wooden St Patrick's church in Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley. The school's success relied on Devitt's scholarship and gentlemanly bearing but equally on the administrative expertise of his assistant D.C. McCroarty who would later become a government Inspector of Schools.

Under the guidance and encouragement of Bishop Quinn and the Cathedral staff, Devitt found time to complete his theological studies. He was ordained on the Feast of Pentecost 1863 and claims the honour of being the first priest to be ordained in the Brisbane Archdiocese.

Devitt was able to continue his teaching ministry by establishing a class of some twenty altar servers but his responsibilities would now include the pastoral care of the entire St Patrick's community. Fortitude Valley was then transforming itself from John Dunmore Lang's well-ordered Scots Presbyterian settlement into an increasingly crowded and uproarious Irishtown. Large numbers of newly-arrived immigrants were finding their way from the South Brisbane wharf to the Valley's cheap boarding houses and then to employment in domestic service or on one of the many construction sites in the business district. To accommodate them on Sundays, Devitt had to extend St Patrick's and add a choir gallery.

In August 1865, the twenty-four year old Devitt was sent out to the Darling Downs to become the first resident priest in Dalby. Bishop Quinn was determined to settle the Downs with Irish farmers. By stationing a young priest of Devitt's



quality in remote Dalby, it was hoped that Brisbane Catholics could be coaxed away from an unpromising urban ghetto to proprietorship and prosperity on the land. A church and school operating in the same wooden building would be the symbol of the Catholic Church's commitment to rural settlement.

Devitt's first challenge in Dalby was to rescue a prematurely established and financially struggling school which was being conducted by Miss Catherine Healy. After visiting the school daily for six months, Devitt dismissed the teacher. Very unwillingly, she left Dalby but seven years later would sue the diocese for 450 pounds in damages. Concerning the school, Devitt had few options. Unless it measured up to Board of Education standards, it was ineligible for the government funding which, until 1880, was till available to Church schools. Without such funding, there would be too heavy a financial burden placed on the people who already demonstrated their inability to pay school fees. Devitt became convinced that his bishop's expectations of pastors in the new rural missions were unreasonable. Therefore, he chose to exempt Dalby from the 'Cathedraticum' and other financial levies promulgated at Quinn's latest Clerical Synod. When the bishop responded by publicly blackening Devitt's reputation with charges of high living and clerical avarice, he quit the diocese and sailed for Europe on 30 March 1867.

After just a few months in the Albany diocese, it became clear to Bishop Conroy that Devitt would not survive many more New England winters. In the spring of 1869 he gave him charge of Cooperstown, a vacation and health resort on the leafy banks of Lake Ostego. This former frontier settlement had been founded in 1786 by the father of America's best known novelist, James Fenimore Cooper. The imposing Leatherstocking Monument in Lakewood Cemetery was there to remind Devitt of Cooper's enormous influence on Cooperstown and on American culture. *The Pioneers*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Prairie*, *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer*, all had been set in the forests and hills of the Cooperstown district. Their central character, 'Natty Bumppo', typified male American self-understanding. He was a self-reliant hunter and trapper, restless and enthusiastic for adventure. He lived on the fringes of civilised society. He was ungainly but philosophical, a good scout and marksman, and possessed cool courage in the face of death. He had a profound belief in fair play, is chivalrous towards women and has a great love and reverence for the wilderness.

There were more than a few latter-day 'Natty Bumppos' in Devitt's congregation at Our Lady of the Lake. The Irish farming community had established itself very well in Cooperstown. They remembered their origins, providing generously for their Irish sisters and brothers during the Great Famine, but they

were keenly aware of the possibilities for Irish advancement in the American democracy. In March 1871, the editor of the *Cooperstown Freeman's Journal* addressed a torch-lit St Patrick's Day Parade outside the St James Hotel. He declared:

*You are in this free country in the enjoyment of new and great privileges, which bring attendant great responsibilities. No longer are your rulers appointed over by others, but you are called upon to aid in choosing them, from the lowest to the highest...That your children may be prepared to take a still higher position to meet the greater obligations and demands that may rest upon them, encourage them to lay hold on those advantages of education which in this country are afforded the poorest child; teach them a love of knowledge, of country, of God, that you may hope to see them grow up good and useful citizens. (Cooperstown Freeman's Journal 23 March 1871)*

With three hearty cheers the procession marched on to the tune of 'Yankee Doodle'.

The good and useful citizens of Cooperstown placed a very high value on the quality of Sunday church services. Devitt would ensure that the liturgies in the Catholics' new red-brick church would more than match the standard set by Christ Episcopal Church at which the Coopers and the local literati worshipped. Devitt began by installing an organ. Catholics and Protestants attended Benediction to hear it played for the first time in May 1870. They were also troubled for a fifty cent donation.

In the religious climate of revivalism, the inspired preacher was the one who 'shows men to themselves...and then shows them the mode by which they may correct themselves.' In January 1873 a Protestant visitor wrote that the Catholics of Cooperstown were 'to be congratulated upon securing the spiritual instruction and guidance of one combining so many desirable qualifications as their Pastor, Fr Devitt.' Apparently his efforts in the pulpit avoided the formal essay, long homily and dry dogmatism which enjoyed such low currency among the church-goers of the 1870s.

The Word of God provided more than spiritual food for the people of Cooperstown. It provided employment for those who turned out 8000 bibles and 60,000 books a year on Phinney's printing press. Salesmen were sent out on wagons specially fitted as travelling book-stores.

Perhaps the greatest appeal of the liturgies at Our Lady of the Lake was the attention given to the environment especially on the great feast days. A member of Devitt's congregation described the 5am Christmas morning Mass of 1877:

*Early as the hour was, the crowds could be seen hurrying in every direction to the church through the sharp, biting wind. As we reached the edifice, and the double doors swung open to admit us, the sight that was revealed amply repaid us for our early rise. All was winter without, all was summer within. Snow and endless trees behind us, in the dark - in our front were palm wreaths and fresh evergreens amid the flickering rays of countless tapers. Everything was joy...Over the main altar, in letters of evergreen, were the Angels' words to the shepherds 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo'. Then on either side of the walls within the sanctuary the Angels' song was finished in letters work of taste and deft fingers, 'Peace on earth to men of good - will'. From the sanctuary the decorations ran in measured grace along the sides of the edifice, meeting here and there long streaming wreaths of palm from the ceiling above the middle aisle. From the pique, the highest point of the building, swung at respectful distances from each other, three large crosses, handsomely covered with holly and from the foot of each of the crosses hung beautiful estoons looped in the centre with a heart, a star enclosed in the wreath, and emerald harp. As we were surveying all these things...the organ, presided over by Miss Maggie Gilligan, gave forth a prelude of joy, and on it went all through the Mass increasing in sweetness till it intoned the Carol, old but ever new, repeated for ages on Christmas morning; 'Venite Adoremus'...It was tout ensemble, from beginning to end a grand ceremony.*

From time to time, news arrived from Brisbane. Robert Dunne kept Devitt posted on Dalby events like the fact that the 'Plough Inn', a former rendezvous for station owners and stockmen, was being bought for the Sisters of Mercy for a Convent and that the Sisters were now conducting a school in Warwick. Initially, Devitt had been sympathetic to Michael Renehan's urging that they should return to Queensland. In June 1869 they had written jointly to Propaganda from Cooperstown requesting readmission to their former diocese but Quinn was opposed to the idea. One suspects that poor health would have been Devitt's only reason for wanting to abandon the welcoming environment of Cooperstown.

In January 1878, the winter proved too severe for the thirty-seven year old Devitt. His parishioners of nine years had sent him on a Mediterranean holiday to regain his health. However, Devitt would not make it to Italy. He died from a protracted struggle with pleuritis and pulmonary tuberculosis on New Year's Day 1879. He had been living for some time with the Misses M' Auliffe, friends of his in Cork where he is now buried. The news was received with sadness but not surprise in Cooperstown. The local paper referred to his grieving circle of friends which extended far beyond the members of his own faith. He was, they all said, 'A

gentleman in feeling and manners, intelligent, genial, well-read; he was justly popular with all classes.' He had died in his native land after a priestly ministry which had taken him around the world in seventeen years.

***PATRICK SHEEHAN (1838-73)***

Patrick Sheehan was already dead when Matthew Devitt and Michael Renehan attended Thomas Keating's Requiem in 1877. At twenty-nine Sheehan had been the youngest member of Brisbane's dissenting septet, and at thirty-five, he was the first to die. A young man from Modeligo, County Waterford, Sheehan was not yet three years ordained when he left Queensland. Bishop Quinn had observed him to be a man of commendable detachment from material things despite his obvious lack of means. He noted that Sheehan was uncomplaining but easily influenced by his more experienced All Hallows colleagues.

After Sheehan's arrival in America, a place was found for him under the roof of Father Michael Corrigan, Rector of St Peter's Church, Jersey City. However, by 1869 he had retired north to join the other Brisbane exiles in the Albany diocese where the name Sheehan was also known and respected. William F. Sheehan was the pastor of Troy West and Maurice Sheehan the pastor of St Joseph's, Albany City. Patrick was sent to Oneido County to assist Father John Ludden with the spiritual care of the 347 families who frequented St Mary's, Florence.

When farm land along Lake Ontario had been offered for sale at low prices, an Irish community had established itself around the town of Florence. In 1845, a group of Catholic farmers and tannery workers had purchased land formerly owned by local Baptists and converted a former trade school into a church. Built and functioning as a worship centre prior to the appointment of any resident priest in the district, the community retained a high expectation of lay ownership and control of St Mary's. Lay trustees held the keys to the church, determined the times of Mass and devotions and generally set church policy.

When Father John Ludden was given charge of six farming settlements in Oneido County in December 1855, he sent word that Sunday Mass would be celebrated at 9am in Florence rather than the accustomed time of 10.30. When he arrived, he found the doors barred. After twice calling unsuccessfully for keys, he broke down the church doors with an axe, said Mass without a congregation and rode on to the next town. Charges for breaking and entering were brought against him and were not dropped before much legal wrangling and name calling. Nevertheless, Ludden would remain as pastor of the Florence community until his death in 1878 by which time St Mary's had finally been deeded to the bishop.

On June 1869, Sheehan wrote from Florence seeking Bishop Quinn's forgiveness. Perhaps he hoped for an invitation to return to Brisbane. In any case his canonical legitimacy and future job security in any diocese still hinged on a reconciliation with James Quinn. Sheehan was to find an opportunity for permanent residence and eventually a parish of his own, neither in Brisbane nor in Albany but eastwards across the Hudson in the new diocese of Springfield which had been separated from Boston in 1870. Bishop Thomas O'Reilly sent him to assist at the new and rapidly growing Irish parish of St Joseph's, Pittsfield, in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts. Sheehan took up residence in the town where two decades earlier, Herman Melville had written *Moby Dick*.

Like Captain Ahab, Sheehan's struggle with the leviathan of Brisbane was finally over. It was a new start and promising omens abounded. Just eight kilometres to the west of Pittsfield was the thriving Hanock Shaker Village, a community of free-spirited Christians who called their farm 'The City of Peace'. The parish registers testify to Sheehan's pastoral activity in Pittsfield from December 1870 to August 1872 about which time he was appointed to St Patrick's, Hinsdale, a new parish which had been split off from Pittsfield in 1868. A community of Irish farmers had settled there in the 1830s and were now in a position to support a priest of their own. This fifth posting in less than twelve years would be Sheehan's last. He died of gastritis on 13 April 1873.

Patrick Sheehan is one of those too easily forgotten priests of Brisbane's troubled past. He was remembered by his brother priests only in the vaguest terms as one of the Quinn 'renegades' who went to America and died somewhere in the 'Puritan country'. In the Springfield diocese, he left no mark and his identity soon became confused with and absorbed by his flamboyant successor and namesake at Hinsdale, Father James T. Sheehan. This Fr Sheehan vaulted himself into ecclesiastical and civil prominence by promoting 'the culture of brain, brawn and heart' and leaving behind him a gymnasium, reading rooms and a debating society for the youth of Hinsdale.

Patrick Sheehan's name would be revived again briefly in 1886 only to be besmirched by a Casino journalist and Orangeman named Balmer during an outbreak of sectarianism in northern New South Wales. Balmer maintained that he had known Sheehan in Brisbane and wrongly asserted the priest had returned from America only to be defrocked by Archbishop Vaughan for his alcoholism and other scandals which had led to a final degradation and descent to the gutter. It is hard to defend nineteenth century priests against the charge of excessive drinking. More than a few were, like Melville's blacksmith, tricked by the 'Bottle

Conjurer'. It may be kinder and more just to think of Patrick Sheehan as a quiet, solitary servant of God who, like Wordsworth's 'Lucy', dwelt among the untrodden ways. Let us acknowledge him now for in his own life, it seems, 'there were none to praise, and very few to love.'

### **REV. MICHAEL RENEHAN (1834-79)**

Of the four members of the Albany quartet, Michael Renehan possessed the greatest love for his former diocese of Brisbane and the greatest desire to return to it. At Keating's funeral, he was still trying to convince the survivors of the old team, Thaddeus Hogan and Matthew Devitt, to support his latest efforts to effect a reconciliation with James Quinn.

One of a family of seven children, Renehan was a Gaelic speaker who grew up in Lower Creggan, Armagh. In 1860, he was among Bishop Quinn's original party of five priests and six Sisters of Mercy. He had emerged from his seminary studies with a love of classical languages but also possessed good managerial skills and common sense. He was sent ahead to make the necessary preparations for Quinn's arrival in Brisbane. Thereafter, Renehan was entrusted with the administration of Cathedral affairs. However, he soon found himself at odds with his bishop over the management of the diocesan accounts, especially Quinn's sequestering 1483 pounds in Fr McGinty's Ipswich parish funds. Along with Frs McGinty, Kaercher and Ricci, Renehan found himself temporarily suspended from priestly duties for daring to disagree on such matters. At the same time, Renehan's own style of leadership could be equally heavy-handed. Personally opposed to Irish republican causes, he was quick to apply his ecclesiastical censure on Brisbane's outspoken Irish National secretary, Thadeus O'Kane.

However, in Renehan's opinion, Quinn's unforgivable sin was committed in 1865 when the latter blamed him for certain views expressed in *The North Australian* which had been brought to the notice of the Propaganda Fide. Quinn was the guilty editorialist, Renehan charged in his own defence. Furthermore he felt that the Cardinal Prefect would like to know something about the bishop's allocation of Society of the Faith funds to non-approved diocesan works and that he was guilty of shaking hands with Freemasons on public occasions.

Quinn sent Renehan to cool off on the Darling Downs. In June 1866 Renehan with Frs Robert Dunne and Fulgentius Hodebourg rode their horses out to Picnic Point on the edge of the Toowoomba Range and uncorked a bottle of champagne. They toasted friendship, the bush and the infant Catholic farming settlements but not the health of their bishop. All suspected that their ministry in Queensland was fast coming to an end.

After the exodus, Renehan went to Ireland and then on to Rome. He was a practical man and mustered all the support he could to clear his name, and hopefully, return to the Australian mission. Yet, despite the backing of All Hallows College and the powerful influence of Dom Bernard Smith of the Irish College, Rome, he did not succeed. However, by this time, Quinn's stony-hearted intransigence was losing him the support of his episcopal colleagues. Bishop John Conroy of Albany was looking for priests and offered Renehan a place. Michael's brother, James, who was then studying for the priesthood in Ireland, also signed up for Albany and would complete his studies at Conroy's diocesan seminary in Troy.

Within the Albany diocese was a vast territory known as the Military Tract, designated as payment to the Revolutionary War soldiers. Simeon Dewitt, the engineer who laid out the tract, named the townships after the great heroes of antiquity: Hannibal, Brutus, Cicero, Aurelius, Marcellus and so on.

In the years following the civil War, Central New York underwent rapid settlement. Canals and railroads connected New York City and Albany with Utica, Syracuse, Rochester and all points between. This transportation network serviced a hinterland of small farmers growing a variety of staples for the markets of eastern cities and a growing export trade. Since the completion of the Syracuse-Binghamton Railroad in 1854, farmers and tannery workers had settled in the green valleys of the Cortland Mountains. The villages of Marathon, Messengerville, Killawog, Lisle, Whitney Point and Chenango Forks would form the parish of Marathon to which Renehan was appointed resident priest in 1869.

It would prove a difficult assignment. Layman Thomas M. Barry had lived in Marathon long enough to know that visiting priests had never 'done well' in his valley. After all this was the 'burned out district,' so receptive to the continuous waves of vigorous Protestant revivalist preachers that the countryside was already dotted with Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist churches. Renehan was not a brilliant orator but neither was he about to forfeit his 'second chance'.

In the absence of any church, he celebrated Mass in various homes and then in Peck's Hall for a few years until £3000 could be raised to acquire Chevalier's Presbyterian Academy in Marathon. The school's study hall was converted into a chapel capable of seating 300 people and would serve as the parish church until 1897. The south end became the pastor's residence. The name Renehan chose for the parish was St Stephen's. That Catholic community which he has helped to establish so successfully around the little Pugin chapel in Elizabeth Street would become the model for his efforts in Marathon.

Occasionally copies of the *Toowoomba Chronicle* and *Brisbane Courier* arrived with newsy letters from Robert Dunne. Renehan learnt that his former housekeeper Ellen Ryan had married Pat Nolan and they were now conducting a public house in Ruthven Street. The Drews of Old Boiling Downs and many other parishioners sent their regards. Dr John Mullen had become a symbol of Catholic progress by becoming a member of the Legislative Council. Frank Connolly of Gayndah had died from a fall from his buggy. Rosie Mayne was still determined to enter the convent but she was in delicate health and now lived with her mother in their seaside house at Sandgate.

Renehan missed the Queensland people but also his beloved horses. He had become well known in the Brisbane racing community and could talk bloodlines with the Tais, J.P. Bell of Jimbour and other Queensland horse-stud owners. Renehan was a fine horseman himself and kept a generous stable of what Quinn termed his 'unnecessary horses.' Dunne wrote to him with affectionate remembrances in 1872:

*You speak of our old rides together over the flats at Eagle Farm and German Station (Nundah). I have not forgotten one of them, nor have I forgotten our first ride to Ipswich together in February 1864 when you changed horse with mine three times to suit me, nor our first visit to the Logan when you put me in the best bed and best room, and took the other for yourself. God bless you old man, and take care of you.*

Renehan needed more than a good horse at Marathon. A priest needed 'wings to fly over these Cortland Mountains', declared one of his foot weary colleagues. Regular visitation of the country parishioners was almost impossible. In the spring of 1878, Renehan informed the Vicar General that he was unable to pay the bishop's levy before next July as he had to travel from farmhouse to farmhouse to collect money from the many non church-attending Catholics. He pleaded: 'If there be any mission exempt from the Cathedraticum, mine ought to be added, as it is certainly one of the poorest.' After surviving ten New York winters in the mountains, Renehan deserved a break. His bishop agreed, and a few months later moved him to the more level ground of Marcellus, not far from Syracuse.

On balance, Renehan had done a pretty good job. As on the Darling Downs years before, he had continued the practical ministry of settling Irish Catholics on the land. A visiting priest noted that the parish now had a solid nucleus of 'robust, thrifty, good-natured and intelligent' Catholics. On some of their centre tables he had observed the 'Websters unabridged'. Others were very desirous to make known to him their knowledge of Church History and other religious topics. Many of



them had large farms under a good cultivation, nicely pointed and respectfully furnished houses, and good (some even excellent) out buildings. Even though they were not an overly church-going people, these people had the faith. Of course, he also observed the usual antipathies between the town and country sections of the congregation.

Marcellus was a better established parish with impressive new church buildings. Here Michael Renehan discovered new reserves of energy. Immediately after his installation, he inaugurated a parish bazaar which for many years would be referred to as 'the great fair'. The \$2,136.41 raised in 1879 greatly reduced the parish debt and enabled Renehan to purchase a store at Onondaga Hill which he converted into a small church. Quite unashamedly he named it St Michael's and it would serve the Onondaga Catholics until a new church replaced it in 1949. 'A new church must be built' was the rallying cry from Catholic communities from the shores of Lake Ontario to the banks of the Hudson and Renehan had made his modest contribution.

Increasingly Renehan's thoughts were returning to his former days in Queensland. Having been sent a lithograph of the St Francis Xavier Church and rectory, Robert Dunne thought Renehan must be out of his head to want to abandon such comfort and return to Brisbane. He now advised against it but Renehan was determined. Thirteen years of exile ought to be a sufficient penance. Renehan wrote to Bishop Quinn with the offer of a party of five priests for Brisbane led by himself and his brother James. The strategy must have worked since Renehan booked himself a passage to Queensland and was expected to arrive in Brisbane in May 1880.

Clearly Renehan had not alerted Quinn to his poor state of health. An assistant priest had been sent to Marcellus to help Renehan survive the winter. However, a bout of typhoid-pneumonia would ensure that he would not survive his forty-second year. He was taken to a Baltimore hospital for treatment but died there two days later on 17 November 1879. Renehan's remains were returned to Marcellus for the funeral service and internment in St Francis Xavier's Cemetery. There were two bishops and a good turn out of clergy for the Requiem which was sung by his brother, the Rev. James J. Renehan. Professor Renaud came out from Syracuse to conduct the parish choir. With fine oratory, the homilist paid tribute to this scholarly priest and his quiet, unobtrusive piety. Perhaps the congregation was surprised to hear so much of his work in Queensland where they learned that many homes still held the name of Fr Renehan in venerable remembrance. In fact the eulogy had been delivered by Renehan's old mate, Thaddeus Hogan, who turned up to preach the homily.

(Part II of this paper will deal with the careers of Thaddeus Hogan, James McGahan and William Mason Walsh)

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Fr Neil Byrne B.D., Ph.D. is currently parish priest of Kenmore. Till recently he was Academic Dean at Banyo Seminary where he lectured in Church History. He also teaches at the Australian Catholic University, Queensland and is a Past President of the Brisbane Catholic Historical Society. His biography, *Robert Dunne* was published by the University of Queensland Press in 1991.