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A SHORT HISTORY OF ST COLUMBAN'S COLLEGE, ALBION

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Introduction: Thank you for inviting me to address the Brisbane Catholic Historical Society. It is difficult for me to compress 70 years of history into an hour, as there are so many different themes in the story of St Columban's College, Albion. I have decided, firstly to try and tell the story briefly, using slides. Secondly, I will try to show why the college folded its tents and moved away to Caboolture in 1996. The move was unexpected as late as 1990 but became increasingly obvious as the Caboolture area grew and needed a local Catholic Secondary College.

It is worth noting that during the 1978 Jubilee celebrations the college was confidently expected to be at Albion and possibly under Christian Brothers' control till at least the year 2028. In 1978 the then Principal, Br Grenier sealed a time capsule in concrete beside the chapel and included a letter addressed to the Principal of 2028.

The story of St Columban's is probably the story of many Catholic schools and differs only in details from them. However it is in the details that the uniqueness of the school appears and in the stories associated with the College. But memory is short and the Old Boys only remember 'their' time as do the teachers and parents. Putting the history together is like trying to sew a whole mass of patches into one garment while knowing that many, if not most of the patches are missing. What I offer then is a collection of fragments patched together to tell some of the story.

The college was located at the intersection of Bonny Avenue and Sandgate Road, Albion Heights on the site of an older property, Highlands, which was bought by the then Archbishop James Duhig in 1926. He had, it appears, decided that the Catholics of the Albion, Woolloowin, Hamilton, Nundah, Wilston, Clayfield, Kedron and other inner city suburbs needed a Catholic school. He not only bought the property but built the school and got the Christian Brothers to run it. There

seems to have been little planning of schools in those days. Provided a religious order was prepared to run a school then Duhig would somehow raise the money to build and a new school would appear, preferably on a hill, near a church. It seems that he had an army of Real Estate agents constantly on the lookout for suitable sites for him.

The college opened in February 1928 and enrolled some 180 pupils who were taught by four Brothers under the direction of the Principal, Br Francis Pius O'Driscoll. O'Driscoll was an archetypical Christian Brother, absolutely dedicated to the work of the order. Including Albion, he founded five colleges during his career as a Brother and died in harness in 1964.

The early years were the hard times of the 'Hungry Thirties'. The Great Depression broke out at the end of 1929 when the school was just two years old and unemployment soared to over 30% of the workforce and many parents had to subsist on 'relief work' which was a kind of 'work for the dole' scheme. The Catholic schools did not receive any Government assistance and had to depend on fees and the payment from the Scholarship. This was the exam at the end of the Primary school years and the successful candidates were awarded a Scholarship to pay for the next two years of schooling taking them to the Junior exam at which time most finished school. The Scholarship teacher was known as the 'breadwinner' because he had to get as many boys as possible to gain scholarships and continue on at school. This meant that there was a guaranteed income for them and that paid for their bread, literally.

In the thirties the College was mainly a primary school with a small secondary section forming about 25% of the enrolment. The senior classes were very small to non-existent. The first senior was in 1933 and combined with sub-senior, comprised six students. The 1934 senior class had three students, one of which, Jack Woodward, was able to say in 1978 that two-thirds of the class entered the priesthood. The other two were Cyril Shand and Tom Guy. He said it with pride, reflecting the outlook of the Catholic school system of those times.

The small senior school was to be a cause for worry until the 1960s because there was a constant drain of students from the college to Terrace, Nudgee and Downlands. The parents probably considered that they would get a better senior education at those places, and they were probably right. However it made extra difficult the task of building up Albion. By the end of the thirties the enrolment after fluctuating, dropped back to 260 students with six Brothers and one lay teacher. There were still only six students in senior.

The forties were dominated by the War and the college faced the usual austerities. The basement of the school building, because of the solid concrete floors over it, was used as an air raid shelter. Over 230 Old Boys enlisted and at least 20 were killed in action. It was a time of mere survival for Australia.

The first purchase of new property occurred in 1943 when two of the seven houses fronting Sandgate Road were bought. The last of the houses was bought in 1973, taking just on 30 years to obtain an unobstructed frontage. The students, staff and parents changed, but the college achieved its goal if it had one. I suspect that the main goal was to stay viable and expand where possible, rather than have long-term goals and dreams. Duhig and Whiteman may have been the exceptions.

In 1945 at the height of victory fever the Cadet Corps was founded and it prospered for the next thirty years with many very enthusiastic volunteers. The annual passing out parade and Anzac Day ceremonies became regular features of the college year. At the end of the forties the roll call was 309 students, seven Brothers, one lay teacher and nine students in senior. The growth was slow, painfully slow. Over the previous 22 years, about 100 students were added, i.e. a growth of 50%.

The fifties saw the beginning of more rapid expansion as the 'baby boomers' began to move into the primary. In addition, the postwar immigration was well under way and many Catholic immigrants wanted a Catholic education for their sons. By 1959 the roll call was 473 students, an increase of 164 students or about 53% in ten years. This was probably the same for all schools. However it was the primary school that grew the most and the secondary still remained at only a quarter of the total. The senior still had only nine students, the same as in 1949.

During the decade there had been some purchase of property but the real need was for more classroom space and it was not appearing, so that by 1959 accommodation had reached a crisis and Duhig stepped in spectacularly. He bought Whytecliffe, the large old home on the western side of the college for £60,000, a huge sum for the time. He expected it to be used for classrooms but the Brothers and the City Council thought otherwise. Also it was separated from the college property by a third property. The Brothers wanted a new building and the only place to put it was on the land in between. Duhig again came to the rescue and bought the land in between the two properties for £40,000 in early 1960. The new classroom/laboratory block opened in 1962, came to be known as Duhig Science Hall and the first major building untaken since 1928. Something was happening at last.

Then in 1962 Br Whiteman arrived and he was appalled at the state of the college, 'a pile of bricks in a mudfield' was his first impression. He set about to raise the morale and standard of the school by calling on the parents to make a choice - keep on the present course or make the school a place where parents would be clamouring to enrol their sons. The parents chose the latter and the work began. Building was a clear necessity, so what to build? He wanted a chapel but the parents wanted a swimming pool, so they got one by building it themselves and raising the money to pay for it. It took 21 weeks of super-human effort, but they were enthused and empowered. (No one had heard that word in those days; it used to be called 'do it'). A P & F executive of 60 was formed and divided into committees, one committee to meet each week night and on Saturday. They worked like navvies on the pool and partied in the night.

Whiteman regarded himself as a leader and beyond that he 'knew nothing'. He got the parents going and then 'ran' to keep up with them - there was no stopping them. Finance, building, planning and organising were all unknowns to him so he got the parents to do the lot and he signed some of the cheques. He didn't even know where the money was coming from, or where it was going but he kept it moving. He unleashed the enormous potential of parental energy. He was a man who was capable of seizing the opportunity of the times and gathered a group of parents who were able and willing to venture.

Finance was raised by a series of measures: Art Unions (Horses and Holdens), Colana Carnival (The biggest show after the Ekka); an Insurance Scheme (if the breadwinner died the children got free education); Direct Giving; a Business Venture; a school supplies shop (which financed the buying of property on Sandgate Road) as well as the usual borrowing, and school fees. Business houses supplied machinery and expertise in exchange for advertisements. There was very little State aid in the early sixties, but it started to flow later.

Once the pool building system was worked out the same method was employed to build Parry Hall (six classrooms, two laboratories, toilet, undercroft, office and work space) which was built in three stages. The Memorial chapel was designed by an Old Boy and built over a two-year period. Finally, Whytecliffe was completely gutted, renovated and refurbished. While the builder, R. Whiteman (& Brothers) was doing all this, the normal maintenance and improvements were being carried out as well. Government funding was available for the laboratories in Parry Hall but not for the other buildings.

In 1969 the roll call was 817 with 491 in the secondary and 323 in the primary. There were 72 senior students with nine Brothers and fifteen lay teachers. By

1965 with secondary enrolment at 536 (Caboolture expects 750), Whiteman was able to claim that St Columban's was a college in its own right. Boys were being enrolled at birth - parents were lining up to get their boys into the college. The parents had succeeded. While classes were too big and more buildings were needed the 'corner had been turned' and the basis had been laid for future expansion. The pinnacle had been reached. The college population had peaked and would decline because of the demographic cycle which had reached a plateau phase in the drawing area and the new students were going to have to come from further away to keep the school viable. The declining numbers partly indicated this.

The building continued unabated into the 1970s under Br Marshall with the library, Biological Science Laboratories and the new Primary School. This was a time when State aid was beginning to flow and all the buildings received substantial Government funding. Br Marshall reduced the size of classes and since the school could only hold so many students then the numbers would decline somewhat. It also meant that, since the number of Brothers was declining, there would be an increase in the number of lay teachers and this would lead to an increase in costs. The new buildings were to upgrade the standard of education and keep on parity with other schools. The building of the primary allowed an expansion of classroom accommodation for existing numbers rather than for the expansion of overall numbers.

In 1979 the roll call was 679 students with 200 in the primary and 479 in the secondary. The senior had dropped to 55 students, which is strange because the secondary numbers had dropped only marginally by 15 students over 1969. Thus the secondary was holding its numbers but the primary declined by 123 pupils, partly due to the dropping of Grade 4 in 1975. This was due to an agreement with the CEO but not all other schools did this. The secondary numbers were good and the school was able to give a good education but more students were required to ensure the long-term future. The minimum number for this was about 500 students and this was reached in the 1980s.

The 1980s started well with the erection of the Moonie Manual Arts building, helped by a Government subsidy and the beginning of Camp Allery in the Brisbane Valley at Moore for outdoor education. This latter move was an innovation, which involved long range working bees by parents, but it was the only way to build the infrastructure needed for such a facility. Again the parents responded. This is a continuing project, which still requires a lot of voluntary work. Another voluntary project completed in the early 1980s was the Corner Sporting Project at Albion, which took some eight years to complete. All of this was aimed at raising the level of education rather than trying to increase the student numbers. Thus the policy of the 1970s was continued.

In 1982 the world of St Columban's temporarily collapsed with the announcement that the Brothers were to leave Albion by 1984 and lay administration would take over. The Brothers were confident that the school would survive. The staff and parents were stunned but there was no going back. The Brothers were also leaving Clairvaux and one of their schools in Toowoomba. The CEO would take over and the primary would be phased out by 1987 - another shock. This was the result of the declining numbers of Brothers and was inevitable. Br Marshall in his capacity as Provincial had to close many schools in Queensland/Northern Territory Province; it was the same in other provinces.

In 1985 the last substantial building to be erected at Albion, the covered area, was completed as a parting gift from the Brothers. From now on there would be an abundance of classrooms as the primary gradually shut down and its rooms became available for the secondary school. Computers became a standard item in the college and a bank of 33 consols was installed in an air-conditioned room for the use of classes.

The secondary enrolment peaked in 1983 at an all time high with 585 students as well as 178 primary students. In 1985 the largest senior enrolment of all time was recorded with 106 students. But a decline in secondary student numbers had set in and by 1989 the roll call was 420 and falling. This was partly due to the fact that there was no input from the primary and only two classes enrolled from outside the school. The secondary had traditionally received four classes in Year 8 - two from primary and two from other schools.

In the 1990s the emphasis swung back to numbers while at the same time upgrading the standard of education, no mean feat. Strenuous efforts were made to attract new students and usually managed to create three classes in Year 8, but they were small classes in the middle twenties or less. The plain fact was that we simply did not have the numbers to be able to offer students the choices they needed so they went to schools where they could get them. Once the process started it grew worse and fewer students were attracted which made it harder to provide extra subjects.

Many improvements were made, especially in the electronic field, with computerisation and school beautification via the introduction of TAFE classes but the decline continued. The school needed help and the CEO had to provide a subsidy over several years. In 1995 it amounted to £188,000. This situation could not continue for long and when the announcement was made by the CEO that it intended to build at Caboolture that was the end for the Albion site.

Albion was built on the sweat, toil and tears of generations of ordinary Catholics and Christian Brothers who spent enormous amounts of time and money to build a college that would provide a 'good' education for their sons. Now it is all gone - many hearts are aching - some are angry - some frustrated - most accept the inevitable and get on with life while taking a nostalgic look as they go past the site. In the words of a prominent 19th Century Irish Australian - 'Such is life.'

WHAT HAPPENED?

The secondary enrolment never had a chance of being fully viable. The peak secondary enrolment of 585 in 1983 was a viable number and if the college could have maintained that enrolment it could have survived and prospered. This would have given it four streams in each form and allowed the diversity of subjects that a modern college has to offer. A viable secondary school has to be able to offer at least twenty subjects in Years 11 and 12, some schools offer as many as forty. St Columban's was offering twenty-three in 1996. On this basis we could not compete with the larger Catholic secondary schools or the State schools. Every year there was an exodus of students at the end of Year 10.

Once the Brothers left, the college had lost that 'something' that the Brothers had. It was the reputation they had - the mystique that surrounded the Congregation. People still wanted a CB education but they were not going to get it at Albion. So they went elsewhere.

The closing of the primary school reduced by 50% the annual secondary intake. Parents sent their boys to the primary intending them to go on to the secondary. Since St Columban's primary closed down they simply sent them to other Brothers' schools so that they would be sure of getting in and completing their education. Between 1982 when it was announced that the Brothers were leaving and 1995, the following Christian Brothers' Secondary Schools grew:

Nudgee	82%	(675 to 1255)
Shorncliffe	69%	(272 to 535)
St. James	35%	(364 to 530)
Terrace	17.6%	(734 to 908)

St Columban's DECLINED by 47.5% (543 to 299). It dropped even further during the year.

Declining numbers in the inner city area affected the feeder area and the college had to look further and further north along the Caboolture line for students. This became the college lifeline and ultimately the majority of the college population came from the Pine Rivers/Caboolture areas.

The need for a Catholic secondary school in the Caboolture-Burpengary area was long recognised. Once the decision to build at Caboolture had been taken that was the end for Albion. The only practical option was to close the Albion site and reopen at Caboolture. After all that was where the majority of the students were coming from and the inner city students could easily relocate to existing Catholic school including CB schools.

Patrick O'Shea served on the staff of St Columban's College, Albion Heights from 1980-1996 and was Acting Deputy Principal from Semester 2, 1992 through 1993. He served in New South Wales Secondary Schools for 20 years and is at present writing a history of St Columban's at Albion Heights.