

**BEFORE CLERMONT THERE WAS COPPERFIELD:  
THE FIRST CATHOLIC SCHOOL OF THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS**

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St Joseph's School Copperfield, the first inland Catholic school north of the Tropic of Capricorn was opened on the 21 July 1873.<sup>1</sup> The local newspaper, the *Peak Downs Telegram* announced that it was 'under the charge of a lady superior, Sr Francis, and was intended for both young and middle aged children. Instruction [would] consist chiefly of the rudimentary principles of education combined with proper religious training'.<sup>2</sup>

Today, there is little or no trace of the town of Copperfield, although in the 1870's it could boast of its four stores, two hotels, resident doctor, churches, schools and a population of 4000.<sup>3</sup> It was situated just four miles from one of the oldest towns on the Central Highlands, Clermont, which had been surveyed in 1863 and named after the birthplace in France of one of the early pastoralists in the district, Oscar de Satge.<sup>4</sup>

Copperfield, like Clermont where gold had been discovered at Sandy Flat and Hurley's Creek in the early 1860's, owed its prosperity to the discovery of minerals. Deposits of copper were discovered there in 1861, and the mine was developed in 1863.<sup>5</sup> The boom period of copper mining was shortlived, and by the late 1870's a depression had set in on the enterprise.<sup>6</sup> The mines were closed, families left the town and in mid July 1877 the Sisters of St Joseph left Copperfield.

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Three Sisters of St Joseph had staffed the Catholic school, the first school to be established in the township. Sr Francis Bartolsmeir aged 26, had been born in Prussia and was considered by the reporter of the Peak Downs Telegram to have ‘an excellent knowledge of the English language ... although a German,’ Sr Laurence O’Brien, aged 20, had been born in Ireland but reared in South Australia from the age of two years, Sr Angela D’Arcy, a novice aged 24, had been born in Ireland but reared in Brisbane, and Sr Mary Dominic McLoughlan, was a fifteen year old postulant whose parents lived in Rockhampton.<sup>7</sup>

Fr Woods visited Copperfield in August 1873 and wrote to reassure Mary MacKillop that ‘the sisters here are very happy and very good’, even though he considered the place unhealthy because the climate was ‘excessively warm, being sixty miles within the tropics, ... fever very prevalent from the least exposure,’ and ‘dust and flies and mosquitoes beyond description.’<sup>8</sup>

Copperfield was a journey of two and a half days by rail and coach from Rockhampton, so the telegram from Fr James Horan informing Sr Clare Wright, the Josephite Provincial in South Brisbane, that the sisters had arrived safely would have quelled any fears about their safety on a route that was often dangerous.<sup>9</sup> The Cobb and Co coach was boarded at the terminus of the Central West railway, Westwood, a short distance from Rockhampton. Not only were the roads impassable in wet weather, the journey was made more perilous by the ferocity of the attacks of the aborigines. The Peak Downs region was considered so dangerous that along the track that linked Bowen Downs west of Clermont with the coast, the government had built fortified police outposts.<sup>10</sup>

The reason for the tension lay in the fact that there was little, if any, understanding by the European, of Aboriginal society.<sup>11</sup> The ever expanding pastoral leases of the Europeans were depriving the Aborigines, not only of their hunting grounds and waterholes, but also of the very animals they hunted. To the white settlers the possum and the kangaroo were seen as pests and as such needed to be eradicated. To the Aborigines these native animals were a source of food, and they were fighting to preserve their habitat. It is no wonder then that travellers in the nineteenth century were wary of travelling west of Rockhampton.

If the Sisters of St Joseph who journeyed to Copperfield, had not been warned of the perils of the trip before they left Rockhampton, their experience along the way made them aware of the danger. The winter night in July 1873 that they, along with the other passengers, had spent in the bush under the stars on the western bank of the Dawson River, where the coach had broken down, was remembered clearly by the coach driver, Sid Bartholomew. Ever mindful of the colourful history of the area, he recalled later that: 'It was near the spot where Commissioner Griffin of Clermont had waylaid the gold escort six years before, and suffered the death penalty for his trouble.'<sup>12</sup> Sr Francis kept it in mind because she warned Mary MacKillop: 'The roads... will be better in summer. It is not safe for one sister to travel alone, because they [the travellers] often have to stay out on the road in the bush all night.'<sup>13</sup>

Sr Columba O'Leary who joined the community in 1876 had her own travel story: 'The coach got stuck in a bog hole, and we had to sleep in the bush all night,' she wrote. 'I was not afraid of anything but the wild dogs. There was such a lot of them there, it would terrify anyone to hear them howling all round.'<sup>14</sup> The passengers of the Cobb and Co coach must have breathed a sigh of relief when the chimneys of the Copperfield mines came into view on the horizon.

Although Fr Tenison Woods, who conducted missions in both Clermont and Copperfield and gave a public talk in August 1873, on 'How Australia was Discovered,' believed that 'the people were living like pagans in [this] wild dissolute mining town,' nevertheless, there must have been much good will among the Catholics.<sup>15</sup> Over the years they had been offered few incentives to deepen their knowledge of the Catholic faith because, at most, a priest had visited only once a year. The first priest to come to the district had been Fr Lonergan in April 1866, and such was the interest of the Catholic community that five months later, in September, they had built a Catholic church in Clermont.

Not to be outdone by the neighbouring town, the Catholics in Copperfield formed their own committee with the intention to build their own church. Through the advertising columns of the local paper the *Peak Downs Telegram*, they invited Fr Lonergan to attend their meetings. He responded with some diplomacy, via the newspaper, that he considered it wiser to build one church at a time. He continued to visit the district annually, and by 1868 Copperfield had its Catholic church.<sup>16</sup>

For the next three years Dean Murlay from Rockhampton visited annually, and while he arranged Sunday School Classes for the children, and the praying of the rosary in the church on a Sunday evening, these, compared with the ministrations of a resident priest, were small encouragements to religious practice. It was not until 1872 that a priest was appointed to the district. By that time the Catholics in Copperfield had built a presbytery, and Frs James Horan and Oreste Terrdozzi lived there until August 1873 when they were appointed to other districts.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that Fr James Horan was leaving the district, as well as the needs of the 'number of children growing up in utter neglect' prompted Fr Woods to make a foundation of the Sisters of St Joseph in Copperfield.<sup>18</sup>

It would seem that the sisters were well received and their work with the children appreciated. The school was housed in an unlined shed and fifty children were enrolled on the first day.<sup>19</sup> By the end of 1874 the enrolment had risen to one hundred and twenty, and of these the greater number were Protestant. When a National School was opened in 1875, taught by three Irish teachers and situated opposite the Catholic school, the enrolment of the Catholic school dropped back to seventy-one with a regular attendance from fifty to sixty.<sup>20</sup>

Only one Catholic parent sent his son to the National School, but the child stayed only one day. By November of that year the enrolment at the Catholic school had climbed to ninety-one. Sr Laurence who had charge of the school reported: 'We have a very good school. We never have any trouble from the children.'<sup>21</sup> The figures seem to indicate that the parents were not only satisfied with the standard of education given by the sisters, but were keen to see that their children attended school regularly.

The Sisters for their part were distressed by what seemed to them a lack of interest in religious practice. They tell of preparing children for their First Communion on the Feast of the Assumption, and express their regret that 'the Catholics seldom think of going to Holy Communion. They think they are very good if they go once a year, and many even do not do that.'<sup>22</sup> Perhaps this judgement is a little harsh. The remarks might have been influenced by the youth and fervour of a writer who had not taken into account the few opportunities that had been offered to the people to practise their faith and depth their spirituality.

The years 1873-77 for the people of Copperfield were ones of insecurity. During the 1860's the mine had been developed by Thomas Mort and some Sydney friends. At first labourers from the South Australian copper fields were employed.

Later, miners from Cornwall and smelter experts from Wales were encouraged to join the workforce and share their expertise. It was an expensive enterprise as firebricks and machinery had to be imported from England, and hauled by bullock teams the three hundred miles from Rockhampton to Copperfield. While the copper price remained at 150 pounds sterling per ton during the Franco-Prussian War [1870-71], the high costs of cartage both to the mine and that of the smelted ingots to the coast could be sustained. Even though between 1869 and 1883, 47 000 tons of copper was transported to Rockhampton, nevertheless, when the price of copper fell after 1871 the mine gradually became uneconomic. From 1876 the threat of unemployment hung over the community.

In December of that year Sr Francis wrote to Mary MacKillop: 'This place is changing, we may have to leave it soon as the mines are going to be closed this week.' Sr Laurence tells how the 'directors are holding a meeting in Sydney so we will hear some day.'<sup>23</sup> She continues: 'If the mines are closed you will have us sailing home.'

The uncertainty of employment as well as the isolation of the township were tensions that had a social impact on the community of this mining town. This becomes clear when the sisters' letters tell, that besides running the school they were caring, in July 1875, for fourteen children whose parents were unable to care for them, and by November two more children had joined the household.<sup>24</sup> Sr Francis wrote: 'Some [children] are very young. Two of their mothers are in the lunatic asylum in Brisbane.'<sup>25</sup> Sr Laurence's letter tells of one woman who rushed into their chapel on a Sunday morning while they were praying, threw herself and her baby down on the floor, and of how the sisters cared for her till she could be taken to Brisbane.<sup>26</sup>

Besides these insights into the instability of the social situation, the sisters' letters tell us little of their efforts to support distressed families. Because of their practice of regular visits to the families of the children they taught, it is likely that the sisters would have met many families that needed support and care. Neither do they mention, in any explicit way, the impact on them of the straitened circumstances of the people. There is only a hint that they may have found it difficult to provide food for the children and themselves, because Sr Columba, on the advice of the doctor, had to be brought to Brisbane because 'she was not taking sufficient food to sustain her health.'<sup>27</sup>

It was the deprivation of Mass and the sacraments as well as the seeming disinterest of the priest in their apostolate that was the greatest stress for the sisters. Fr Francis Dunham from the Clifton Diocese in England had replaced Fr James Horan in 1873. From his entry into Copperfield he was at loggerheads with the Catholic community.

Prior to the sisters' arrival, Fr James Horan had arranged for them to live in the Copperfield presbytery, and for the priest to live in Clermont. Fr Dunham did not approve of this arrangement. He could not understand why nuns would come to such an isolated, poor place, and he did not take any interest in the school or offer the sisters any encouragement in their apostolate.<sup>28</sup> When he was in the district he said Mass once a fortnight in Copperfield, but there were periods when the sisters were without Mass and the sacraments for months at a time. 'Father has been away for ten weeks. No Mass all that time. I hope the saints do something for us today and send him home,' wrote Sr Laurence to Mary MacKillop on All Saints Day, 1875.<sup>29</sup> On another occasion Fr Dunham was away for five months, and Sr Columba believed that she 'would not know how to go to confession when he came home.'<sup>30</sup>

It would seem that this priest was at loggerheads with the bishop, James Quinn.<sup>31</sup> When Fr Dunham left the diocese of Brisbane in 1879, he did so 'without an exit permit'.<sup>32</sup>

As well as these deprivations the sisters felt the loneliness of their situation and longed for letters and a visit from Mary MacKillop or their provincial Sr Josephine Mc Mullen.<sup>33</sup> When Sr Calasactius Howley left for Brisbane after her short unexpected visit, Sr Columba wrote: 'I cannot tell you how lonely I feel.'<sup>34</sup> The sisters felt their insecurity in the diocese. They knew that Dr Quinn was dissatisfied with their Rule and was endeavouring to persuade them to separate from Mary MacKillop and join with him and Fr Woods in forming a new group. Fr James Horan had been kind to them prior to his departure and used to write to them occasionally. His last letter was one in which he tried to persuade them to agree with his uncle's [Dr Quinn] wishes. After the sisters' reply in which they assured him that they wished to remain under the leadership of Mary MacKillop, his letters ceased.<sup>35</sup>

By February 1877 the strain was too much for Sr Francis, and she wrote requesting a dispensation from her vows: 'I am sorry I did not let you know how unhappy I was at Copperfield and how much the priest tried me... I feel the sisters will lose their vocations if left much longer in the trying positions they hold in Queensland, and as I do not wish any to be as unhappy as I am, I hope you can do something for them.'<sup>36</sup>

So Sisters Francis and Laurence left Copperfield and arrived at the convent in South Brisbane on 1 August 1877.<sup>37</sup> Three years later all the Sister of St Joseph had left Queensland. Little did Sr Laurence dream when she closed the door of St Joseph's School, Copperfield, for that last time in 1877, that she would return to the Blair Athol district in 1916 to visit another St Joseph's School in Copperfield's neighbour, Clermont.<sup>38</sup>



In 1900 the Sisters of St Joseph had returned to Queensland at the invitation of Bishop Higgins of the Diocese of Rockhampton. He was pleased to tell Mary MacKillop that: 'the people retain a very grateful recollection of your labours there in years gone by, and will be delighted to receive you back'<sup>39</sup> How happy Sr Laurence was to renew her acquaintance with friends and pupils from Copperfield days.

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Peak Downs Telegram* 26 July 1873.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Review*, Rockhampton, vol 12, n. 8, December 1946.

<sup>4</sup> Glenville Pike, *Queensland Frontier* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1973) p.106.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-7.

<sup>6</sup> W. Ross Johnston, *The Call of the Land: A History of Queensland to the Present Day* (Milton, Qld: The Jacaranda Press, 1982) p.74.

<sup>7</sup> *Peak Downs Telegram*, 26 July 1873. Profession Register of Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart Reg. Nn, 51, 108, 180, 227. Sisters of St Joseph Congregational Archives, North Sydney.

<sup>8</sup> Woods to MacKillop, 27 August 1873. Woods' Letterbook, Mary MacKillop Archives, North Sydney.

<sup>9</sup> Clare Wright to MacKillop 10 June 1873. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.

<sup>10</sup> Glenville Pike, *Queensland Frontier*, pp.104.

<sup>11</sup> Ross Johnston, *The Call of the Land*, pp.37-41.

<sup>12</sup> *The Review*, 1946.

<sup>13</sup> Sr Francis to MacKillop, 23 August 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.

<sup>14</sup> Sr Columba to MacKillop 20 December 1876. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Petra*, 2 April 1923.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Julian Tenison Woods, *Memoirs*, p.201.

<sup>19</sup> *Petra*, 2 April 1923.

<sup>20</sup> Sr Laurence to MacKillop 24 July, 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.

<sup>21</sup> Laurence to MacKillop 1 November 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.

<sup>22</sup> Laurence to MacKillop 24 July 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.

<sup>23</sup> Francis to MacKillop 27 December 1876. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney..

<sup>24</sup> Francis to MacKillop 23 July 1875; Laurence to MacKillop 1 November 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.

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- <sup>25</sup> Francis to MacKillop 23 July 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>26</sup> Laurence to MacKillop 24 July 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>27</sup> McMullen to MacKillop 4 April 1877. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>28</sup> Francis to MacKillop 16 November 1875; Laurence to MacKillop 24 July 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>29</sup> Laurence to MacKillop 1 November 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>30</sup> Columba to MacKillop 20 December 1876. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>31</sup> Francis to MacKillop 16 November 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>32</sup> James Quinn to Kirby 29 March 1879. Quinn Letterbook, *Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives*.
- <sup>33</sup> Dominic to MacKillop 16 January 1875; Francis to MacKillop 16 January 1875; Angela to MacKillop 16 January 1875; Laurence to MacKillop 22 August 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>34</sup> Columba to MacKillop 20 December 1876. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>35</sup> Laurence to MacKillop 1 November 1875. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>36</sup> Francis to MacKillop 12 February 1877. Francis to MacKillop 16 January, 1875.
- <sup>37</sup> Claver to MacKillop 2 August 1877. Qld Sisters' Letterbook, MMA, North Sydney.
- <sup>38</sup> *The Review*, Rockhampton, Vol. 12, No. 8. December 1946.
- <sup>39</sup> Higgins to MacKillop 24 February 1900. *Folio 1900*, v.1, n.3, MMA, North Sydney.