

ANECDOTES

1 June 1999

Fr Denis Martin

I

In the year 1866, a bankrupt French aristocratic family fled to England en route to Australia. Jules André Collin (de Souvigny) with his wife and family arrived in Moreton Bay on the *Vanguard* in January 1867. They had passed the weeks at sea learning English.

With the £180 worth of Queensland government land orders, Jules bought 135 acres of land at Indooroopilly upon some of which Kenmore House stands today. With money brought from France, he purchased a small farm on the banks of the South Pine River at Bald Hills. Here the family settled; but struggled to make a living. Times and seasons were bad indeed; so bad in fact that Charles, the eldest son, took two horses, a cart, and some tools and headed north to try his luck on the Gympie goldfield.

Soon after his arrival he entered into a conditional partnership with two other men and they secured a claim. After weeks of hard unrewarding work one of the partners walked off. Then a letter from Bald Hills requested Charles to return to help on the farm as conditions had worsened. George Curtis worked on through the dry summer heat. His perseverance paid dividends, for on 6 February 1868 his last exertions for the day brought to the surface the largest nugget ever found in Queensland – 74 lbs of gold. Known as ‘Perseverance’, it went on show around the colony before being purchased by the Sydney mint.

The press had made suggestions that the lucky owners should present it to the Duke of Edinburgh who was at that time visiting Australia!

With the sale of the nugget Charles Collin received his share and the family troubles were over. They sold the Indooroopilly land to increase their Bald Hills acreage. A very contented Jules wrote home:

We confined ourselves to the care of our fowls and cows, and we lived, without difficulty, a very peaceful and happy life. We got up early, said our prayers and went to our work. In the evening we read the lives of the Saints or other good books, said the rosary and night prayer in common. On Sundays we read prayers of holy Mass, sang hymns in three vespers. We continued to have a priest to come and say Mass at our place at least once every month.

Not long after writing this letter in 1870, Jules died. He was buried in Brisbane by Fr J.P.M. Connolly.

During 1876 a priest from France wrote to the family to inform them that their debts had been cleared. They decided to sell up and return to France.

Now here is the most remarkable part of the story: Charles, aged 36, joined the Oblates of Mary and after ordination worked at Jaffna in Ceylon. Jean Marie did likewise. Caroline Marie had entered the Convent of the Daughters of Our Lady. Josephine Louise and Marie had both entered the Carmelite convent. Gabrielle remained at home to care for their ageing mother. Gustave eventually returned to Brisbane, married, and bought out the Lomer photographic business.

That little farmhouse on the banks of the South Pine River was truly a Catholic home.

Kenmore Park – The Land, the House and the People
by Jean Stewart, assisted by the descendants of Gustave Collin.

II

Bishop Wilson arrived in Hobart in 1844. He brought with him an 18 year old catechist named George Hunter who was ordained priest in 1850. In Tasmanian church history he is known as Archdeacon Hunter (+ 1868).

Other members of the Hunter family emigrated from Nottingham, England, in 1849 to live in Adelaide. Henry, Fr George's brother, was apprenticed to various trades of the building industry in Adelaide, Melbourne and Bendigo. Bishop Wilson then encouraged him to move to Hobart in 1855 where he established himself as an architect who was to dominate the scene for over thirty years. His major works still to be seen are the Hobart Town Hall, Art Gallery and St Mary's Cathedral.

This Cathedral work deserves comment. Bishop Wilson's first St Mary's was built between 1860 and 1866 according to plans of W.W. Wardell (Wilson never went ahead with his 1853 plans for a Pugin Cathedral); Hunter being the supervising architect. After ten years the building was declared unsafe so that Fr Therry's St Joseph's church of 1841 had again to become the pro-Cathedral.

Questions were asked about the workmanship. Henry Hunter blamed the builder and the stonemason and exonerated himself on the grounds that he was only the supervising architect! The generous donor of £10,000 was particularly annoyed with him. It was demolished during 1876. Despite this, Henry Hunter was nevertheless appointed architect of the new St Mary's Cathedral built between 1878 and 1881, and still standing!

Due to an economic downturn as well as for health reasons, Mr Hunter left Hobart and moved to Brisbane in 1888. One of the few remaining timber Catholic churches in this city is his work: Christ the King at Graceville.

It was built originally as St Michael's and All Holy Souls at Toowong; then in 1930, floated across the river at Indooroopilly to be resited.

In Indooroopilly is Hunter Street where, at its junction with Clarence Road, is the fine home Hunter built for himself. He also built *Eulalia* for Judge Patrick Real at Norman Park and was responsible for some additions at All Hallows School.

At the time of his death in 1892, Henry Hunter was described as 'a prominent and devout Roman Catholic, an accomplished musician and conductor of St Stephen's Cathedral choir.' He was aged 60 and buried at Nudgee cemetery.

Queensland Architects of the 19th Century
Tasmanian Church History - Watson and McKay

III

One day, not so long ago, a man came to the Cathedral office to ask if he might see and photograph the Bishop's chair. He explained his request – his great-grandfather had made it for Bishop Quinn.

So I took him over to the sacristy where he was delighted to examine it. I told him that we had often wondered about its origins, as it could be discerned in the 1882 photograph of Bishop Dunne's consecration.

He then told me all he could about Francis Murray, the maker, who was - for some years - a prominent citizen of early Brisbane, being an alderman and mayor in the year 1871. He had previously been a furniture maker and undertaker and also

involved in the Queensland Hibernian Society. The chair - and perhaps a prie dieu - was certainly made in the 1860s and for the old Cathedral.

The chair served five bishops of Brisbane during 120 years.

IV

On another occasion an elderly lady came to the sacristy to ask if I would offer the Mass for her grandfather, Henry Harvey, whose anniversary it was.

As caretaker of the Cathedral he had lived on the property with his wife and young family in a cottage on the Creek Street side. One day in 1883, he decided to remove a bird's nest from the Cathedral roof but fell from the ladder and died soon after at the feet of his eleven year old son.

It was comforting to be shown a cutting from *The Australian* where Fr Fouhy arranged for subscriptions for the benefit of the Widow Harvey. She was subsequently presented with a cottage at Kelvin Grove where she spent the rest of her days.

V

Another 'widow' who sought Fr Denis Fouhy's help was 'Mrs Rogers'. As Alice Dowling, a 16 year old Irish girl, she immigrated to Queensland to live with a married sister. But at 17 she fell pregnant to the son of the Agent-General for Queensland (Unmack), who soon fled overseas.

So what did Alice do? She slipped on a wedding ring, donned widow's weeds, and - as the poor young Widow Rogers, with tears welling up in her eyes - she narrated the tragic death of her husband in the United States.

Fr Fouhy sympathetically arranged a seating for her in the Cathedral – it all had the air of Victorian respectability. The brass plate remained on one of the old seats until they were disposed of.

Then Alice did marry, to none other than the playboy cricketer Arthur Coningham, first Queenslander to play in an Australian touring team. In cricket history he is remembered for his on-field pranks, one of which was lighting a fire while fielding at Blackpool to keep himself warm.

In church history he is remembered for the infamous Coningham v O'Haran case of 1900 in Sydney. The stunned court heard Coningham's allegations of Alice's misconduct with Fr Denis O'Haran, Cardinal Moran's secretary. He claimed custody of two of the three children, implying that Fr O'Haran was father of the other, and claiming damages of £5,000.

In the end, Coningham's perjury and collusion was exposed. When Fr O'Haran was declared innocent, Brisbane Catholics contributed generously towards a fund to pay his considerable legal expenses.

Coningham, Coningham v O'Haran in *The Catholic Church in Australia* – O'Farrell

VI

Thomas Jefferson was the first to take a Stradivarius violin across to the New World. Who brought the first one to Queensland? Descendants of Antonio Benvenuti feel sure that he did.

Known in London as 'the modern Paganini', he was one of the talented Italians encouraged to emigrate here by Bishop Quinn. He, with his wife and three musician sons, sailed from London on the barque *Polmaise* in mid 1871

The Benvenuti family was in good company; for occupying the saloon were several priests including Frs. Antonini, Ricci, Pompeii and the Dunham's, the latter accompanied by their sister and her maid. There were few other passengers aboard; it being 'a short ship', but she was well ballasted with railway lines destined for the Darling Downs.

It was this heavy unmoveable cargo which really saved the ship. On reaching the equator, the weather was still and calm; so the crew, from the Captain down, celebrated the crossing by opening the rum and drank themselves senseless. Only two A.B. passengers were familiar with the handling of a ship. It was 19 years old Henry Somerset who at nightfall noticed the ominous clouds of a fast approaching hurricane on the horizon.

Soon the vessel was engulfed in a tempest that was to last till around daybreak. Somerset and his companion having lashed themselves to the spindle wrestled unceasingly to hold the wheel throughout. The sails had earlier been ripped to ribbons. At one point it seemed all was lost for the *Polmaise* rolled on her beam ends; but the heavy cargo enabled her to regain buoyancy. The precious cargo of priests, passengers and Stradivarius eventually arrived in Moreton Bay.

If you thought the name Henry Somerset familiar, it was he who in 1893 saw the wall of water crashing down the Stanley-Brisbane river system. He rode post-haste from Esk to warn settlers and citizens in Brisbane of imminent flooding. Few heard the warning, but few could have done much to mitigate such a disaster.

Benvenuti Family Records *H.A Somerset: Autobiography*

VII

And finally here is a story; a type which the Redemptorists would have been likely to use during an old-time mission, viz. that sin brings its punishment in this life and the next.

It so happened that when Archbishop Polding went out to the former Paddington cemetery to bless the Catholic section on 7 December 1858, he lost his precious gold pectoral cross. Those present were certain that he was wearing it when he arrived and during the ceremony when he stood under the green bower shading him from the hot sun. When it came time to leave, the cross was nowhere to be found. Neither did any subsequent search through the coarse grass and bushes produce any result.

On the following day His Grace sailed for Sydney on the *Yarra Yarra* without his cross. Even though a reward of £5 was offered for its return, it was never claimed. The cross came to be regarded as irretrievably lost.

About three months later there occurred a remarkable series of events. Captain John Murphy of the Brisbane-Ipswich paddle steamer *Breadalbane* died on Moreton Island during sick leave. His body was brought to Brisbane for the funeral to leave from St John's Church of England on the morning of Wednesday, 26 March, 1859. So that its crew members could attend the funeral of its popular skipper, the steamer's trip was cancelled that day.

The cook, one Steadman Hobart, was working about the vessel in the morning prior to departing for the church. He was on a plank stretching across from the sponson to the river bank when he was distracted by a passing vessel, overbalanced and fell into the river. His body was not recovered for a few days. Then, in going through his box of possessions aboard the steamer, the missing cross was discovered.

The only reference to the whole affair in the *Moreton Bay Courier* is this one sentence: 'The cross which was lost by Archbishop Polding in this district was found in the deceased's box in the search made of his effects after death.' It can only be assumed that Dean Rigney was given the responsibility of forwarding the precious object to its rightful owner.

People reviewing the recent events found that this Steadman Hobart had arrived from England on the immigrant ship *Alfred*. He landed here in Brisbane on the same day that the *Boomerang* had landed Dr Polding from Sydney – 18 September, 1858. Although he was not a Catholic, some claimed that he was at the ceremony at Paddington, must have seen the cross drop into the grass and quickly retrieved it. It was then assumed that he was holding on to it until a larger reward was offered.

As they say: 'fact is stranger than fiction'.