

WILLIAM A. DUNCAN: CATHOLIC PATRIOT AND CHAMPION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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William Augustine Duncan took up the position of Moreton Bay's first Sub-collector of Customs in early 1846. When he left the district to head the Customs Department in Sydney in April 1859, following a distinguished record in the northern outpost, he was given a cool farewell from the *The Moreton Bay Courier*.¹

Having acknowledged Duncan's unblemished character and his successful leadership of the Brisbane School of Arts, Brisbane's premier journal expressed no regrets over its former editorials and articles that aimed to teach him his place as a senior public servant. Basically, Duncan was a meddler, one who was portrayed as either overtly or covertly prominent in several political and economic movements that were outside his jurisdiction.

Neither was any reference made to other criticisms previously aired in '*The Courier*' regarding some of his iconoclastic decisions based on his arrogantly flaunted superior intelligence, his obvious Sydney-based ambitions and his volatile personality. Nor was reference made to occasions when that liberal, humanistic paper applauded his courage in taking on virtually the whole northern community to ensure a greater measure of personal safety for the urban-based Aborigines.

Similarly, his indefatigable labours for Catholic worship, liturgy, building and schooling, not to mention his foremost role in establishing Brisbane's first musical society and laying the groundwork for the National education system, received no mention.

Having previous leadership experience in Sydney with several of the crucial socio-political issues which arose in Brisbane at the beginning and end of his term of office, he naturally felt he had the credentials to assist Brisbanites. Yet, his behind-the-scenes involvement in opposing the reintroduction of transportation (thus putting a brake on plans for a squatting oligarchy) and his chairmanship of the public meeting, which paved the way for Brisbane's municipality, were accorded scant positive recognition.

Further, his key role as local adviser to Matthew Henry Marsh - whose efforts in London were crucial to the achievement of separation from New South Wales - was reported in merely one low-key sentence when that important goal was achieved.²

Considering that *The Moreton Bay Courier* was the northern mouthpiece of his implacable opponent - the Rev John Dunmore Lang - Duncan was, on the whole, accorded surprisingly fair treatment by its proprietor and editor, James Swan. While he lacked the literary finesse and acerbic vitriol of Duncan and Lang, Swan competently delivered written bouquets and brickbats as deserved. As a Scottish Baptist who also despised religious bigotry, Swan demonstrated that he was more than capable of taking on that rabidly anti-Catholic and anti-Irish Presbyterian cleric when the occasion demanded it.

Early in 1849, following the arrival of the first of Lang's immigrants' ships, Swan accorded short shrift to the plan outlined in *Cooksland* and a subsequent letter to *The Courier* to convert Moreton Bay into a protestant colony.³ He summarily dismissed Lang's extreme, religiously chauvinistic measure for reforming and developing the debauched, violent frontier society which confronted the *Fortitude* immigrants on disembarkation in January 1849.

Instead of subjecting the district to an undiluted dose of Calvinism, Swan set down the welcome mat for a healthy

mixture of Christian sects, and even respectable non-believers, who would be committed to the common objective of labouring unselfishly for the moral and economic progress of Moreton Bay. After all, Duncan, Lang and Swan agreed on one point; they believed the future of the district lay in the endeavours of agriculturalists at the expense of squatter dominance. Their only difference lay in the specification of the religious adherence of the much-needed respectable farmers.

Duncan reportedly endured a 'Kilkenny cat relationship' with arch Lang disciple, Robert Cribb, in the School of Arts and in the wider community. Nevertheless it was a result of a loose alliance of those crusaders, together with the efforts of the Langites, Chartists, liberals, conservatives and working-class radicals, that the goal of societal transformation was achieved. Ultimately this action loosened the grip of the squatters upon the district and laid the groundwork for post-separation self-government and freeing-up the land for the much-vaunted agriculturalists. Through the influence of reinvigorated churches and schools, in addition to newly established temperance associations, libraries and building societies, respectability, industry, thrift and moderation were enshrined as social norms. The lay leadership of the likes of Duncan, Cribb and Swan ensured that Brisbane took its place within a decade of the *Fortitude's* arrival as a township which Queensland's first governor, Sir George Ferguson Bowen decreed as being one of the most moral and respectable towns in the British Empire.⁴

Yet Duncan, with a stubborn, intransigent, intellectually and culturally elitist persona, remained an unpopular enigma within the Brisbane community. It was difficult to understand many of his decisions and actions, let alone appreciate the convoluted process through which they were made.

Agree with him or not, Brisbane was forced to accept that Duncan, with full support of the colonial government, was unassailable and often marched to the beat of a different drum for

society's well-being. He appeared to be a paradox personified, many of his decisions certainly lacking predictability and appearing to be devoid of coherence. To those familiar with his colonial background, it was difficult to reconcile his role as champion of Sydney's working class with his distrust of democracy based on popular franchise.

Moreover, his motion to increase the annual subscription to the School of Arts to such a level as to place membership beyond the reach of the very workers for whom this institution was designed was also incongruous for a recipient of a medal from Sydney's artisans.⁵ The 'Lang mob', as Duncan derisively dubbed the faction led by Cribb, ensured that this motion was fiercely contested and defeated. Duncan's reaction to such an unaccustomed setback was to resign in a pique – a temporary measure as the membership of that popular adult education facility appreciated his erudition and leadership.

As a leading Catholic intellectual and strategist, he was particularly active in planning the campaign which upgraded Sydney's status to an archbishopric; a fact that he hoped would earn him unflagging loyalty of the beneficiary, Rt. Rev. John Bede Polding. Those who were ignorant of Polding's inaction when Duncan was dismissed from his position as editor of *The Australasian Chronicle*, the literary vehicle in which he championed colonial Catholicism, must have wondered why he irrevocably snubbed that prelate and subsequently sniped at his administration under various *noms de plume* in the *Freeman's Journal*. He proved to be as unforgiving and dismissive toward what he perceived to be a fickle colonial church hierarchy as he was with his lay opponents within the district.

Duncan was a formidable foe to those who attacked the colonial Catholics and especially the Irish section of that faith. He decimated Lang in print when he attacked the extent and nature of Irish immigration.

This prompted an elated Polding to encourage Duncan to lay in upon 'the impertinent troublesome puppy' thickly and strongly.

Yet the Irish did not gain Duncan's unconditional loyalty and regard. He criticized those émigrés from the Emerald Isle for their divisive influence on Catholicism and the colony. He was particularly severe on the group of wealthy Irish emancipists who formed, in his opinion, the illiterate and unprincipled management committee of *The Australasian Chronicle*. Duncan stated he was careful not to mix socially with them and 'constantly refused their invitations' - a practice he continued with some other outcasts whom he defended 'tooth and nail'.

The fact that Polding overrode Ullathorne's advice to place the newspaper under the control of more respectable businessmen caused the initial wedge between Duncan and his prelate.⁶ Passionate about human rights and social justice, Duncan appeared to operate merely at the intellectual and aggrieved levels when championing the oppressed. It seemed as if mere target identification, cerebral distance and confrontational drive displaced empathy and continued intimate association.

Also, as one of the most persuasive advocates for the secular National system of education, Duncan delivered in 1851 at the School of Arts, a widely-acclaimed landmark lecture on the subject which severely criticized church-run schools. Thus his role as Brisbane's Catholic Church representative on the local Church and School Corporation Committee appeared to be incompatible with his principles.

Forever ready to rationalise his unique position, he named many Catholic bishops in Britain and Ireland who had no problems reconciling their positions in the church with their advocacy for the Irish education system.⁷

Just as difficult to understand was his apparently unsympathetic advisory role to the Rev. James Hanly in rejecting the pleas of

the Passionist missionaries at Stradbroke who were suffering constant harassment from hostile, local Aborigines. Invoking Duncan's name as their protector and friend, the indigenes warned the besieged foreign clerics and their followers against any thoughts of retaliation. It is probable that Polding's decision to withdraw support for the mission was probably critical to Catholic Brisbane's seemingly heartless inaction towards their desperate brethren.⁸

Duncan shared with Lang the conviction that the future of Australia lay with small farmers and the civilizing influences of schools, churches, women and children which invariably flowed from their presence. Both agreed that the sooner the squatters' stranglehold on the land was broken, the better. Hence Duncan's virtual lone support for Sir George Gipps' Land Act of 1844 in his newspaper, *The Weekly Register*, resulted in his financial ruin at the hands of his pastoral enemies (as well as the compensatory reward of a vice-regal and Westminster sanctioned appointment to his Brisbane post).

Hence, Duncan's anti-Brisbane support for the northern squatters' option of Cleveland Point as the district's port was totally unexpected. In spite of the expert opinion of marine surveyor Captain Owen Stanley, pro-Brisbane protests, local wisdom and ultimate departmental reversal of his decision, he stubbornly adhered to his choice.⁹

Brisbanites would never forgive him for advising the government that the town 'could never be aught but a village' and that South Brisbane, also a contender for port status and customs location, was merely a swamp and the sooner it returned to that state the better.

Similarly, the eventual location of the Customs House at Petrie's Bight - nearly a mile from the existing wharves and established business activity around the Commissariat Store-South Brisbane ferry corridor - was met with incredulity and useless protest.

Neither did the proximity of this building to his newly-purchased property on what was later to be known as Duncan's Hill escape the notice of his detractors. Swan fulminated against Duncan's high-handedness in reaching the above decisions. He deplored Duncan's audacity and arrogance which was based on incontrovertible private opinion, overriding the sound judgement of local interests based on long experience. While recognizing the right of officials to make recommendations related to their departments, Swan questioned verdicts based on 'the superior right of government officials to sit in judgement upon matters affecting the public, on some fancied superiority in intelligence and treating local wisdom with contempt'.¹⁰

Brisbanites learned early in the piece that Duncan was immune to the pressure of local opinion, representations by pressure groups, reminders of established practices and confrontation with expert knowledge, when he decided for the private or public good. He cared not a fig for popularity, being completely unfazed as the oft-called threat of ostracism reared its ugly head.

Robert Lowe's criticism in the Legislative Council of the appointment of a mere bookseller to such a specialist position as a sinecure for services rendered, appeared to have substance in the sub-collector's early period of service.

However Lowe, the brilliant legislator in both New South Wales and Britain, was not the first to underrate this courageous intellectual.¹¹ He also neglected to recognise that Duncan's brilliant classical education, rather than despised specialist qualifications, would allow him to enter the British Civil Service with the highest expectations.

Moreover, his illustrious backers who included Sir George Gipps, Sir Edward Deas Thomson, Henry Plunkett and W.E. Gladstone, would have exerted the necessary clout to clinch this enviable appointment.

In that era of the British Civil Service, it was boldly reckoned that a man with a first in classics was quite capable of ‘boning up’ on specialized knowledge in a mere week or two; it was a liberal education which counted most. Improbable as this assertion may seem, Duncan found that this principle certainly applied to Moreton Bay’s Customs Department as he quickly came to grips with its specialized regulations and procedures.

In common with Lang, Duncan believed he had God on his side. After more than a decade of experiencing Duncan’s actions and behaviour, including his fury at obstruction, the very mortal *Moreton Bay Courier* provided its ultimate judgement. It stated that Duncan, whose future was obviously not tied to Brisbane, was unacceptable in any representative role – inappropriately grouped with squatters against whom he had valiantly fought for a just society.¹² Unappreciated in the wider northern community, Duncan’s talents and services were eventually destined to be fully valued and appropriately rewarded in Sydney.

The extent to which Duncan’s adolescent conversion from Presbyterianism to Catholicism contributed to the mean-spirited approach towards him by a Protestant-Chartist dominated community is not clear. Lang was probably more vengeful towards Duncan for the literary pasting he received following his fierce and insulting attack on Irish immigration than for a far-off conversion which did not directly affect him. Duncan certainly demonstrated his harassment however, complaining bitterly in his diary about the obstructive ‘Lang mob’.

Yet he never received the harsh treatment meted out to Rev. John Gregor, another Presbyterian turncoat and Brisbane’s first Church of England priest of the post-convict era, who was personally brought to Australia by Lang. Duncan was too well entrenched and protected as a government officer and too well regarded by the local Catholic establishment to succumb to such bullying.

Gregor - unmercifully abused in *Cooksland* by Lang, unrelentingly harassed by Lang's Brisbane supporters and unmercifully rejected by his congregation - was arguably pursued to an early grave; as much for his unpardonable religious defection as for his ineffectiveness as a Church of England priest.¹³

Undoubtedly, Lang's champions, such as Cribb, did their utmost to needle Duncan when the opportunities arose; particularly in the School of Arts and important public meetings. When he was frequently outvoted in that educational institution by the Langite radical majority, he was sometimes provoked to demonstrate the 'rash and totally unwarranted' reactions for which he was infamous.¹⁴ Yet the formidable, indomitable Scottish official ultimately retrieved such situations by his fearless style which combined superior erudition, single-mindedness and just ruthlessness.

Unlike the unfortunate and isolated Gregor whose survival depended finally on a hostile community, Duncan's security was unassailable. His refuge was found in his supportive wife, a well-stocked library of history and theology in four European languages, an impressive daily reading diet and his music room. Regardless of his seemingly endless troubles, he never ceased to enrich the liturgy of his beloved Catholic church through his intellectual, cultural and spiritual gifts.

Enjoying the full backing of the colonial government, he was free to oppose adverse public opinion to further his quest to attack those entrenched social structures and initiatives which obstructed his ideal for a plural society based on civil and religious liberty.

Also, Duncan was no wilting flower under attack; often initiating the offensive when the situation demanded it. He was pugnacious and actively sought revenge and retaliation.

The prominent, such as Rev. J.D. Lang, Archbishop Broughton, Archbishop Polding and Police Magistrate J.C. Wickham felt the sting of his fluent, incisive rhetoric delivered via the press and platform.¹⁵

Yet it was indeed ironical for a person who excelled at tearing apart the work of others, to reveal anxiety in his diary when awaiting press reaction to his brilliant and officially well-received paper delivered at the Brisbane School of Arts on the NSW Constitution Act. He recorded with some pathetic irony, that no-one likes to be abused or have their work criticized. Hoping to avoid a dose of poetic justice, Duncan's acute anxiety while awaiting the eventually favourable reviews was quite palpable.¹⁶

Ultimately it was the result of a temporary, uneasy alliance of the radical Langites, the Duncan liberals and an incipient working-class which transformed Brisbane's unsavoury reputation as a rough and ready frontier town, socially and morally stagnating under the indifference which was part and parcel of pastoral control.

When Sir George Ferguson Bowen arrived in 1859 as the first Governor of Queensland, he discovered Brisbane to be not only a prosperous, God-fearing urban centre which was less dependent on squatter influence, but also a bustling business hub founded on middle-class respectability, religious freedom, social justice and political liberalism.¹⁷

Duncan's life script as acted out in pre-separation Brisbane would have been quite predictable to those who had known him in Scotland. Bravely marching to the beat of a different drum within communities which offended his sense of social justice, he inevitably and necessarily trampled over local wisdom and sensibilities in making personal decisions.

More often than not, these outcomes affected the equilibrium and habitual functioning of those societies to the detriment of his popularity. His cool indifference to resulting demands for societal ostracism was part and parcel of his *modus operandi* as he dealt with life's traumatic watersheds which his just skirmishes often brought upon him.

Growing over-confident and reckless by the success of his powerful pen and formidable intellect, he was quite capable of turning on groups and individuals whom he had previously championed such as the Church of Scotland and Archbishop Polding. Unyielding and single-minded, he pitilessly exposed issues and practices at odds with his intransigent convictions and alienated those who demonstrated disloyalty to him and thwarted his idealistic plans.

Despite Duncan catalytic influence on each society he encountered before ascending to one of the most powerful positions in Brisbane in 1846, his brilliant and successful tactics ensured that he made as many life-long antagonists as well as staunch supporters .

While Duncan was a favourite of the mid-century colonial government, a champion of the workers and crusader for Aboriginal rights, he ultimately fell foul of the Anglican establishment, the Protestant community and several among the Catholic hierarchy, not to mention the powerful squatters.

Whereas the Church of England adherents never forgot Duncan's challenge to Archbishop Broughton's claim to official precedence over Polding and his audacious challenge to the legitimacy of Anglican holy orders, the Protestants' long-standing doctrinal and personal antipathy to Catholics was exacerbated by the verbal mauling he meted out to the irrepressible Lang.

Duncan never forgave Polding for lack of loyalty, having made no apparent effort to reverse the coup which led to his removal from editorship of the Catholic mouthpiece, *The Australasian Chronicle*. Overconfident from the successes gained as Sydney's leading Catholic strategist, Duncan was outraged that the Rev John McEncroe replaced him. He could not accept that this coup was as much an official adverse reaction to a journal which promoted Duncanism at the expense of colonial Catholicism, as the subterfuge of W.C. Wentworth and the Irish management committee.¹⁸ Despite several attempts by Polding to bury the hatchet, Duncan turned his back on him, relegating him to the status of *persona non grata* until the end of his life.

Duncan apparently formed a habit of 'getting too big for his boots' and turning upon leading personalities within the religious denominations he supported. Believing that he was touched by the divine, and comfortable with his radical behaviour, this feisty iconoclast was more than capable of living with mere human opposition.

However his most extreme and heart-wrenching decision, based on his unique reasoning process, must certainly have been that which alienated him from his mother, family and the community of his birth. His defection from the Kirk to the Papacy in his sixteenth year was his first major watershed. The behaviours and attitudes that caused this upheaval and those coping mechanisms which helped him survive were to become the basis of his unique life script - replicated in many adverse situations thereafter.

Duncan was born at Bluefield in the parish of Towie, Aberdeenshire, on 12 March 1811 to Peter Duncan, one of Scotland's rare freehold farmers, and Mary Macdougall of Western Highland extraction.¹⁹ For the first fifteen years of his life, Duncan was raised as a staunch member of the Church of Scotland within this resolute pro-Presbyterian, anti-Catholic Lowland district.

Within that rural environment, Duncan's well-read father was regarded among his rustic peers as a literary and political oracle, and was popular among the gentry which included local laird Sir Charles Forbes.

In addition to his acknowledged intellectual heritage, shared by the likes of Professor William Duncan and other kin, who were members of Aberdeen's literati, Peter Duncan was a proficient sportsman and desirable companion. Thus consummate skill in the field and widely admired social skills ensured that he was frequently sought out as company by 'men of the highest social rank'.²⁰ Living beyond his means, Duncan enjoyed a social life which subsequently made excessive demands upon his financial resources.

While William Duncan's predilection towards learning and argument were obviously derived from his father, the combative dimension of his temperament was inherited from his mother. He related with pride that his mother was descended from a belligerent Highland line 'which was engaged in every revolution from the days of Bruce to those of Charles Edward'.²¹

This formidable combination of aggressive personality traits and sharp intellect was fearlessly brought to bear upon a succession of oft-hostile societies as he acted out his life script, characterized by courageous, idiosyncratic decision-making and valiant defense of groups whose human rights had been violated.

Having been raised as a fervent Presbyterian during the formative years of his life, Duncan would have absorbed not only the need to keep the Sabbath purely for worship, bible reading and reflection, but also to minutely regulate his everyday conduct according to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Widely recognised as a child genius and subsequently selected to direct his schooling towards ministry within the Church of Scotland by ecclesiastical and lay authorities, he was considered to be indeed blessed.²²

Duncan must have been regarded as possibly one of the unknown, pre-determined minority to be saved on the day of Judgement - if his character remained devout and pure and he fearlessly used his God-given gifts towards the unselfish betterment of humankind. With every indication that he was divinely inspired, Duncan was in an enviable position to fear the Lord, put his trust in providence and be unafraid of mere mortals in formulating and executing his well-intentioned decisions. Undoubtedly he was sustained by the belief in the promise that God would help his believers cope with any suffering which might arise from just, divinely-inspired actions and beliefs.

Not dissimilar to his subsequent actions in other societies he entered, Duncan tackled head-on, those forces which disrupted peaceful relations and exerted oppression within the first community in which he was immersed – the local school. To avoid being labeled a coward, he sought out and did battle with the school champion whom he ‘thrashed to his heart’s content’.²³

Having successfully navigated this rite of passage and neutralized a potential source of bullying, he stated he was free of molestation throughout the remainder of his school career.

When affronted in various social situations, and sensing that such humiliation could lead to marginalisation, he was also quick to restore his honour to maintain his place within the group. The youthful school monitor who heard the first lesson of this feisty four year-old for the busy schoolmaster, found this out to his detriment. In retaliation for the monitor’s scornful report to the teacher of his immature effort, a wounded and infuriated Duncan gloated that before twelve months had transpired he was more than a match for the boy whom he thereafter regarded as a mere ‘spelling assistant’.²⁴

Although Duncan subsequently met with many rebuffs, most of which disappeared within his sub-consciousness, that childish indignity remained vividly with him and undoubtedly fired his

adult practice of exacting stinging revenge, mainly through his pen, for implied or explicit insults to his ego. No doubt this sense of affront and need for justice extended to other individuals and groups whom Duncan considered to be societal underdogs.

Duncan's educational progress was outstanding:

At six years of age I was a good English scholar. At eight I had got by heart the whole of Ruddiman's Latin grammar, was reading the Dialogues of Corderius and Cornelius, Nepos, De Vita Imperatorum [and at the age of ten] I was pursuing my mathematical studies with élat.²⁵

As a ten year old, Duncan experienced the first of several life-altering crises he would encounter during his mortal existence. His life turned upside down in 1821 when his father died in debt; having valiantly and unsuccessfully attempted to keep up with the spending power of his wealthy neighbours.

Peter Duncan's death left the family in dire straits, causing William to temporarily interrupt, but not abandon, his studies. After releasing the domestic and rural servants, Mrs Duncan modelled the grit and determination which her fourth child internalized and thereafter lauded in his brief autobiography. By dint of hard work and sacrifice, Duncan's mother paid off her husband's debts, the children doing their part by undertaking agricultural labour.

While William was employed variously as teacher in the district and worked as ploughman and farm servant on the family farm, Sir Charles Forbes recognized his undoubted ability and leadership potential by appointing him as overseer of planters on his estate.²⁶

He was to feel that double blow of death of a loved-one and crippling debt, followed by maternal-inspired recovery, again in Sydney during late 1845.

This setback was occasioned by the death of his only son and the squatter-directed ruin of his newspaper *Duncan's Weekly Register*.²⁷

Also enjoying in Sydney the patronage of a highly-placed person similar to Forbes in Scotland, Duncan set about re-establishing himself psychologically, professionally and financially in the north. Following his mother's example, he worked off his debt, basking in the sinecure of a government officer (second in seniority to the Government Resident). Within a decade he became a reputable landowner with considerable financial means.

Although his aim to take out a degree at 'Auld Aberdeen' (university) was thwarted by his mother's straitened situation, Duncan was scarcely crest-fallen. With typical self-sufficiency and confidence, he immodestly believed his self-appointed reading to be superior to the courses offered by that tertiary institution which had fallen into low repute at that time.²⁸

This regimen led him to the second major watershed in his life, a period of rebellion which was to change the course for which his life had been so assiduously charted. His reaction to this upheaval occasioned the severest of society's retributions – familial and community ostracism.

While suffering from a long incapacitating illness, accompanied by mental depression, Duncan read voraciously from his late father's extensive library and the apparently well-stocked shelves of his neighbours.

On applying his inherently logical mind to 'religious controversy', he became affronted by 'the rancour with which our protestant Divines attacked the Doctrines and practices of the Roman Church'. After reading the Catholic doctrines expounded by several authors such as Gother and Turberville, he concluded that the Divines had deliberately contrived to misrepresent the

Church of Rome before fabricating their attacking arguments based on that loaded premise.²⁹

Affronted by such intellectual dishonesty and following further reading of the writings on the Fathers and analyzing the history of the reformation, he experienced a type of Pentecostal episode which led to his conversion to Catholicism. Duncan revealed: 'I was led at once by sincere conviction and by an invisible impulse, which I experienced to be ... Divine grace to pronounce myself a Catholic'.

With the nearest chapel twelve miles distant, across virtually inaccessible mountains, and there being no person of the Catholic faith within miles of the family farm to provide guidance, Duncan was solely responsible for his own decision to renounce Presbyterianism and embrace Rome.³⁰

Duncan's ultimate religious transformation was achieved in the midst of personal adversity. When he was at the point of making open profession of his new faith, Duncan was severely struck down with scarlet fever, an illness which brought him to the point of death. During this time, he once more experienced a mystical episode. It was during ten days of convalescence that the thankful and devoutly rejuvenated lad contrived to visit a distant relative who lived close by the nearest Catholic chapel at Glengairn.

Without his family's knowledge, he was able to hear several Masses and became known to his future mentor, the Rev. Lachlan Macintosh. After receiving instruction from Fr McIntosh, Duncan was received into the Catholic Church in August 1826. Intimating that he wished to enter the priesthood, Duncan experienced no trouble in gaining McIntosh's support. Sadly, his plans were thwarted at the diocesan level. Having been utterly dissatisfied with an aspirant whom Macintosh had formerly recommended, Bishop Cameron demonstrated his lack of faith in McIntosh's judgement.

Each of several petitions made by McIntosh on Duncan's behalf was summarily rejected.³¹

Predictably a tumultuous storm arose in the Duncan household when the proud family's aspirant for ministry in the Kirk defected to Rome. Duncan recounted that persuasion eventually changed to threats when he resisted entreaties to return to the Kirk. With his mother's curses still ringing in his ears, Duncan shook the dust from his feet and departed from his family home which was 'full of rancour and religious hate'.³²

He had felt the full force of ostracism from his family and his community and found subsequent rejection in the colonies for his beliefs insignificant and tolerable, compared to that heart-breaking denunciation by family and friends.

In a manner similar to that set forth in St Matthew 10 for the disciples, Duncan set forth to Aberdeen in 1827, without a penny in his pocket and with no vocational prospects, to be a follower of Christ's true church.

'Being unable to work and too ashamed to beg' and encouraged by the conviction that God would provide, he sadly set forth to forge a new life. After several days journey on foot, without food and sleeping in the open fields by night, Duncan arrived at the Granite City to seek employment.

One of his few possessions was a testimonial from Fr Macintosh to the Rev Charles Gordon, written four months before his departure. Duncan was introduced as 'a young man of respectable character and good behaviour, and warmly attached to the Holy Catholic Faith which he has embraced, and persevered in, in spite of the cruel opposition of his worldly friends'.³³

More character-forming rejection was to follow, this time within the religion he adopted. Duncan subsequently endured a very

uneasy relationship with Fr Gordon who frustrated his desire to enter a Catholic college. Originally persuading Duncan to opt for the new institution at Blairs, Kincardineshire instead of Ratisbon in Europe, Gordon kept Duncan waiting for two years. He further frustrated Duncan by avoiding the topic thereafter. It was only when Duncan committed a youthful indiscretion of missing Mass in favour of festivities one New Year that Gordon brought up the subject again, proclaiming he would withdraw his support for admission.

On another occasion, Gordon attempted to block Duncan's desire to be confirmed, so necessary before he could even contemplate admission to holy orders. Having reacted furiously towards Duncan, who openly criticised one of his 'eccentric sermons', Gordon could not be pacified by either excuses or abject apologies made in private. Even the act of prostration, which Macintosh recommended, did not appease Gordon who demanded a public apology. Assuring Gordon that while he was sorry to give offence, there was nothing to be retracted, Duncan refused this added humiliation.

Although he declined to recommend Duncan 'as a proper subject for ecclesiastical state', Gordon eventually relented on the subject of confirmation. This occurred only when Duncan threatened to involve the wary Bishop Kyle who already possessed unfavourable information relating to that testy and apparently vindictive Aberdeen priest.³⁴

According to P.S. Cleary who wrote a lengthy character sketch on 'The great Catholic patriot' in the *Catholic Press* on 10 December 1908, Duncan eventually entered the famous Scots Benedictine College at Ratisbon on the Danube.

During the years which he spent with the studious Benedictines, he steeped himself in the literature of the early fathers which served him so effectually in his controversies over misunderstood Catholicism in the newly emancipated but still

ignorant British Empire. He also studied French, German, Italian and Spanish and in these languages he found congenial spirits in the writers who were then developing the great Catholic revival, De Maistre, Bonald, Stolberg, Mohler and Brenlaus.³⁵

In his biographical sketch on Duncan in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Michael Roe recorded that Duncan also studied at Blairs, only to withdraw after quarreling with his teachers.³⁶ Having antagonized influential characters in the Scottish Benedictine community, even Duncan recognized that entry into the priesthood was a virtually unattainable goal. He made one last attempt, once again with the assistance of Fr Macintosh. After delivering Macintosh's letter of recommendation to an uninterested Bishop Kyle in Banffshire, enduring a two hundred miles return journey on foot, Duncan eventually saw the writing on the wall. He viewed a further twelve months of Episcopal indecision and silence on the matter as tantamount to refusal.

As Duncan noted, 'in a fit of disgust at what [he] conceived to be unworthy treatment', he redirected his efforts from the priesthood to business as a bookseller and publisher in Aberdeen. Irrevocably abandoning his priestly ambitions, he commenced a long married life with Mary Yates in 1831.³⁷

While he admitted to publishing some 'ephemeral trash' in Aberdeen, Duncan was especially proud of his production of excellent works such as *Life of Bishop Hay*, *The Protestants' Trial*, Carruther's *Life of Queen Mary* and the *Catholic Magazine and Review*. In addition, Bishop Kyle gave his permission to publish the *Dornay Cathecism*. Antagonistic towards Duncan and his products to the end, the Aberdonian Catholic clerics ignored that important publication; further opening the wound originating from the Gordon-Duncan variance.³⁸

Realising that he had embarked upon an unprofitable business, Duncan then took up journalism and teaching. Concurrently, he

continued with his learning, travelled extensively, read widely, immersed himself further in foreign languages and became intensely involved in current liberal political, religious and educational movements. He was particularly prominent in supporting the Reform Act of 1832 and advocating the non-denominational system of education introduced to Ireland by Hon. E.G. Stanley one year earlier. During his visit to Ireland some time before 1838, he probably became qualified as a teacher in that instructional system which he would also vigorously promote in New South Wales.³⁹

Ultimately it was his political radicalism and passion for human rights which brought him to Australia. While he was employed as a journalist in London in 1838, he was exposed to the Rev Dr William Ullathorne's recruitment campaign for the Catholic Mission in New South Wales. Duncan was not only impressed with the Vicar-General's exposition, but was also attracted by societal reconstruction being undertaken by the colony's liberal governor Sir Richard Bourke.

In particular, Bourke's proposals to remove the privileges of the Church of England, accord equal treatment to all religious bodies and establish government schools according to the Irish National model, strongly appealed to Duncan's liberal sentiments, anti-establishment stance and fervor for human rights.⁴⁰

Hence, along with priests, schoolmasters and five pioneer Sisters of Charity recruited by Ullathorne, this 'shrewd, clever Scotch convert from Presbyterianism' and his family arrived in Sydney in 1838 to support Bourke's far-sighted ideals.

Being familiar with Duncan's educational philosophy, it was not unexpected that he quickly gave up in disgust his first appointment as a teacher at Maitland's Catholic Denominational school, finding 'it was impossible to do anything like justice to it'.⁴¹

Although he subsequently championed the Catholic church in the colony, led the Customs Department, crusaded for the civil rights of minority groups, pioneered an effective and efficient educational system in addition to founding the municipalities of Sydney and Brisbane; fellow adherents to these causes could never rely on Duncan's general uncritical compliance towards their leaders and policies.

No respecter of persons, whether they were archbishops, governors, legislative councilors, high ranking government officials or leaders of powerful pressure groups, Duncan followed his conscience and possessed unshakable faith in his distinctive reasoning process. In spite of the fact he believed, in common with other liberals of those times, that government should be controlled by the best educated and those who had accumulated wealth and property, he laboured to prevent persecution of minority groups, promoted religious toleration and created a more intelligent, moral and just society.

As P.S. Cleary has recorded, Duncan, invariably 'the cause of political crisis' and a frequent centre of bitter controversy in New South Wales, which often led to his unpopularity, was the most persistent and ablest defender of the Catholic minority during Australia's Protestant ascendancy period.

While he occasionally mounted the platform to argue his case, Duncan generally eschewed the glare of personal public show. Instead he mostly worked in silence, wielding a powerfully persuasive pen to achieve his ends. He championed colonial Catholicism, '... not in the House like Plunkett, nor in the pulpit like Archdeacon McEncroe, but in his study; in the shady half anonymity of his newspaper, he waited for the aggressors and overpowered them by the weight of his ready erudition and his masterly relentless logic'.⁴²

This was truly a formidable arsenal, forged in Scotland, by a youthful societal and religious outcast who ruthlessly sought to follow the original way, truth and light.

Although Duncan carried out his best work in Sydney, adhering more or less to the discernible life script laid down in his formative years, his less-publicised efforts at Moreton Bay produced several significant improvements and long-lasting innovations. Despite his lack of charisma, high-handed decisions and rigid personality, the courageous meddler significantly contributed to the formation of a better Brisbane than the one which confronted him when he arrived in 1846 – deceptively appearing to be a ruined and broken man to those who were unfamiliar with his faith, firmness and fortitude.

Whether the majority approved of his methods or not, he was effective in achieving change for the better. St Stephen's church and cathedral, the Customs Department, the State Education system, Catholic Education, the Queensland University of Technology, the State Library of Queensland, together with the choral and musical sectors of Brisbane's vibrant cultural scene, are just some of the major developments which grew from the seeds he sowed in mid-nineteenth century Brisbane.

They are current memorials - within a modern vibrant city - to his religiously-driven courage and the foresighted service he rendered over 150 years to an unappreciative, parochial frontier community.

ENDNOTES:

1. *Moreton Bay Courier* [MBC], 16 April 1859, p. 2.
2. *MBC*, 20 October 1858, p.2.
3. *MBC*, 13 January 1849, p. 3.
4. S. Lane-Poole, *Thirty years of colonial government*, London: 889, p. 128.
5. *MBC*, 29 January 1852, p. 3.

6. W.A. Duncan, *Autobiography* 1811-1854, A2877, CY reel 162, Mitchell Library, pp. 29-32.
7. W.A. Duncan, *Lecture on national education*, Brisbane: James Swan, 1851, p. 14.
8. See Denis Martin, *The foundation of the Catholic Church in Queensland*, Brisbane: Church Archivists' Press, 1968, pp. 41-51.
9. Captain Owen Stanley to Colonial Secretary, 11 April 1848, *NSWVP*, 1848, p. 1.
10. *MBC*, 3 March 1849, p. 3.
11. *SMH*, 16 May 1848, p. 2.
12. *MBC*, 12 April 1859, p. 2.
13. See John Mackenzie-Smith, 'Rev. John Gregor: Like a lamb to the slaughter', *RHSQJ*, August 1992, pp. 517-528.
14. *MBC*, 13 October 1849, p. 2.
15. For example, *Duncan, Autobiography*, pp. 29-32.
16. William Augustine Duncan Diary 1856, CY reel 164, Mitchell Library, 20 May 1856.
17. S. Lane-Poole, *Thirty years of colonial government*, London: 1889, p. 128.
18. *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 1, p.336.
19. *ADB*, p. 335.
20. Duncan, *Autobiography*, pp. 3-5.
21. *Ibid.* p. 4.
22. *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.
23. *Ibid.* pp. 8-9.
24. *Ibid.* p. 10.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.* pp. 11-12.
27. *ADB*, p. 336.
28. *Autobiography*, p. 12.
29. *Ibid.* p. 13.
30. *Ibid.* pp. 13-14.
31. *Ibid.* pp. 16-19.
32. *Ibid.* p. 15.

33. P.S. Cleary, 'Mr Augustine Duncan: The great catholic patriot of the early days', *The Catholic Press*, 10 December 1908, p. 4.
34. Autobiography, pp. 20-21.
35. Cleary, 'Mr Augustine Duncan', p. 4.
36. *ADB*, vol. 1, p. 336.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Autobiography, pp. 27-28.
39. *ADB*, vol.1, p.336
40. *Ibid.*
41. William A. Duncan, Evidence to the Select Committee on Education, 2 July 1844, NSWVP, p.25.
42. Cleary, p.4.