



*Fr Paul Tissot at the front door of St Mary's Church, c.1873.*

## **FROM MISSION TO PARISH MARYBOROUGH 1861-2011**

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*Fr Denis Martin*

For 100 years and more, Maryborough seemed to be the town that had everything—coal, gold, rich pastoral and agricultural lands, sugar, timber, and heavy industry building ships, mill machinery and locomotives, some for export. Archbishop Dunne liked to recall that the city bore the name of the mother of our Saviour.

It all began in 1847 as a little port settlement on the Wide Bay River, renamed the Mary in 1848. Wool came down from the Gayndah stations and supplies were taken up country by bullock teams. Soon considerable quantities of timber were being shipped to Sydney and elsewhere. The population numbered c.70 in the town but dozens more passed through to work on the stations. There were of course a few Catholics among them.

Brisbane's pioneer priest, James Hanly, first visited the settlement in July of 1849 when he baptised three children, a son and daughters of labourers and a sawyer.<sup>1</sup> Coming down from 'the Burnett' he called again in 1850 and 1851. It is recorded that a congregation of thirty souls was present for the first Mass in the town at Chief Constable McAdam's house in 1852.<sup>2</sup> From the baptismal records the date was August 19th. The most prominent Catholic, Mr James Cleary, had taken up his property in 1849.

As it was foreseen that the growing settlement on the river bank would soon become a town of some importance, Surveyor Labatt was sent to draw up plans for the layout of a new town site which was two miles to the eastward. In accordance with the requirements of the *Bourke Church Act of 1833*, two acres of land was set aside for a Roman Catholic church, school and parsonage.

Dean Hanly accepted a tender for the construction of a wooden church to seat 300, but early the following year in 1857 as the annals say, ‘the development of the town was set back for some months by a terrific hurricane (cyclone) and consequent flood’. The unsuitability of the land grant became apparent so James Cleary came forward and gave his three acres of new town land which is still the church site today. So here in Adelaide Street opposite the government land grant the church-school was completed by Dean Rigney in 1858.

At this point in time it is fitting to recall that until mid 1859 Maryborough was only a Mass station of the parish of Brisbane which itself was the most northerly in the Benedictine Archdiocese of Sydney. In the *Catholic Directories* of the late 1850s there is this note:

Stations are held during the year at the Squatters’ residences on the rivers Brisbane, Logan, Albert, Burnett etc. N.B.—As the Catholics at the sheep stations are so scattered and cannot leave their flocks, even for a day, the Catholic clergyman can very seldom celebrate Mass at any of the stations. Moreover the roads are so bad, creeks and rivers having to be crossed over, that it is almost impossible to take the vestments on horseback for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice. Maryborough and Gayndah, being about 300 miles from Brisbane, are occasionally visited by a clergyman. There may be about 30 Catholics at the former, and 20 at the latter. The most that a clergyman can do in travelling through this wild region is to baptise children and administer the Sacrament to those in danger of death, he being always in a hurry to return to Brisbane where the services of a priest are constantly required.

It was by passing through these wild regions that the great missionary Archbishop Polding of Sydney came to Maryborough in November of 1858. He rode on horseback in company with Dean Rigney from Brisbane to Nanango, Gayndah, Maryborough, and back to Brisbane via the Darling Downs.<sup>3</sup> They spent three days conducting a mini mission with Masses, instructions, baptisms, and a confirmation ceremony. He left this description of his visit:

At Maryborough on the Mary River, I found a most excellent man of the name of Cleary, a great friend too and protector of the aboriginals. He is a single man and has made his will in favour of the church, or rather made over to the church the property on which he resides, being a house such as you find in the bush and 28 acres of the richest land. He has retained only a life interest in it, but the Bishop, when he comes, will be its occupant until another residence may be raised. Here he has a large number of natives in employment. He gives them flour and tobacco, sometimes meat. This is on one side of the River Mary. On the other side is his run 16 miles x 7 with scrub containing opossum and other native animals. This he considers and I also, the best place for the establishment of a mission as it is divided from the town by the river and is not likely to be intruded upon. In the event of Dr. Salvado being removed to this side, as I trust will be the case, it would be well to include it within his jurisdiction as I think that Maryboro would form in many respects a better title to a See than Gladstone...<sup>4</sup>

In June 1859 the Colony of Queensland was proclaimed. In anticipation of this division, Dr James Quinn was appointed and consecrated for the See of Brisbane which at that time was the whole of the new colony. If Archbishop Polding had had his recommendation listened to in Rome, Brisbane would have remained a Benedictine diocese under Abbot Sweeney from Downside with Dr. Salvado (officially Bishop of Port Victoria) given jurisdiction over a missionary district which included Maryborough.<sup>5</sup>

In a letter of August 1859 to Dr. Salvado, the Archbishop says:

To the North a new Colony named Queensland has been formed, Brisbane its capital being made an Episcopal See. About 300 miles north of Brisbane numerous tribes of natives were visited by me last year. Ample means for the opening and establishing a noble mission to them have been prepared by a good Catholic of the name of Cleary whose brother is unfortunately a prisoner in Fremantle. It would be a great charity to visit him.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Bishop was consecrated in Dublin in June 1859 it made no difference in Brisbane or its Mass station, Maryborough, for almost two years. In May of 1861 Bishop Quinn arrived in Brisbane. In July he landed from the steamer *Clarence* in Maryborough to begin his first visitation of the diocese. He had with him Frs Renehan and Tissot. They arrived on July 25th and so it is from about this date that Maryborough as a parish is reckoned. The 150th commemoration was held last year.

The *Maryborough Chronicle* reported on the Bishop's Sunday Mass in the school-house adding that 'Rev. Tissot and Renehan are both to remain in the district, the Catholic body having undertaken to provide for their temporal necessities'.<sup>7</sup> The Bishop and Fr Renehan galloped off for Gayndah while Fr Paul Tissot, being unable to ride, was left to minister to the Catholics of the district.

Just as the text of the history of St Mary's was to be sent to the printer, the phone rang: a lady had found an old family marriage certificate and was enquiring what the + in front of the celebrant's name meant. When she read it out, it was dated July 27th 1861, the marriage was at the Catholic school house, Maryborough, Wide Bay, and Bishop Quinn was that celebrant. The bridegroom was George Bennett, a carrier, and among the first dozen pioneers of the town.

Owing to the lack of any records, Fr Tissot's first few years there were shrouded in mystery. Then, thanks to the efforts of Bishop Foley of Cairns, some records and letters from the A.A. house in Rome were released. Fr Tissot wrote how he and a lay assistant, Brother Francisco, stay with the farmer Mr Cleary who provides them with food and in return Brother Francisco acts as Mr Cleary's servant by looking after the garden, keeps an eye on the Aboriginal workers, brings home the cattle, keeps busy in the kitchen and chicken run, and sees to the storing of the necessary water and wool. In the evening they recite the rosary. The chapel is inadequate but the Blessed Sacrament is reserved and

thirty people attend 6.30.am weekday Mass.<sup>8</sup> So here is something of pioneer life in early Maryborough.

But that is not all. Recently Mick Sullivan, a member of this Society, handed into the Archives a pile of papers that had come via Brian Doyle and Archbishop Duhig. For years James Duhig had been compiling a history of the Church in Queensland, fragments of which we already had. However, in 1959 when he realized he was never going to complete it, notes and primary sources seemed to have been given to Brian Doyle for articles to be written for the *Catholic Leader* at the time of the Centenary of Queensland.

Included in that collection was a cutting, some reminiscences of J.J. Kelly who, as a small boy, arrived in Brisbane with his parents on one of Bishop Quinn's ships, the *Chatsworth* in 1862. He wrote:

After remaining in Brisbane for 3 weeks, my family removed to Maryborough at the invitation of a friend of my mother's. The Priest was Fr. Tissot of the A.A. order and a native of France. He was an aged gentleman, but very active and full of refinement. Fr. Tissot induced my parents to allow me to go and live with him which they readily did. He resided out of Maryborough proper with James Cleary, a squatter, who lived at what was called the old township. Daily Mass was celebrated at Mr. Cleary's homestead. The Sunday 10 am Mass, rosary, sermon and 7pm Benediction were at the town church attended by the McAdams, Clearys, Fannings, Sheridans, Adams, Kellys and others. Here, as at the homestead, a bullock bell summoned the congregation to Divine Services. I was the officer in charge and the ringing of the Angelus at midday regulated by the homestead clock also came within my jurisdiction. The blacks' camp was close to the homestead. Old man Cleary was considered by them to be a very good fellow. He was very kind to them, and if there was nothing to steal, they would never thief.

As in Brisbane and Rockhampton immigrants came through Maryborough by the hundreds per shipload for some years. Fr Tissot wrote to the Bishop early in 1865 that 250 immigrants, ‘mostly good Catholics’, had recently landed ‘and so the chapel is full for weekday Mass and Benediction on Thursdays. On Sundays, there are as many outside the church as within’, adding: ‘you will have to shake up the people to help build a new church, presbytery, and school.’<sup>10</sup>

The *Maryborough Chronicle* reported another incident on the arrival of 104 single immigrant girls at the wharf, and continued,

Instead of going directly to the depot some of them ran away. The worthy matron went in pursuit and found them engaged in devotional exercises in St Mary’s Church blissfully unconscious of their gross infringement of the laws of their adopted country, the home of the brave and free...<sup>11</sup>

The discovery of gold at Nashville (Gympie) in late 1867 saw Bro. Francisco ‘desert his religious vows to go to the diggings’. He was only one of thousands who were soon on the field and nearly all passed through Maryborough. Fr Tissot travelled down to visit the miners and was pleased to find so many and such excellent Catholics among them. Fr Matt Horan was soon appointed there.

Meanwhile plans for the new brick St Mary’s Church in Maryborough were drawn up by the Government Architect Charles Tiffin. In late July of 1869 Bishop Quinn came to Gympie by Cobb & Co coach to bless and open their first church;<sup>12</sup> all the timber for which had been cut in Maryborough and carted the 60 miles down. He then borrowed a horse to ride on to Maryborough to lay the foundation stone on July 29th in what was described as an imposing ceremony for the construction of the first part of a handsome Early English Gothic church.<sup>13</sup> It is of interest to mention that the Bishop returned via Gympie at which place he was presented with over £700, which, as he gratefully acknowledged, would enable him to pay his fare and other expenses to attend the First Vatican Council. It was during his absence that the church was opened

by ‘the venerable and esteemed pastor Dean Tissot’, on 4th February 1872.<sup>14</sup>

In mid 1870 two Sisters of St Joseph arrived to take over the education of the girls and infants.<sup>15</sup> They had the help of a few lay teachers as there were from the beginning over 150 on the roll. Fr Tissot handed over his house for use as the convent and it was here that Mother Mary MacKillop stayed several times. Nor was the education of the boys overlooked. In 1875 Fr Tissot had Brother Barrett from the Christian Brothers in Melbourne up to consider taking over the lay-run school and to inspect sites.<sup>16</sup> On the way home Bro. Barrett called to visit the Bishop and was persuaded to make their first foundation in Queensland in Brisbane.

Fr Tissot turned 74 years of age in July of 1875. He felt it was time to return to his native France to prepare for his death. When 60 years of age he had generously followed Bishop Quinn to this pioneering colony. Almost as a reward he was granted another twenty years. When news of his death at 94 reached Brisbane in 1895, Archbishop Dunne wrote up requesting a solemn Mass to be celebrated at St Mary’s.<sup>17</sup> Letters from his Order’s house in Paris recall some extraordinary happenings in his life: when an altar server at the great Cathedral at Lyon, Napoleon was present at one of the ceremonies; when he was considering becoming a Priest he trekked out to Ars, a country church, to consult with the Curé; and near the end of his life he saw automobiles on the boulevards of Paris.<sup>18</sup>

Following the retirement of the Dean, recently ordained Fr Thomas O’Brien was appointed. He took a special interest in the Catholics like the Greatheads and Adams who had moved north from Maryborough on to cane-growing properties around Bundaberg. On 3rd October 1875 the St Mary’s of the Holy Rosary Church was opened there. A few years later he had the quaint little Sacred Heart Church opened down at Tiaro. St Joseph Sister Bonaventure provides the setting in a letter:



We are going on pretty fairly now. Every one of us has been laid up in some way since the school opened after the Christmas vacation. I think it is mostly caused from the school room, the roof of which is of iron and unlined. We have over 200 on the roll. There are 3 sisters. We went to Tiaro on Sunday to open a dear little church dedicated to the Sacred Heart. The choir children were in two coaches with 7 horses. It was a terrible journey amidst rain, thunder, and lightning....<sup>19</sup>

When visiting Maryborough a little while later, the Bishop rode down to inspect it. He was at that time recommending that Rome form an episcopal See of Maryborough.<sup>20</sup>

Fr O'Brien was never robust. At the age of 35 he collapsed and died during a visit to Bundaberg. He was laid to rest within St Mary's at Maryborough.<sup>21</sup>

The extremely popular Fr John O'Reilly made a great and lasting impression during his 20 years as P.P. from 1878. He was one of those priests whose photo hung in many homes for years after his departure. His first duty was to reluctantly farewell the Sisters of St Joseph. An account in *The Australian* illustrates his graciousness and Mother Mary's selflessness by conducting a three-day public examination in the convent schoolroom. Fr O'Reilly said:

A pleasing circumstance in the examination is the presence of the Mother General of the Order of St Joseph who not only honours us with her presence but shows what a very deep interest she takes in your welfare by spending so much of her valuable time here and conducting the examination herself.<sup>22</sup>

In April 1880 the Sisters of Mercy moved into the convent and reopened the girls and infants' school.

Fr Tissot pioneered the parish, Fr O'Reilly consolidated it. After considerable debt had been paid off he set about completing the church according to its original design, i.e. doubling the length of the nave with a permanent sanctuary added. In May of 1885, Bishop

Dunne consecrated these additions, described now in *The Australian* as ‘a pretty red brick building, by far the finest church outside the metropolis.’<sup>23</sup> The first purpose-built presbytery, a solid two-storey building, was blessed and occupied in 1887. The following year, a school and residence awaited the Christian Brothers’ arrival. Fr O’Reilly had been able to purchase the residence for £600. No wonder Archbishop Dunne commented that ‘Fr O’Reilly in his wealthy district spoke of £50 as another priest would half a crown.’<sup>24</sup> The new convent, still one of the finest buildings in the town, was designed by F.D.G. Stanley and opened in 1893. The original church was demolished in 1895, but the parish expanded with outer churches being built—St Patrick’s at Howard in 1895 and St Joseph’s at Pialba in 1897. Fr O’Reilly was taken away to become Administrator of the Cathedral and secretary to Archbishop Dunne.

Over the years, some notable church figures were connected with Maryborough in some way. They included Archbishop Polding, St Mary MacKillop, Fr Duncan McNab who attempted to establish a mission to the Aborigines around Fraser Island and Noosa, and Fr Julian Tenison-Woods who surveyed the coal deposits around Burrum for the Queensland Government. Cardinal Moran with Archbishop Dunne and a suite of southern Bishops visited in September of 1892. His Eminence was anxious to see first hand the conditions under which the South Sea Islanders (Kanakas) were working on the canefields around Bundaberg. A special train was put at their disposal to steam express from Brisbane. On the return journey later in the week they stopped overnight in Maryborough as guests of Fr O’Reilly. A special Mass was celebrated in St Mary’s, addresses of welcome were read, the schools were visited and the town inspected before departure for Gympie.<sup>25</sup>

The next P.P. was Fr Philip Brady whose tenure lasted from 1898 until 1922 although he had been an assistant there since 1893. He was a man of quiet disposition and retiring nature. In something of a

Maryborough tradition, marble memorial plaques were erected on a side wall of St Mary's to the memory of their first four P.Ps.

Transferred down from Gayndah to succeed his brother was Fr Pat Brady. A prominent foundation stone on the new 1925 primary school adjacent to the convent bore his name until demolition of the building about thirty years ago. He found Maryborough too onerous, especially the travelling required and asked to be moved.

The parish was now destined for another major building campaign — the builder of St Brigid's at Red Hill, Dean John McCarthy, the first of the three Monsignori, came in 1926. The former presbytery was demolished and a large timber replacement was blessed by Archbishop Duhig in July of 1927. It occupied the site of Fr Tissot's house which he surrendered for the Sisters. The former girls' school of 1870 was refurbished as a parish hall. St John the Evangelist Church at Bauple was built in 1928. Then the depression put the brakes on spending for a while. His major undertaking was the complete remodelling of the church for which Archbishop Duhig laid a foundation stone in March of 1936.<sup>26</sup> The Archbishop returned to Maryborough in November, this time by plane, to bless the completions. He said that visitors would hardly recognize it as the former parish church—'it was now like a Cathedral'.<sup>27</sup> The most noticeable change was that it had been 'turned end to end' so that the front door was now where the altar had been. The planned spire was put off until another day; fortunate since poor foundations and workmanship have caused subsequent heavy expense.

In 1941 came Mons. Jordan and in 1957 Mons. Lyons. Major changes during the latter's twenty-one years were the sale of the N.S.W. land grant, the building of yet another presbytery and parish hall and blocks of schoolrooms.

Subsequent years have seen expansion of the parish schools and maintenance; the church in particular requiring extensive restoration to avert possible demolition in 1992. The secondary schools amalgamated in 1979 followed by the gradual withdrawal of the Christian Brothers and Sisters of Mercy.

Maryborough is now served by one priest with country churches at Tiaro and Aramera. The little seaside church at Pialba was made the nucleus in 1958 of the thriving parish of Hervey Bay where two priests serve Howard and the Fraser Coast.

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*He spent from 1977 to 1980 in Maryborough, home to some of his Catholic forebears who knew Fr Tissot and Fr O'Reilly well.*

## ENDNOTES:

1. St Stephen's Cathedral Baptismal Register.
2. G. E .Loyau, *History of Maryborough* (Brisbane: Pole, Outridge & Co., 1897), pp. 313, 315.
3. St Stephen's Cathedral Baptismal Register.
4. Cardinal Moran, *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia* (Sydney: Oceanic Publishing Co., 1894), pp. 595-6.
5. Cardinal Moran, *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia*, p. 598.
6. Polding to Salvado, 14 August 1859 (copy of a letter held in the New Norcia Archives), B.C.A.
7. *Maryborough Chronicle*, 1 August 1861.
8. Tissot to D'Alzon (Superior of the A.A.'s Nimes, France), extracts from copies of letters held in B.C.A. 1861-1874.
9. J.J., Kelly, 'Reminiscences', *The Age*,(Brisbane), 3 September 1925.
10. Tissot to Quinn, A.A. archives, 1862-5.
11. *Maryborough Chronicle*, 29 May 1880.
12. *Gympie Times*, 24 July 1869.
13. *Maryborough Chronicle*, 31 July 1869.
14. *Brisbane Courier*, 10 February 1872.
15. *Maryborough Chronicle*, 6 July 1870.

16. K.K. O'Donoghue, *P.A. Treacy and the Christian Brothers*, (Polding Press, 1983), pp. 93-5.
17. Dunne to O'Reilly, 7 August 1895, B.C.A.
18. Monsieur Dupre to the author, 30 May 1983, B.C.A.; Fr Austen Treamer, A.A., *The Mission of the Augustinians of the Assumption in Australia 1860-1875*, Nottingham (unpublished), 1988, pp. 8-10, B.C.A.
19. Bonaventure to MacKillop, 26 February 1878, Josephite Sisters Archives.
20. Cardinal Moran, *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia*, Report to Rome, pp. 621-2.
21. *Maryborough Chronicle*, 24 March 1881. Fr O'Brien died in 1878 and was reburied in St Mary's, Maryborough.
22. *The Australian* (Brisbane), 28 June 1879.
23. *The Australian* (Brisbane), 21 May 1887.
24. Dunne to O'Reilly, 8 March 1885, B.C.A.
25. *Maryborough Chronicle*, 22-24 September 1892.
26. *Catholic Leader*, 26 March 1936.
27. *Maryborough Chronicle*, 30 November 1936.