

Miss Florence Honoria O'Reilly: Business Woman and Philanthropist

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Writing in *They Crossed the River: The Founding of the Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Brisbane, by the Sisters of Mercy*, H.J. Summers states:

Miss O'Reilly was a remarkable woman whose redoubtable business sense was matched by her flair for investment. Her interests in Brisbane real estate extended from city buildings to suburban land...¹

In my own humble way

Some time in the first half of 1871, Mother Mary Bridget Conlan, the Superior of All Hallows' Convent in Brisbane, received the following brief letter, sent from 55 Talbot Road, Bayswater, a fashionable area of London.

Dear Revd Mother,

You will be surprised I am sure at getting a letter from me who am quite unknown to you. I will therefore tell you at once what I write about. I heard by some chance that you had to borrow four thousand pounds and are paying at the rate of six per cent for it. I had nearly that sum in the funds paying me three per cent and I have sold it out with the intention of lending it to your community at the interest I was getting. I can in this way save you a considerable sum annually without injuring myself. I send



Miss Florence Honoria O'Reilly

you by this mail three thousand, and I hope to make up the other thousand a little later.

The letter continued:

I hope to see you and all your good institutions in less than a year from this. I must tell you I have no present intentions of becoming a nun, but I wish to serve God in my own humble way as well as I can. Please to pray for me and all your community.

The letter was signed, 'Florence H. O'Reilly' and dated, February 21, 1871. The letter, if it were genuine, would go a long way towards resolving some of the financial difficulties then facing Mother Bridget who had been one of the group of six Sisters of Mercy who had founded All Hallows' some ten years earlier. In November, 1863, the Bishop of Brisbane, Dr James Quinn had purchased on behalf of the Sisters the residence known as *Adderton*, for the sum of £6 000 at an interest rate of ten per cent. In the intervening years, Mr Patrick Lillis had made 'a lucky strike' on the Gympie gold fields and underwrote the loan at a rate of six per cent; hence the principle and interest had been reduced to the rates quoted by 'Florence H. O'Reilly.' The Sisters were also in the process of establishing an orphanage at Nudgee for which a mortgage of £2 000 was owing to Mr Patrick Lillis.

On 9 June, 1871, Florence O'Reilly, still in Bayswater, penned a second letter informing Mother Bridget of her 'intention of coming out shortly to Brisbane', repeating her intention, 'I am not thinking at present of becoming a nun. I do not feel called to it; but I wish is to occupy myself to the best of my small ability as you do.' She added, 'I am sending out my piano and some books I have in advance of myself'.

A third letter was written from Upper Baggot Street, Dublin, on 3 August, 1871. This address was not far from the earliest Convent of Mercy founded by Venerable Catherine McAuley

at 64a Lower Baggot Street, in 1827—now known as Mercy International. The letter read:

Dear Revd Mother

I forgot to mention in my last letter that I do not require any mortgage security for the money I lent you, it better from yourself undertaking on the part of the community to pay the interest mentioned as long as you wish to keep the money is sufficient for me. It would be useless to send the letter here as I shall have left before it would arrive. Please to keep it in your own possession until I see you.

I received your letter quite safely by last mail and I am glad that what I have done has proved of some service to you. All I want in return are your prayers.

Florence had by this time come into contact with the Sisters in Dublin, and especially with Mother Vincent Whitty who had led the foundation to Brisbane in 1861 and who was at that time in Dublin at the request of Bishop Quinn, seeking recruits for the Brisbane mission. Bishop Quinn himself, having attended the sessions of the First Vatican Council in Rome during the previous year, was seeking priests and suitable laymen to accompany him back to Brisbane at the beginning of the following year.

By 28th January, 1872, Bishop Quinn and his party, including Florence O'Reilly were aboard *The Silver Eagle* about to set sail for far-off Brisbane. Florence penned 'a few lines' to Mother Bridget:

My dear Revd Mother,

I send you just a few lines before we get out of reach of land. I hope to have them brought ashore by the pilot. I want to tell you that since I lent the four thousand pounds to your Community, I have come in for a larger sum, and in thanks to God who gives

all, I wish to make a present to your Community of the four thousand I lent you. Pray for me...

Bishop Quinn had already apprised Mother Bridget of Florence's intentions some ten days earlier, writing in a letter dated 17 January, 1872:

... Miss O'Reilly has come in for a considerable sum of money and she intends making the convent a donation of the £4000. Is not God good! Pray for her, and ask that her legacy may come to her safely, and that God may bless her and make her means fructify. She [is] accompany[y]ing us ...

So it was that just eleven months after her initial correspondence with Mother Bridget Conlan in faraway Brisbane, Florence O'Reilly, along with her companion and domestic servant, Louisa Walder, had embarked for Brisbane.

Amongst those on board the smart clipper leaving London, besides Dr James Quinn, Bishop of Brisbane, were Archdeacon Rigney, (formerly parish priest of Moreton Bay but recently appointed to St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney), Rev Peter Capra, and several other young men seen by the bishop as prospective clergy or professional men for his large diocese. Many of the names appearing on the ship's list are of Italian origin. Bishop Quinn had found it particularly difficult to attract priests from Ireland and so had sought men from continental Europe. Among these was the engineer and later priest, Joseph Canali. The party also included Achille Simonetti, the sculptor who was later to immortalise the bishop in marble and Chiaffredo Fraire who would later himself become an immigration agent for the northern parts of Queensland. Besides Florence O'Reilly and her companion, were twelve young women who had volunteered for the Brisbane foundation of the Sisters of Mercy. Several of them already professed Sisters; some of whom were to make their own marks in Brisbane and beyond. Amongst

them was Sister Mary Benigna Desmond, who, after some years working in both Brisbane and Rockhampton, was to become the foundation Reverend Mother in Townsville.

Silver Eagle arrived in Sydney on 20 May, 1872; the voyage had taken them via France, Spain, the Cape of Good Hope, across ‘the forties’, south of Tasmania and from there north to Sydney. The voyage had taken just short of three months. The *Sydney Morning Herald* of the following day reported:

The Clipper ship *Silver Eagle*, Captain Case, arrived last evening from London ... she was ... taken up by the Government for the conveyance of emigrants to this colony and having embarked 86 single females, 14 married couples and 6 children, 17 saloon and 23 second-class passengers took her departure from the Downs on the 25th January ... The passage of this well-known vessel, although somewhat prolonged, has been a most pleasant one, and the passengers all speak in the highest terms of the kindness they have received from Captain Case and his officers The only drawback to the voyage has been the loss of three of the crew The three above mentioned men were never seen after being knocked overboard.²

The Bishop and his party almost immediately boarded the coastal steamer *Lady Young*, bound for Brisbane. Dr Cani, as administrator of the diocese in the absence of the bishop, had been enthusing to the Catholic population about the return of His Lordship—who had been absent for the best part of three years—and the imminent completion of the new cathedral. (It was completed two years later in 1874.) As often happened, there was confusion about the arrival time. A number of people flocked down to the wharf on seeing a flare at about ten on the previous evening. However, the flare was from the *Balclutha* passing through on her way to Maryborough and ‘the people consequently dispersed, much disappointed.’³ *Lady Young* arrived at about four the following morning, 24 May, 1872—and

no one was there to greet the travellers. The people of Brisbane had other distractions on their minds that day, for it was the 53rd birthday of Queen Victoria and a complete programme of events had been prepared: races at Eagle Farm, a temperance rally in the botanical gardens, a pleasure trip down to Cleveland aboard the *Emu* and various musical events in the evening. This was the Brisbane to which Florence arrived in 1872; so different from the England she had left behind.

Who was Florence Honoria O'Reilly?

Florence Honoria O'Reilly was born at the family home at 42 Bloomsbury Place, Brighton, Sussex on 25 June, 1846, the second child and second daughter of John O'Reilly Esq. originally of Bury St Edmonds, Suffolk and Mary Ann (née Skeggs) originally of Farnborough, Kent. Her older sister was Mary Charlotte, born the previous year and a brother, Nicholas Shelton was born some seven years after Florence. When Florence arrived in Brisbane she was twenty-five years of age, financially secure and living from the proceeds of properties she owned in England. She was obviously determined to do what she wished with what must have been considerable wealth.

Investing in Queensland - Brisbane

As a single woman who had paid her own passage to Queensland, Florence was entitled to purchase land selections of Crown land at fixed purchase prices, subject to conditions concerning the improvement of the land. Florence soon began to purchase land both privately and by selection in and around Brisbane.

Her portfolio in and around Brisbane, purchased privately, included:

July 1873: four allotments on the corner of Elizabeth and Creek Streets, Brisbane City. On this land she had built the premises

which housed the Royal Bank of Queensland. She leased the office space to a partnership which sub-leased it to the bank. She also owned the Queen's Hotel fronting Creek and Charlotte Streets.

November 1873: a small lot (24 perches) on the corner of Gipps and Wickham Street, Brisbane. This adjoined the Bishop's residence, *Dara*, and was part of the land on which it was later proposed to build Holy Name Cathedral. She also owned some of the land on which St John's Anglican Cathedral was later built.

July 1874:

New Farm – just over 50 acres including what was later to become New Farm Park and business and residential lots as far back as Merthyr Road.

Toowong – just over nine acres fronting Cemetery Road (now Sylvan Road)

St Kilian's Hill – ten acres on which the Mater Hospitals now stand, (later sold to the Sisters of Mercy) and thirteen acres on which St Laurence's College now stands (sold to the Archdiocese of Brisbane who later gifted the land to the Christian Brothers).

Land at Myrtle town (Pinkenba) – almost 96 acres.

Land at Nudgee – 18.5 acres, later sold to the Sisters of Mercy.

Florence was also responsible for ensuring that the *Magdalen Asylum* (Holy Cross) at Wooloowin was opened free of debt in 1889. Their first report, published in 1892, states:

The Sisters gave the site—a valuable freehold property of twelve acres adjoining the Wooloowin or Lutwyche railway station—and Miss F. H. O'Reilly gave £500 to release a mortgage on the property, so that when presented to the Asylum, it was quite free of debt.

Florence had a habit of ‘not letting her right hand know what her left hand was doing’ and waited until all the donations had been tallied after the opening day and then quietly made up the shortfall. The donations list records, ‘Florence O’Reilly, £1’. She did ask later that the Sisters record her name in such a way that she could benefit from ‘the daily prayers of the community and of the inmates’.

Investing in Queensland – further afield

At the same time, Florence was acquiring land by means of the government’s selection process. These included the following properties in the Samford Valley:

August 1872: parish of Bunya, 507 acres

July 1874: parish of Parker, 6 000 acres second class pastoral land

February 1875: parish of Samford, conditional purchase of 220 acres first class and 4 690 acres second class land

March, 1876: parish of Warner, 311 acres at 28s per acre plus £28 for improvements to the land

June 1879: parish of Parker 3 200 acres

May 1880: parish of Parker, 640 acres along the South Pine River. This land was bequeathed to her by Randall MacDonnell who had made a conditional purchase of the land. The will specified that Florence should continue to pay fees, according to the conditions of purchase. She appears to have acquired it outright in 1880. To this was added an additional 318 acres, ranging from ‘moderately timbered forest, poor soil’ to ‘heavily timbered, stony and precipitous slope.’

She also acquired by virtue of the Will of Randall MacDonnell, who died on 22 June, 1877, a further two lots, in the parish of Samford, one of 621 acres, the other, 735 acres. These properties were later passed on to the widow of Randall MacDonnell.

In November, 1875: Florence also acquired by conditional purchase, 2 400 acres first class pastoral and 2 950 acres second class pastoral land in the parish of Sahl to the west of the d'Aguiar Range in the vicinity of Lake Manchester/Mount Crosby.

In September, 1877: 2 200 acres in the parish of Sahl was surrendered for re-selection.

O'Reilly, Miss, Grazier

The above entry appears in the Post Office Directory of 1889.

As has been indicated, the purchase of Crown land carried with it the responsibility of improving the property according to fixed standards. At least one of the properties purchased by Florence O'Reilly had been surrendered by a previous selector and, it is noted above, that part of the O'Reilly holding in the parish of Sahl had been surrendered for re-selection.

Florence O'Reilly entered into a working partnership with a Mr R. A. Ryan and it was under the business name of 'O'Reilly and Ryan'—more often cited as 'Messrs. O'Reilly and Ryan'—that the Samford holdings were maintained. The land included the old 'Samford Run' and soon improvements were made; literally miles of fencing were erected, buildings were added, the house and stables were extended, stud cattle were imported and any cattle not bearing the Ryan and O'Reilly brand, F7R, were removed. In November, 1875 Bishop Quinn visited Samford Station and celebrated Mass and by the following year had promised to build a church in the district. Florence had also made provision that the income from the Samford land should be used to finance St Kilian's, South Brisbane, a college for boys, especially those it was thought may have some aspirations towards the priesthood.

In 1877, Florence O'Reilly and R.A. Ryan announced the dissolution of their business partnership. Following the dissolution of the partnership of O'Reilly and Ryan, Florence entered into partnership with John Delaney Bergin. Bergin acquired further land of his own to augment those of Miss O'Reilly, leased some of her lands for which he was solely responsible, and managed others on her behalf.

By 1892, Florence was disposing of some of her land in Samford, selling some 1 690 acres. From 1914 to 1918, the site of Samford Station became the Samford Hotel. Part of the old homestead was relocated into the township as was the hotel in 1918. During the 1950s the C.S.I.R.O. glasshouses were established on the site which is currently being redeveloped by the Moreton Bay Regional Council as the Samford Valley C.S.I.R.O. Parklands. After the First World War, what had been some of her lands reverted to the Crown for the Highlands Soldier Settlement.

Beyond Brisbane

Further north, Florence had made the following acquisitions:

- Maryborough – 1 790 acres
- Rockhampton – just over one acre, in Kent Street and adjoining (or including) the site of the first Sisters of Mercy Convent in Rockhampton.
- Emu Park, just outside Rockhampton – just over an acre.
- Yeppoon – just over twelve and a half acres.

In Warwick, Florence purchased land in an area known as 'Mount Tabor' which in a partnership with Gerald Pigott and trading as 'O'Reilly and Pigott', produced prize-winning wheat and ran sheep. The proceeds from Mount Tabor were also designated for the endowment of St Kilian's. Another portion of

Mount Tabor was owned by Father James Horan, nephew of Bishop Quinn. The partnership with Pigott was terminated in 1882 and about ten years later, much of the land was cut up into smaller farms and sold. The Warwick City Council continued to purchase gravel from the quarry which Florence still owned after she had returned to England.

Investments in the north of Queensland

In the 1880s, through Bishop Quinn, Florence made the acquaintance of Thomas Henry Fitzgerald, a man of great drive and experience. A surveyor by profession, he had served in the parliament of New Zealand for some years before coming to Queensland, selecting land for the purpose of growing sugar cane in the Mackay district. Fitzgerald was interested in opening up areas to the north, in Mourilyan, on the Johnstone River, where Innisfail now stands. Selections were being offered in 1 280 acre lots. Florence acquired one of these, and later purchased another from Bernard Fitzgerald, son of Thomas Henry. She sponsored the selection of a further seven blocks by the Sisters of Mercy who had recently emigrated from Ireland and Bishop Quinn sponsored a further four Sisters in their selections. Cane growing proved to be difficult, partly because of the shortage of labour and partly because of the lack of proximity to a sugar mill. The landholders had relied on Pacific Island workers in the early days. In some cases the land owned by the Sisters was leased by Chinese market gardeners. In a letter to her solicitor and adviser, A. J. Thynne, written on 27 January, 1882, in the interregnum between the death of Bishop Quinn and the appointment of Bishop Robert Dunne, she wrote:

I think it would be well if you would take the whole Johnstone business in trust for the Bishop of Brisbane from me. The interests of mine in that place are mostly on account of the Sisters of Mercy,

*and it seems to me best to place them under the protection of the highest authority.*⁵

Florence and her Family

At the beginning of 1879, Florence accompanied Mother Bridget Conlan on a trip back to England and Ireland. While there she spent time with her brother, Nicholas Shelton, his wife and their couple of young children and with her sister, Mary Charlotte Power living in Scotland with her husband and four young daughters. She explains in letters to Mother Bridget that her family does not mind what she does with her money but questions why she has to be so far away. She also explains that her late Uncle George was not quite so liberal in his views of how she should have managed her inheritances. They did, however, question the influence of the bishop on her and her financial affairs. Nevertheless, Florence returned to Brisbane in May, 1880.

Financial Crisis of the 1890s

During 1890 Brisbane suffered no fewer than three floods. Photographs and newspaper accounts show that Florence's properties in Brisbane, being so close to the river, were badly affected. In 1893, four further floods occurred, the waters rising even higher than during the previous inundations. In addition, Australia suffered a financial crisis, with the result that twelve banks throughout Australia suspended operations. These banks had liabilities totalling £100 million, a situation brought on by excessive borrowing by both Government and private enterprise.

Florence prepared to leave Australia, selling some of her properties and naming George Wilkie Gray and Andrew Joseph Thynne as her attorneys to handle her interests in Queensland, in conjunction with Ward, Willis and Witham of London.

She transferred several of her interests to the Archdiocese of Brisbane; others were sold after her departure, often as smaller farming lots or as house lots, usually referred to as 'Miss O'Reilly's Estate.' In 1897, after Florence had returned to England, Gray and Thynne were named as garnishees for monies owed to the Australian Joint Stock Bank, a sum amounting to just over three thousand pounds. In addition she had mortgages totalling approximately £45 000. For all that, in a letter to Ward, Willis and Witham, George Wilkie Gray estimates her assets in Queensland were in 1895 still valued at almost £106 000 sterling.

Leaving Queensland

Florence O'Reilly had been part of the Sisters of Mercy mission in Rockhampton from the earliest days of its foundation in 1873. She travelled to and from there quite frequently and was active in the affairs of the Sisters and the parish (later the diocese). She sailed from Port Alma, Rockhampton on 27 November, 1895, the only saloon passenger on the B.I.S.N. *India*; the only other passengers being two in steerage whose destination was Colombo.

According to the census of 1901, she was again living in London as a lodger. By the time of the 1911 census, she is listed as living with her brother, Nicholas Shelton, and his family in Littlehampton, Sussex. Florence died in St Joseph's Nursing Home, 15 Church Street, Edmonton, London on 10 March, 1929. Her usual address recorded on the death certificate is 144 Eastern Road, Brighton, Sussex, the address of her brother and of the niece, Madeline Mary, who was the informant on the certificate. There is no record of her Will, or of her place of burial. Nor do we know anything of her activities during the almost thirty-five years she spent (presumably) back in England

from the time of her leaving Queensland until the time of her death.

Florence's Legacy to Queensland

We remember Florence Honoria O'Reilly for her business sense and her flair for investment; her investment and faith in the suburban and rural development of Queensland; her contribution to the many enterprises foundational to education and social welfare; her constant financial backing of diocesan and Mercy needs and projects; the personal influence she exerted both in Brisbane and in Rockhampton.

Altogether her contribution to Queensland is inestimable, particularly for a woman whose only wish was 'to serve God in my own humble way as well as I can.'

Just outside Samford, on one of the selections Florence once owned stands a peak of some 532 metres above sea level, Mount O'Reilly, 'named for Florence O'Reilly, land owner'. Also in Samford, is a little patch of land, untitled, but appearing on maps as O'Reilly Park. In the Cathedral of St Stephen, in Brisbane, is a stained glass window, product of the Royal Bavarian Stained Glass Institute of Franz Xavier Zettler, Munich, 'donated by Miss O'Reilly in memory of Bishop O'Quinn.' Whilst it is a memorial dedicated to Brisbane's first bishop, it also stands as a fitting memorial to the generosity of Florence Honoria O'Reilly.

ENDNOTES:

1. H.J. Summers, *They Crossed the River: The Founding of the Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Brisbane, by the Sisters of Mercy* (St Lucia: University of Queensland, 1979), 6-7.
2. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May, 1872, 4.
3. *Brisbane Courier*, 24 May, 1872, 2.
4. Letter to Reverend Mother, (M.M. Patrick Potter), 8 July, 1892. Quoted in Summers, 7.
5. Letter 27 January, 1882. Quoted in Summers, 7.

Pauline Smoothy rsm is a member of the Brisbane Congregation of Sisters of Mercy.

Her interests include history in many of its forms: Church history, world history, local history, family history and the history of the Sisters of Mercy, in Brisbane and beyond. In 2011, as part of the Sisters of Mercy Brisbane sesquicentenary celebrations, Anne Hetherington rsm and Sister Pauline edited and published the letters of Mother Mary Vincent Whitty rsm, founder of the Brisbane Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy.

Sister Pauline is currently engaged in documenting the life of Florence O'Reilly, building on the research previously undertaken by the late Sister Ursula Markham rsm.