

## Three French Priests in Central Queensland

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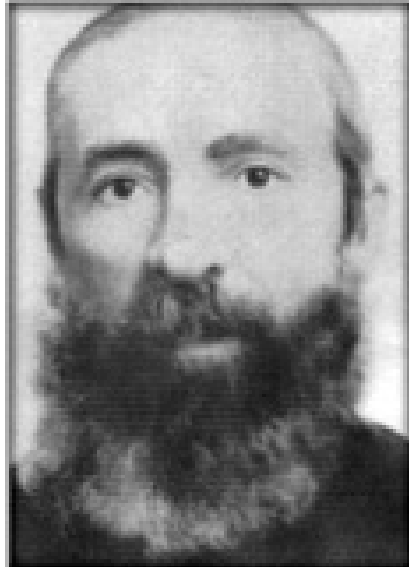
*Neridah Kaddatz*

*So I leave my boats behind!  
Leave them on familiar shores!  
Set my heart upon the deep!  
Follow you again, my Lord!*

The Galilee Song

The history of Queensland is filled with incredible stories of pioneers who opened up frontiers of grazing and mining land, of coastlines and desert-like regions, of rainforests and mountains. These strong, practical people came from many lands across the seas. Amongst these pioneers were three men from the same family who travelled over 16 000 kilometres from Brittany in France, to Queensland to serve—for the length of their natural lives—Catholic and non-Catholic communities alike.

The first of these men was Father Pierre Bucas who was followed by his nephews, Father Jules Bucas and Father Julien Plormel. The story of their journeys and work in Queensland is an interesting one, as they gave unselfishly of themselves to help their fellow men and women, frequently under very harsh conditions and in very difficult climates.



Father Pierre Marie Bucas



Father Jules Bucas



Father Julien Plormel

The first of the priests to travel to Australia was Father Pierre Bucas, who has been described variously as a soldier, a linguist (who spoke French, English, Italian, Maori as well as Aboriginal dialects), a medical man (even though he never officially qualified as a doctor), an educator and a tireless worker for the poor and the underprivileged. In his panegyric at Father Bucas' funeral, Archbishop Duhig of Brisbane described Father Bucas as 'A priest with the heart of St Vincent de Paul and the courage of Napoleon Bonaparte'. There can be no doubt, as evidenced in this statement, that there was enormous respect for Father Bucas on the part of Archbishop Duhig. So how did this man come to earn such an epithet from, at that time, Queensland's highest ranking churchman?

Pierre Marie Bucas was born in the small potting village of St Jean de Poterie in Brittany, France in 1840; the youngest of twelve children ([www.gw.geneanet.org](http://www.gw.geneanet.org)) in a family made up of nine girls and three boys. As was sadly typical of that time period, four of his sisters died before the age of three. Pierre Bucas was the son of Joseph and Mathurine (nee Noury) ([www.gw.geneanet.org](http://www.gw.geneanet.org)). The village of St Jean de Poterie was then known for its fine clay pots, which even today are one of the tourist drawcards. As a boy, Bucas attended the local school from the age of ten. In 1860, at the age of twenty, he left the family home and moved to Paris in order to attend the Grand Seminaire des Missions Etrangeres, which still operates as a seminary today. This seminary has never been associated with any single order. Its instructions were provided by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and was established in 1659 with its role being to train mission priests who would be sent to Asia and Africa to care for the indigenous populations. It is interesting to note these mission priests were expected to adapt to local customs and establish native clergy, while staying in close contact with Rome. As shall be seen

further on, Bucas was true to the focus of his training, in that he happily came to know the culture, language and people of both New Zealand and Queensland, as a means of evangelising them without disrupting their traditional practices.

While undertaking his training at the Grand Seminaire, Bucas answered the call by Pope Pius IX to join the Papal Zouavres (the Vatican Army). This military force was convened by the Vatican in response to the development of the Italian War of Unification, from 1860 to 1870. It was essential the Vatican literally fight to protect its territory in Italy as a separate state. If it had not, then the security of the Vatican could not have been guaranteed as an independent, international political power. Bucas enlisted in 1861, taking part in several engagements, during which he was wounded in the leg, just above the knee. It is reported amongst the local people of Mackay that this wound would cause him pain and discomfort for the remainder of his life. Regardless of this, Bucas never let the old wound interfere with his extensive travel, by various modes, as he tended to the people of his vast parishes. According to records compiled by Stichting Nederlands Zouavenmuseum (the Dutch Zouavre Museum) Bucas signed up on 6 June 1861, was promoted on 11 March 1862 and given liberty on 7 June 1863. This record of service also lists Bucas' date of birth specifically as being 18 August 1840 and that he became a missionary priest in Australia. Zouavres enlistees needed, at a minimum, to be Catholic, obviously, and unmarried or widowed with no children. This latter condition, one presumes, was to prevent hardship on wives and/or children should the soldier be injured or killed in battle, particularly as there was no social welfare system at the time. Enlistees came from as far afield as the United States of America, Holland, England, France and Belgium. The men were permitted to serve for a maximum of

two years. At the end of this time Bucas returned to the Grand Seminaire in Paris to complete his seminarian training.

Bucas was present when Bishop Pompallier from New Zealand arrived at the Seminary seeking priests who would be willing to carry out mission work with the Maoris in New Zealand. From all accounts Bucas was very keen to take up his role as a missionary and volunteered. Pompallier had arranged for the payment of the seminary training for Bucas as well as his passage to New Zealand. Bucas completed his training and left France in 1865 on the *Andrew Jackson*. This particular vessel was an American clipper ship which completed only two voyages from Europe to New Zealand. The second of these voyages was the journey which carried Father Bucas from his homeland—never to return. The *Andrew Jackson* had travelled from London; one supposes stopping at a port, such as Calais, to pick up French and European passengers. Sailing via South America through some rather rough weather, it took 90 days to travel the distance to New Zealand where the ship docked in Auckland Harbour on the 24th August 1865. Pierre Bucas was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Pompallier, shortly after his arrival in Auckland.

While Pierre Bucas was serving with the Pope in the Italian Wars of Unification, his nephew and future fellow priest, Jules Bucas was born in 1862 in the village of Beganne in the district of Morbihan, approximately 16 kilometres from Pierre's home village of St Jean de Poterie.

Bucas' second nephew—who would also join him in the priesthood, and in Queensland—was Julien Plormel. Bucas had already left for New Zealand when Julien was born in September of 1866 in his uncle's own home village: St Jean de Poterie.

Following his arrival and ordination by Bishop Pompallier in New Zealand, Father Pierre Marie Bucas was provided with Maori guides, a shotgun and the equivalent of \$160 in cash and sent to the town of Mangakahia in the north of the North Island. Here his role was to continue the work of the already established Catholic church; providing the sacraments to the local community as well as acquiring knowledge about the indigenous population of the area. Bucas felt very comfortable with the Maori people and was enthusiastic in his learning of their customs and language. It was not long after arriving in New Zealand that Bucas landed himself in trouble with the British-run government. This was the time of the Great Land Wars between the English and the Maori people. While treating a Maori patient for a gunshot wound (remembering his interest in all things medical) Bucas realized the wound was self-inflicted. To prevent future injuries he began to teach the Maori people how to care for, and fire, their guns correctly. He was reported by a local turned ‘spy’. The government in New Zealand did not appreciate the historical irony of a Frenchman teaching the Maoris how to discharge their weapons correctly; particularly as they would most likely be aiming at English troops. Consequently, Bucas was removed from his position in the far north of New Zealand to Auckland, where he spent several weeks before leaving the country. Bishop Pompallier had, in fact, been given the choice between either sending Bucas elsewhere or allowing his mission priest to be charged and tried for sedition.

In August 1867, Father Bucas left New Zealand on the Steam Ship *Auckland*, arriving in Sydney with no real direction or a role to fulfil at this point. Queensland’s Bishop O’Quinn came across Father Bucas during a visit to Sydney, where Bucas was awaiting his ship to return to France where—in all likelihood—he would have been sent, by the Vatican, to complete his

mission service in Africa, as he had first intended. At the time Bishop O'Quinn's diocese was the whole of a sparsely populated Queensland and he was searching for priests willing to travel to the 'wilds of the north', so to speak. Bucas accepted Bishop O'Quinn's invitation to become a mission priest in Queensland and he travelled to Brisbane to begin his missionary work. He was to remain in Queensland until his death in Rockhampton in 1930, some 63 years later.

Prior to moving to the northern reaches of Queensland, Bucas spent two years in Brisbane, arriving on 17 August 1867. He was assigned to work in the parish of Nudgee in a number of capacities, but in particular following his previous pattern of working closely with, and learning from, the indigenous population of the area. While in Brisbane, Bucas assisted in providing background information to Governor Bowen who had been appointed Governor of New Zealand. Bucas was an important source of information for Bowen as his knowledge of Maori language and culture was very detailed. In total, Bucas spent approximately two years living and working in and around Brisbane before moving north. On July 13, 1869 Bucas left Brisbane to sail to Rockhampton where he spent two weeks before taking a steam ship north to Mackay.

From the time of his arrival, Bucas loved the Mackay region and its people with an almost religious fervour. In his reflection on his time as Bishop of the Rockhampton diocese, in *The Crowded Years* (1947), Duhig comments on the relationship which formed between this unusual French priest and the local Mackay people—Catholic and non-Catholic alike. He says that Father Bucas became 'the law and prophet of Mackay'. The population of Mackay, when Bucas arrived, was about 500 people with 130 dwellings. There were some 35 miles of road under municipal control and 57 men registered to vote in local and state elections. The Catholic congregation of the

time consisted of some 32 people. Prominent cane farmer, businessman and Catholic, Thomas Henry Fitzgerald, provided the Sisters of St Joseph with the family home he had built on Riverside Corner. The Sisters had come to Mackay, at the request of Father Bucas, to assist in the education of the local children. Fitzgerald was able to provide the accommodation as he had built a new home for his wife and children, out on a cane farm in the area known as *Meadowlands*. Fitzgerald employed some 400 men on the farm, which was located south of the town centre. Given the size of the work force on the property, Bishop O'Quinn permitted Father Bucas to celebrate Mass on a weekly basis for over 200 people at the property; of whom obviously not all were Catholic. However, being of Christian background they were grateful for any religious services provided. It is possible Bucas and Fitzgerald had met in New Zealand, as Fitzgerald had moved to Queensland following a failed farming enterprise over there.

Mackay was only one parish from the time of Bucas' arrival in 1869 until 1906. His purview, as parish priest, spread from Bowen in the north to Clairview in the south, and west as far as Longreach. There are almost monthly references in the *Mackay Mercury*, in the shipping arrivals and departure notices, of Rev. Fr Bucas leaving for, or arriving from Bowen on the SS *Tinonee*. This would have been quite a journey to undertake on a regular basis as, in contrast with today's two hour car trip, the voyage averaged 24 hours from Mackay to Bowen. He certainly would have had a private room on board the steam ship; but with no air-conditioning and wearing the mandated woollen cassock, at least in the early years of his service in the district, it must have been a seriously uncomfortable journey. During his time in Mackay, Bucas was to see to the construction of two churches, on the North (River) Street site and the construction of several others throughout the district. The *Mackay Mercury* attests



to the timing of these constructions through advertisements asking for tenders for the construction work. Bucas also saw to the construction of the first Catholic church in Bowen.

Father Bucas established the first 'official school'—Catholic or State—in Mackay; teaching young boys on the verandah of his presbytery until the arrival of the Sisters of St Joseph in 1872. The Sisters staffed two schools, one in North Street and the other out on the property of *Meadowlands*. In a very short time the Sisters were providing education for over 100 students between the two schools.

A remarkable trait Bucas possessed was his ability to befriend people. His charity was boundless and locals were frequently heard to say 'Book it to Father Bucas'. In a number of obituaries published in newspapers in 1930, it is reported that Bucas was contemptuous of material possessions and is quoted as saying 'money is as the dust beneath my feet'. Every item booked to the accounts in various stores in Mackay—by people other than himself—was honoured by him. He apparently had the knack of not making people feel demeaned in having to accept charity. It is important not to romanticize Bucas, as he was very human in every way; however, stories abound as to the generosity of the priest in the district and not exclusively to Catholics. Whoever was in need of assistance, he would do everything in his power to provide what was required. There are stories amongst older members of the Mackay community which include the times Father Bucas could be seen riding his horse or peddling his bike in his socks, back to town down the main street, because he had seen someone in greater need of boots or shoes than himself. These are but a few of the examples of the gentle, generous and practical nature of Father Bucas.

Correspondence by Father Bucas indicates some considerable presence of impoverished people; most prominent of whom were the local indigenous population. As was demonstrated during his time in New Zealand, Bucas held a deep compassion for indigenous populations in the Mackay district. This included the Yuibera and Wiri tribes, as well as the South Sea Islander people who were 'blackbirded' to work on cane farms and other properties in the Mackay region. Bucas became associated with an Anglican pastoralist and philanthropist, George Francis Bridgman, and together they applied to the State Government to gazette, in 1871, the first Queensland Aboriginal reserve—a strip of land 3 miles wide and 8 miles deep (14 000 acres), between the estuaries of Sandy and Bakers Creeks, just south of Mackay. Bucas' relationship with Bridgman was quite close even though Bridgman was an Anglican; another example of Bucas' ability to accept people as he found them. Unusually for the time, he and Bridgman shared a strong common interest in preserving Aboriginal life and traditions without the influence and manipulations of missionaries or white do-gooders. Both men were very active in recording the language and culture of the people on the reserve. Unfortunately little remains of these particular records. In addition, both men planned for another reserve to be established north of Mackay in the Cape Hillsborough area. However, while the government agreed and gazetted the land, it was never to eventuate as Bucas was transferred to far north Queensland in 1880. Eventually the government reclaimed the land with the intent of further developing the region for agricultural purposes.

Adult Aborigines frequently died as a result of exposure to European diseases such as measles and influenza, from which they lacked immunity. Bucas, in his care and concern for the Aboriginal and Islander populations of the district,

was deeply compassionate to the children who, sadly, often became orphans due to the impact of European violence on their families at this time. Many of these orphans frequently ended up at his presbytery or at the home of the Josephite sisters. Bucas was determined to construct an orphanage to house them and one, along with a smaller second aboriginal reserve, was formally established sometime around 1879; with the land having been gazetted to Bucas between July 1876 and December 1877. Father Bucas selected a total of 2 880 acres in the area of Shoal Point, called Merara (later Seaview) and finally named Bucasia in honour of this man who cared for and ministered to the people of Mackay. The land selected was gazetted as second quality grazing land, with much of it being comprised of mangrove swamp, although a long strip was sand-dune country edged by a fine long beach. Interestingly enough, Bridgman acquired several selections of land surrounding the allotment, almost as a protective barrier around the reserve for the local aborigines and, later, the orphanage which housed children—both white and black. The exact location of the orphanage has been lost to time.

It is not possible to overstate the importance or closeness of the relationship between this French priest and the people of the Yuibera (Mackay) and Wiri (Sarina) tribes. He was determined to have land allocated to the indigenous people in several locations, in order for them to be able to maintain their traditional links with the land and continue traditional practices as far as was realistically possible. As stated previously, Father Bucas spent an enormous amount of time recording the language and customs of the people. Only two pages of his and Bridgman's records of the indigenous language survive. In Mackay history circles tradition has it that Bucas' notebooks were destroyed by a priest who came to the St Patrick's Presbytery after Father Bucas left in 1912. Thinking the

notebooks of little importance, the priest burnt them. Stories abound about local Aborigines being seen near the presbytery, on the verandah, with bread and other food items and with Bucas attending court in support of those arrested for various offences and speaking in favour of their character.

On a personal note: what was life like for Bucas in Mackay—so far from family and his homeland? In many ways Bucas was quite well informed of events in Europe, and in his homeland France. The *Mackay Mercury* of the time included comprehensive and varied reporting of international events. One such event was the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 which ultimately resulted in the unification of Germany. Progress of the war was reported faithfully in the paper, on a weekly basis, including the numbers of casualties suffered by both sides. It must have been very difficult for Bucas to read about the crushing defeats being suffered by his fellow nationals at the hands of the hated ‘Hun’! Rod Manning, former editor of the *Mackay Mercury* and descendent of Mannings who have lived in the district from very early settlement, recounts one story where, upon hearing that the French had been defeated by the Germans in 1871, Bucas collapsed in the street in a completely distraught state. There can be no doubt of the emotional pain felt by Father Bucas at this time.

In sharp contrast to this, and on a lighter note, there are several advertisements in the local classifieds in 1870 and 1871 providing evidence that Father Bucas had the occasional problem in keeping his bay mare tied up and readily accessible. It appears the mare had the knack of escaping; leaving Fr Bucas little option but to place an advertisement in the ‘Lost and Found’. Bishop Duhig tells great stories in his memoirs, of his time from 1905 to 1912 as Bishop of the Rockhampton Diocese. *The Crowded Years* reveals much about his relationship with Father Bucas.

More importantly, Archbishop Duhig provides a telling description of Bucas when he wrote in his eulogy in 1930:

He was prodigal of his meagre possessions, handing out help to every needy person that called on him... . To the end he retained his French mannerisms, of which gestures and graceful bowing were notable features. He lived and died like a soldier, with a keen eye, a manly bearing and complete indifference to his own comfort.

Archbishop James Duhig

With his time in Mackay drawing to a temporary close, Bucas was assigned to Cooktown in 1880, from where he moved between Townsville, Cloncurry, Charters Towers, Port Douglas and Cairns. The next regular reports of Pierre Bucas in Mackay begin again around 1887; however there is some evidence to suggest that he visited the town on his journeys from the north to Rockhampton and Brisbane. Following his time in the far north, between 1891 and 1895 Bucas served Catholic and local communities in Barcaldine, Mount Morgan, Clermont and Rockhampton. While in the north, particularly in Cairns, Pierre Bucas was involved in translating for police on a semi-frequent basis. Newspaper reports in the *Brisbane Courier* reveal the frequency with which French-speaking prisoners would escape from French-held New Caledonia, 700 miles off the North Queensland coast. They would arrive in Cairns in a wretched state, having sailed in rather poor circumstances rather than remain imprisoned in the French Caledonian prison. Effectively, these prisoners were early asylum seekers, hoping for protection from the horrific conditions imposed in the French-run prisons in the South Pacific.

During this time Bucas' nephews, Jules Bucas and Julien Plormel, arrived in Australia to train for the priesthood and to begin their service to the people of Queensland in remote and regional areas. Jules Bucas was 20 years of age and Julien Plormel a very tender 16 years old. Prior to their arrival in

Queensland, Bishop Cani had guaranteed to cover the cost of their training to the priesthood.

While Bucas Senior was stationed in Charters Towers in 1882, Bucas Junior and Plormel travelled to Australia on the P&O steamship, the *Rosetta* (*Sydney Morning Herald*), sailing through the Suez Canal and arriving at King George's Sound (Western Australia) on 23 November 1882. They then sailed the southern coastline of Australia, disembarking in Sydney on 5 December. Having completed this long journey, the men boarded, almost immediately, another ship (the SS *Glanworth*) and sailed for 'ports north'. In his obituary in 1921, the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* makes mention of the fact that Plormel then travelled to Charters Towers to visit his uncle, Pierre Bucas, for a period of two months prior to then travelling back to South Australia where he commenced his seminarian training. There is no record of where Jules Bucas was at this time; however it is unlikely he would have left his young cousin to travel to outback Queensland on his own. One can only imagine the excitement Father Pierre Bucas experienced at seeing family—after leaving France in 1865 and not having returned from that time.

In early 1886 both nephews travelled to South Australia, where they remained under the care of Jesuit priests until they had completed their seminarian training. Bishop Cani was the first bishop appointed to the diocese of Rockhampton. It was he who had arranged for the men to complete their seminarian training in return for their service in the diocese at the completion of their studies. It was at the seminary at Sevenhill near Clare, that both men learned much of their English. Father Jules Bucas was ordained to the priesthood on 27 September 1886 in Rockhampton by Bishop Cani. Plormel had to wait until 1887 as he was not of canonical age at the time of his cousin's

ordination. Jules Bucas' ordination was reported in the *Brisbane Courier* as being:

a very imposing ceremony ... [it] was performed at the St Joseph's Roman Catholic Church. ... . Father Jules Bucas was ordained by the Right Rev. Dr Cani, Bishop of Northern Qld.

In referring to Father Jules Bucas, the newspaper said that Jules Bucas 'is a nephew of the Rev Father Bucas, of Charters Towers, whose name is a household word among Catholics in this part of Queensland ...' .

It must have been, at times, a challenging situation to follow in the footsteps of a well-known and well-loved uncle. Upon their ordinations, both nephews were sent north to serve various communities, including Charters Towers, Townsville, Clermont, Winton, Aramac and Rockhampton.

Upon his return to Mackay in 1887, Pierre Bucas was greeted like the old friend he was. He immediately picked up his association with the local Aboriginal population; even, on occasion, acting as government agent for the distribution of equipment and goods (including blankets, food and medicines) to the Aborigines in the district. In a not unexpected return to a previous pattern, the local Aboriginal people were regular visitors to the presbytery. In addition to this, Father Bucas extended his knowledge and practice of botany and horticulture by establishing an experimental garden—largely for medicinal purposes. His interest in medicine saw him a frequent visitor to the local hospital where he observed surgeries and other medical procedures. Father Bucas loved music, reading and people and never lost his inquisitive nature. One of the tasks Father Pierre fulfilled on his return to the Mackay district was to see to the construction of a Convent for the Sisters of Mercy who now worked as educators for the children of the district in the Catholic School.

It is interesting to note that all three men became naturalised Queenslanders: Pierre Bucas in 1872, Jules Bucas in 1889 and Julien Plormel in 1894. Given that each one was responsible for the purchase of land for the purpose of building schools, convents and churches, as well as Pierre Bucas' original desire to establish protected areas for the Aboriginal people, it is very likely the naturalisation process was a legal necessity—rather than an emotional response to living in Queensland. However, travelling great distances—over land or sea, on horseback or by carriage, train, or steamship—became an integral part of the daily lives of the three French priests who did indeed develop an emotional connection with the country and its people.

The two nephews followed in their well-known uncle's footsteps in many ways. Just as Pierre Bucas worked to establish schools, churches, and convents also in towns other than where he was resident, so too did Jules and Julien. There are records, for example, of Father Plormel having laid the foundation stone for a chapel in Winton in 1889. He was responsible for the building of the small church which cost £700. It is interesting to note that, in the story about the consecration of the church, mention was made of the fact that the Anglican Church—completed twelve months previously—generally stood empty except for occasional services, as the parson had deserted the town. (*Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, February 1890) Further to this, in 1895 Father Plormel was in Rockhampton at the time of the planning for the new Cathedral and was present for the laying of the foundation stone by Bishop Cani. Father Jules, not to be left out, established the Catholic School in Ayr in 1912, under the instruction of Bishop Duhig. This was the last decision enacted by Bishop Duhig in the district as Ayr and surrounding territory became part of the Townsville Diocese a short time later. The school was staffed by the Good Samaritan Sisters, who were daily driven by Father Jules Bucas, from Brandon to Ayr



and back again, by horse and buggy. The school was originally to be built in Brandon. However, for various reasons—mostly for student convenience—the school was finally established in Ayr.

For part of the time that Jules Bucas was in Charters Towers (1887–1888), he served as Assistant Parish Priest with his Uncle Pierre. Upon Bucas Senior's return to Mackay, his other nephew, Julien Plormel would also serve with him, sporadically, particularly as their uncle's health deteriorated in the years which followed. Between 1888 and 1927 there are numerous instances of the family being together, in pairs or as a trio, in Rockhampton, Mount Morgan, Barcaldine and Mackay. Both nephews were by the mid-1890s carving out reputations for themselves as committed, compassionate and caring priests who were well liked by people in the communities in which they lived. Evidence of this, for Father Bucas junior, is seen in a newspaper report about a visit he made to St Lawrence. The news report in the *Rockhampton Bulletin* described him as:

... very well-liked by all who come in contact with him, Catholics and non-Catholics unite in voting him a pleasant gentleman, and one who is determined not to let small differences stand in the way of good fellowship.'

This is an early acknowledgement of what we see reported later in life that he was a gentle, warm man who generally related well to people.

In light of the reputation Jules Bucas gained as a quiet, retiring man who did not seek publicity, it is interesting, and—rather surprising—to see him become involved in a very public debate about the issue of conscription. In 1916, Father J Bucas was posted in north Queensland, to Ayr; having been stationed at Bowen prior to this. Unusually for a Catholic priest, Bucas had spoken out in support of conscription, which was up for

referendum in the November of 1916. An anonymous letter was sent to the *Bowen Independent* chastising Bucas for upholding the referendum on conscription, urging him to vote 'no'. It was signed 'An Old Bowen Catholic Friend'. Bucas responded by thanking the writer for their patronising letter branding them:

... a coward, because no one else writes an anonymous letter; a traitor because you would ... coerce me to assimilate my opinion to yours and persuade me to abandon our brave brothers who are fighting in the trenches in France at this moment for you and me. Before you wrote your letter you should have remembered that I hail from no other country but patriotic France, where in the hour of danger, we have always been, are now, and even shall be, ONE. They do not cut each other's throats there when the enemy is at their door. As to your circular, I ignore it—I am standing to my own conscience—it is neither the conscience of a coward nor of a traitor—and my vote on Saturday next will be YES.'

It is common knowledge that the accepted national position of the Catholic Church was anti-conscription in both 1916 and 1917. So why did Father Jules speak out in opposition to the Church's position? There was a very personal reason—apart from being of French origins—that Bucas was so strident in his statement. His cousin, Julien Plormel had signed up with the Australian Infantry Forces as a military chaplain. Plormel departed Australia on October 31st aboard His Majesty's Australian Transport Ship, *Argyllshire*; in his own words, 'anxious for a permanent position at the front'. Plormel disembarked in Devonport England on 10 January 1917 and then in France on 11 February 1917. Father Plormel saw action in the trenches with the men as chaplaincy support, as well as out of the trenches in the Australian General Hospitals near the front lines. There are a number of letters available, which were published in the Rockhampton *Morning Bulletin* during his

service overseas. One example of these comes from part of the letter he wrote home to his Uncle Pierre in October 1917:

During the bombardment we were in our dug-outs deep in the ground. The ground would tremble at the firing of the big guns, and the noise of the tear shells bursting over us was like a crash of thunder ... . At dawn the firing ceased. We all came out of our dugouts. The trenches had been about levelled. Everyone was at his post with his rifle and his machine gun ... . Soon we saw them coming with their heavy packs, shoulder to shoulder, marching along. Suddenly the word 'Fire' rang out ... then our boys fixed bayonets, lit their cigarettes, and over the trenches and at them. In twenty minutes the enemy were all dead or prisoners. We took their rations from them and had German sausages. Our losses were very small.

(Published in the *Rockhampton Bulletin* 16 October 1917)

Plormel was demobilised on 13 November 1919 and, according to his discharge papers, he was recorded as not wounded and not requiring disability payments. However, we do know that at some point in the time he spent in France, he was exposed to mustard gas and suffered problems with his lungs following this. He returned to his home village of St Jean de Poterie in May 1919 for a visit and, according to reports from the time, the reception received by Captain Julien Plormel in his home village, was outstanding. He had not been home since leaving as a boy of 16 and returned as part of the Allied Forces who had defeated the Germans.

Back in Queensland, Father Pierre Bucas was Administrative Priest for the parish of Barcaldine where his nephew had been Parish Priest prior to enlisting. Both men had moved to Barcaldine in 1912. Plormel had hoped that access to the water from the artesian wells in the district would help improve the health of his ailing uncle. Father Plormel returned to

Barcaldine in 1920, suffering serious health concerns with his lungs. Plormel lived with his uncle until his death in the Rockhampton Mater Hospital on 15 March 1921. He was buried in the Dawson Road cemetery. One obituary described this outgoing and personable priest with the words:

exceptionally broadminded and charitable ... most humorous and entertaining. He was beloved by his own people and respected by everybody. On several occasions very tangible evidence has been given of his popularity by all classes and creeds.

We also know, from the obituary in the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, Jules Bucas was at the side of his cousin when he died in 1921. His uncle was still at Barcaldine at this time but by 1923 had moved to the Rockhampton Mater Hospital, taking on the roles of chaplain and gardener there until his death in the October of 1930.

The second member of this French family of Queensland priests to pass away was Jules Bucas. In 1925 Bucas junior had requested a move to Brisbane, for a number of reasons, not the least of which was his ongoing friendship with Archbishop Duhig. Father Bucas was appointed Parish Priest at Our Lady of Loreto and remained administrator there until his death in August 1930. It was reported in various newspaper articles and obituaries that he had remained in good health until a few weeks prior to his death. Archbishop Duhig celebrated the Requiem Mass for Father Jules Bucas at St Stephen's Cathedral. In his panegyric, Archbishop Duhig stated:

Today we mourn the death of a simple, cultured, saintly priest whose life ... was most unobtrusive. He seldom appeared in public, his name seldom appeared in the press, but he was a man of great piety, of very deep affection for his people and for his fellow priests, and he was a man, above all, of very devout qualities. He was always cheerful and happy, however, and

never was this better shown than when he was amongst the children and amongst the poor. As a man he had two noteworthy characteristics—his great courtesy and his great friendship.

Archbishop Duhig referred to Jules Bucas as Pierre Bucas' favourite nephew, mentioning that Jules' great hope had been to have his uncle with him, to live out their years together in Brisbane.

On 20 October 1930, Father Pierre Bucas died, aged 90 years, in Rockhampton. Archbishop Duhig delivered the panegyric at the funeral. Pierre Bucas, to quote the Archbishop, was:

... an extraordinary figure, like one stepping out of some mediaeval history or drama. His deep learning, his rare intellectual gifts, his passionate eloquence even in our English tongue; his warm heartedness for the poor and suffering; his broad sympathy for his fellow men without distinction of race, colour or creed, made him universally loved.

Father Pierre was buried in Rockhampton; however he was reinterred in the Mackay Cemetery in 1946. Local legend has it that, on his death bed in Rockhampton, Father Pierre promised that if his body was interred in Mackay—the town which won his heart—then he would ensure Mackay would never again be hit by a cyclone. To date this has been the case, with the last cyclone to devastate Mackay being in 1918. The interment was celebrated with four Masses at St. Patrick's Church, with a Pontifical High Mass being celebrated on the morning of reburial. Archbishop Duhig travelled from Brisbane to lead the Masses. The Christian Brother's College cadet corps formed a sentinel guard of honour at the church, prior to and during the Mass. School children, parents, parishioners, business people and others came from all over the district, and beyond, to pay their respects. Many accompanied Father Bucas from

St Patrick's Church to the Mackay Cemetery on Shakespeare Street, marching beside and behind the coffin. The importance of Father Pierre Marie Bucas to the Mackay—and in particular the Catholic—community is indicated by the action to bring Father Bucas 'home' to rest. The ceremonies also reflect the level of respect and esteem with which he was held.

Quoted at the beginning of this article is the refrain from the well-known hymn, *The Galilee Song*. These words sit well as a reflection of the life of these three men. As in the hymn, we can't know the voices which whispered to the three Frenchmen to travel, so far from home, to a strange land with a strange language; to take the land and its people to heart, to give their lives in service to others. It is essential their story not be forgotten and their work fully acknowledged as a part of our history, as Catholics and as Queenslanders.

Father Pierre Bucas, Father Jules Bucas and Father Julien Plormel put their boats upon the deep, to follow the call to be a part of the history and development of so many communities in Queensland. We owe them and their families an enormous debt of gratitude.

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The author's ultimate goal is to publish a book containing as much information as possible on the extraordinary lives of these three priests. To this end she would welcome any stories, photographs, scanned letters or articles that may exist in the wider community. If you are able to assist in any way, Neridah would appreciate if you would kindly contact her on her email: [kaddatzn@hsc.qld.edu.au](mailto:kaddatzn@hsc.qld.edu.au).

*Neridah Kaddatz, a long-time resident of Mackay, is married with two children. She began her teaching career at Catholic schools in 1983, under the guidance of the Brothers at Mackay Christian Brother's College, and continued working there as an English and History teacher when the College became St Patrick's Senior Co-educational College in 1987.*

*In 2005 Neridah 'crossed the river', taking on the position of Head of English at Holy Spirit College. In 2007 she was appointed to the Leadership team of Holy Spirit College in its role of Assistant Principal Mission for a twelve-month period. It was Neridah's suggestion that the name of the new multi-purpose centre should recognise the variety of the many contributions made by Father Bucas to the Mackay district.*

*Through her own research and that of local historians, Neridah's interest in the life—first of Father Bucas and later those of his two nephews—led to her preparing this presentation to the Brisbane Catholic Historical Society. Her ultimate goal is the publication of a book giving a fuller record of the extraordinary lives of these three priests.*