

# **An almost bishop: Father James Comerford in Barcaldine and Charters Towers**

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An anonymous priest in North America told Alexis de Tocqueville, the French traveller, historian and social theorist, that 'it is necessary to go with the people, Sir'. James Comerford may not have read de Tocqueville, but he understood the wisdom of the North American priest's message<sup>1</sup>. Comerford, a Catholic priest who can readily carry the adjective 'extraordinary' arrived in Rockhampton, Queensland in 1876. He lived there for two years, tutored in the ways of his Church, in a colony not twenty years old, by the warm and erudite French native, Father Charles Murlay. The Frenchman introduced Comerford to Rockhampton, the port for Central Queensland, sprawled as it was along the banks of the broad and muddy Fitzroy River with its coastal boats and tenders, channels, sand-bars and mudflats, forty kilometres from the ocean.

Born in County Tipperary, Ireland, Comerford was schooled there before he was ordained in the cathedral in Thurles<sup>2</sup>. When he left southern Ireland for Queensland, Comerford had for his whole life been inured into (in the words of the Welsh historian, Gwyn A. Williams) 'the

rooted *sense of the normal*<sup>3</sup>, the ‘unavoidable presence’<sup>4</sup> that was the monstrous social and economic system the English aristocracy had inflicted upon Ireland for centuries. As Sydney Smith put it:

the moment the very name of Ireland is mentioned, the English seem to bid adieu to common feeling, common prudence and common sense, and to act with the barbarity of tyrants and the fatuity of idiots<sup>5</sup>.

Affirmation of Smith came from the Christian socialist and prolific author, the Anglican clergyman and Regius professor of modern history at Cambridge, Charles Kingsley, who reported after a visit to an Ireland ravaged by the Great Famine that he was:

daunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don’t believe they are our fault. I believe that there are not only many more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better and more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure are as white as ours<sup>6</sup>.

Understandably perhaps, the recently arrived Irishman was not dismayed that Rockhampton ‘could be divided into two classes - the “haves and the have-nots”, the former working in white collars with their coats on, and claiming affinity with squatter and planters and business men, the latter made up of manual workers, labourers and navvies’<sup>7</sup>. The ‘haves’ were so completely satisfied with themselves and so utterly contemptuous of anybody else; ‘the collarless crowd - the manual workers often justified the contempt measured out to them’. Other ‘have-nots’

included 'the Kanakas' living in their primitive shelters on the northern banks of the Fitzroy (until it began to flood), and the Chinese living in blocks of streets in the city's centre. Both races were foreign to Comerford who would soon learn that the 'have-nots' were the majority of Murlay's Catholic congregation<sup>8</sup>.

In the summer of 1879-80, Comerford left Rockhampton and rode into the sunset, with only an inkling of the Olympian task confronting him. As a week became a fortnight, the bush became more familiar, but unforgiving still, and the priest dared not treat it with contempt. The silence and isolation of Galway Bay could not be compared to this strange new land. The 1880 *Catholic Almanac*, not given to hyperbole, understated the priest's chosen field of work as 'this unusual mission'<sup>9</sup>. But, undaunted, the young priest went to the people and followed a motley band of railway construction workers who had already begun building a railway line west from Rockhampton. With the dint of daily experience over several years, few colonists would know the first three or four hundred miles of the Tropic of Capricorn better than the gangs of construction workers, setting up new settlements (as they went) at places that would dot the western trek with their old world names - Alpha, Beta, and Jericho. And, ten years on, few of the construction workers would know Central Queensland better than Comerford.

And as the days slid into weeks, Comerford began to understand what colonists meant by distance with its associated dangers and discomfits. (Brian Penton in his historical fiction is one of the few writers to recognise the

continuing pestilence of living with flies and mosquitoes, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, or any century, for that matter). Some of the hazards were man-made. Comerford was still living in Rockhampton when five men were killed during the construction of the railway bridge over the Comet River, several kilometres east of Emerald. Twelve survivors were taken to hospital in Rockhampton where Comerford may have visited them and heard about his future prospect of life on the Tropic of Capricorn<sup>10</sup>.

Capping it all, from his first days in Rockhampton he had heard and read accounts of blood on the frontier, some of the horror emanating from Hornet Bank (1857) and Cullin-la-Ringo (1861) in the Dawson Valley near Springsure. Nor would anyone declare the danger had diminished. No young man (less than a decade out of a seminary in Ireland) would have been unmoved by the dangers associated with being alone in the Australian bush near the places where one hundred or more people, black and white, had lost their lives violently only twenty years before<sup>11</sup>.

Comerford caught up with and joined the gangers and their navvies, two hundred or so miles west of Rockhampton, at Bogantungan. Several thousand people were living there in various degrees of permanency, their lives matching the priest's, all of them readily accepting the actuality of life beside the railway line, for a month or a year. Some men and women were drawn by the Willows gemfield that surrounded the township, but the railway's construction was the magnet, and stores and hotels and the other appurtenances of commerce were flourishing.

Tony Judt, revered intellectual and historian, who wrote about a diverse range of subjects - Israel, the Cold War, Eric Hobsbawm, the 'forgotten twentieth century' and 'the glory of the rails' - reminded his readers:

Railway tracks reinvented the landscape. They cut through hills, [and were]... carried across valleys, towns and estuaries. [They were] purpose-built: nothing else could run on them - and trains could run on nothing else. And because they could only be routed and constructed at certain gradients, on limited curves, and unimpeded by interference from obstacles like forests, boulders, crops, and cows, railways demanded - and were everywhere accorded - powers and authority over men and nature alike: rights of way, of property, of possession...<sup>12</sup>

As Judt found in the northern hemisphere, 'Communities that accommodated themselves to the railway typically prospered'<sup>13</sup>. Bogantungan State School did not open until 1883 and Comerford inched westward a year or two later. But the prospect of a state school's opening would have been sufficient to goad the priest's oppositional mentality. Comerford had learned (with Murlay as his mentor) that no priest should tolerate Catholic parents enrolling their children at a state school and for thirty years Comerford and his fellow priests harassed Catholics who defied them, and no other priest more aggressively than Comerford.

In 1862 John Bede Polding, long-time Catholic Archbishop of Sydney and inveterate overland traveller for all of the years of his episcopacy, urged an unnamed young priest to remember, 'You are a priest; but you are also more than that. You are a missionary priest'<sup>14</sup>. So

were some of Comerford's friends, still saying Mass in the western ramparts of Ireland, but unquestionably daily life in the colonies was beyond their imagination. For Comerford, who probably never met Polding, Bogantungan confirmed the old Bishop's declaration made twenty years before. Hardened by his life beside the railway tracks, Comerford was, definitively, a missionary, as he rode his horses to the west, but diverting north and south of Capricorn too, to Springsure and Clermont, Blackall and Aramac, as he tended to committed Catholics, harassing the lapsed, plotting and planning foundations for his Church.

All the while the iron rails hugged the Tropic of Capricorn as it disappeared into the west. Places like Bogantungan had sprung up overnight 'like patches of weeds...tents, bark huts, galvanised iron shacks would house the men and the few women and children with them'. Thomas Hanger, a contemporary of Comerford, called the settlements 'mushroom-growth towns'. As a child Hanger lived in some of these outposts with his mother and wheelwright father. He remembered water being the deciding factor 'for a temporary terminus where public houses and stores would be erected somehow and anyhow'. Daily life for the surveyors, engineers, gangers and navvies and the women and children with them was colonial life writ large<sup>15</sup>. Always primal, sometimes crude and savage, a local butcher applauded his son in the western way for his profanity, 'Christ, you ought to hear him'<sup>16</sup>.

Nor would Comerford's Irish friends comprehend his life in Bogantungan, the locus of the Irishman's mission for

four years. He acquired a building, consecrated it as the Church of the Sacred Heart and when he left Bogantungan he would drag the church with him for nine years until he and his improbable chattel reached Barcaldine, in the mid to late 1880s, at the end of a journey that stretches one's credulity. There the Sacred Heart became Barcaldine's parish church, with James Comerford parish priest: parts of the building were still being used seventy years later<sup>17</sup>.

But Barcaldine was the end of the line for Comerford and the gangs of workers, with no certainty when construction westward to Longreach would re-commence. Scores, even perhaps a couple of hundred men, were unemployed. Their plight, not unknown to Irish men and women, highlighted life in the colonies. Month after month, one new experience after another for Comerford: racial tensions with the Chinese and Kanakas, not to mention the Aborigines, unemployment, flooding rivers, railway construction through a hostile bush over distances unheard of in his native land. And (though he wasn't to know) the beginning of a hundred years war with Protestants over who would pay for Catholic schools. Mass was said in churches so crude and ugly, as his memory continued to recall the cathedrals and churches he had left behind in Ireland. And then there were the pastoral scenes so foreign to his childhood: 'the whitened water in a billabong... the distant thunder of running emus, a bullock team coming out of nowhere and raising a cloud of dust'<sup>18</sup>.

Sometimes, amongst the drunkenness, even debauchery, new arrivals found men like Comerford edging towards his vision of civilization, however distant it continued to

be. In Pine Hill, midway between Bogantungan and Alpha, the priest organized a Hibernian Society as a rival to the score or so of pubs. Some men, travellers realized, were trying to make themselves respected. ‘In a new and rapidly changing society, inimical to them in spirit and immoral to them in meaning, working men had to establish their value, their worth, their “respectability”, their very presence’<sup>19</sup>. A working-class consciousness was being established that was fundamental to the debate about grammar schools across Queensland, in general, and, a decade later, for Comerford, in his determination to build a secondary school for girls (and then boys) in Charters Towers. In the central west and Charters Towers, for Comerford that presence would be Catholic, first and foremost.

John James (‘Vagabond’ he used for the *Bulletin*) wrote of Pine Hill, the first town west of the Great Dividing Range, where ‘the hum of humanity bubbled beneath the pure blue of the North Australian sky’. Boldly resorting to hyperbole, James declared ‘every nation under the sun is here’ but he could only list some of them: French, Poles, Italians, Fenians, Chinese, English, South Sea Islanders and Aborigines [sic]<sup>20</sup>. A Rockhampton correspondent to the *Bulletin* described Pine Hill: ‘there is dust everywhere, not only in the streets, but in the houses. You breathe it, you eat it, you drink it, you sniff it, touch what you will it is there. It almost blinds you...’<sup>21</sup>. Comerford had been ‘there’.

Each new terminus would be ‘frantically busy’ until another creek or river further west was reached and ‘the whole community with its goods and chattels would move



on'<sup>22</sup>. Judt's thesis for Europe is apposite to central western Queensland: 'the railways did more than just facilitate travel and change the way the world was seen and depicted. They transformed the very landscape itself'<sup>23</sup>. Sometimes several hundred men were employed. They seem to have been predominantly Irish Catholics. In 1887 a contemporary wrote of a conservative estimate of 'about 60% of Irish amongst the unskilled workers. The sub-contractor from Jericho to Saltern Creek employed 376 men and of these 360 were Irish. In summer they started work at dawn, knocked off at 10.30 am, and started again at 4.30pm'<sup>24</sup>.

Railway construction was slow and Comerford used it to advantage, his and his Church's, riding north from Emerald, or perhaps Bogantungan, in the first months after he left Rockhampton, to organise the building of a church in Capella (Peak Downs)<sup>25</sup>. Much later, he plodded into the bush in a sojourn to Charters Towers, three hundred kilometres away to the north-east of Barcaldine<sup>26</sup>. Even in Barcaldine where he was relatively stationary for weeks and months at a time, his parish was a vast area, most of which he crossed on horseback, a feat that said much about his character.

In 1890 Comerford transferred to Charters Towers after two years in Barcaldine. Charters Towers, the booming city of several thousand people, and Barcaldine, the tiny, tin-roofed township were both in the diocese of Rockhampton. Given his visit to Charters Towers during his residency in Barcaldine, one can believe that the gold city attracted him, and he hastened to shift. And given the years he had spent since he had ridden out of

Rockhampton, it was as though, ten years later, Charters Towers could not be denied. Distance often thwarted bishops in their governance of priests, so much so that in their daily lives the priests suffered little interference from a bishop. In his years west of Emerald, and then during his residency in Barcaldine, and later in the gold city, Comerford was always so far away from his bishop as to allow him to be ‘an almost bishop’ (Patrick O’Farrell’s appellation)<sup>27</sup>.

Notwithstanding his being an almost bishop for a decade, one presumes that Comerford informed John Cani, Bishop of Rockhampton, that he was going to Charters Towers, but one cannot be certain as events there a decade later would affirm. Being an almost bishop exposed James Comerford as doctrinaire, abusive, stubborn, irascible, angry, bad-tempered, authoritarian (and all of these especially in his dealings with other priests, nuns and lay school teachers). Not to mention opinionated. He drank whisky with the next man and he did not discriminate between his parishioners and Protestants when he resorted to fisticuffs<sup>28</sup>. But all of his social interactions, he would have argued, if he thought about it at all, were for the advantage of his Church. As the University of Queensland academic, literary critic and historian, Cecil Hadgraft wrote, ‘Nations may be praised for their good and humble men, but they are made by their strong and ruthless ones’<sup>29</sup>.

Hard and brown from eleven years in the bush, the priest was finely tuned to life in western Queensland. He knew about rusty (and shiny) lengths of railway lines and the building of railway bridges. He knew what people meant

when they talked about ‘the drought’. He knew about life without medical and dental assistance: the diseases dreaded by every colonist - dysentery, scarlatina, malaria, yellow fever, dengue and typhoid, all described simply as ‘ague’. Hanger remembered ‘Blight, sore eyes - what we called sandy blight, because the eyeballs felt as if they were rubbing against sand’<sup>30</sup>. Comerford knew about man-made misery: the gambling, drinking, brawling and associated illnesses. He was replete with his western experience: the heat and dust, mosquitoes and flies, shortage of water, sandy ridges, spinifex deserts, hour after hour on a horse, sometimes the luxury of being bounced around in a horse-driven coach. He knew Irish Catholic families whom he encouraged and comforted, badgered and harassed. His Irish brogue may have persisted, but he was Irish Australian, blooded in Rockhampton and the central west. As the years had passed and the wheels turned, by any measure, the priest from Tipperary, was ready to say Mass in Charters Towers.

Charters Towers, in the grip of gold fever when Comerford arrived, had wealth that was more confronting than his still-clear memories of Rockhampton:

Crushing mills and, in later years cyanide plants: a major industry existed simply to transport ore and tailings between mines, mills and cyanide works. This transport industry ... created subsidiary demands ... for breeding horses, stabling, grazing, growing ... and carrying feed; and for tradesmen such as farriers, smiths, saddlers, harness makers, wagon builders, wheelwrights, veterinary surgeons and knackers. Several mining companies had their own railways, and

the network of lines throughout the towns [Charters Towers, Millchester, Queenton, Black Jack] employed further labour. Supplying firewood to mines, mills and locomotives was a major industry in itself<sup>31</sup>.

Two foundries, four sawmills, a brickworks and engineering plants provided further employment while other men worked as plumbers, tinsmiths, carpenters, glaziers, and bricklayers. Some women and men worked for merchants, ironmongers and publicans<sup>32</sup>. Others taught in state schools or eked out a precarious existence in private schools or assisted the nuns in the convent in Gill Street. And then there were the men who spent most of their lives underground. Wherever humanity spent its days in Charters Towers, it hummed like nothing the priest had seen (or heard). John James had found nothing in Pine Hill to match it.

The fire-brand Michael Davitt, Irish nationalist and republican, visited Charters Towers late in the 1890s. He found a city ‘throbbing with life...Mines are all over the place’<sup>33</sup>. A visiting journalist found a ‘bustling, thriving city...’ while another visitor ‘put up at one of the hotels in the main street: the place was full of miners’<sup>34</sup>. But dominant too were ‘the pit-gears [that] could be seen above the house tops in every direction’. Over-shadowing every scene was the equipment and paraphernalia of mining, ‘the view consisting chiefly of poppet-legs and engine heads’<sup>35</sup>. As Comerford watched the nineteenth century slide into the twentieth, Charters Towers was ringed by seventeen mills, each an affront to the ears:

Almost every mill in North Queensland crushed its ores with gravity stamps, a process involving between

five and sixty steel cylinders each weighing nearly half a ton, falling about seventy times a minute onto rocks in a steel mortar, twenty-four hours a day<sup>36</sup>.

Charters Towers like other mining towns across the continent ‘seethed for twenty-four hours a day with trains, machinery, dust, smoke, and electric lights in close proximity to, or even amongst, the houses of settlement’<sup>37</sup>. In agreeing that St Mary’s would be the site for a secondary school for girls, Comerford could not avoid the mills: four of them would be seen from St Mary’s convent where the cacophony of mining noises was the background for every prayer, every interaction between nuns, between Sister Mary Augustine Hardiman, Superior to the Sisters of Mercy in Charters Towers and Comerford, and between nuns and their pupils. The piano lessons on which the Sisters of Mercy would build much of their reputation (as they were already doing down south) could not be heard across the street for ‘the roar of the quartz mill everywhere’<sup>38</sup>.

Being an almost bishop had added significance for Comerford when Robert Dunne, parish priest in Toowoomba, succeeded James Quinn as Bishop of Brisbane in 1882, and Archbishop of Brisbane in 1887. Dunne had been parish priest of Toowoomba since 1868 where he was hermetic by inclination: he disliked Brisbane, finding it ‘ugly and overcrowded’<sup>39</sup> and his situation in Toowoomba allowed him ‘to forge a catholic social policy specifically for rural catholics. Fostering catholic homes rather than building churches or schools would become his first priority’. Indeed, he refused ‘to collect money for schools from his rural parishioners’<sup>40</sup>. Like Comerford, Dunne was a Tipperary native, and like

Comerford he was willing to go to the people, being (while he was a parish priest) a 'regular caller at the shearing sheds, washpools and railway camps'<sup>41</sup>. Like Comerford, he was prepared to erect simple wooden churches in rural settlements across the Darling Downs and as far west as Charleville, even as he opposed further building in Brisbane and provincial towns<sup>42</sup>. Yet the two Irishmen had huge differences about the place the Church should take in colonial society. Still, one thousand miles separated them, and as Comerford was safe from Dunne, so Dunne was protected too by distance from the almost bishop. But ten years and more into his life in the colonies, one is bound to say Comerford had little truck with bishops wherever they lived.

Dunne had been in Brisbane for thirteen years when Comerford arrived in Rockhampton. Dunne's route to Brisbane had been vastly different to Comerford's journey to Rockhampton. Dunne had some years of theological study in Rome and then served under James Quinn's presidency at St Lawrence O'Toole's school in Dublin, an institution allied to John Henry Newman's Catholic University. Dunne taught Latin, Greek, mathematics, algebra and geometry, and no evidence is extant that suggests Comerford had similar skills or knowledge. Comerford did not read Latin texts for pleasure and enrichment as James Mc Ginty, one of his predecessors in Rockhampton had done<sup>43</sup>.

Patrick Cardinal Moran, newly appointed Archbishop of Sydney had Dunne, the recently appointed Bishop of Brisbane, selected as secretary to the first Plenary Council of Bishops of Australasia in November 1885. Dunne

wrote a long, remarkable and unsolicited letter to Moran about his hopes for the Catholic Church in Australia. Dunne found much to object to in mining towns. His preference was ‘a persistent effort to settle people on the lands of the Colonies, withdrawing them as early as possible from mines, and from Railways and other possible public works’<sup>44</sup>. Moran supported him:

You find Catholics abundant in the police force, in the navy camps, in the labour gangs of large contractors, in the charge of public houses, on the wharves and on the cab-stands, dam making or fencing in the far interior, or timber getting by the fever-stricken estuaries along the northern coast. In fact you find these poor fellows wherever the hours are long, the climate merciless, the labour unskilled, the comforts few, and the remuneration small<sup>45</sup>.

Dunne conceded that ‘some middle class families, indeed, bring up their boys to professions, but such pushing people do not form one per cent of the Catholic Mass’<sup>46</sup>. More Catholics on the land as he had known as a child in Tipperary was Dunne’s hope and vision. ‘Save your earnings for a couple of years,’ Moran pleaded, echoing, even plagiarising, Dunne, ‘get homesteads and make to yourselves some provision and resting place for the evening of your life’<sup>47</sup>.

Nonetheless Moran was firm in his belief of a bricks- and - mortar Church even as Dunne was urging parents to educate their children, literally, thereby lessening the cost for the parish. Dunne’s limit on the building of schools and constraining the teaching orders of nuns were other policies that were anathema to most of Dunne’s contemporaries<sup>48</sup>. On the Darling Downs, Dunne’s

homesteads would provide no shelter for the pushing people.

If Comerford had heard or knew the expression, ‘pushing people’ had an entirely different meaning: for him, ‘pushing’ was more participle than adjective. Nothing objectionable about pushing people, he’d been doing it for years. It was as though he had battled, and survived the West, and comparatively, opponents were of small consequence: indeed they could be ignored, bishops or not. In the cloisters and altars of the colonial Church Comerford held little sway, notwithstanding his being an almost bishop. By definition an almost bishop lived and served in remote outposts of the colonies. Comerford’s life was ‘a localized, provincial, face-to-face world’<sup>49</sup> and bishops were out of sight and, mostly, out of mind.

Two of the assumptions underlying Comerford’s building intermediate (secondary) schools for Catholic girls and boys in Charters Towers were his schooling and ordination in Ireland, and the influence of Charles Murlay, Comerford’s first colonial mentor. Years before Comerford arrived in ‘The Towers’, Murlay brought applause when he told a parish audience:

It was a fact that the children of the poor attended school between the ages of 5 and 12: some went to school until they were 13, but others till they were only 11 years of age. They went to work after that to earn a few shillings a week to assist the father and mother in maintaining the household.

What, Murlay asked, did the children of the wealthy do, and quick to answer his own question:

They attended school until they were 14,15 and 16 -



and now they had a Grammar School opened which was supported by the State - doubtless they would attend school until they were 17, 18, and even 19 years of age; thus obtaining all the extra years of education which the poor were obliged to contribute to<sup>50</sup>.

The compulsory clauses of the 1875 legislation defining schooling for Queensland were not proclaimed until 1900. Until then compulsory attendance was not enforced<sup>51</sup>. Since 1873, before the creation of the Department of Public Instruction, (and the system continued after the 1875 legislation), boys and later girls had been eligible to win, at the completion of primary school, scholarships to a grammar school, but only a grammar school: the same schools that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church regarded (rightly) as state grammar schools. Those schools were secular, and thus for most, probably all, bishops and priests, they were reviled as godless institutions. Indeed the priests' opposition was demanded by the 1885 Plenary Council which stated:

Let the priests oppose, by all the means in their power, all attempts of the enemies of our faith to influence Catholics to send their children to heterodox schools<sup>52</sup>.

And moreover, underpinning the debate until 1884 (Catholics knew) was the exclusion from the candidacy for scholarships at grammar schools for girls and boys attending Catholic primary schools. In point of fact children at Catholic schools were precluded from competing, with the Regulations in 1882 explicitly stating candidates for the scholarships had to be enrolled at a state school for the previous eighteen months<sup>53</sup>. Monstrously discriminating against Catholics, the Regulations were amended in 1884 permitting candidates for the awards to

have attended at a state School 'or other school inspected by the officers of the Department'.

As the debate about policies governing schools swirled through the corridors of the ruling class in George Street in Brisbane, the 1885 Plenary Council of Bishops of Australasia in Sydney had stressed the need for developing higher education for Catholic boys. The bishops believed that secondary schools should multiply 'in every town of reasonable size'. Comerford's decision to provide a secondary school for girls before building a similar school for boys may be evidence of Sister Mary Augustine Hardiman's influence, notwithstanding her clashes with Comerford. Or he may have recognised the obvious advantage provided by the well-qualified Sisters of Mercy (already resident in Charters Towers), some of whom were teaching, randomly, intermediate subjects. Or it may have been Comerford's fundamental irascibility and his determination to continue the free-wheeling execution of his priestly duties as he continued to be an almost bishop. Or it may have exemplified his oppositional mentality: the conclave of bishops in Sydney wanted higher education for boys: Comerford's fractious disposition opted for higher education for girls.

St Mary's Convent High School for girls opened in 1892, and state scholarships could be (and were) taken there by Catholic and non-Catholic girls. It was a huge boon to Charters Towers, offering the opportunity for the daughters of tinsmiths, labourers, knackers, saddle-makers and miners in the gold city to match the pushing people in the more salubrious grammar school towns of Townsville, Rockhampton, Maryborough, Brisbane and

Toowoomba.

Peter Airey, pupil-teacher trained, taught in a number of state Schools around Queensland including Charters Towers before he was posted in 1901 to Hughenden, a ‘teacher’s penance in the north west backblocks’<sup>54</sup>, a further 140 miles or so west along the Great Northern railway from Charters Towers. Airey was not a Catholic, so while he was in ‘the Towers’ he may not have met the priest, but his sympathy for the labouring population meant he had much in common with Comerford. A few months after his arrival in Hughenden Airey was elected unopposed to the Legislative Assembly as Member for Flinders, an electorate that included Hughenden. He was the first state school teacher elected in the Labour interest<sup>55</sup>.

In his maiden speech in the Assembly, Airey gave robust support to other members who had been complaining for years about the iniquities of grammar schools. ‘There is an impression abroad’, Airey asserted:

that by this system [scholarships to grammar schools] the children of the poor man can get to those schools and enjoy the same education as the children of the rich man; but that is a fallacy, because in the case of the average working man when his boy attains the age of fourteen or fifteen years, he must send him to work, and the value of the scholarship is so little that he cannot afford to send him to a grammar school and pay for his books and clothing<sup>56</sup>.

In the memorable words of Thomas Hanger, long time state school teacher and headmaster, and a contemporary of Airey, ‘scholarships do not pay for books or boots’<sup>57</sup>.

Charges that grammar schools were the preserve of the rich were commonplace among Catholics and Protestants alike. Comerford did not need parliamentarians to tell him about parents who could not afford to send their children to grammar schools, some of those same parents defiling grammar schools as ‘hot-beds of snobbery’<sup>58</sup>. Worse, many parents would have agreed with Hanger’s judgment of a grammar school ‘where the chief thing learnt was to be ashamed of his parents and look with contempt on any form of manual labour’<sup>59</sup>.

Ten years after he settled in Charters Towers, Comerford bought the land for Mt Carmel. Perched upon a hill on the eastern outskirts of the city, the Christian Brothers opened their college for boys in 1902, with an enrolment of 123, most of whom would have arrived after their primary schooling at St Joseph’s (St. Columba’s) or St. Patrick’s (Millchester). The *Northern Miner* emphasized the point that was as obvious as the moon: ‘this noble institution[Mt Carmel] exactly supplies for boys a “long felt want”, what is already supplied and enjoyed by girls, in the extensive, commodious, and beautifully situated Convent of Mercy High School’<sup>60</sup>.

The delay in opening Mt Carmel may be further evidence that Catholic schooling (St Joseph’s convent) in Charters Towers was in turmoil, with Comerford central to the imbroglio. Documentation to explain the disruption is scant, but at its core was (probably) the personalities of Comerford and Mother Mary Augustine Hardiman. She was as formidable and authoritarian as the priest, and while she did not absolutely defy Comerford’s policies - a serious breach of her vows - collisions occurred. To

emphasize the point: at the end of the nineteenth century, no Catholic secondary school had been established for boys in Townsville or Charters Towers, but girls in ‘the Towers’ had been enrolled in intermediate classes for nearly a decade at St Mary’s Convent High School for girls.

Joseph Higgins succeeded John Cani as Bishop of Rockhampton in May 1899. Even after several years in his see, (and nearly five decades of being in the colonies), Cani, an Italian native, had been unable to shed the denigration of being ‘a foreigner’, an appellation that the Irish seldom carried, so Higgins was welcome across his Seat, and particularly in the Irish- dominated Charters Towers. On his first visit there in December 1899, Higgins was accorded such a welcome that ‘it was impossible for any language to express the pleasure such a visit had given him’. A procession along Gill Street from the railway station to St Columba’s led by a mounted marshal with hundreds of well-wishers lining the route, Higgins and Comerford in ‘a four horse drag drawn by a beautiful team of black horses’, cabs, private vehicles, the Hiberians in their regalia marching to a band, a thousand children, many of them marching, bedecked with green sashes and ribbons, a packed church, a choir and a banner inside St Columba’s declaring ‘We welcome you’.

But the pleasure Higgins was unable to express was, nonetheless, about to be exploded. If, in the few months of his occupancy of the Rockhampton see, Higgins had not realised that he had an almost bishop resident in Charters Towers, the truth of that fact was to hit him like one of the stampers at the Venus battery at Millchester. At

the very least, two months after Higgins had arrived in Rockhampton, Comerford did not inform him that he had closed, inexplicably, the upper grades of St Joseph's Convent in Gill Street, Charters Towers. And Higgins had come to learn that some months before his visit, Catholic children 'had all passed over to the State Schools'. It was an exaggeration, but whatever the truth of the numbers<sup>61</sup>, the Bishop was, presumably, angry, and especially as he had only learned about the collapse of the convent in the hours after his arrival on the train from Townsville. Nearly as objectionable, Comerford was allowing one nun and lay assistants in the lower classes of the convent to supervise (teach would be inaccurate) three hundred pupils.

Cani's visits to parishes distant from Rockhampton usually lasted a few days: Higgins stayed in Charters Towers nearly a fortnight, some measure of the catastrophe that had befallen the biggest school in the diocese. Then, having sought the safety of home, he returned to Charters Towers, not a dozen weeks later. His biographer suggests Higgins was 'mild and lenient' and avoided 'public controversy wherever possible'<sup>62</sup> and he needed to be all of those. During December and January 1899-1900, Higgins recalled the Sisters of Mercy from their holidays at convents around Queensland and transferred them to convents in North Queensland, dishonestly declaring they were more needed there than in the populous Charters Towers. With considerable assistance from Moran he replaced them with the Congregation of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St Benedict who, in the twentieth century, would be known as the 'Good Sams'. They were an Australian

Order founded by John Bede Polding, and for one hundred years (and more) thereafter, the Good Sams have ‘consecrate[d]themselves without reserve to the service of God and the succour of their fellow creatures in the religious state’. They (like nuns across the world) have left their own homes and gone:

to the ends of the earth in pursuit of their holy vocation, life becoming one continual round of duties from morning to night, day after day, year after year, to the end of their lives - prayer, visiting and consoling the poor, the sick and the dying, instructing the young and the ignorant ... their chosen lot ... (being) poverty and sacrifice harder than a Victorian housemaid’s<sup>63</sup>.

But Eagleton’s notation of the chosen lot of the nuns he knew and studied in the northern hemisphere was equally applicable to nuns across the Australian colonies (and States), and some might say, the sacrifice of the Good Sams was accentuated by their having Comerford as their parish priest. The Good Sams had left Glebe, beside Sydney’s harbour, to plunge into North Queensland, and, until then, protected by Australia’s largest city, they may not have had the experience of an almost bishop. From 1900 that would be their lot, until 1910, when Comerford retired.

Eagleton wrote too about priests. By any reckoning Comerford knew about what Eagleton called a priest’s ‘devot[ing] himself to the arduous work of a foreign mission’. Only further research in Ireland may reveal whether Comerford got more than ‘the mere necessities of life’<sup>64</sup>. James Duhig succeeded Higgins as Bishop of the Rockhampton diocese in 1906 and he tolerated

Comerford for four years. It must have been a bitter irony for Comerford that it was at the behest of a complaint from an Anglican clergyman that Duhig demanded that Comerford's resignation be 'in my hands by 31 March [1910]'<sup>65</sup>. But the further truth is that Duhig had already been lambasted by the Catholic priest Jules Bucas, whose mission had included many years in central and northern Queensland. Duhig may have already known when Bucas told him that Comerford had 'a vulgar and underbred nature...a venomous tongue...every word it utters a disfiguration of the amiable type it represents', but as he believed Bucas had 'the spirit of Napoleon and the heart of a St Vincent de Paul', Duhig eventually paid heed<sup>66</sup>. Indeed, it would have been difficult to ignore Bucas' denunciation that there was a 'brutality' to 'this raving monomaniac'<sup>67</sup>

St Columba is a corruption of St Columcille, the name of an ancient Gael, who had 'the gift of second sight combined with the power to control other men by force of his own personality...a shrewd judge of character... a man of warm sympathies'<sup>68</sup>. Some of it an exaggeration, perhaps, to attach to Comerford, though not to suggest he could terrify, comfort and delight. Whatever the truth, Comerford retreated to Ireland where he continued his commitment to his Church and where, before his death in 1918, he may have reflected upon a life that was 'a sufficiently striking instance of self-sacrifice and devotion'<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A.de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, J.P. Mayer(ed.),1958, quoted in Daniel A Kerr, 'The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland by 1844' in *Peel, Priests and Politics: Sir Robert*



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- Peel's Administration & the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1841-1846*, Clarendon, Oxford, p.6
- <sup>2</sup> *The Bushman*, 'Father James Comerford, "The Big Priest"', *Townsville Catholic News*, June- July 1969
- <sup>3</sup> Gwyn A. Williams, *Proletarian Order Antonio Gramsci: Factory Councils and the Origins of Communism in Italy, 1911-1921*, Croom Helm, London, p.255
- <sup>4</sup> Gwyn A. Williams, *The Welsh in their history*, Croom Helm, London, 1982, p.73
- <sup>5</sup> Sydney Smith, *Peter Pyley Letters, no 2, Stevenson's Book of Quotations Classical and Modern*, Cassell, London, 1967, p.999
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish saved Civilisation The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the rise of Medieval Europe*, Doubleday, New York, 1995, p.6
- <sup>7</sup> Thomas Hanger, *Sixty years in Queensland Schools*, Boolarong, Salisbury, 2016, p.3
- <sup>8</sup> Hanger, p.4
- <sup>9</sup> *Catholic Almanac 1880*
- <sup>10</sup> Isobel Hoch, *To the Setting sun: a History of Railway Construction Rockhampton to Longreach*, Central Queensland University Press, 1997, pp.29-30
- <sup>11</sup> Raymond Evans, *A History of Queensland*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2007, p.75 and Timothy Bottoms, *Conspiracy of Silence Queensland's Frontier Killing-Times*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2013, pp.53-4
- <sup>12</sup> Tony Judt, (Jennifer Homans, ed.), *When the Facts Change Essays, 1995-2010*, Heinemann, London, 2015, p.286
- <sup>13</sup> Judt, p.287
- <sup>14</sup> John Bede Polding to an unnamed priest, 8 October 1862, in Patrick Francis Moran, *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia from Authentic Sources*, Frank Coffee, Sydney [n.d, but 1896], p.320.
- <sup>15</sup> Hanger, p.6
- <sup>16</sup> Hanger, p.9
- <sup>17</sup> Personal conversation with Patrick Ogden, 1 May 2016, Barcaldine, Queensland
- <sup>18</sup> A.R. Chisholm, review of David Campbell, 'Speak with the sun', *Australian Quarterly*, December 1949, p.112

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- <sup>19</sup> Gwyn A. Williams, Introduction, John Gorman, *Banner Bright An illustrated history of the banners of the British Trade union movement*, Allen Lane,1973, p.6
- <sup>20</sup> Janice Cooper, *Crossing the Divide A history of Alpha and Jericho Districts*, Barcaldine Shire Council,2013,p.38
- <sup>21</sup> Cooper, p.40
- <sup>22</sup> Hanger, p.6
- <sup>23</sup> Judt, p.286
- <sup>24</sup> Hoch ,p.30
- <sup>25</sup> *Petra*, April 1923, p.203
- <sup>26</sup> Martin Sullivan, *Saints and Slaves A History of Catholic Schooling and the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Townsville*, North Queensland, Martin Sullivan publisher,2017, p.124
- <sup>27</sup> Patrick O' Farrell, *The Catholic Church And Community: An Australian History*, UNSW,Kensington,1992, p.35
- <sup>28</sup> T.P. Boland, *James Duhig*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia,1986, p.90
- <sup>29</sup> Quoted in Sullivan, p.69
- <sup>30</sup> Hanger, p.8
- <sup>31</sup> Peter Bell, 'Essay on North Queensland Mining Settlement', in K.H. Kennedy (ed.),*Readings in North Queensland Mining History*, James Cook University, Townsville,1982, p.16
- <sup>32</sup> Bell, p.19
- <sup>33</sup> Sullivan, p.133
- <sup>34</sup> Bell, pp.42-5
- <sup>35</sup> Bell, pp.42-5
- <sup>36</sup> Bell, pp.42-5
- <sup>37</sup> Bell, p.45
- <sup>38</sup> Mary Hannay Foott, *The Bookfellow* (1899), quoted in Henry Kellow, *Queensland Poets*, Harrap, Sydney, p.115
- <sup>39</sup> Neil J. Byrne, *Robert Dunne 1830-1917 Archbishop of Brisbane*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia,1991,
- <sup>40</sup> Byrne, p.76
- <sup>41</sup> Byrne, p.77
- <sup>42</sup> Byrne, p.138
- <sup>43</sup> Sullivan, p.10
- <sup>44</sup> Moran, p.691. Robert Dunne as secretary of the First Plenary Council of Bishops in 1885 Moran hoped to establish the agenda

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for the meeting. Moran used much of Dunne's letter in *History of the Catholic Church* but did not attribute it to Dunne.

- <sup>45</sup> Moran, p.691
- <sup>46</sup> Dunne to Moran with accompanying letter, 24 October 1884, St Mary's Cathedral Archives, Sydney.
- <sup>47</sup> Moran, p.691
- <sup>48</sup> Byrne, p.149
- <sup>49</sup> David Cannadine, 'The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition", c.1820-1977' in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition', Cambridge University Press,,1989, p.110
- <sup>50</sup> *Petra*, February 1923
- <sup>51</sup> Hanger, pp.4-5
- <sup>52</sup> Byrne, p.145
- <sup>53</sup> Rupert Goodman, *Secondary Education in Queensland,1860-1960*, Australian National University Press,1968,p.95
- <sup>54</sup> A.G.Stephens, 'Peter Airey', in Vance Palmer (ed.), *A.G.Stephens His Life and Work*, Robertson & Mullens, Melbourne, 1941, pp.188-9
- <sup>55</sup> *ADB*, 7,p.23
- <sup>56</sup> Martin G. Sullivan, 'Education and the labour movement in Queensland 1890-1910', unpublished MA thesis, University of Queensland,1971, p.203
- <sup>57</sup> Hanger, p.86
- <sup>58</sup> Hanger, p.86
- <sup>59</sup> Hanger, p.86
- <sup>60</sup> *Northern Miner*,12 August 1899
- <sup>61</sup> Sullivan, *Saints and Slaves*, p.142
- <sup>62</sup> *ADB*, 9,p.291
- <sup>63</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper A Memoir*, Penguin, Camberwell,2001,p.11
- <sup>64</sup> Eagleton, p.11
- <sup>65</sup> Duhig to Comerford, 12 March 1910,file 450,Rockhampton Diocesan Archives
- <sup>66</sup> R.J.Manning, 'Pierre Marie Bucas', *Footprints*, volume1,no 11,July 1973,p.24
- <sup>67</sup> Bucas to Duhig,4 March 1909, Brisbane Archdiocese Archives,(Rockhampton),Box 3

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<sup>68</sup> Cahill, p.187

<sup>69</sup> Eagleton, p.11