

## THE GEM OF THE WEST

Mr. Damien Morgan

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Thank you to the Brisbane Catholic Historical Society for the opportunity to speak. I'm gratified that many people find this type of history interesting. I will begin by acknowledging the Barrangum people of the Wakka Wakka nation, the traditional owners of the land where I live, and their leaders past, present and emerging.

My presentation this evening will look at the background to this project, and the early days of the Catholic Church

in Dalby leading up to the opening of our parish church, St Joseph's, the centenary of which we will commemorate in a few months' time. An approach came from Fr. Jim Cronin in December 2019 to write a history for the centenary; there would be a lead time of nearly two years. I had no experience at anything like this. My previous published writing had been restricted to a couple of pieces in education journals (my career background is in Catholic Education in Queensland and Victoria), a couple of researched non-fiction pieces, and some opinion and memoir-styled material. So, this was very different.

I accepted the job in February 2020 after discussing how I might go about it with a couple of people. One of my sisters has a Ph.D in History and was very encouraging, right up to the point where she reminded me that because this work was new, it would be referred to by people for years to come so I had better get it right. My plan was to read and collect information, photos and stories for six months, to start writing in winter, and to be finished by Christmas. Good plan - didn't quite work that way, but the two years' time frame reduced pressure on me.

From the start, I received excellent support from the Parish Centenary Committee who I think were all pleased that somebody else had taken on this writing task, especially a couple of members who went out of their way to research particular items and to look for interesting stories. Narelle McIntyre became an excellent research

assistant, falling down TROVE rabbit holes, following up interesting stories, seeking out family histories and so on.

Initial questions I had to resolve included the following. Would I look at St Joseph's Church (from 1921), the Parish (from 1868) or the Catholic Church in Dalby (1849)? I ended up going with the third option, because it just seemed more interesting to follow those stories back. I considered whether to place my research emphasis on priests or parishioners? My answer was instead to seek stories which would best tell the life of the parish. After reading as widely as I could about Dalby's early history, and about St Joseph's Church itself, I decided that my first task was to search for the first priest and mass celebrated in the town.

William McGinty's name came to the fore. An interview with one of the oldest residents at the time of opening St Joseph's in 1921 'remembered' him as the first priest (she would have been a little girl at the time). There is a story that has been repeated by bishops and others in the past that Fr. McGinty, or M'Ginney, had arrived in Brisbane in 1843 with Dean Hanly, but he hadn't even been ordained at that time and wasn't even in Australia until 1847. In fact, Fr. McGinty didn't get to Queensland until 1852, when he was sent to Ipswich by Bishop Polding.

McGinty held my interest for a long time, but eventually it became clear that the first priest at Dalby was Fr. Eugene Luckie from Ipswich, who said mass here, in Stewart's Public House, on 2 December 1849. A diary or

journal entry by Fr. Luckie, and quoted in John Kane's 'The Luckie Parish', was the clincher.

Samuel and Mary Stewart had arrived in Sydney on the *Premier* in July 1840. They were from Monasterevin in Co. Kildare, and had arrived as 'bounty immigrants'; they were free settlers, but the immigration agent, in their case a Mr. Capper, was paid a bounty for each person landed safely. They had been assured of work in Sydney, but arrived to find a pretty rough town in the middle of a drought. So they moved north into the Hunter Valley, later to New England, and then to Cecil Plains Station in what is now the Darling Downs. Henry Russell, who owned the property, took a liking to young Sam and his wife, and when it was suggested that an inn at The Crossing on Myall Creek would be a good idea, Russell put up the money and the Stewarts had the first "permanent" building at The Crossing. This was Stewart's Public House, later the Traveller's Inn, and after Samuel's death and some licence movement, the Ploughman's Arms and then the Plough Inn. The owners now were Josiah and Teresa Milstead who had bigger plans, and they built a bigger and very elaborate building, also called the Plough Inn, which opened in 1863 right across the road. Their daughter, Mrs Robertson, donated the original building to the Catholic Church, and it became the first local school and was used for mass.

The Milsteads' new Plough Inn was magnificent, but they had over-capitalised and they lost control of it in 1866. It

sat vacant for some time. It may have been used as a hospital for a period, but was certainly unused when Bishop Quinn directed Fr. Byrne to purchase it in 1876 to be used as a convent and school for the Sisters of Mercy.

After Fr. Luckie's first visit in December 1849 and before St Joseph's was established as its own Mission, or Parish with Fr. Denis Byrne in charge in 1868, there had been quite a number of visiting priests, some of whose names will be familiar to you from the early days of Brisbane and Ipswich: Fr. James Hanly, Dean Rigney, Robert Downing, McGinty, Fr. Hodebourg (from Ipswich and later Drayton), Eugene McCarthy (the first resident priest), Michael Renehan, William Bowe, Matthew Devitt (a resident priest, and here when the first St Joseph's Church was opened), Robert Dunne (later to be the first Archbishop of Brisbane), David D'Arcy (actually had a parish at Peel, near Bathurst in NSW, but had at least two extended visits to Southern Queensland, and based himself in Dalby - a popular man apparently), and both Archbishop Polding (once in 1858 on a long camping-out journey, 600 miles over a period of a couple of months, with Dean Rigney) and Bishop Quinn (many pastoral visits, the first of which was in 1861).

St Joseph's Parish was established as separate to the Drayton/Toowoomba Parish in 1868, at the same time as the railway was extended here. The town had something of a boom, and developed a bit of a reputation as a rowdy

sort of place. Bishop Quinn was quite concerned about the lack of temperance here.



*The first St Joseph's Church - 1866-1886*

There's not a lot of detail about who exactly was responsible for the planning of the first St Joseph's Church, although my guess would be that Fr. Bowe started things off in 1864, and that Fr. Devitt saw it through to completion. Fr. Hodebourg in Toowoomba was probably overseeing the project as the 'Head of Mission'. We do know that the original builder decided to use locally sourced clay for the bricks to be used in construction. Apparently, he had found a good source nearby on Myall Creek which would keep the task of brickmaking basically on site with the church. This raised a few eyebrows, as the *Dalby Herald* reported that other builders had used local clay for bricks with results substandard to say the least. Anyway, in October 1865 it

was reported that it was all going well. Then on 9 December a very nasty storm hit Dalby, resulting in the death of one child and a number of buildings being damaged, including the Catholic Church, the gable wall of which was blown down. The next we hear is March 1866, when a contract is awarded for the demolition and reconstruction of the church. By early July it was as good as completed, and Fr. Hodebourg said mass there on his way through to Roma. The official opening was on 5 August 1866, when Bishop Quinn attended and, with Fr. Devitt on hand, the church was appropriately blessed and opened with some ceremony. The *Herald* reported that despite bad weather, the church had been beautifully decorated for the occasion.

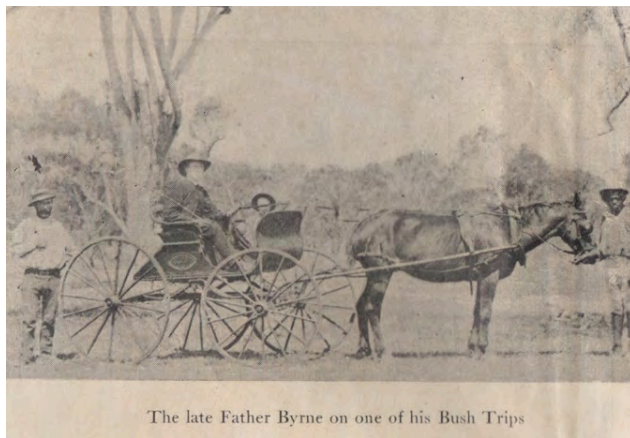


*Fr. Denis Byrne*

Fr. Denis Byrne had been ordained at Carlow College in Ireland in 1865, and pretty much immediately embarked

on a ship to Moreton Bay, arriving in Brisbane on New Year's Eve 1865. In 1866 he was appointed to Toowoomba as the assistant priest, living in Drayton. I don't think he got on very well with Bishop Quinn and there are a few events that point to this.

In 1868 when he was appointed to Dalby, Byrne's Drayton/Toowoomba parishioners wanted to present him with a buggy, as a gift, as a sign of their gratitude and knowing how big his new parish was going to be. However, the Bishop thought it would be a good idea if, instead of keeping the buggy for himself, Byrne raffled it off and gave the proceeds to a new school or a fence for the church in Toowoomba. Clearly, Byrne disagreed and so declined the gift. The Bishop was unhappy that 'someone' had told the Toowoomba people that he (the Bishop) had forbidden him (Byrne) to accept it! Outrageous!



The late Father Byrne on one of his Bush Trips

*Obviously not the "gift buggy" from Toowoomba*



The Bishop sent Byrne a letter as he prepared to go to Dalby. It read in part, of his time in Toowoomba:

You allowed your flock to wander about on Sunday nights where their curiosity might lead them, or spend their time in public houses, and did not even give them a Rosary. You never visited the stations belonging to your district, or if you did visit some of them you never gave the poor Catholics employed on them an opportunity of fulfilling their Religious duties. If you act in Dalby as you did in Toowoomba, I won't be satisfied with you. Exert yourself and call on the people to help you to do all that remains to be done.

He was also counselled about his handling of money; I'm unsure as to what the Bishop had in mind, but Byrne left a substantial estate when he died many years later.

Byrne heard from Fr. Dunne about problems with the Sisters of Mercy when they arrived in Toowoomba (it seemed they had little control over the children in their care), and he was concerned about the financial drain on the parish supporting a community of sisters. Apparently quite satisfied with the lay staff already at the school, Byrne was at least reluctant, and for some time quite opposed to having a convent in Dalby. Eventually though, under local pressure and with the Bishop providing the money to purchase and prepare the old Plough Inn, he relented, and the Sisters arrived in Dalby in 1877 and maintained a presence in the town until 1990.

In a parish that extended from Jondaryan in the east to Miles in the west (about 200km), and from Cecil Plains in the south to Gayndah in the north (some 300km), Byrne was on his own for the first 15 years or so until Fr. James Lonergan joined him in 1883.



*The second St Joseph's Church - 1886-1916*

The first St Joseph's Church was slowly falling into disrepair (it might have had something to do with those dodgy bricks), and in 1886 it was described in *Queensland Punch* as 'shameful'. The local parishioners were sick of it, and mass was said on the other side of the creek in the convent while a new, wooden church was built. The second St Joseph's, on the same block of land on the corner of Bunya and Jimbour Streets, was blessed and opened by Bishop Dunne in September 1886.

Fr. Byrne was here until his death from asthma in 1907, having spent 39 years in Dalby. Some lovely things were

written about him at the time of his passing, and apparently his funeral was the largest the town had ever seen.

I want to spend a little time on what happened in the parish after Byrne's death. This is partly speculation, based upon what is known as fact, and deals with something of a scandal. The 'local' story is that Fr. Nolan, who had been here since 1900 as a curate and would be here until his death in 1950, took over as parish priest. However, in July 1909 it was reported in the press that Fr. John Hegarty of Red Hill (Brisbane) had been appointed as the new parish priest for Dalby. Throughout 1910, in the advertisements for mass times in the *Dalby Herald*, Hegarty is named as parish priest, and Fr. Nolan's name follows.

When planning for the 'new' convent was happening in early 1910, Hegarty chaired those meetings, and crucially at the blessing of the foundation stone in November 1910 with Bishop Duhig present, Hegarty is named as parish priest by the Sydney Catholic paper, the *Freeman's Journal*. But current lists of parish priests at St Joseph's Dalby omit him. We are changing that! Why has he been cancelled?

Fr. Hegarty was one of a kind, in that he had a University degree (a Bachelor of Arts from Royal University, Dublin, achieved before his ordination); the only priest in Queensland at the time with such an academic background. In 1892 it was reported that since his arrival at Red Hill a few months earlier, mass attendance had

increased so much that extensions to St Brigid's were being considered. He also, as parish priest at Red Hill, established Queensland's first St Vincent de Paul Conference. He, along with other local clergymen, was seconded by Ithaca Council in the aftermath of the Brisbane floods in 1893 to their relief committee, specifically to identify people in need of relief.

In 1897, at the blessing of the foundation stone for a new school at St Brigid's, Archbishop Dunne described Hegarty as one of the best priests working in the diocese. Fr. Hegarty was a cultured man and encouraged his musicians and choirs to challenge themselves by performing beautiful music at mass.

So, why did Dalby forget him? We know from Archbishop Dunne's letters that Fr. Hegarty had a serious drinking problem. It has been suggested that an extended overseas holiday he took in 1902 which was described as an attempt to improve his health, may well have been to dry him out and get some treatment. My guess is that after returning to Australia and falling back into his old ways, the Archbishop decided on another 'fresh start' for this otherwise capable man, and sent him to Dalby as the parish priest and mentor for the younger and less experienced Nolan. We know that during his brief tenure in Dalby he got the convent started, purchased land on behalf of the Diocese, and was involved in the broader community.

But by late 1910, Dalby parishioners had complained to the Archbishop, claiming that Fr. Hegarty was saying mass drunk. The Archbishop, who wrote that he had sworn Hegarty to sobriety a number of times, and was unwell himself, handed the problem onto James Duhig, then Bishop of Rockhampton, and soon to be coadjutor Bishop of Brisbane. Duhig moved Fr. Hegarty on, this time to Esk, where apparently the problem did not go away.

Sadly, the foundation stone in place at the convent does not recognise Fr. Hegarty, nor his work in the initial stages of planning. The stone is dated incorrectly (one year too late) and names Fr. Nolan as 'Head of Mission', which he was by late 1911.

When the new St Joseph's Church was opened in December 1921, only 11 years after he had been here as a busy parish priest, Fr. Hegarty's name was omitted from the list of priests who had served the Dalby Parish, and the local legend that there had been only two parish priests here between 1868 and 1950 was given its beginning.

Fr. Thomas Nolan took over as parish priest in 1911, and became legendary in both the Church and local community. He was described by one of Dalby's mayors as being the town's best ambassador. He was a builder for the parish (halls, the convent, a new school, and not only the new St Joseph's Church, but churches in a number of the smaller towns and settlements that made up this vast parish). He was immersed in the community - from

sporting organisations (Patron of the Dalby rugby league for many years), the hospital board, bands and choirs, and show societies among other activities.



*Fr. (later Mons) Thomas Nolan*

But Fr. Nolan's crowning achievement will always be seen as building the 'Gem of the West', blessed and opened on 4 December 1921, and consecrated in 1928. He is not forgotten. Dalby Town Council named a street in his honour which runs between Cunningham and Condamine Streets, near St Joseph's. The parish priest's residence is Nolan House, and our local P-12 school, Our Lady of the Southern Cross College, proudly has Nolan as one of its four student houses.



### ***The Gem of the West***

The value of a gem is not only judged by reason of its lustre, but by the rarity of the quality of which it can boast. St Joseph's has been aptly styled "The Gem of the West" and the epithet can be valued more than ever, for St Joseph's is one of the few consecrated parish churches of the Commonwealth.

*Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs Gazette, 24 September 1928*

*Editor's note: The presentation above is derived from Mr Morgan's 2021 book, "The Gem of the West". Copies may be purchased from St Joseph's Parish, Dalby. Telephone 07 4662 4011 or by email to [dalbyparish@twb.catholic.org.au](mailto:dalbyparish@twb.catholic.org.au).*

