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IN A BEND OF THE MURRUMBIDGEE

The Foundation of the Catholic Church in
Wagga Wagga (1858)

by SYLVIA WALSH

A paper read to the Society on 22 October 1979
by Mrs Sylvia Walsh, a Vice-President

IN SEARCH OF PRIESTS

On the arrival, in 1835, of Australia's first Catholic Bishop, John Bede Polding, the Catholic population on the mainland was scarcely 22,000, scattered mostly, apart from a small concentration around Sydney, over an area stretching from Moreton Bay to Port Phillip.

They were being ministered to by a handful of priests. None could be spared for service even a few miles from Sydney let alone for further inland. This scarcity of priests prompted the Bishop to send his Vicar-General, Dr Ullathorne, to England to recruit priests for the Church struggling for its existence beyond Sydney.

The only Englishman to answer the call in 1837 was Father Charles Lovat. Initially he came to teach at a Seminary at Saint Mary's in Sydney but in 1839 he was placed in charge of the Yass Mission.

Wagga Wagga was then part of the Yass Mission which, in turn, was part of the Diocese of Sydney.

With no previous missionary experience he confronted this new challenge, the inhospitable Australian bush, in what was one of the hottest and driest summers in the country's history. It was a far cry from the verdant fields and shady trees of England to the dust and heat of the arid inland already plagued for three years by a drought which continued for yet another

four. James Gormly wrote with regard to the drought, that his wife's father, Joseph Cox, travelling from Gobarrolong with his wife and family during that period, camped on the dry bed of the Tumut River.

Never before had Father Lovat been in a saddle and, as John O'Brien wrote, "had ridden nothing harder or rougher than a Chair of Theology". In the first three weeks in his Parish he rode 518 miles in order to attend to 187 people in congregations of 6 to 30.

He followed the tracks of the shepherds who drove their sheep to the high land above Tumut, to escape the ravages of drought. Coming down from the mountains, back to the Port Phillip track, through Tarcutta Gap and into the present Riverina area, he was the first priest to minister in what is now the Diocese of Wagga Wagga.

It was his successor, Father Patrick Magennis, who offered the first Mass in the town itself in 1851. This would probably have taken place in the small Court House which usually was the venue for Religious Services before Churches were established. Later on, however, Mass was celebrated in a room made available in Thomas Byrnes' Australian Family Hotel. The latter, situated on a rise opposite the Post Office in Fitzmaurice Street, was built in 1857. It has now gone the way of some of its early counterparts. It serves the needs of a different nature, in the form of offices and a shopping Arcade.

Masses were also offered later on in private homes situated some distance from the Church. One of these was the home of the writer's grandparents, Daniel and Harriet Maher of "Mount Pleasant".

FATHERS M. McALROY AND P. BERMINGHAM

Following the previous poor response from English Priests for service in inland Australia, an appeal went out to the Irish Clergy. As a result a steady flow of Priests began to arrive in 1838 and continued to do so in succeeding years, to help carry the burden. They were welcomed with open arms by the settlers deprived for so long of the comfort of their religion. These Priests have now been immortalized by John O'Brien (Monsignor Patrick Hartigan) in his book, "Men of '38 and Other Pioneer Priests". Among these were Father Michael McAlroy and Father Patrick Bermingham. In the service of the Catholic Church no greater pair ever faced the rigours of the sunburnt country.

In Ireland they had heard from Father Patrick Dunne of the Church's needs in the inland. While on a visit to Ireland, Bishop Goold of Melbourne met and invited them to come to

his Diocese and join their friend, Father Dunne, who was in charge at Geelong. They arrived in 1855 but one year later all four Priests in Geelong were sent to different parts of the Diocese. None of them was happy. Father McAlroy could find only about a dozen resident catholics in the inhabited parts of Gippsland where he had been sent to take charge. For a man of his energy anxious to get on with his mission, this was unsatisfactory. In a while he left and joined Father Bermingham who resided at Mt Moriac, having charge of Colac, Ararat and the Upper and Lower Dee.

Voicing their dissatisfaction to the Bishop they asked to be released. They then went to Sydney. Dr Polding was pleased to have them and sent them to the Yass Mission where, in 1857, Father McAlroy took over from Father Patrick Magennis.

Father Dunne, who had been placed in charge at Port Fairy, left the Diocese in 1857 and returned to Ireland where he became President of the Seminary at Tullamore, but in 1861 he was on his way once more with immigrants for Queensland.

These three priests played an important role in the development of the Catholic Church in Wagga Wagga. All three are written up in the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

The Yass Mission, which was founded in 1838 under the care of Fathers Michael Brennan and John Fitzpatrick, covered an area of 400 miles long and, in places, 120 miles wide with 5,000 catholics scattered over the area.

With the coming of Fathers McAlroy and Bermingham the landscape took on a new dimension. Whereas previously there was no complete Church between Yass and Melbourne, now they sprang up as if by magic.

Father McAlroy had all the qualities of a business man and financier. With a knowledge of architecture acquired in his early years, he designed most of the Churches and supervised the building of all of them. His co-worker, Father Bermingham, an outstanding scholar and orator, had great organizing ability when guided by Father McAlroy. He handled the publicity. Father McAlroy had eight Churches in the course of erection at one time, all of which opened almost free of debt. In ten years he had built sixteen, each one of lasting quality, and paid for them all.

One of these was the first Saint Michael's in Wagga Wagga, the foundation of which was laid by him in 1858. It was opened also by him in 1859.

The building of the Churches did not make their work any easier. Each Church was visited for Mass once a month or once in every five weeks. Considering that the furthest Church from

the Yass Presbytery was 120 miles distant, it meant extensive travelling.

Both priests were outstanding horsemen. They literally lived in the saddle. Besides saying Mass in the Churches they visited every Catholic family, whether they be in houses, bark huts or makeshift dwellings, from Gunning to the Albury border, from Kiandra to The Levels (Temora) and the Lachlan. At times they would not see each other for three months. While one was serving outback areas, the other one would be working closer to the home district. It was estimated that each one of them travelled eleven thousand miles per year.

Father McAlroy was admired by all, irrespective of their creed. He was known to be a counsellor to many not of his faith. When Sir Charles Cowper, the Colonial Secretary or Premier as he would be known now, was going to Lambing Flat (Young) in 1861 in an endeavour to quell the riots among the miners, he reached Galong and was feeling apprehensive. He refused to proceed unless Father McAlroy accompanied him in order to protect him. Father McAlroy had just called in at the Galong homestead after attending a sick miner. Although he had already ridden 35 miles on his way home, he remounted and rode back to the diggings, a trip of 70 miles or so on the same horse. A few miles out of town he dismissed the escort to avoid inflaming the miners. He then stood beside Sir Charles Cowper while the latter made his speech. Such was the man who well earned his title of "Apostle of the South". Another well-deserved honour was the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity bestowed upon him by Dr Lanigan when the latter became Bishop of Goulburn. It was expected that Father McAlroy would be made Bishop of Goulburn. Big man that he was he did not show any resentment or disappointment when Dr Lanigan's appointment was announced.

Father Bermingham, a learned man, did not possess the business acumen of Father McAlroy but together they formed a great team. While Father McAlroy was building the Churches Father Bermingham, a master of the spoken word, made the appeals for the money to pay for them.

In later years when they were stationed in separate Parishes, Father Bermingham missed the guidance of the business man, Father McAlroy. Being too trusting in dealings with tradesmen and not having contracts signed brought him some financial problems, but he will always be remembered for his outstanding pioneer work in the south.

In his book, "Men of '38" (from which much of the foregoing information has come), John O'Brien writes of Father Bermingham that "he was a venerated priest, a noted preacher, a respected controversialist in the Church's cause, a cultured

gentleman, a scholarly Irishman who pushed aside his books and peeled off his coat to do the digging in a distant and uninviting section of the vast Vineyard where the harvest was great and labourers sorely needed". John O'Brien wrote also of the horses which carried these men on their Mission, so perhaps a word should be spared for them here. They were called the "Murrumbidgee Walers", spelt walers. He wrote of them that they were the hardiest in the world. The climate had given them a sturdy constitution and splendid feet. Many had never been shod, groomed or stable fed; they were ridden from daylight till dark and were capable of travelling two or three hundred miles a week without effort. One hundred miles a day was a commonplace event for the walers. Sadly they are no longer heard of except in the reminiscing of some of the old folk who had links with yester year.

ACQUIRING A SITE

It would be naive to assume that to obtain suitable land for Catholic Church purposes was an easy matter. On the contrary it was fraught with many difficulties. Land at first set aside on the north-western corner of Travers and Fitzmaurice Streets was not considered suitable as it was subject to flooding. At the time of writing the site was occupied by the City Stock Saleyards. The memory was still fresh in the minds of the residents, of the tragedy which occurred just five years previously, in 1852, when the flooded waters of the Murrumbidgee River claimed the lives of more than eighty people in Gundagai—almost the entire population in one horror-filled night. Wagga Wagga also experienced its share of misery on that occasion.

Efforts to obtain more suitable land were supported by William Macleay, a prominent pastoralist, J.P. and later the parliamentary representative for the district.

Applications were made to the appropriate authorities seeking a grant of two acres in section 43 viz. the south-eastern area of Johnston Street. This land included the site on which now stands the Technical and Science Block of the Christian Brothers' Regional High School. That is where the first Church of Saint Michael was built.

Correspondence began in November 1857 with a letter being sent from the office of the Vicar-General of the Catholic Diocese of Sydney, Reverend J McEncroe, to the Surveyor-General, Mr G Barney, requesting on behalf of Archbishop Polding that the land mentioned be granted.

In his reply the Surveyor-General stated that, although there was room for a grant in the area desired, the request of His Grace could not be acceded to because the land was situated

within the space set aside for the Church of England. He went on to say that the area was large, and although the whole of it would not perhaps be granted to that denomination, yet, under the decision of the Government, two grants to different bodies could not be made in close proximity while other sites were available. He requested that the Archbishop make another selection.

The Vicar-General then wrote to the Secretary of Lands and Public Works enclosing a copy of the Surveyor-General's reply and stating that no other site was suitable because no other within practicable distance was secure from floods. He therefore requested that the Government might perhaps be induced to relax its decision and grant a site where the letter of the Surveyor-General testified that there was ample room. Because of the fear of floods there was a reluctance to accept the offer of an alternative site on the western side of Church Street in Section 41. The Surveyor-General informed the Secretary of Lands and Works as follows: "The land indicated in Section 43 has been measured by Mr Surveyor Fisher into two allotments of one acre each, one of which has been reserved for a burial ground as it contains numerous graves. The other has been appropriated as a site for a Hospital and the description will shortly be submitted in abstract for formal approval".

About that time the hospital committee had been seeking an allocation of land as the town's only hospital had been operating since 1856 in Kincaid Street premises loaned for the purpose. The site for a hospital was granted and the hospital built on the north-eastern corner of Tarcutta and Johnston Streets where now, in 1979, stands the residence of the Inspector of Police. The Christian Brothers' Monastery now occupies the site which had been appropriated for a hospital.

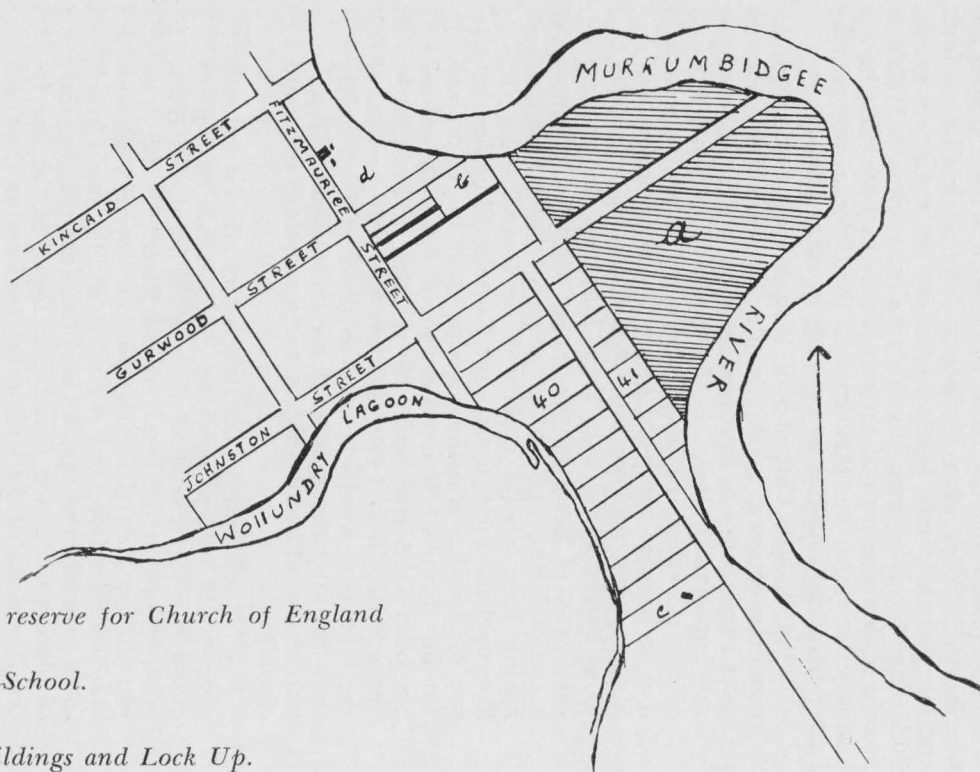
The burial ground mentioned was visible for many years, in fact in the present day former Christian Brothers' School students say that a few tombstones remained for some years after the School opened in 1914. One at least remained upright and was used by many a student as a wicket for cricket practice. The graves were situated in what is now the playing field.

For many anxious months the Catholic Community awaited the outcome of the applications made on their behalf. Archbishop Polding, travelling south with Father Patrick Bermingham in February 1858, laid the foundation stones of four Churches between Sydney and the Victorian border: Jugiong, Gundagai, Tumut and Albury. He visited Wagga Wagga during the tour and no doubt Saint Michael's would have been included in the number if suitable land had been made available at an earlier date.

Sketch map of the eastern end of Johnston Street prior to the formation of Tarcutta and Church Streets.

From an 1849 map.

(Archives of New South Wales)



- (a) Shaded area showing reserve for Church of England and Parsonage.
- (b) Reserve for National School.
- (c) Blacksmith's Shop.
- (d) Old Court House buildings and Lock Up.

Time passed and the patience of the Catholic people was wearing thin. They were anxious to have their Church built and felt that they were being singled out for unfair treatment. Following a public meeting the Chairman, James Walsh, a prominent business man of the day, wrote in July 1858 the following letter which was forwarded to the Colonial Secretary by Father Bermingham. The letter reads in part:

Sir: We the Catholics of Wagga Wagga and surrounding country, in Public Meeting assembled, beg most respectfully to approach you as the Premier of this important Colony . . . To approach to the nature of our grievance, 1st having been led to the opinion that as soon as we could secure a certain amount of funds, a sight [sic] for our Church would be granted to us by the Govt., 2nd There being on the extreme North east of South Wagga Wagga a block of land of a conical form, and out of reach of flood, this spot having been always spoken of as intended for the Episcopelian, Presbyterian and Catholic Churches, the two former denominations having their shares marked out for them, while our portion of the high ground has been interfered with, by running a large street upwards of ninety feet wide thro' the only portion of the land that would be safe in times of high floods, thus throwing the sight [sic] for the Catholic Church into a flat which is subject to inundation at second class floods.

With reference to the large street alluded to, such street could lead to nowhere, as the block of land in question is in an isolated place in the form of a Horse Shoe, in one of the bends of the River . . . We trust you will be pleased to take this our appeal into your kind consideration, and cause the site for our Church to be granted to us that we may have the pleasing duty of placing under the foundation stone, in the inscription, the name of the Ruling Powers forming the Govt. of New South Wales, in the year of Our Lord 1858, and shall feel ourselves in duty bound to pray,—

For and in behalf of the Catholics of Wagga Wagga, and the surrounding country, in Public Meeting assembled,—

James Walsh
Chairman of Committee

One wonders if such a document was placed on the site and if so was it found during demolition in later years.

Father Bermingham's covering letter dated 2 July 1858, stated that considerable dissatisfaction existed in the district.

He pointed out that, whereas sites had been granted to three Denominations and also provision made for a Hospital and Mechanics' Institute, it was incredible that the application of the Catholics should be practically set aside although their application was made long before the present subdivision of what is commonly called Church Hill.

The letters had the desired effect. The area of two acres on the eastern side of Church Street, which was the Street referred to in James Walsh's letter, was granted. It was there that the first Church of Saint Michael was built, where now stands the Technical and Science Block of the Christian Brothers' High School.

From the Yass Presbytery on 11 August 1858, Father Bermingham wrote to the Secretary of Lands and Works expressing the gratitude of the clergymen and the Catholics of Wagga Wagga for the prompt and truly impartial response made to their appeal.*

THE FOUNDATION

Fathers McAlroy and Bermingham wasted no time in arranging for the building of the first Church of Saint Michael. Less than seven weeks after the land had been granted they were on their way for the blessing of the foundation.

The worries associated with the obtaining of the site were not the only problems encountered. Travelling from Yass in September 1858 for the ceremony they met with problems of a different nature. It was a hazardous journey for both of them. Roads were poor at the best of times but in a wet season they were well-nigh impassable. The Daily Advertiser 20 February 1965 quoting from the Freeman's Journal 13 October 1858, reported that a few days earlier heavy rains had fallen causing severe flooding. It seemed doubtful that the two officiating clergy would arrive in Wagga Wagga on time as was the case with many of the Catholic Community.

Father McAlroy swam his horse and vehicle over the Hillas Creek but on arrival at Tarcutta was not permitted to pass over the bridge even though he explained that his non-arrival at Wagga Wagga would inconvenience many people. And so with a prayer on his lips and a tight rein on his horse he braved the swollen waters once again with a swimming horse and a floating gig within sight of the bridge a few yards away.

**Note:* Information regarding the foregoing correspondence was given to this writer by the late Mr Bernard Dowd, F.R.A.H.S., some months before his death in 1978. Mr Dowd was the Officer for Historical Research in the Department of Lands, Sydney.

Father Bermingham who was travelling on horse-back was expected in Wagga Wagga on Sunday at 10 a.m. The creeks had become almost impassable by this time and for some hours he too was detained at Tarcutta being also refused access to the bridge. Undaunted he mounted, not his horse but a rail fence, and was permitted to move around a large paddock, tediously holding on to the top rail while he inched his way along the second one. As a result of these mishaps the ceremony was delayed. Instead of its taking place on Sunday, 26 September, it was postponed until Monday, 27 September.

After the celebration of Mass at Mr Byrnes' Australian Hotel the procession moved off to the beautiful site in the bend of the river, so picturesquely described in the Wagga Wagga Express at the time of the Church's opening in 1859 viz: "The natural beauty of the situation at the base of the rocky hill, with the sinuous Murrumbidgee winding at its foot; the curious co-mingling everywhere around of advanced civilization with the rudest makeshifts of the early settler and even with the primeval forest as it stretched around in simple, but awful solitude and grandeur, formed a picture such as landscape painters would have loved to dwell upon".

There Father McAlroy had a wooden cross erected on the site of the future High Altar. He then performed an impressive ceremony of blessing. Father Bermingham preached an appropriate sermon. They were assisted by Father Con. Twomey.

A CHURCH IS BUILT

Because there was no stone of suitable quality available in the area, the Church was built of brick. J. Wilson was the bricklayer and plasterer; D Howell the carpenter and J Houghton the cedar paneller. The Gothic roof was topped by an attractive cupola. The 89,000 bricks were used at a cost of £223, while the 28,000 shingles cost £56 (£2 per 1,000). Total cost of the Church was £1,500 16s, of which £1,489 4s was subscribed by the residents of the town and district by opening day. Then the Catholic population numbered only 250.

Not all the subscribers were of the Catholic faith, in fact many people of kindred denominations shared the cost. This demonstrated that a happy relationship existed and a spirit of ecumenism prevailed in the community. The list of donors reads like a "Who's who" in Wagga Wagga. Among the donors was the town's first Police Magistrate, Henry Baylis, who gave his name to the main Street, south of the Wollundry Lagoon. In the same year (1859), he laid the foundation stone of the first Saint John's Church of England.

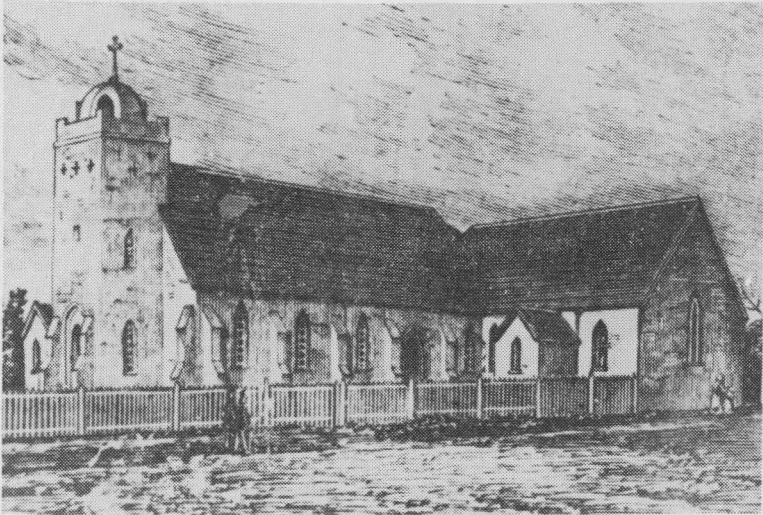
The names of other prominent folk who gave their names to streets of the town will be recognised in the following list

which appeared in a "A Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Yass Mission from its Foundation, 1838, to the Present Time", written by Dr Morgan O'Connor while he was practising medicine in Yass, and published in Goulburn in 1861. Dr O'Connor, a distinguished Irishman educated in Belgium and London, came to Wagga Wagga where he practised medicine for over twenty years and followed pastoral pursuits. He was attuned to all aspects of the Community's needs and he strived for its advancement culturally, educationally and socially. He was also an outstanding Catholic layman. He gave service as a Magistrate and died in Wagga Wagga in 1895.

SAINT MICHAEL'S CHURCH, SUBSCRIPTION LIST, 1859

Revds. Messrs. McAlroy and Birmingham	£15 0 0	Per Mr Walshe.....	£3 0 0
Thomas Byrnes	26 0 0	John Delahunty	4 2 0
Stephen Fennell	10 0 0	Patrick Hogan	10 0 0
Donald McIntosh	22 11 0	John O'Loughlin	1 0 0
George Forsyth	10 0 0	Per John Fennell	1 0 0
Thomas Cartwright	11 0 0	Thomas Bourke	20 0 0
Denis Keeffe	10 7 0	Jas. Bourke and lady	45 0 0
James Gormly	5 0 0	Michael & Mrs McNamarra	25 0 0
James Hughes	1 0 0	Thomas A. Fennell	5 5 0
P Maloney	3 0 0	Patrick Carroll	1 0 0
Job and Mrs Blythe	5 0 0	Richard and Mrs Slate	2 0 0
William Harris	1 0 0	Miss Best	1 0 0
Marcus Patterson	1 0 0	H. E. Thompson	2 0 0
George Harris	1 0 0	-Roche	1 0 0
John Levington	1 0 0	James Holloway	1 0 0
James Rudd	15 0 0	John Hart	12 0 0
Mrs Jackson and daughters	5 0 0	Nicholas and Mrs Troy	19 0 0
Charles McReddin	3 0 0	Mr Turner	1 0 0
John Hiles	1 0 0	William White	2 1 0
A B Morgan, M.D.	5 0 0	Mrs Browne	1 0 0
Charles Buffery	1 0 0	George McGill	3 0 0
Michael Bourke	42 10 0	Miss Jane O'Loughlin	2 10 0
Edward Crowper and wife	1 0 0	Miss Buckley	3 0 0
Terence Williams	1 0 0	P. Ryan	2 10 0
Patrick Fennell, snr	19 0 0	John Peters	20 0 0
Michael Maher	13 2 0	Mrs Peters	40 0 0
Henry Baylis	10 0 0	Miss Keighran	4 10 0
Hugh Byrnes	5 5 0	John McAlister	3 0 0
Mrs Smith	2 0 0	John Cox	14 0 0
Robert Nixon	7 2 0	Mrs Dodd	5 0 0
Charles Clarke	7 10 0	Charles McKenzie	5 0 0
John Green	1 1 0	John and Mrs McKenzie	7 2 0
Mrs S. McDonnell	2 0 0	-Irwin	2 0 0
James O'Keefe, C.C.	10 0 0	-Cummins, senior	3 0 0
Ashton's Benefit	38 0 0	Michael Cummins	4 0 0
John Lupton	5 0 0	Andrew Donovan	1 0 0
Arthur Graham	15 0 0	James Walsh and family	29 0 0
Alexander Murphy	12 0 0	J. S. Stamp	5 0 0
John and Mrs Dill	11 0 0	Jacob & Mrs Marks	5 10 0
D. Hannom	2 0 0	Michael Carroll	1 0 0
John Kane	12 0 0	John Strachan	1 0 0
W. McLeay, M.P.	20 0 0	Mrs Maguire	1 10 0
		Mrs Thurtle	7 0 0

Mr & Mrs John Bent	£25	0	0	Henry Norton	£1	1	0
James Flood, snr	20	0	0	Mr Price	2	0	0
James Flood, jnr	2	2	0	Mr Murdock	1	1	0
Thomas Power Loughlan	5	0	0	Michael O'Loughlin	1	0	0
M. Higgins	1	0	0	Patrick Sheedy	1	0	0
H. N. Loughnan	15	0	0	Maurice Conlan	2	2	0
Bridget Connell	1	0	0	Per Wm. O'Brien, Levels	21	0	0
Edward Ray	5	0	0	Per Mr Fennell	2	0	0
Joseph King	1	0	0	Lawrence Roache	2	2	0
A friend	0	5	0	James Scott Dele	1	1	0
John Fennell	15	0	0	Jeremiah Rodgers	1	1	0
Mr Corbyn	1	0	0	Mrs Gormly	1	0	0
—	0	5	0	John Leech	5	0	0
John & Mrs McNamara	11	18	0	Jonathan Boon	1	0	0
Mrs Bourke	2	0	0	Per ditto from Court	10	0	0
Mrs Joseph Harrold	3	0	0	P. F. S. Stephens	2	2	0
John Maxwell	1	0	0	T. B. Caldwell	1	1	0
Joseph Cox	5	0	0	John Broughton	1	0	0
David Cox	1	0	0	Dr Levy	5	5	0
Catherine Bourke	0	7	0	William Scott	2	0	0
Mrs Hasting	1	0	0	Walter Dexereux	10	0	0
James Crawford	0	7	0	Mr Ferguson	5	0	0
Joseph King	1	0	0	Mr Calvin	2	2	0
Elizabeth Sarill	0	10	0	Mr Dal'as	5	5	0
Miss Russell	1	0	0	Mr Byrnes	1	1	0
Messrs Vernon & Mellin	2	2	0	John Rewin	3	0	0
John Loughnan	0	10	0	Isaac Chaplain	2	0	0
Anthony Stenson	2	0	0	Mr Irwin	5	0	0
James Bothwell	0	10	0	John Gardner	1	0	0
—Cormac	1	0	0	Collected Sunday, Nov. 13	20	6	0
Denis O'Brien	1	0	0	James McEvoy	5	0	0
William O'Hare	0	10	0	—Forbes	1	0	0
William Dacey	1	0	0	A friend	2	2	0
Patrick Marony	1	0	0	Ditto per W. O'Keefe	4	0	0
Jeremiah Marony	1	0	0	Opening Church	130	15	0
William Cummins	1	0	0	Mrs O'Brien	2	1	0
John O'Brien	1	0	0	James Leathen	1	0	0
John Ryan	1	0	0	Small sums	1	5	0
James Commans	2	0	0	Mrs D'Acy	1	0	0
Joseph Swan	1	0	0	James Rawley	1	0	0
William O'Donnell	2	0	0	F. Thompson	5	0	0
P. J. Doyle	1	0	0	Collected for seats etc.	70	0	0
Mr Lacey	1	0	0	Mr Stamp	2	2	0
John Gardner	1	0	0	Thomas Fennell	3	3	0
John Dillon	3	0	0	Ditto for bell	3	3	0
Miss Harney	2	0	0	Mr Vardy	1	0	0
M. Byrnes	1	0	0	Cavanagh	1	0	0
Michael Ryan	5	5	0	Michael Long	2	10	0
Alicia Hough	0	5	0	Miss Russell	0	10	0
Mary Baker	1	0	0	Mrs Peters	2	0	0
Francis Walton	2	0	0	Michael Commans	4	5	0
Thomas Moylan	2	0	0	William O'Brien	2	0	0
P. S. Murray	1	1	0	Robert Beverly	1	0	0
Patrick Keighran	2	0	0	Thomas Kearns	1	0	0
E. George Collins	1	0	0	Per W. O'Brien and M.			
John Post	5	0	0	Commans	27	10	0
Edward White	5	0	0	Per Mrs McKenzie	8	5	0
Matthew Sawyer	1	0	0	Per Miss Maher	12	5	0
Henry Moxom	1	0	0	John Cox	5	0	0
John Wilson	3	3	0	Sundry sums	17	0	0



*First Saint Michael's Church, foundation laid 1858,
opened 1859.*

(Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society Archives)

care of Mr H. Wilkinson. "It was a finely tuned instrument which will no doubt add much to the musical effect of the service of the Church".

At the time of the building of the Church, the Diocese of Goulburn had not yet been formed. This took place in 1864. Bishop Geoghegan, who was chosen to be its head, died while in Ireland before assuming charge of the See. The Diocese was administered by Dean Hanly until Dr Lanigan was consecrated its Bishop in 1867.

FIRST RESIDENT PRIEST

The Catholic Community now had a Church but no resident priest. Repeated requests were made, a house and £500 per year were guaranteed but sufficient clergy were not available. It was not until 1871 that a resident priest was appointed.

Bishop Lanigan travelled to Wagga Wagga in March 1871 driven in a horse-drawn buggy by Father John Gallagher who had arrived the previous year from Ireland. In later years he succeeded Dr Lanigan as Bishop of Goulburn. With young Father Gallagher at the reins they covered the distance in four days. Now in a fast car it takes three hours.

While there, the Catholic people petitioned the Bishop to appoint a resident priest. As a result Father William Bermingham, younger brother of Patrick, took up residence in June of that year. He was assisted by Father John Dunne who later became Bishop of Wilcannia. Prior to Father Bermingham's appointment the town was served from Yass with Mass being offered every five weeks. Service was also given from Albury and Tumut following the formation of Parishes in those centres.

EDUCATION

It is not possible to divorce the affairs of the Catholic Church from the subject of education. They have always gone hand in hand.

As early as 1858 Archdeacon McEncroe of Sydney proposed to set up a Catholic School in Wagga Wagga under the Denominational School Board. Most probably this was not done because of the delay in granting of a site for the Church, but in 1860, just after the Church was opened, a School was conducted in the Church by John Egan who had previously taught in the short-lived Catholic School at Binalong. Egan's administration of the School left much to be desired, but in fairness to him it should be noted that the local School Board did nothing to see that the School had proper furniture and equipment, nor did Archdeacon McEncroe do much to ensure that the School had a supply of books. The School closed in 1861.

It re-opened in 1864 under the care of Francis O'Doherty at a salary of £60 per annum which increased to £72 by 1866. Although the Council Inspector deemed him to be a fair teacher, his work deteriorated. It was alleged that he failed to send in his quarterly returns. Contributing factors were, however, upsets in the local Board and the fact that he was suffering from a terminal illness. The certificate for the School was lost in 1872, probably unfairly, but regained in 1876 under Mr M. Moran who, in later years, was assisted by J. Davis. In the interim the School was conducted for a time as a private one by Charles Coghlan, who is said to have been a University graduate. Until the Presentation Sisters came in 1874, the School was a mixed one. Mr Moran's School was for boys only. Moran was a stern disciplinarian, scholarly and very popular in the community.

THE COMING OF THE PRESENTATION SISTERS

Dr Patrick Bermingham who had played a leading role in the building of the Church sixteen years earlier, succeeded his brother as Priest-in-charge in 1874. In 1862 he travelled to Europe. While in Rome he gained a Doctorate of Divinity.

Continuing on to Dublin he held the Professor's Chair in Moral Theology at Carlow College.

In 1873 his friend and former co-worker, Father Michael McAlroy, was in Ireland at the direction of his Bishop to seek volunteers to teach in the Diocese. He asked Dr Bermingham who had relatives in the Presentation Order in Kildare, to persuade some members of the Order to offer their services. Five were chosen from among those who volunteered. In the following year they sailed for Australia accompanied by the two priests. On 21 June, not long after their arrival, Dr Bermingham's appointment as Priest-in-Charge was announced.

The Sisters on their arrival had no home to call their own. The Priests moved out of the Presbytery to quarters in Mr Byrnes' Australian Hotel. Later on the Priests were offered free use of "Foxborough Hall" and eighty acres of land, by Mrs Jackson of Boree Creek. This generous lady, not a Catholic herself, furnished two rooms to accommodate the Priests. Some fifty years later "Foxborough Hall" and twenty acres were purchased to become the nucleus of Lewisham Hospital, now known as Calvary Hospital.



First Presbytery, circa 1871.

—courtesy Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society

On their arrival from Ireland the Presentation Sisters were not only obliged to live in inadequate quarters (there were but two bedrooms for five Nuns in the Presbytery), but also to impart the fundamentals of the 3 R's or rather the 4 R's, to 130

children in the Nuns' first school, an overcrowded, uncomfortable and ill-equipped stable divided into two sections and situated behind the present Bishop's House. This writer's father, Telacon Lloyd, was one of the pupils. Later on he transferred to Mr Moran's School in the Church. He recalled that he secretly smoked on his way to and from School. He would hide his clay pipe and twist of tobacco under a box-thorn hedge near Saint John's Church of England and retrieve it on his way home.

The stable, steeped in history, was demolished in 1959 to make way for transport facilities of a different kind—a garage for motor cars. It is regrettable that this monument to early Catholic Education in Wagga Wagga could not have been preserved. Perhaps it could have been re-located at Mount Erin Convent.

To the Church he had helped to establish Dr Bermingham added, in 1875, an extension wing to serve, not only as a school, but to provide for 160 additional people to attend Mass. The Presentation Sisters taught there. The foundation stone of the wing was rescued from the rubble when the Church was demolished in 1965. It is now in the Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society's Museum.

Dr Bermingham was the driving force behind the building of Mount Erin Convent in 1876, but incurred the displeasure of Bishop Lanigan who, being conservative and even austere in his ideas of what a Convent building should be, considered it to be too elaborate. In later years his opinion in this regard mellowed and he expressed pride in the establishment.

In January 1878 the Nuns transferred the Girls' School to Mount Erin Convent. Mr Moran continued to conduct the Boys' School until State Aid to all denominational Schools ceased in 1882. On his departure he was given a farewell and a purse of sovereigns.

Encouraged by Bishop Lanigan, the Catholic Community decided to continue the School under laymen. Various teachers followed Mr Moran. J. J. and M. M. Ryan, who were not related and who were nicknamed Big and Little Ryan respectively, came in 1883. They prepared some boys for University examinations. Early in 1884 J. J. Ryan left to take up a teaching position in Victoria. In later years M. M. Ryan was to become a foundation member of the Farmers' and Settlers' Association of New South Wales. At the time of its formation in 1893 he was in charge of the Mundawaddera School. Gunning Francis Plunkett of the Yerong Creek Hotel was the Association's first President, J. T. Williamson of Wagga Wagga and Ryan were joint secretaries. Other teachers at Saint Michael's School were W. J. Boyle and Michael Murphy.

DR BERMINGHAM'S DEPARTURE

Towards the end of 1882 Dr Bermingham resigned from his duties. His letter of resignation, written to Bishop Lanigan, was tinged with sadness. He had given so much of himself for the Church and now could no longer continue his mission. The letter, preserved in the Lanigan Papers at the National Library Canberra reads:—

Sydney
Pettys Hotel
October 6th 1882

To The Right Rev. W. Lanigan
Bishop of Goulburn—

My Lord

I find that a year or so of perfect rest and of freedom from worry and excitement affords the only hope of saving my life.

I beg, therefore, to anticipate by a few months my already notified departure from your diocese;—to which I was never affiliated—and to hereby formally send you my resignation—When I'm able—at present I'm very ill—to go back to Wagga and make final arrangements with my Successor I shall call to bid your Lordship goodbye.

Asking your blessing

I remain my Lord

Your obedient servant in Christ

P. Bermingham.

His medical adviser, Dr Morgan O'Connor, had suggested that a change abroad might improve his health. Before his departure a valedictory meeting was held in his honour at the Sydney Town Hall. He had a wide circle of friends and admirers. On their behalf Dr O'Connor, who was chairman of the meeting, presented him with £900.

Broken in health, suffering with a lung complaint, he returned to Ireland in the hope of a recovery, but, while on a visit to London, he died at a Passionist Monastery on 9 September 1883 and is buried at Kensal Green, London. The latin inscription on his tombstone when translated reads:—

Pray for the soul of Reverend Patrick Bermingham whose body lies here. Born in Kings County Ireland. Served at first as a Missioner for Christ, in Australia. Later a Professor of Sacred Theology at Saint Patrick's College Carlow for many years.

Died in his 56th year on 9 September A.D. 1883. R.I.P.

SECOND CHURCH OF SAINT MICHAEL

Dr McAlroy, his saddle mate during their pioneering days, had passed away three years earlier.

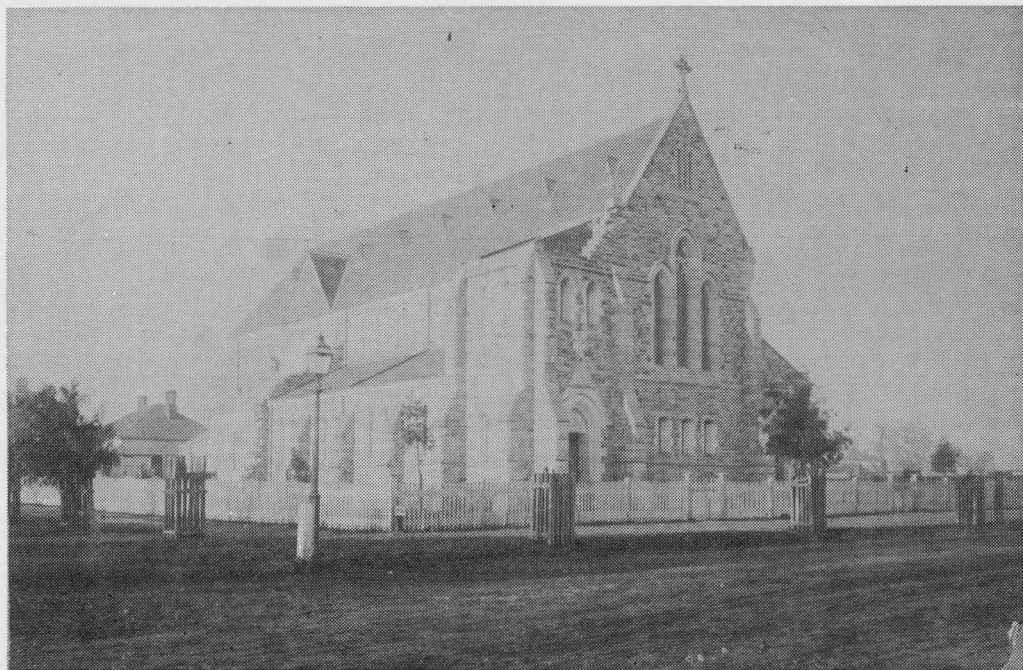
The successor to Dr Bermingham in 1883 was the man who influenced him to come to Australia, Father Patrick Dunne. He was appointed Vicar-General of the Goulburn Diocese following the death of Dr McAlroy. He came to Australia in 1850 and was the first Priest to say Mass on the Ballarat Goldfields. He was a man of vision, neither frightened of work nor of any man.

In March 1885 he convened a meeting to consider building the second Church of Saint Michael as the original one was inadequate for the increasing number of parishioners. The foundation stone was laid on 26 April 1885 by Bishop Lanigan. The nave alone was built. The architects were Tuppin, Gilbert and Dennihey of Melbourne. The stone work was carried out by Mr Gibbs and the carpentry and woodwork by Charles Hardy. The exterior was built of Gerogery stone with Oamaru, New Zealand free stone facings.

During Father Dunne's four years in charge at Wagga Wagga, the landscape at the eastern end of Johnston Street changed considerably. Besides commencing the Church building in 1885, he also had Saint Joseph's School erected. The Catholic population at the time was approximately 1,000. Blessed by Bishop Lanigan, the School opened on 25 January 1886 as a Boys' School in the charge of the Presentation Sisters. The girls were taught in the old Church.

Father John Gallagher, an outstanding Greek and Latin scholar, small in stature but big in mind and heart, was placed in charge of the Parish when it became a Rectorate in 1887. He became the first irremovable Pastor to be appointed in the south. On Sunday 2 October of that year the Church was opened and consecrated. The ceremonies began on the previous day when visiting members of the Hierarchy and Clergy were met at the Railway Station. The four Bishops—Dr Moran of Dunedin; Dr Lanigan, Goulburn; Dr Byrne, Bathurst and Dr J. Dunne, Wilcannia—were driven to the Church in a splendid drag by John Cox of Mangoplah with a fine four-in-hand. The visitors were welcomed and a window, donated by the Catholic Community in honour of Father Dunne, was placed in position. On the following morning the ceremony of Consecration was performed by Bishop Moran who had been a classmate of Bishop Lanigan. Bishop Byrne celebrated High Mass at which Bishop Lanigan presided.

On the preceding Thursday evening a recital was given by Mr Broadhurst on the magnificent George Fincham Pipe Organ



Second Church of Saint Michael, opened 1887, became a Cathedral in 1918.

—Saint Michael's Cathedral Archives.

which was constructed during that year especially for Saint Michael's. Five hundred people were present and, to enrich the Organ fund, paid three shillings for the privilege.

The fate of the Organ is veiled in mystery. It was sold to the Chapel of the Melbourne Grammar School and, in turn by it in 1913, to Saint Bartholomew's Anglican Church at Burnley where it is now. One may well ask the question: Why was it removed? Could it be that Bishop Lanigan disapproved of such an elaborate instrument and disallowed its use? Knowing the Bishop's frugal ideas regarding Church property, his distaste for anything suggestive of lavishness, one could perhaps be forgiven for being inclined to such a conclusion.

While on a visit to Ireland Bishop Lanigan invited Patrician Brothers to teach in the Diocese. They commenced teaching the boys in the old Church in January 1890. A portion of the School wing was adapted to living quarters for the Brothers, the balance used as a School. The girls were then transferred to Saint Joseph's School.

Owing to unforeseen circumstances in the Order, the Brothers gave up their Schools in Goulburn, Albury and Wagga Wagga in 1898. After their departure the School was placed in the care of a Mr Byrne for a time but it was not a success and in 1900 the Presentation Sisters were requested to again resume the teaching of the boys. The latter were transferred to Saint Joseph's and the girls to the old Church. This arrangement continued until the coming of the Christian Brothers at the end of 1913.*

Father Gallagher was successful in having a Girls' Boarding School built at Mount Erin Convent. Earlier, Dr Bermingham endeavoured to do this but the plan, making the Boarding School part of the Convent, did not meet with Bishop Lanigan's approval. Despite his initial opposition, the Bishop now welcomed the idea of the Boarding School with a slightly altered plan. It opened on 9 February 1890 and was enlarged two years later.

In 1895 Father Gallagher was requested to return to Goulburn to resume his former position as President of Saint Patrick's College which was experiencing difficulties at the time. Four months after his return in that year, he was consecrated Co-adjutor Bishop of Goulburn to Dr Lanigan and succeeded him in 1900.

To take his place came a former Seminary colleague, Father Michael Slattery, Vicar-General of the Goulburn Diocese. They

*Note: Much information regarding the early school was supplied by Brother J. M. Mahon, F.S.C., M.A.

had been ordained together at Maynooth in 1869 by Dr Lanigan who was visiting Ireland in search of priests. They were the first to offer their services to the newly-appointed Bishop.

Father Slattery had a record of organising prowess, having successfully got under way four newly-formed Parishes, Crookwell, Corowa, Temora and Narrandera. Another record is credited to him also, that of preaching interminably, a habit which tried the patience of many a parishioner.

John O'Brien, his contemporary, wrote thus of him—"He was known far and wide as the greatest talker of his time. In fact it was general knowledge that he talked right around the clock . . . when he talked he rambled along in a non-stop run and touched on every subject under the sun, but when Slattery talked, that is when he really talked, there was nothing to do but to slip the mind into neutral and await the coming of a merciful unconsciousness—and still Slattery talked".

John O'Brien also wrote that when the Kelly gang raided the bank at Jerilderie in 1879 they arrived on a Saturday. Having locked the two local police in the cell and having donned their uniforms they then confined the members of the household in the residence.

The sergeant's wife asked to be allowed to go to prepare the Altar for Mass as the next day was Mass Sunday. Before allowing her to go, Ned Kelly asked which priest was coming, Father Slattery or his assistant Father Kiely. On being told that it was Father Kiely, Mrs Devine was permitted to go to the Court House accompanied by Dan Kelly who was in police uniform. He helped her with the cleaning and moved the makeshift Altar and while doing so explained that had it been Father Slattery who was coming on that Sunday he would have had to be put in with the rest of the household for his own protection and for every body's well-being. But for all that, Father Slattery was well-loved, particularly by the poor of the Parish who had cause to be grateful for his assistance in their time of need. A capable Administrator, he was responsible for the building of the fine two-storeyed Presbytery or Bishop's House as it is now known.

NEW PRESBYTERY

The need for more suitable accommodation was evident for several years. Because of a period of depression aggravated by drought there was a reluctance to further burden the parishioners with a building debt. Dean Phelan of Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, said in his sermon on opening day that "The needs of the Church and School buildings had been met, this work being considered most necessary for the spread of

religion and education. All this was taken care of first, for it was ever the rule of the Church, he said, that the accommodation of the clergy should be a secondary consideration as compared with other needs of the faithful”.

The Wagga Wagga Advertiser of 10 November 1900 reported that, after much discussion, it had been decided that the site of the old Presbytery was the most desirable. A portion of the humble, old, single-storeyed building was utilized thus in a material way linking the past with the present. The foundation stone was laid by Bishop Gallagher on 11 November 1900. The cost of the new Presbytery was approximately £2,000. The building was enlarged some years later.

It would seem that the first Presbytery was built in 1871. Bishop Dunne, at the opening of Mount Erin Boarding School in 1890, said that when he came to the town 19 years earlier the Presbytery had just been completed by Father Finnegan. Bishop Dunne was the curate assisting Father William Birmingham when the latter was appointed first Resident Priest in June 1871. Now at last the Clergy had a comfortable and roomy residence which was long overdue.

On Sunday 28 September 1902 the blessing and opening ceremony was carried out by Bishop Gallagher. He recorded in his diary that it is “a fine commodious building whose only fault is too much external wood-work and unnecessary ornamentation. But it is on the whole in entire keeping with the



Saint Michael's Presbytery (now Bishop's House)

—courtesy Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society

other fine Cath. buildings of Wagga". Present on the day were Bishop Murray of Maitland, Dean Phelan of Melbourne and fourteen priests. Pontifical High Mass was celebrated by Father Buckley of Junee. Worthy of mention is the fact that Father Wilfrid Dwyer who was stationed at Wagga Wagga at the time and who, in 1918, was to become its first Bishop, rendered a clarinet obligato to accompany the vocalist, Miss Quilty of Sydney. He also conducted the choir during the evening service.

In 1907 Father Slattery died at his post, sorely missed by all his parishioners. To follow him in that year came Monsignor Buckley.

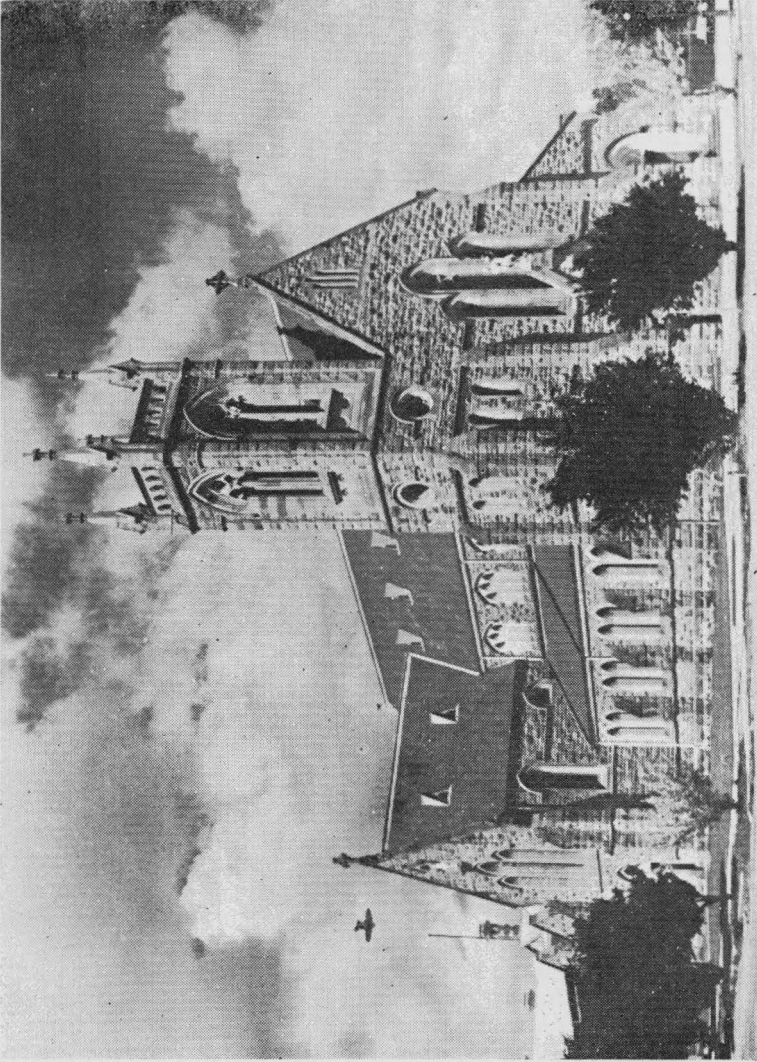
THE COMING OF THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS

Through the years each of the Priests in charge made a significant contribution to the advance of religion and education. The building programme continued to be developed. Monsignor Buckley had the beautiful Chapel at Mount Erin built, a new wing added to Saint Eugene's High School, additions to Saint Joseph's School and a new Church built at North Wagga Wagga. He was responsible for bringing the Christian Brothers to the town and having their Monastery built. This was an important step in the field of Catholic education. The foundation stone of the Monastery, built on the south-eastern corner of Johnston and Church Streets, was laid by Bishop Gallagher on 11 May 1913 and the Monastery was blessed and opened by him in the following year. The Bishop said that [since coming to the Diocese] he had had the privilege of attending the laying of the foundation stone of every Catholic building in the history of the Church in Wagga Wagga.

The Christian Brothers on their arrival took over the School which opened under the new Order of teachers on 27 January 1914 with a roll call of 71, which, by the middle of February, had increased to 100. The day the enrolment reached 100 was an occasion for a half-holiday for the pupils. In those first years of the Christian Brothers' residence the going was by no means easy. The First World War was having its effect on many a family and very few were able to pay school fees. Despite these trials the Brothers provided an excellent standard of education for boys and they continue to do so in the present day, sixty-five years later. It was not until 1935 that the new Christian Brothers' School was built.

FORMATION OF DIOCESE, COMPLETION OF THE CATHEDRAL

Monsignor Buckley remained in charge until the first Bishop of Wagga Wagga, Dr Joseph Wilfrid Dwyer, was appointed in



Saint Michael's Cathedral, completed 1925.

1918 following the announcement of the formation of the new Diocese in July of the preceding year. Dr Dwyer was consecrated Bishop of Wagga Wagga on Sunday, 13 October 1918.

Less than four years after his Consecration, Bishop Dwyer commenced the herculean task of completing the Cathedral. Work began in January. The foundation stone of the completion works was laid on 7 May in the same year by Bishop Dwyer in the presence of the Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr Mannix, Bishop Phelan of Sale and many priests.

To what Father Patrick Dunne had built forty years earlier were added two transepts, a bell-tower, a centre front door and portico, an eastern and western entrance. Included in the furnishings were five magnificent marble altars which were imported from Italy. The contract price for the completion was £34,894 19s 4d. This did not include the gifts of altars, windows, statues and other Church fittings. The architect was W. J. Monks and the builders, Charles Hardy and Co. It was stated at the time of completion that the Cathedral would be fully lit by electric light!

On Sunday, 22 March 1925, the re-opening ceremony was performed by the Bishop of Wagga Wagga, Dr Joseph Wilfrid Dwyer, in the presence of the Apostolic Delegate, Dr Cattaneo, the Archbishops of Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Brisbane, eleven Bishops and many priests. Eight thousand people attended an afternoon meeting following Mass. The Cathedral was consecrated in October 1928.

In 1977 Saint Michael's Cathedral and the Bishop's House, which stand side by side, were classified by the National Trust indicating that the preservation of the buildings is essential to Australia's heritage. The Trust describes the neo-Gothic sandstone Cathedral as a well-detailed exercise in ecclesiastical architecture and as being probably one of the last such buildings completed in the country.

The sight of the completed Cathedral would no doubt have given great pleasure to the grand old pioneer, Father Dunne just as the demolition of its namesake and predecessor would have given sorrow to his colleagues, Drs McAlroy and Bermingham. The latter's memory is perpetuated in a window of the Cathedral, the window being donated by Mrs John Cox. Father Dunne and Dr McAlroy lie buried not too far distant from each other, Dr McAlroy behind the High Altar in Saint Patrick's Church in Albury which he built in 1868, and Father Dunne near Saint John's Orphanage and a cottage he had built at Thurgoona on his retirement and in which he died in 1900. Eleven thousand miles separate them from their co-worker Dr Bermingham.

FIRST SAINT MICHAEL'S DEMOLISHED

How fortunate it is that 120 years ago there was a relaxing of Government policy regarding the granting of Church land. To-day Church Street is graced by imposing Church buildings of three denominations, each building complementing the other. The group makes a significant contribution to the aesthetic quality of the environment. The historic little Church of Saint Michael is alas the missing link. In 1965, after serving the Catholic Community for 106 years as a Church, a School, a residence and, in its twilight years, in the humble capacity of a tuck shop, it was demolished.

In an age when the motorist speeds on multi-laned highways where before were but mud-sodden or dust-laden tracks bearing only the imprint of the bullock waggon and the tilted cart; when flying machines break the sound barrier and men walk upon the moon; when computers strive to replace the mind of man and tell us what we want to know and often what we don't; perhaps it is too much to expect that there would have been a stay of the wrecker's hammer, to expect that the little Church in the bend of the Murrumbidgee would be restored and preserved to perpetuate the memory of those valiant pioneers who, despite incredible hardships, brought the word of God to their Brethren in the infant town of Wagga Wagga.