

Notes on the Early History of the Church in South Australia - 1836 to 1859

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A TYPICAL FAMILY OF CATHOLIC PIONEERS

The white sails of the good ship "Diadem" had been furled around her long boom in the year of Our Lord, 1840, and she rode at anchor on the peaceful waters of Holdfast Bay (Glenelg) after her nine month's voy-age from "Home"; down her gang-way came a young Irish immigrant couple, Daniel and Rose Brady, the mother carrying in her loving arms her bonny baby girl of two. The baby had been born at Laffan, Co. Cavan, Ireland, in 1838.

In that same placid bay, in that same year also rode the three-masted barque, "Dauntless," and down its gangway simultaneously with the Brady family's descent from the "Diadem" came Peter and Catherine Starrs leading their eight-year-old son, Francis Paul, between them: their precious boy had been born at Fintona, Tyrone, Ireland, in 1832. Strange how Providence arranges destinies and still gives man the exercise of his own free will. These two families did not know each other un-til they landed on the shores of South Australia. With the camaraderie of strangers in a strange land they threw in their lot together, their sole introduction being they were Catholics from holy Ireland, though both came from Ulster and the "Black North." Together the two little families trudged from Glenelg through roadless scrub and bracken, never halting until they reached the banks of the River Torrens. There hewing down timber from the trees, forming a veritable forest around the river, they built themselves two small shanties as make-shift homes. And no doubt bracken leaves made snugger resting places than resilient spring mattresses, a luxury probably unknown to themselves and their times. But soon the charms of Bow-den on the Hill beckoned and the families moved thither in a short time; eventually they took up land in the Gawler district.

The families being neighbors, the children grew up together and the time came when Francis Paul became aware of the dawning loveliness of a "sweet Irish Rose," otherwise known as Catherine Ellen Brady. Her modest grace had won his young unsullied heart: and the Irish colleen was not insensible to the virile perfections of Francis Paul; whether it was in the magic of moonlight or by the warming flames of a boree log, the vital question had been put, the banns declared, and Francis Paul Starrs, a bridegroom of 23, led Catherine Ellen Brady to the altar as a bride of 17 sweet summers, and Father John Smyth joined them together in the holy bonds of matrimony till death did them part. The historic old St. Patrick's, West Terrace, was the scene of this holy and happy union.

Hardships, pioneer hardships, surrounded the young couple, but their wedded bliss was not to be abated, for the blessing of God and of His Church was upon their nuptials and the special graces and special blessings of the Nuptial Mass rained down upon them.

* * * In 1865 the new settlement of the Broughton Extension was opened at Mundoorra. There the Starrs took up land and there Cecilia, Agnes and Laura were born; other babies arrived regularly until the family numbered thirteen. Millionaires rarely have large families but

millionaires rarely have the happy homes and the simple joys of such large families as that of the Starrs, though constant toil and a fight for existence was their daily lot: all land had to be cleared in the new settlement and Ridley's reaping machine had not yet appeared upon the scene to ease the settler's burden of work. Their Catholic faith and the Church were buckler and stay. But the Church of St. Aloysius, Sevenhill, a long way off, was their nearest Church. Thither the family travelled when they could, and Father Pallhuber, S.J., and later Father Parsch, S.J., came to Broughton Extension as frequently as possible and the family had the help and consolation of the Holy Mass and the Sacraments.

Mrs. Laura Bridget Fitzpatrick, of Cummings Street, Mile End, the last surviving member of this Starrs family, has given us all this authentic information of her typically Catholic pioneer family. Mrs. Fitzpatrick is very justly proud of her family history and she writes:—

"My father (Francis Paul Starrs) had the privilege of driving the long distance from Broughton Extension to Sevenhill upon each occasion of the Priest's visit to us. A buggy and pair, the first buggy in the Broughton Extension, served as the conveyance. At times a camp was pitched by night and the weather was often wet and stormy for these journeys. Mass was celebrated at my father's house, or at times at the home of my mother's sister, Mrs. Smith, who lived at Muntoora. Father Pallhuber would then travel around isolated districts and the remotest places, often as far north as Georgetown, with my father always in attendance.

"My father spoke of the Reverend Father Pallhuber, S.J., as being a saintly man.

"On one occasion when returning from Georgetown, on an extremely hot day, both Father Pallhuber and my father suffered much from thirst. It was in a period of drought. They neither had water with them nor was it to be found anywhere. They struggled on but when still a considerable distance from home the very horses became so distressed they could proceed no further. And now happened an incident for the truth of which my father absolutely vouched.

"Father Pallhuber alighted from the buggy and walked away a short distance. Then he stood with arms uplifted calling loudly upon God for assistance. After praying for a time he moved further on and then called out to my father to bring along the horses - as he had discovered a spring of beautifully fresh and cool water. It was as if the saintly Priest had wrought a miracle, like another Moses in the desert.

"When the men and horses were thoroughly refreshed the homeward journey was resumed.

"Father John Evangelist Pallhuber, S.J., was held in the most loving and reverent veneration by his flock and by good men everywhere. My parents spoke of him with reverent admiration to the end of their lives.

"Later a church was built at Redhill, where the Rev. Father Parsch, S.J., was amongst the earliest Priests in attendance.

"In the year 1833 my parents moved from Muntoora to Wokurna, another new settlement. The nearest churches were Kadina, and (later) Snowtown: alas, too far away for the constant attendance of the few Catholics there.

"The Revs. Fathers Power, Enright, McGrath and Murphy used to come from Kadina to attend the needs of their small and scattered flock. These Priests stayed frequently at our home upon these occasions and celebrated Holy Mass and administered the Sacraments. From time to time the Priests stayed with other settlers, thus taking in different parts of the district. "

"Then a church was built at Port Broughton in the early nineties of which the Priests stationed at Snowtown were in charge. The journey from Snowtown to Port Broughton was too great to undertake early on Sunday mornings. My father's house was the "Half-Way-House," and very proud we felt to have the Priest with us on the Saturdays before Mass on the Port Sundays.

"My father died at Wokurna on September 9, 1909, at the age of 77. My mother and two daughters, myself one of them, repaired to Kadina where my mother died in 1922.

"From my infancy I can remember the recital of the Rosary every night. I cannot recall one occasion upon which it was missed. Mass prayers and Litanies were recited at home upon the Sundays when we were unable to attend Holy Mass itself.

"Of a family of six girls and two boys who grew to maturity, the girls were all school-teachers and the boys, Peter Joseph and Francis Leo Paul, continued on the land. Peter was a writer and noted for his verse. Leo enlisted and fought in France in the first Great War. His only son, Francis Gerald Starrs, was killed in action in New Guinea on October 1, 1943.

"Peter's family numbered three boys and one girl. Two of the boys, Joseph and Benedict, are at present in the forces. Three other sons of Agnes (Mrs. Felix Simon, of Gumbowie) are also in the forces. There are fifteen grandchildren living, five of whom are in the war."

A maternal uncle of Mrs. Laura Fitzpatrick (nee Laura Starrs), Mr. Thomas Brady, who died highly respected by Priests and people at Balaklava, discovered the famous Teetulpa Goldfields on Rosary Sunday, 1886. In speaking of the nuggets he found there Mr. Brady said "it was like picking plums out of a pudding." He was awarded £1,000 by the Government for his discovery which saved the credit of the colony, then at a low ebb, and the goldfields gave employment to hundreds of un-employed.

Peter Starrs who wrote under the pen-name of "Jo Murna" (J.M.) was a poet of marked ability and a frequent contributor to the "Southern Cross." His poems, of which we give some verses, were essentially mystic and Catholic.

Catholic poets with few great exceptions, such as Dante and Thompson, receive little worldly recognition. But that does not stay them. Such songsters are too spiritual and have no appeal to the materialistic minds of moderns to-day. Essentially Catholic poets write for the spirit, for the soul, for eternity in terms of deep Catholic faith and God's free gift of the grace of faith must be possessed by those who would read their inner meanings with true discernment.

Beneath is one of "Jo Murna's" poems which is a good introduction to all his work. There is here no superficial vision but one that sees deeply into the content of truth: and such is the substance of all true poetic vision.. Moreover, our poet's craftsmanship might be envied by many a maker of poems: —

THE ASSUMPTION

Beyond the fair Starlands,
A palace of garlands
Presents a superlative scene.
Elysium ringing,
With myriads singing
The praises to-day of their Queen.

Bright angels repeating
The annual greeting
To Mary, the star of our race.
To human perfection, To heaven's election,
Created by God "full of grace."

Renewing, repeating,
The welcome, the greeting
'Tween Mary, her Son, and her Lord,
In Eden imparted,
The day she departed,
From earth to her royal reward.

All heaven rejoicing,
Sweet harmony voicing
The glories of Mary to-day,
No mortal can picture,
Imagine, conjecture.
The happy, the holy display.

On earth, too, delighted,
Her children united,
Their Mother's crowned glory extol,
The day she ascended
To heaven, attended
By Seraphims - "Body and Soul."

[N.B.— We are indebted to Mrs. Fitzpatrick's cousin, Mrs. Frank Keating, of Ardrossan, Y.P., for our communication from this fine old lady, Mrs. Fitzpatrick.]

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