



How my hand trembled the first time I opened the Tabernacle and touched Our Lord in person. May it always tremble..." Such is one expression that the writer recalls from a Retreat given at Manly College about the year 1933. "Daddy", as we called the grey-headed Father John, was regarded by some students as screwy, but he certainly portrayed and conveyed a strong faith in the Eucharistic Presence.

He was born at Thomondgate, Limerick, on 19th August, 1870. Education for the priesthood and the Redemptorist calling was obtained at the CSSR House in Limerick, at Bishop Eton and Teignmouth Order Houses in England. Profession was pronounced on 15th October, 1888, and Ordination conferred on 1st September, 1895.

First years appear to have been employed as a teacher of history at Teignmouth and at Clonard in Belfast. In the early 1900s he was engaged in parochial and missionary duties in Limerick. Highlights of his stay in that city was his successful directorship of the Holy Family Confraternity, and his involvement in trouble with the city's Jews whom he was alleged to have attacked. In 1905 or earlier he was posted to the Philippines where through a feverish zeal he suffered a nervous breakdown. So in poor shape he came for a year to Waratah, NSW, recovered his zeal and balance, and went to Wellington, N.Z. There his missionary activity became a household word. Returning to Australia he was appointed Rector of the Perth House, remaining at the post from 1914 to 1916. No doubt he became closely associated with Archbishop Clune, a fellow Redemptorist. Next came Creagh's appointment as Vicar-Apostolic of the Kimberleys.

Taking up the movements from there we find him listed as acting Parish Priest of Bunbury from 1923 to 1925. Then came an overseas visit and holiday. From 1926 to 1930 he was stationed at Pennant Hills. Next station was Waratah and it was there that he suffered a paralytic stroke. But an eventual recovery meant more active years of preaching missions and retreats both in Waratah and in Wellington, N.Z. And there the chapter of 76 years and a golden jubilee of priesthood closes. He died on 24th January, 1947, at Lewisham Hospital, Wellington, and was interred at Karori ... (Fr. William Packer, *Footprints*, October, 1978).

The north-west corner of Australia is a lonely country, the last region of the continent to yield to settlement. Even the Aboriginal people who were there when the Europeans came, were fiercely independent, protecting their traditional hunting grounds against all newcomers, black or white. But the Kimberleys were coveted by the 'cattle kings' in the closing decades of the last century, and they moved in to occupy their vast holdings reckoned by the thousands of square miles. To this wild region, sparsely inhabited, hot for most of the year with the thermometer soaring as high as 120 Fahrenheit, with its immense, scarcely explored distances, came Father John Creagh, the Limerick-born Redemptorist.

Since the 1880s a mission for the Aborigines had been in existence at Beagle Bay. It had been established by a heroic priest from Queensland, Fr. Duncan McNab, who, moved by his zeal to preach to the natives of the Kimberleys, crossed the continent in the wake of the 'over-landers' to work alone among them for four years, until he was replaced by a small group of French Cistercians. They, in turn, were succeeded when the new century was beginning by Pallottines from Germany. Then came World War 1, and all sorts of unfounded rumours began to circulate about these Germans at Beagle Bay, so close to the raiders in the Indian Ocean. At length the Australian government authorities, through Archbishop Patrick Clune of Perth, arranged for a British subject to be put in charge of the missions. The Archbishop, to whom it was left to make the choice, had no hesitation in naming his friend and fellow Redemptorist, John Creagh.

Fr. Creagh was forty-six years old at

Fr. John Creagh in the Kimberleys

by S.J. Boland

the time and had been a Redemptorist since 1895. He was a flamboyant character, a persuasive preacher, quick-tempered, sympathetic, of more than ordinary ability, but impetuous; and he just loved a fight. He had gained some measure of notoriety when he was Director of the Holy Family Confraternity in Limerick; he had been one of the founders of the Philippine missions; and he had come to the Kimberleys from New Zealand.

His responsibilities extended along the six or seven hundred miles of coastline from Broome to Wyndham and eastward until all traces of habitation were lost in the Dead Heart of the continent. There were two German Pallottines caring for the missions in Beagle Bay and Lombadina. From the start he helped them out of his great wealth of compassion, providing them with little comforts, news and even in ways he never tried to explain with newspapers in their own language.

But nobody had warned him about Broome. It was a teeming pearling port with an incredibly cosmopolitan population - Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Malay, as well as the ever-present Aborigines and a confused European hotch-potch. John Creagh came to them in 1916 and for the seven years he was in the Kimberleys he could rarely get away from Broome. It was an untamed community, and he saw in



An early picture of Father John Creagh in Limerick.

all its moods, from the 'lay-up' in the cyclone season when the luggers were beached in Roebuck Bay and the crews fretted in the steamy heat and clouds of mosquitoes, always on the lookout for a chance to even the score for grievances only half-remembered, to those equally turbulent days when the discovery of the pearl of great price was celebrated in ways other than those described in the Gospel.



The priest quickly made himself respected by the wild men of Broome. His gifts as a preacher were his principal weapon. "His preaching was irresistible," said Sister Ignatius, a St. John of God Sister who remembered him vividly up to her death. One dour North of Ireland Protestant used to come each Sunday to 'sit under Fr. Creagh,' ostentatiously leaving the church after the sermon. He spared no one, and the people just loved it, regularly overflowing the church into the street. He embarrassed the government by speaking about the grant of one shilling a year to the Sisters' mission and the fact that in their hospital they were reduced to prescribing the old and tried Aboriginal medicine, dugong oil, for every known human ill. He enraged the pearling companies by describing, with an abundance of vivid detail, the exploitation of crews and divers, most of them Asiatics, living for years in exile to support impoverished families.

His most enthusiastic supporters were the Filipinos, who delightedly claimed him as one of themselves. In all honesty one has to say that the short time he spent in Opon hardly justified the claim; but, characteristically, he seized the opportunity for the good of his church. The Filipino choir and band were a happy memory that lived on in Broome long after Fr. Creagh had gone. Sundays invariably saw the church crowded for Mass and even for Benediction. The music and the preaching were Broome's only respectable entertainment in those boisterous times.

The 'lay-up' was the bad time. The priest met the problem with an extraordinarily successful venture. With the ready co-operation of the Sisters of St. John of God, he organised study courses for the crews. The Sisters held classes in English, while he himself taught Catholic doctrine to anybody who was interested. Both courses were surprisingly well attended, especially by the Japanese. The Japanese crewmen and divers in Broome numbered more than a thousand. Maybe it was because they were so numerous that so many of them are to be found among Fr. Creagh's converts. A day to be remembered was 2nd February, 1919, when the baptismal register recorded a group of fourteen baptised, Japanese names being christened by additions like Alphonsus, Clement, Gerard and, inevitably, Patrick.

It is not possible to estimate the number of converts, as it would be necessary to trace the lugger crews to other pearling harbours like Darwin and Thursday Island. Sr. Ignatius, usually reliable in her reminiscences, said there were at least eighty. Of infinitely more value than the statistics were the

letters the priests and the Sisters used to receive from their old pupils. Everybody was happy to read the news sent from Thursday Island by Thomas, reporting that he had sent ten more Japanese to the priest there to be received into the Church.

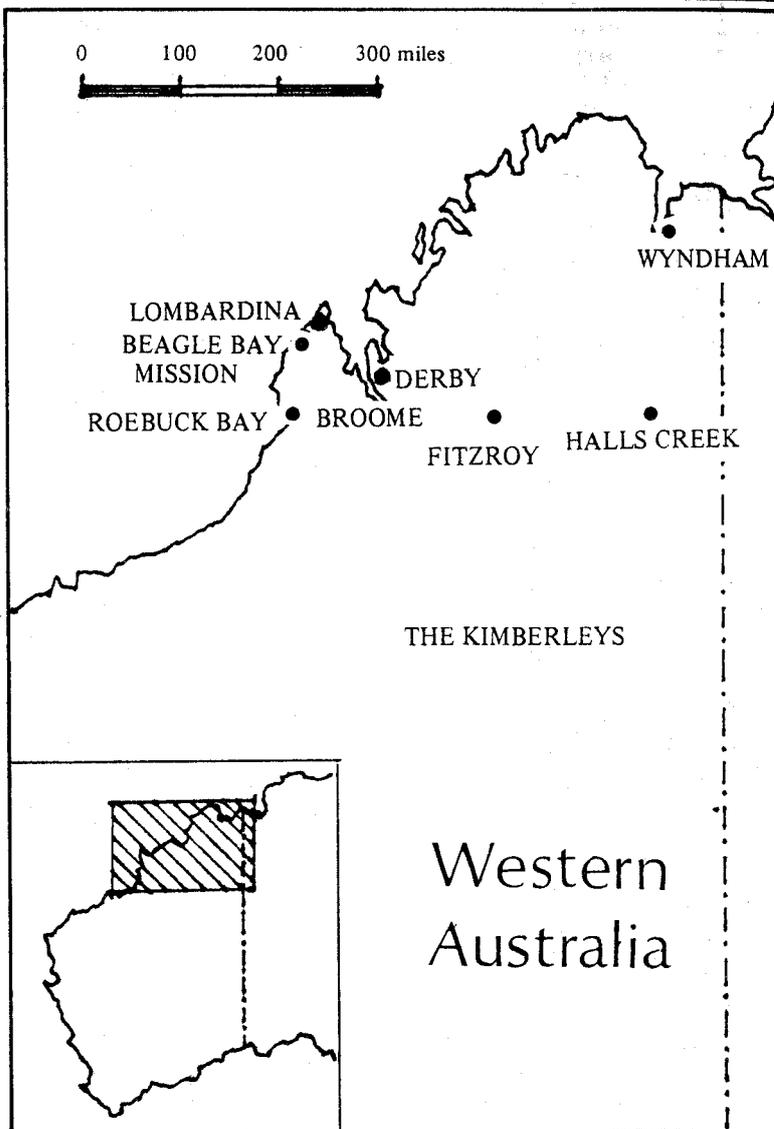
Among the pearlers the Malays were the biggest worry. A Moslem people, they kept aloof from the other races. During the long, hot weeks of the lay-up they became increasingly irritable to the extent of violence. Fr. Creagh was afraid — needlessly says Sr. Ignatius — for the safety of the Sisters, and organised a roster of armed men to stand guard at the little convent during the nights. One bad night of torrential rain he himself went out among the mangroves to plead with the Malay lugger-man who was terrorising the whole town. By his pleading and no doubt his courage, he calmed the poor fellow, relieved him of his knife, and brought him back to sleep off his temporary madness.

John Creagh had come to the Kim-

berleys at the beginning with the resounding title of Pro-Vicar Apostolic. He took his office conscientiously, and it was always a matter of distress to him that he could do so little for the lonely settlements at Derby, Hall's Creek, Wyndham and Fitzroy Crossing. His two Pallottine 'confreres', as he affectionately called them, had as much as they could manage to maintain the flourishing Aboriginal missions. And in Broome itself there was work for far more than the one man.

He pleaded with bishops for help; but until he left the Kimberleys in 1923, he was left to battle alone. The half dozen or so priests who came to help him during that time never lasted more than a few months before each succumbed to the appalling heat and the total lack of comfort.

Once each year, however, Fr. Creagh left Broome to fend for itself while he went by lugger to preach to the meatworkers in Wyndham. The killing season saw the port crammed with workers, while money and alcohol flowed almost as freely as the blood in the





abattoirs. Wyndham had been from the start typical of the spirit of the Kimberleys, a makeshift town of people who set about the job in hand with very little thought for comfort. When the meatworkers came, conditions were rough in the extreme. And, until he left the Kimberleys, the priest was there among the meatworkers, sharing their many inconveniences, as he attended to their spiritual needs.

The journey to Wyndham was a hazardous one of nearly seven hundred miles and the only transport was the mission lugger, the *Namban*. Once on the eighty mile run from Beagle Bay Fr. Creagh and eight Sisters were becalmed for ten days. They ran out of



Archbishop Patrick Clune of Perth.

food, and fresh water was dangerously low before a welcome breeze came along to carry them into Broome. The missionaries told him how one of the Fathers and two Sisters had died a few years earlier because the *Namban* could not bring the doctor in time.

John Creagh used his Limerick charm to raise funds for a motor vessel, which he hopefully named the *San Gerardo*. It proved to be not one of the wonderworker's successes. Maybe the trouble was the skipper, who was drunk almost all the time the boat was in Broome. The unhappy fact was that every time it was needed for an urgent journey it was out of order, and the faithful but unpredictable old *Namban*

had to serve for the whole seven years.

It was a lonely life in Broome. Visits to the German Fathers in Beagle Bay and Lombandina had to be infrequent, and visitors were much more so. One visitor who intrigued the Sisters was Archbishop Clune, who had always shown an interest in the Kimberleys. He came up from Perth on one occasion, and he and the Pro-Vicar Apostolic at once went down to the ocean, where they were seen with their pants rolled up scrambling about looking for crabs.

The priest was especially delighted when his brother, Monckton, came across from Queensland to help him. Monckton had done well with cattle in the Eastern States, and his experience proved a great boon to the mission herds. He bought shares in a couple of pearling luggers and with the proceeds was able to provide some little comforts for his brother and the Sisters. Unfortunately, he was not on hand for long. One night he fell overboard from one of his luggers, and was eventually found clinging feebly to the anchor chain, but was so weakened by exposure that he died soon after being landed in Broome.

That was in 1919. It was a lasting grief to John, especially as it happened during one of his rare absences from Broome. The war had been over a year, and he was wondering if he had been forgotten. It was not proving easy to replace him. The Pallottines stayed in their lonely missions, and he stayed on by himself in Broome as year succeeded year. The work was as constant as ever, but Roman authorities were finding it hard to choose the man for the Kimberleys.

Finally, in the middle of 1923, a bishop arrived, the Salesian, Ernesto Coppo. The Salesians were to remain until 1928. By that time Fr. Creagh had long been back in Redemptorist communities in Perth, Sydney and Wellington, where he died in 1947. Sr. Ignatius was happy to speak about him; and she summed up his work in her own fashion, which does him justice: "Seven years he was in the Kimberleys, lonely, poor and frustrated. The Redemptorists should never forget him."

Postscript

Apart from the fund of information in diocesan archives in Perth and Broome, the richest source for the story of Fr. John Creagh's work in the north-west was Sr. Ignatius, a St. John of God Sister. She came to the Kimberleys in 1912 and was rarely away from there until her death sixty-five years later. Even as an old nun in her eighties, her wise, compassionate and delightfully humorous reflections on the religious life were eagerly read in Australia. And

Sr. Ignatius remained one of the priest's greatest admirers. She knew his faults as well as his virtues, and she was always willing to talk to him.

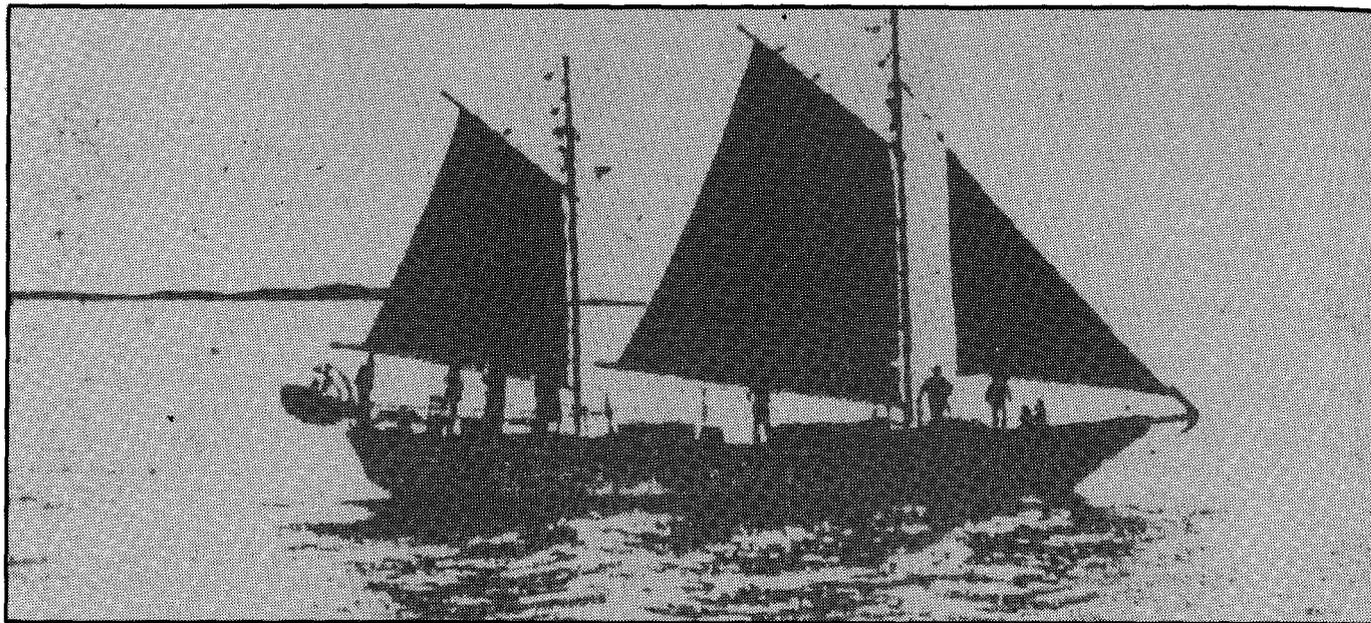
Asked what sort of man he was, she answered without a moment's hesitation: "He had a flashing temper." Then, after a pause: "And the heart of a mother." That is so true. There was a lot of fire in him. It was apparent in the old Sister's description of his preaching to those who overcrowded his church to hear him speak of government neglect, of the many injustices of the pearling industry, of the harshness that was the prevailing fault of the get-rich-quick population of Broome. His anger was always smouldering close to the surface; but so, too, was the warm compassion of which the Sister had so many happy memories.



Fr. John Creagh, Pro-Vicar Apostolic of the Kimberleys 1916-1923.

On his first visit to the Lombandina mission he arrived late in the day; and after being put ashore from the old *Namban* he trudged seven miles through the sand. It was already dark when he got to the mission, and he was so tired he just tumbled to his bed. The next morning he said Mass for the few Sisters and then joined them for breakfast. When he saw the table, he burst out: "Glory be to God! Just look at the goblets!" The Sisters were drinking out of jam-tins. His horror was all the greater when he tasted what they had to drink. It was what was called 'natives' tea, supplied to the missions by the government. There was not much tea in the mixture, colour and flavour being ingeniously provided mainly by tobacco.

He was more and more horrified as he learned the tale of what the Sisters



The San Gerardo, Broome.

had to suffer. Habits of black serge were stained and rotting on them in the steamy climate. For breakfast there was only dry bread to go with that undrinkable 'tea'. On that the Sisters had to work in the schools and the hospital. That hospital had to be seen to be believed! It was spotlessly clean, but so dreadfully short of just about everything. There were no medicines apart from the dugong oil the Aborigines of those parts had been using long before civilization, such as it was, had come to the Kimberleys.

Fr. Creagh, before he left Lombandina, asked each of the Sisters what he could get her as soon as he raised the funds. The list was heart-breaking; some light clothing to make life and work just that little bit easier, some jam - there had been only one tin all of last year - a tiny taste of butter now and then. He wrote diligently, until one of the Sisters said to him: "Father, do you think you could get us just a few books?"

With that the famous temper flashed. "Will you just look at the shoes the woman's wearing, and she asks for books!" He put away his list and promised that he would get for them just whatever he could. And in no time he begged, threatened and pleaded until he had got together all that they had asked, even down to the books.

He was kind to the Sisters. Within a couple of years he had managed to buy them what Sr. Ignatius described as a tiny farm just outside Broome, where they could go for rest, for their retreat or just for a welcome and well-earned holiday. Whenever there were Sisters at the farm, he would visit them every morning to give them Communion, getting back to town in time for his catechism class at 9 a.m.

When his brother, Monckton, came

he bought him a horse, 'a beautiful grey', recalled Sr. Ignatius, who had been born into a well-known farming family in the Colac district. Polly, the grey, was patient under the priest's far from negligible bulk. He could never manage to get on in fewer than four attempts. But Polly was understanding. It was one of the sights of Broome, the fine white horse ambling along so peacefully while the large Pro-Vicar Apostolic contentedly read his breviary.

His tussle with the government over the allowance to the mission was brief and decisive. The hospitals were reorganised in a short time, the dugong oil disappearing as medicines were regularly supplied. When Monckton Creagh died in Broome in 1919 Sr. Ignatius was able to say that though he had the best possible treatment, his life could not be saved after his night in the sea.

The care he took of the Sisters revealed a rich store of kindness in Fr. Creagh. His attention to the needs of his Pallottine confreres showed an understanding, even a delicacy one who had experienced that 'flashing temper' of his would hardly have expected. The two German missionaries continued year after year to attend to their duties faithfully in spite of the galling restrictions imposed on them by the government and the suspicions loudly voiced around Broome.

John Creagh understood them. His correspondence with them and with the authorities on their behalf shows to what an extent he was able to identify himself with them in their difficulties. He was solicitous for their health, seeing that they could have access to proper attention whenever they needed it. He was always careful about sending them supplies by the *Namban*, expressing his delight when he was

able to include some little comfort like tobacco, beer and even those devily procured German newspapers.

During the short while Monckton was in the region, the two Creagh brothers dreamed up great plans for the missions. Monckton was a devoted admirer of John and only too glad to lend his support and his money to his schemes. It was largely due to their combined efforts that the missions went far towards supporting themselves from their cattle sales. Beagle Bay long retained a good name for its stock.

The priest was a great favourite with the children, who had long been accustomed to being let run wild in Broome. He never came late for his catechism class of a morning, the Sisters recalled, and made it the first of the regular duties of each day. With a generosity more suitable to the monasteries he had been used to since his ordination, he often told the people they could call him for confession at any time and on any day of the week. The children were not slow to take him at his word. It was a frequent and highly diverting sight to see a small penitent leading by the hand the portly Pro-Vicar Apostolic in his immaculately laundered khakis across to the church. His flashing temper was never in evidence when he was with the children, and well they knew it.

A regular visitor to the presbytery was Zoe Williams, so very typical of the Broome children, grubby, forthright and with a self-assurance far beyond her half dozen years. She would drop in at least once a day, chattering away as happily as a magpie. And, before she went off, she invariably had a couple of biscuits from the gratified pastor. One day he put to her an extremely ill-advised question: "Zoe, what do you

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A homestead and outbuildings of a cattle station in the Kimberleys, Western Australia.

keep coming here for? Is it to talk to me, or is it just to get my biscuits?". A Broome kid could give only one answer to a silly question like that. And Zoe gave it without a moment's hesitation: "The biscuits, Father."

Raphael was another familiar figure around the presbytery. He was a tiny Aboriginal boy, and everybody in Broome knew him. Raphael absolutely loved Sundays when he could squeeze himself into the crowded church; and it was just wonderful the way the grown-ups used to give way to him as he pushed through them right up to the altar rails. And the priest used to look for that familiar engaging grin as he distributed Communion each Sunday. But Raphael never came to confession. He had apparently never learned his catechism as well as those other youngsters who happily invaded the presbytery at all hours. The Pro-Vicar Apostolic foolishly took it on himself to give Raphael a little special instruction, only to receive himself some wholly unexpected food for thought. "Raphael", he said, "It's nice to see you coming to Communion every Sunday. But don't you think you should come to confession some time as well?" The answer came back like a flash. "No sin, Father, no confession." And that engaging grin, as white as the very best pearls in Broome, confirmed what he said without the slightest possibility of further argument.

The children of Broome were dirty,

ragged and no respecters of person; and the priest simply loved them. The St. John of God Sisters did wonders for them, without spoiling that ingenious charm that the Pro-Vicar Apostolic found so utterly captivating. Sr. Ignatius spoke of his eagerness to talk about the children and to hear the latest delightful anecdote.

There was a mixture of races in Broome. And there were unhappy scenes at which one could be only a helpless spectator, as when Japanese and Malays fought until blood was spilt. But there were other incidents to be recalled with more than a twinkle in the eye. One such was the marriage of a Filipino diver to an Aboriginal girl. It was a splendid occasion, of course, with the Nuptial Mass enhanced by the very best efforts of the Filipino band. The bride, dressed by one of the Sisters with devoted care, was the only one who was uncomfortable. Sister had made the beautiful white dress too fashionably tight, so that when Mary gave an exasperated stretch and wriggle during the Mass there were loud popping sounds as the buttons flew off and Mary spread her generous self without restraint.

There were grimmer moments, of course; and few reveal the true character of the man more clearly than the Jackie Parks' case. Parks was a drover, who finding an Aboriginal stockboy sneaking off and leaving the team short, fired a charge of buckshot at his

legs. The boy was killed, and Jackie Parks was charged with murder. A violent outcry in Broome demanded that he be hanged.

That was not good enough for John Creagh. He made one of his rare visits to Perth to give evidence at the trial. He was able to show that it had long been the practice of drovers to punish any misdemeanour in the team with the familiar charge of birdshot. His evidence swayed the Perth court to change the charge of murder to one of manslaughter, for which Jackie Parks went to prison. The evidence and the publicity it gained in the papers had the further good effect of putting an abrupt end to much of the ill-treatment of the Aboriginal stockboys. Even those who had been loudest in condemning him for this part in the trial, in the end came to recognise him as a man of justice and humanity.

More than half a century later Broome is a different place. The pearls have gone, and with them most of that population the priest had known. There is a Bishop in Broome now, with missions scattered about the Kimberleys where the Pro-Vicar had struggled with his two Pallotine confreres. With the passing of Sr. Ignatius, the last living link with Fr. Creagh's day has disappeared. She was only too ready to speak about him, as she said, lest a man she admired should be forgotten. (Reprinted from *Apostolicum*, Melbourne, July, 1980).