



# The Early Irish Catholic Missionaries to Australia



It is a difficult task to try to write briefly about the first Irish Catholic missionaries to Australia.

A lot has been written already about those priests, notably in Father Eris O'Brien's *The Dawn of Catholicism in Australia*, Cardinal Moran's *History of the Catholic Church in Australia*, Archbishop Ullathorne's *Catholic Mission to Australia*, J.F. Hogan's *The Irish in Australia*, John O'Brien's *The Men of '38*, and other volumes.

Still, there are a few more scattered references that can yet be assembled into a fascinating study, in particular relating to the Munster and indeed the Limerick connection with Australia.

It is seldom realised that the bulk of Irish emigration to Australia after the Famine came from a midland area, embracing Clare, Limerick, Tipperary and Kilkenny. Many of the emigrants had their passages paid for by Irish landlords such as Lord Monteagle of Mount Trenchard, Co. Limerick, better known here as Thomas Spring Rice.

Prior to that, great numbers were transported thither from Limerick port, from which the tall ships sailed with their human cargoes like later on in the

## Jeremiah Newman Bishop of Limerick

Famine years.

They left from Cork too. The *Freeman's Journal* for 26 February, 1791, tells us of how 'the Jailer from Limerick set off for Cork with a number of prisoners, where a large transport is preparing to carry all the convicts in the Kingdom to Botany Bay'.

Most of the early Irish emigrants were Catholic convicts. The first Irishmen are said to have been transported in 1791 and the first convict ship to carry political prisoners from Ireland to Australia – the *Marquis Cornwallis* – left from Cove in 1795. There must have been some Irish there however even earlier than 1791. For, although it is not widely known, it is a fact that a Kilkenny priest, Father James Walsh, sought permission to travel with the First Fleet to be with his countrymen, but was refused.

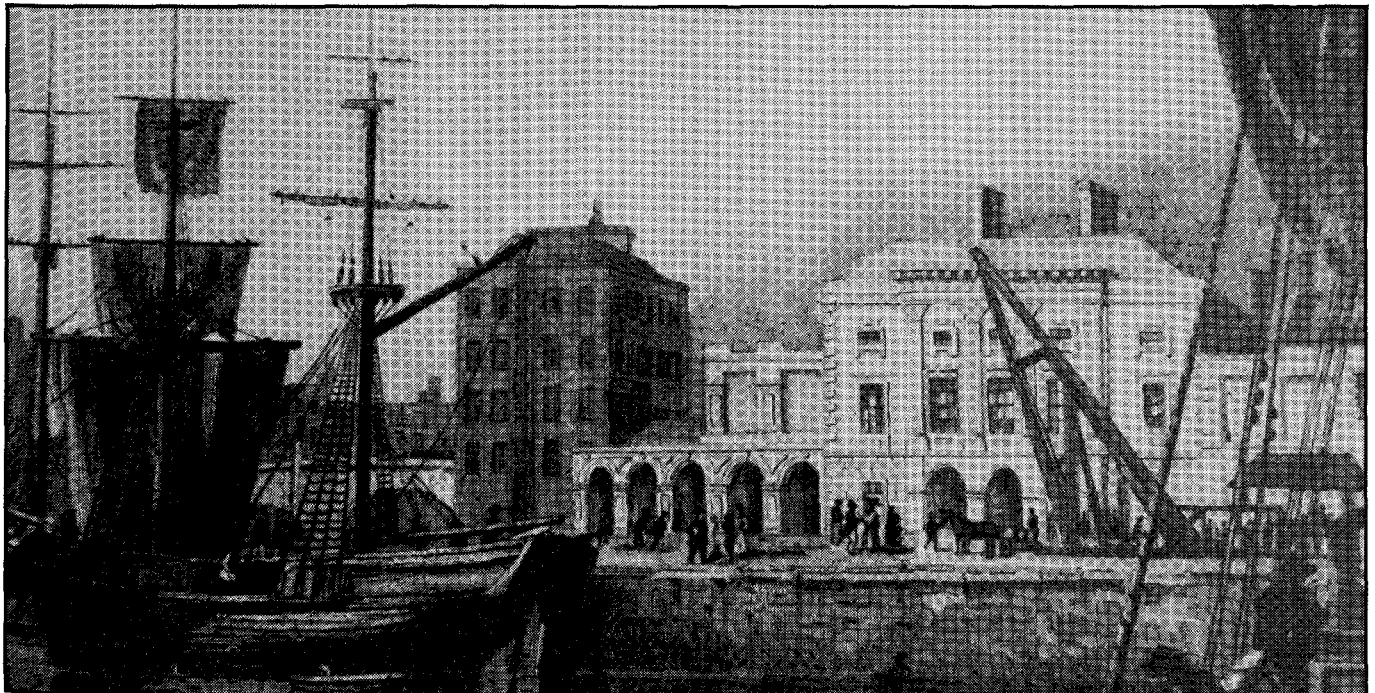
The first Catholic political convicts were members of the Whiteboys or Levellers, who had sown the seeds of rebellion in Tipperary as early as 1761, and the Ulster Catholic Defenders. It was said of the *Marquis Cornwallis* that of the men on board "several ... were known by the name of Defenders, and

the whole were of the very worst description'. Small wonder that, being thus regarded, more than forty of them were summarily flogged while the ship was still at sea.

The tide of transportation became greater after the Rebellion of 1798, as also did the contempt in which the unfortunate transportees were held. In 1801 the Governor of the Sydney area recorded that a vessel from Waterford brought 'one hundred and thirty-seven of the most desperate and diabolical characters that could be selected throughout the kingdom ... together with a Catholic priest of the most notorious, seditious and rebellious principles'.

This was Fr. Peter O'Neil, a native of Ballymacoda, Co. Cork, who, even before being sent from Ireland, had received two hundred and seventy-five lashes of the cat. Perhaps indeed he was a rebel, as some sixty or so years after, his grand-nephew, Peter O'Neil Crowley, a Fenian leader, was killed in the uprising of 1867. Or which was the cause of which ...?

Fr. O'Neil was accompanied by two other Irish fellow-priests. The three were the first Irish Catholic missionaries to Australia, celebrating Mass with a chalice made of tin by one



The Custom House and part of the old port of Limerick.



Sydney Cove: the earliest known picture.

of their fellow-convicts and wearing vestments fashioned out of some cast-away curtains.

It was not too long before their ministry was terminated, owing to the authorities' fear that their congregations were gatherings for the subterfuges of traitors. Two of them (one being Fr. O'Neil) were allowed to return home in 1803, the other sent to Van Diemen's Land, or Tasmania as it is better known. For nearly ten years after 1808 Catholics in Australia were without a priest, though there were at least six thousand of them there by 1816.

The first priests were succeeded by a rather extraordinary man, Fr. Jeremiah O'Flynn. Born near Tralee in 1788, he became a Trappist monk in England. After a varied and colourful career, he eventually went to Australia, to which he had been appointed by Rome as Prefect-Apostolic of Bottanibé (sic). He landed in New Holland in 1817.

By all accounts he was a rather uncouth individual. How effective he was is open to doubt. Fr. Eris O'Brien describes him as 'clumsy' and 'rash'. Nevertheless, O'Brien goes on to say that 'he was the only type of man who could have succeeded in his mission. An adroit and politic expert would have failed'.

Yet, after only a short time, the

enlightened but autocratic Governor Macquarie had him returned to Europe, again leaving behind Catholics – almost all of them Irish – without a pastor. Macquarie was probably influenced by the English Catholic Vicar-Apostolic of London, Dr. Poynter, under whose religious jurisdiction all the British colonies had been placed, and who was none too happy with O'Flynn's assignment.

The Antipodes also saw other and very different Irish 'characters' during the 19th century. One such was the Corkman – married to a Quaker – who had earth shipped from Cork to keep away snakes! Another was Lola Montez, born a Gilbert in Co. Limerick, who entranced audiences in Melbourne, Adelaide and Ballarat with her dancing.

The early missionaries of whom we have been speaking were followed in 1819 or 1820, first by Fr. John Joseph Therry, a native of Cork, who became a legend in his day. Then came the most flamboyant of them all, John McEncroe, a native of Rathalla, or Ardsalla, Co. Tipperary.

Maynooth-educated, McEncroe had been recruited by Therry when he visited that college in 1815. McEncroe left in 1822 for New South Wales, where his mission was fruitful and his memory is still fresh.

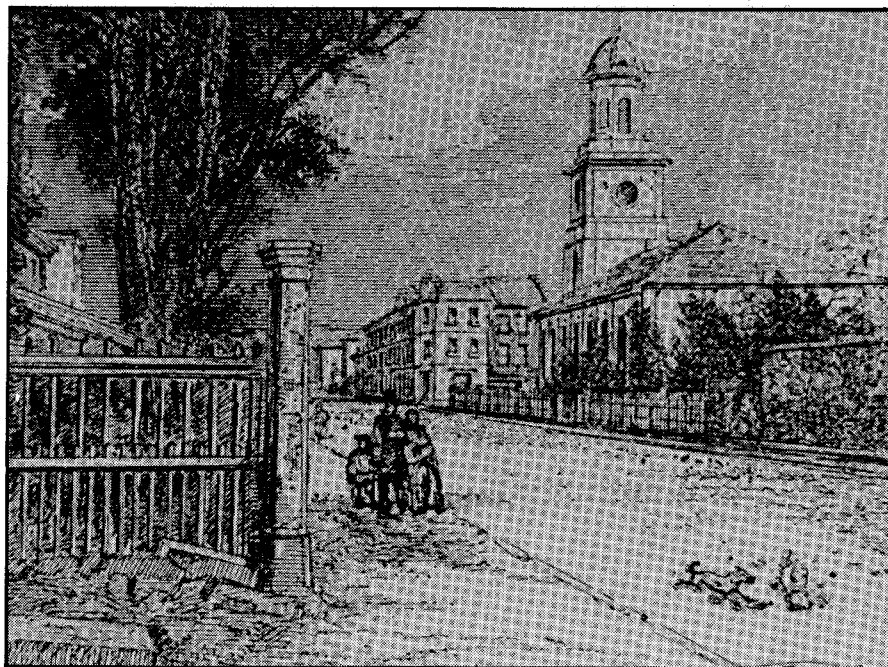
It is almost unbelievable but true that, while a priest in the brutal convict settlement of Norfolk Island, (near the more famous Pitcairn Island), McEncroe managed to write a book, entitled (perhaps suitably) *The Wanderings of the Human Mind in Searching the Scriptures*, printed in Sydney in 1841. Cardinal Moran wrote that it was probably the only work ever written in that fearsome penal enclave. I have a feeling that some spiritual writing in the Irish language came from the convicts in Australia, but whether from Norfolk Island I am not sure.

McEncroe was followed in 1837 by another group of priests and by still another in 1838, after the establishment of All Hallows College. Among the latter was a Fr. Slattery from Limerick. Having received a good education in one of the principal classical schools for which Co. Limerick was renowned, he was ordained in Maynooth in 1837 and in January of the following year sailed for Sydney.

His first major appointment was in Bathurst and the next in Western Victoria. Later on, the *Warnambool Standard* was to say of him: 'At that time his mission extended from Colac to the South Australian Border, and from the Ocean to the Dividing Range. With no roads, and settlements miles apart, his

duties must have been of the most arduous nature, but his indomitable courage and untiring zeal overcame all difficulties. Old residents can tell of his braving the storms of winter, often swimming his horse in the darkness of the night across flooded rivers, and cheerfully undergoing the many other hardships incidental to an unsettled district, when on his way to celebrate Mass or to bring consolation to a departing soul'. Around 1860, he became Dean of the Diocese of Melbourne (a separate See since 1848).

The same paper went on to say: 'Dean Slattery was the pioneer of Catholicity in the Western district, and the result of his exertions may be seen in the number of priests, churches, and Catholic scholastic institutions now here. He took an active interest in local affairs and has always been ready and willing to aid the cause of charity, 'did good by stealth and blushed to find it fame', and many families have reason to bless the priest who so generously assisted them in their necessities'. Dean Slattery died in 1882.



Hobart Town in the 1830s.



Dean Thomas Slattery.

It is interesting to note that the book from which the foregoing quotations are derived, that is, *The Men of '38*, was written by 'John O'Brien' and published in Kilmore, Victoria, in 1975, edited by his nephew Fr. Frank Mecham. I am the proud possessor of a copy presented to me in 1977 by Fr. Mecham.

'John O'Brien', known best for his gentle rhyming in *Around the Boree Log*, was born Patrick Joseph Hartigan in October, 1878, at Yass, New South Wales. With a name like Hartigan, one can be pretty sure of Limerick connections, although his immediate family came from Lissycasey, Co. Clare. That the family, and therefore himself, managed to retain their religion, if not in today's 'outback' then without doubt in that of the time, must have been due in

great part to the presence there of Catholic priests, one of whom, Fr. Michael Brennan from Limerick, was stationed at Yass and encouraged by the people to build its first church, starting in 1837.

When, in 1834, an Englishman, Dr. Polding, was appointed the first Catholic Bishop in Australia (in Sydney), he turned his attention to Western Australia and in 1843, sent two priests and a catechist there to work among the Aborigines. One of the three men was Father John Brady from Cavan (of the 1838 group) and the catechist an Irish youth named Patrick O'Reilly. These were the first Catholic missionaries ever to set foot in Western Australia.

Irish priests were also to become some of the first bishops in Australia. Fr. Francis Murphy, who had arrived in 1838, went on to become the first Bishop of Adelaide in 1844. Fr. Brady became the first Bishop of Perth in 1845. Fr. Goold from Cork, who had also come in 1838, was appointed the first Bishop of Melbourne in 1848. Incidentally, the latter is said to have lacked all 'bush sense' and frequently travelled around in circles, on one occasion leaving Yass for a station forty miles away and arriving 'there' some ten hours later only to find that he was back in Yass!

Surprising though it must have been at the time, these Irish priests had powerful lay friends in Australia, both Catholic and Protestant. One of the first was Roderick O'Connor who, in 1824, chartered a ship to bring Irish settlers to Australia. O'Connor, a brother of the Chartist leader, Fergus O'Connor, was not at that time a Catholic, but he

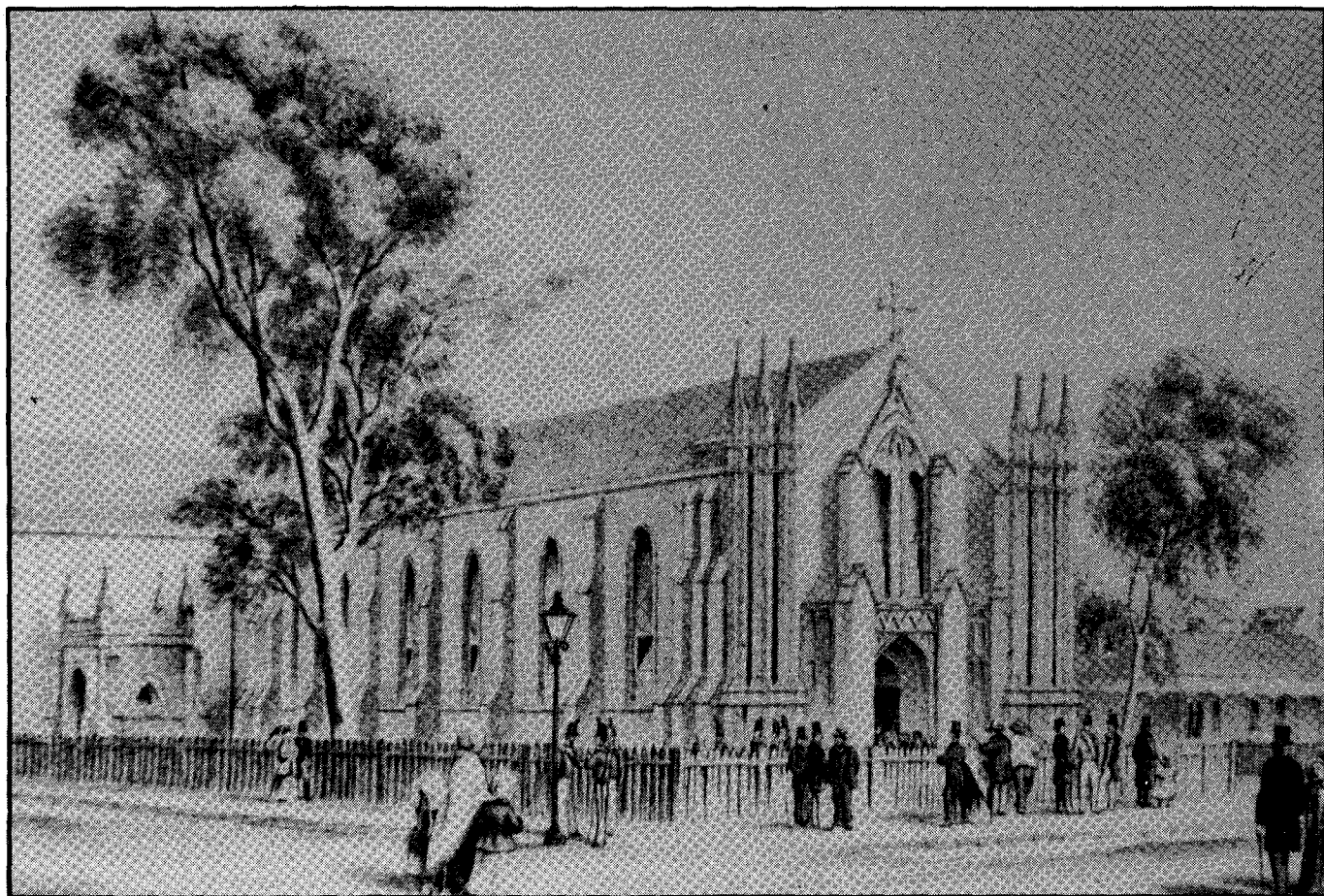
became one afterwards and donated the then great sum of £10,000 to the building of a cathedral in Hobart. It was there that Thomas Francis Meagher and other Irish political exiles after the 1848 debacle resided.



Father Patrick Joseph Hartigan ('John O'Brien'), 'best known for his gentle rhyming in *Round the Boree Log*'.

Then there was Governor Sir Richard Bourke, although not a Catholic himself but having many relatives and friends in Limerick; he was most likely a kinsman of Sir John Bourke of Brittas, a martyr for his faith in 1607. Bourke's coming to Australia put an end to the prevailing anti-Catholic policy of the civil authorities.

There was also Sir Terence Aubrey Murray, who was born at Balliston, Co. Limerick, in 1810. Some of his family



St. Francis Church, Melbourne, c. 1860.

had followed James I and later Sarsfield. After serving under Wellington in Spain, his father, Captain Terence Murray, had transferred to the 48th Regiment and went with it to Australia, where he acquired some land.

Returning to Ireland in 1826, he had brought back with him to Australia his son, Terence Aubrey, who was to become an intrepid developer of the countryside on both sides of the Murray River. Appointed a magistrate by Governor Bourke, he later became a member of a fledging House of Representatives, and eventually a minister in the colonial government.

It is notable that his first public speech was made on the steps of old St. Mary's in Sydney, when he supported Fr. Therry in the latter's appeal to restore the church after burning. He was a real friend to the priests of the area.

One dares to wonder about the situation when the then Governor was proposing the expulsion of Fr. Jeremiah O'Flynn, and two hundred Catholic soldiers of the 48th Regiment signed a written petition on the side of Fr. O'Flynn, even if that might only have made his situation worse! One wonders if Terence Aubrey Murray was involved, even indirectly?

I would like to conclude with a personal reminiscence, not that I was one of the early missionaries(!) but because it is amusing and not hitherto recorded.

In September, 1977, I was appointed by Rome as Apostolic Visitator to the seminaries of Australia and the Theological Faculty at Manly. The notification sent by the Congregation for Catholic Education to the Australian Bishops was short and there was considerable suspicion Down Under as to what might be the purpose of my visit.

Fancy my surprise when I arrived to find in *The Bulletin* (the Australian equivalent of *Time* or *Magill*) in its 29th October issue an item headed 'Vatican 007 on the way': 'The Vatican is sending Jeremiah Newman, Bishop of Limerick and former president of the priests' training college at Maynooth, here to do a secret study of the Catholic Church'.

It went on to expound a number of possibilities as to what I might be up to. While remaining puzzled, it found some consolation in retailing that the visitor 'is not ranked as a conservative...'

In reality, there was nothing sinister about the visit. The fact was that at that time, Australian Catholic educational institutions had passed from being under the aegis of Propaganda (the

Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples) to that of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and the latter wanted to get up-to-date information on the situation.

As it turned out, the visit was eventually a very pleasant one and the results appear to have satisfied both the Vatican and the Australian Hierarchy. I cannot resist though saying facetiously that it marked the end of 'early' Irish evangelization in Australia!

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