

The Church in New Zealand

SOME EARLY OTAGO CHURCH HISTORY

(Lecture by Mr. D. L. POPPELWELL.)



The second public function of the Gore Catholic Club, which proved extremely interesting, was held in the Federal Cabaret on Monday evening, the 9th inst. (writes our Gore correspondent), when Mr. D. L. Poppelwell delivered an illuminating address on "Early Church History in Otago." Probably owing to the inclement weather a large portion of the congregation failed to avail themselves of a golden opportunity of hearing a good man on an extremely interesting subject. Before and after the address musical items were contributed by Miss M. Cronin and Mr. M. Cronin (vocal duet), Misses J. O'Brien and M. Inder (songs), and Miss S. Inder (recitations).

Mr. R. Fraser occupied the chair, and introducing Mr. Poppelwell explained the value of the lecture about to be heard, which had entailed much research by Mr. Poppelwell. The paper about to be read dealt with early Church history in Otago between the years 1850-1860, and had been compiled chiefly from notes and information obtained from "old identities."

Amidst loud applause, Mr. Poppelwell delivered his address as follows:—

The paper which I propose to read is based upon one which I commenced to write

about 35 years ago. At that time I was in possession of a number of letters written to my father by various persons in the 'fifties of last century. Some of these letters were from the late Bishop Viard, the first Catholic Bishop of Wellington, and some from Fathers Seon and Petitjean, the first priests to make regular visits to Otago, while other letters were from well-known Catholic laymen who lived in Otago in the early times. The notes on the early Catholic Church in Otago commenced, as above-mentioned, were never completed because I was in search of other letters which would throw light upon the events of those days. Later my "notes," much of which were founded on old letters and upon information gathered from "old identities," were borrowed and lost. The original letters and other documents I had were unfortunately burnt when my office in Gore was destroyed by fire in 1897. Recently some of my old manuscript was accidentally discovered by a relation among some old waste papers and returned to me. As these old facts have not, I think, been placed on record before, I thought some of them might be of value now that an interest is being shown in early Church history in New Zealand. Only one copy of an old letter has

been preserved, but I will endeavor from memory to set down some of the things mentioned in those letters which were destroyed.

For the benefit of those who are not already cognizant of the fact, I may point out that the Otago settlement was originally formed under a charter granted to the New Zealand Colonising Company and was intended to include only Presbyterians belonging to the Free Church of Scotland. About the year 1845, at the same time that the famous Tractarian Movement in which the late Dr. Newman took a prominent part was going on, a movement was set on foot in the Established Church of Scotland to render the Church Courts in Scotland independent of and not subservient to the Civil Courts. The quarrel began in connection with disputes about the appointment of some unacceptable ministers by the system of lay patronage established in the beginning of last century. The struggle having gone on for a long time, at last a great secession took place and the Free Church of Scotland was formed under Dr. Chalmers. Like the Pilgrim Fathers of old many of the seceders began to look round for some place in which they could settle and have their own form of church government, and pitched upon Otago, New Zealand, which was granted to them by charter. In 1847 the first ships arrived with many prominent members of the new body and their wives and families. They had long been struggling for their own form of church government and worship, and were consequently embittered against and intolerant of other religions which might interfere with the perfect scheme of combination between Church and State which they intended to introduce here. As showing the determined nature of the opposition displayed by the Colonising Company to the emigration of those who differed from them in religion, I may mention that when my father first applied at the agency of the company in Edinburgh for his passage to New Zealand in 1847 it was refused him, although, upon learning that he had previously been in Otago, they did not hesitate to seek from him for their own purposes what information they could concerning the country, etc., which was then little known. Subsequently the passage was granted in the *Blundell*, one of the first ships. The first pastor of the new Presbyterian settlement was the late Dr. Burns, a strong staunch Presbyterian, a good, kindly man, but one of somewhat narrow views born of those prejudices against Catholicity which for a long time characterised Presbyterian Scotland. Keeping these facts in mind it will be readily understood that it was a hard struggle for the few Catholics who, after a time, found their way to Otago, to get along at all, and still harder for them, both from the smallness of their numbers and the opposition shown, to forward the interests of their Church.

A considerable time before the formation of the Otago settlement the conduct of almost the whole of the missions among the Polynesian Islands had been placed in the hands of the Marists, one of the regular Orders of priesthood whose headquarters were in France, and consequently almost all the