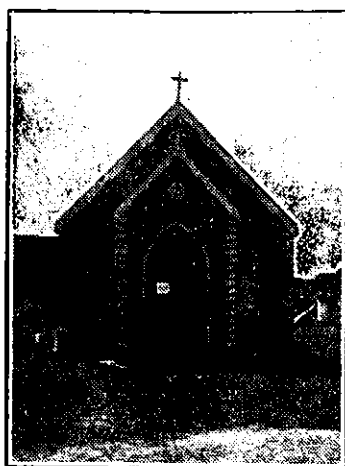


The Church in New Zealand

SOME EARLY OTAGO CHURCH HISTORY

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

(Concluded.)



THE OLD CHURCH AT ROXBURGH.

This historical building, still standing at Roxburgh, was built in 1869 by Father Ecuyer, who is mentioned by Mr. Poppelwell in the course of his lecture. Since the erection of the fine new Church of Our Lady of Peace by the late Father D. O'Neill, the old structure has remained in disuse.

During the next two or three years, at long intervals, the district was revisited by Father Seon, but the Catholics of Otago were anxious for a more regular visitation. Active in this movement were the late Mr. N. J. B. McGregor, of Silverstream, North Taieri, and Mr. Edmond Peel, an early settler, Mr. Burk before mentioned, and my father who, about this time, took up a farm in the Tokomairiro district. A word or two about some of these pioneers of the Church may not be out of place. Mr. McGregor was a sturdy settler of the old type. As his name implies he was a Scotchman with all the shrewdness of that race. He was, I believe, a convert to Catholicity, and a very strong Catholic who never spared either his time or money in the interest of the Church he loved so well. Mr. Edmond Peel was also a convert. He was an Englishman, a staunch Catholic, and a nephew of the famous Sir Robert Peel who was Premier of England early last century. Among the letters that were burnt as before-mentioned was one from him written in the early years, about 1855, to my father from Fortrose, urging the taking of steps to procure land for Church sites and drawing attention to the right to acquire land at the upset price for this purpose.

My father was English by parentage but was born at Sunwick, in Hutton parish, near Berwick, just beyond the romantic valley of the Tweed. He was educated at Ushaw, the famous Catholic College of Durham. This college prides itself upon being the direct descendant of Douay, in France, which has given its name to the "Douay Version" of the Bible. Upon leaving school my father went to sea. After some years he arrived

in Wellington in 1840. He was a great reader and had learned both French and Spanish before he arrived in New Zealand. He was the Captain of a schooner trading on the coast for some time. He was married in Wellington in 1842. He subsequently returned to England and later came to Otago in the *Blundell* as a permanent settler. My father was a very sincere Catholic and an active worker for the Church at all times.

In the year 1854, some of the Catholics, after talking matters over, commissioned Mr. E. Peel to write to Dr. Viard with reference to their wish to have a more regular visitation from a priest. A letter was written accordingly on the 12th October, and on the 20th November Dr. Viard sent the following reply:—

Wellington,
November 20, 1854.

Dear Sir,—

I have read with much pleasure your letter of 12th October, showing the good feelings of the Catholics of Otago. I will endeavor according to their wishes to send a priest twice or three times a year to visit your district. Let us pray the God of Mercy to establish one day a parish in your town. This will be the greatest blessing for that remote part of the district. Till that fortunate time let the Catholics of Otago live as true Christians, loving each other and avoiding the vices too common in new colonies.

I give my Benediction to all the faithful.
(Signed) ✠ Ph. J. VIARD.

In terms of his promise the good Bishop at different times sent priests to Otago whose ministrations were much appreciated by the Catholic residents. Among these priests I must mention Father J. B. Petitjean. He was a man of very different style from Father Seon. He was an oldish man, very tall with broad shoulders and white hair. Of strong will and tremendous energy, pushing, active, busy, and determined to build up the infant church on a solid foundation. On the spiritual side he was a good, holy man, zealous in the performance of his duties and of true missionary instincts.

Shortly after this time there grew up a feeling among the Catholics of the South that they would like to have a resident priest. This feeling was probably strengthened by the arrival in Otago of Mr. Finlay Murchison, a sincere Highland Catholic who came from near Fort William in Scotland. My mother also came from Fort William whence Mr. Murchison brought her a letter of introduction. Mr. Murchison was a well-educated man and was for many years a sincere Catholic worker until his death at Waikaia some time ago. When discussing the question of having a resident clergyman,

Mr. Murchison stated he knew a certain Father Lamont in Scotland who he believed would be willing to emigrate to Otago. He said this priest was a zealous young man who would be in every way suitable for the task. No doubt the prospect of obtaining the services of such a man who, from nationality and other reasons would commend himself to the people, helped the suggestion. The result of this movement was that a strong fund was raised for the purpose of paying the passage of Father Lamont to New Zealand and obtaining a suitable equipment for him. The correspondence in this connection was left in my father's hands and he wrote to the Bishop of the diocese in which Father Lamont then was, making the necessary arrangements. Copies of this correspondence were unfortunately among the letters destroyed as before mentioned. The letter which was written stated that a draft for £200 had been sent to, I think, an Edinburgh firm for the purpose of equipment, etc., and failing Father Lamont being able to come instructions were given as to how the money was to be disposed of. Nothing came of this proposal probably owing to some question as to whether a secular priest could be introduced to a Marist diocese. It is interesting, however, as showing the keenness of the earlier Catholics in Church matters. When the priests came to Otago in those days some idea of the hardships they had to undergo may be realised when their long journeys overland are considered. Among other letters which were burnt were a number from Father Petitjean referring to his missionary visits. One series in sequence described such a journey in 1857. The first was written to my father from the hotel at Tokomairiro. It was written in a hurry apologising for not calling at "Sunwick," our then farm-house, as he had heard of a Catholic family at Popotunoa (now Clinton) and he was just starting to visit it. Of course this visit would be on foot, unless by some luck he got a lift on horseback. The next letter was written from on board the schooner *Ann Jane* at "Bloomfield Harbor," Bluff. This harbor was possibly one of the small bays in Awarua, although I have been unable to locate it. The letter reported a trip to the whaling station at Riverton. It was quaintly written in rather French style, and gave some account of his good luck in finding some Catholic families. Among other things this letter stated that the writer "By the Grace of God had the good fortune" to find some Catholic families and had been able "to baptise several of their children and at the same time give the Church's blessing to their marriages." Here we have an example of the application, the provisions of the famous *Ne Temere* decree so far as it applies to persons who, from their situation, are unable to be married by a priest, but themselves enter upon the marriage contract.

Between the years 1853 and 1861 our house at Sunwick, near Milton, was a sort of centre for the scattered Catholics in the country district of South Otago. There from time to time when a priest visited the district Mass was said and those within reach