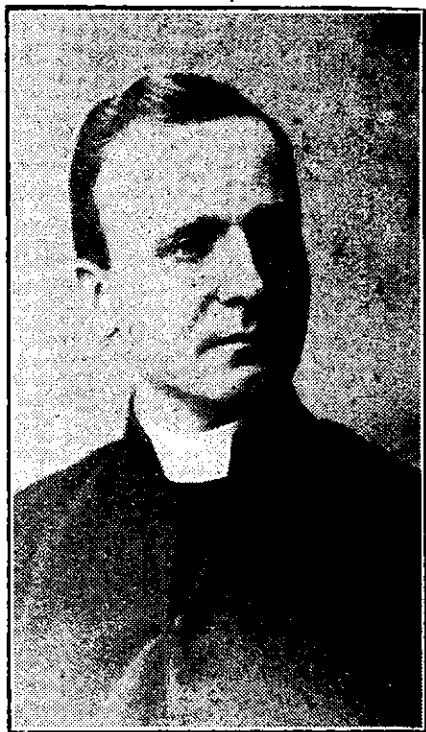


The Church in New Zealand

SOME HISTORICAL NOTES.

Dunedin Diocese in the Early Days: Well-remembered Priests



FATHER McGRATH.

Father James McGrath was born in the parish of Kill, a few miles from the city of Waterford, in 1844. His parents were among the prominent parishioners and gave him a sound Catholic education. Amongst the companions of his boyhood was Thos. Sexton, who afterwards became a prominent member of the Irish National Party, and for his eloquence in the House of Commons was known as the Silver-tongued Sexton. James McGrath was always of a studious turn, and took up the profession of teacher under the National Board. In the course of time he accepted the position of professor of mathematics and physics in the Model School at Belfast, in the north of Ireland; a position to which a substantial salary was attached. Whilst attending to his professorial duties he studied privately: Latin, French, logic, and cognate subjects.

Feeling called to the priesthood he consulted the Passionist Fathers at Ardoyne, Belfast, and on their advice resolved to offer himself to the Bishop of his native diocese, Dr. John Power, to qualify for admission to the ranks of the diocesan clergy. In September, 1876, he entered St. John's College, Waterford, the *Alma Mater* of a large number of the older priests of the diocese of Dunedin. On account of his undoubted proficiency in scientific knowledge he was allowed to perform the feat known to students as "skipping physics," and at the end of his first year entered the theology class. Ordained in Waterford Cathedral in 1880, his first appointment was that of professor in the college school in Stephen Street, which had been successfully ruled for years by Father Joe Phelan, as he was familiarly known to his colleagues. In 1881 Bishop Moran visited Waterford College, and one of the first to submit to his attractive personality and volunteer for mission work in

Dunedin was Father McGrath. The Dean of St. John's, Father Wm. Burke, now so well-known in New Zealand, also threw in his lot with his friend of the college school. Father Nicholas Fitzgerald, another Waterford priest then recently ordained, also joined up. Father Fitzgerald, after some months in St. Joseph's Cathedral, became curate in Invercargill, where he is still remembered by some of the old people. Subsequently he became the first residing priest of Gore, where he erected the first Catholic Church and provided a presbytery, as well as churches in Wyndham and Maitland. Being of a delicate constitution the climate proved too much for him and he succumbed in 1884, being the first priest to die in the Dunedin diocese. The fourth cleric who accepted the invitation of Bishop Moran was James O'Neill, who had finished his studies at St. John's and having selected no mission, was waiting in Limerick for the only remedy that could remove the obstacle to his ordination—namely, arrival at the canonical age. He used to tell his friends that he was suffering for having been so young when he was born.

Bishop Moran put his *comedher* on him, as they say in the old land, and promised if he came he would get a dispensation from Rome. The Bishop then conferred minor orders and subdeaconship on his new recruit in the chapel of the Jesuit Home of Retreat at Milltown Park, near Dublin. After waiting for a time and cabling to Rome to Archbishop Kirby, rector of the Irish College in the Eternal City, a reply came that the utmost he could hope for was a dispensation of twenty months off the canonical age. The message disappointed the Bishop more than the candidate for priesthood; so to relieve the situation, the subdeacon put himself entirely in the hands of the Bishop. As all arrangements had been made for the sailing of four ecclesiastics and six Dominican Nuns the Bishop decided that all would go together as arranged, and on his arrival in Dunedin six months later he would confer the order of priesthood, a ceremony that had never till then taken place in the diocese of Dunedin.

The party left London in October on board the Orient steamship *Cuzco*, going round by Capetown. On arrival at the Cape the cabled news of the death of John MacHale, Archbishop of Tuam, reached the voyagers. The Cape newspapers had sympathetic references to the sad event which closed the earthly career of one of Ireland's noblest and most glorious sons.

Besides the Dunedin party the *Cuzco* carried a number of Sisters of Mercy for Singleton, in the Maitland diocese in Australia, some of whom afterwards came to found the Mercy Convent in South Dunedin. Father Foran, returning from a trip to Ireland to his parish in Maitland and Father Walter Curran, newly-ordained for the Bathurst diocese, were, too, on board, together with Father John Healy, of the Waterford diocese also, whose destination was Adelaide, where he died after forty years of strenuous labor in the Lord's vineyard. In Thebarton, a

suburb of Adelaide, Father Healy spent most of his missionary life. He built a beautiful parish church and founded an Order of Brothers of St. John the Baptist, who have charge of the industrial school and orphanage as well as the prison gate home founded by the good priest. Father Healy was known far and near through Australia as the Saint of the diocese of Adelaide. His memory is enshrined in the hearts of archbishops, priests, and people, as a true apostle and martyr to his all-embracing charity.

On the arrival of the Dunedin party in Melbourne they were met by Mr. John Duffy, who has in the intervening years filled so prominent a part in Victorian life. The Ringarooma, in charge of Captain Chatfield, was sailing for the Bluff on the same day, so the ten Dunedin missionaries transhipped and braved the terrors of the Tasman Sea which happened to be in one of its unpleasant moods. Arrived at the Bluff Father McGrath disembarked under the care of Father McEnroe, S.J., who was then pastor of Invercargill, and until his promotion to the pastoral charge of Cromwell, Father McGrath continued as assistant to the Invercargill parish priest.

When Cromwell parish was vacated by the promotion of Father (afterwards Monsignor) O'Leary to Lawrence, Father McGrath took charge of the Otago Central mission. During his time a stone church was erected at Alexandra and another at Hawea. Finding a difficulty in getting a suitable teacher for the Cromwell school, he took on the duties of teacher, in addition to the oversight of the large and scattered district. At weekends his figure was a familiar one riding round to the various stations on his mare, "Bessy." Sometimes in coming down from the Cardrona by the old track known as Tobin's, to visit the clergy of the Wakatipu district, he had some hair-breadth escapes when the track happened to be covered with ice, quite a usual thing in the winter months. On these occasions his pathetic surmises as to whether if he had died on the track there would be anybody to sing "Regem" over him aroused mixed feelings in his amused auditors. As a teacher of catechism Father McGrath is still remembered by the survivors of his pupils and their families. The late Mr. John McCarthy, the princely donor of the Tschemakers property to the Dominican Nuns, often averred that it was in listening to Father McGrath's catechetical instruction to the Hawea children that he got a real grip of the teaching of the Catholic Church and imbibed the love for it which was a conspicuous feature in his character.

Failing health compelled Father McGrath to take a trip to the old land, where he remained with friends for some time. On his return to New Zealand he put in a second term in Invercargill and also at Gore. Finally taking charge of the Tapanui district where the accidental burning of the boarding house in which he stayed put an end to his missionary labors. His will had been made in Bishop Moran's time and he left most of his savings to the Bishop of the diocese. Dr. Moran's successor put the money into Mosgiel College, where it is to be hoped some day a record of the gift of such a generous benefactor will meet the eye.