

THE POTTERS OF LONGFORD AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHURCH IN QUEENSLAND

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Longford is one of the smallest counties in the Republic of Ireland, and I am not sure how many of its sons and daughters migrated to Australia during the Irish exodus of the nineteenth century. But even if the only ones were two of the three people we are discussing here, Longford would have given a great gift to the Church in Queensland. I am referring to the three members of the Potter family who arrived in Brisbane in the 1860s and 1870s. They were Norah Mary, called Mary by her family, who later became Mother Patrick in the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy, Elizabeth (or Lizzie), who became Sister M Michael as a Sister of Mercy and Michael who became a priest and whose memory is still revered in Warwick where he spent most of his priestly life. It would be no exaggeration to say that few other Irish families have given as much to the Queensland church as the Potters of Longford.

The Potters were not your typical 19th century Irish Catholic family. The picture most easily conjured up of the Irish immigrant of that time is of dirt-poor tenant

farming families or itinerant agricultural labourers. This was the background of my Irish forebears and I am sure many Queensland Catholics could say the same. After all, Catholic Ireland still bore the scars of the crippling Penal Laws and the periodic famines which decimated the population.

Longford natives James Potter (born 1809) and his wife Elizabeth (née Mullooly) (born about 1819) were teachers. James had also inherited the Potter family farm at Cloontagh, an area about seven miles south of the town of Longford. So, although they were not wealthy, one could say that compared to the majority of their Catholic fellow-countrymen, they were in comfortable circumstances financially, as can be seen from their home which is still standing today, albeit with additions. Cloontagh was a farming district rather than a town. The nearest village was Killashee, where the Potters worshipped at the local church.

James and Elizabeth married in nearby Lanesborough on 18 January 1846, and on 1 October 1847 they were both appointed to the Cloontagh National Schools, James in charge of the boys school and Elizabeth in charge of the female school. Although both schools shared the same building, they were run as separate establishments as was the custom back then. Unusually for a woman of her time, Elizabeth Potter continued to teach after her marriage, although she also gave birth to a family of six children:

Anne (b. 1846), Norah Mary (b. 1849), Elizabeth/Lizzie (b. 1851), James (b.1853), Michael (b.1857) and Patrick (b.1863). Elizabeth finally retired from teaching in 1880, aged 60.

The children were educated at the Cloontagh School, and all except Mary opted to train as teachers at the same school through what was known as the monitor system. There is documented evidence of their years of training and the salary each received as a monitor.¹ Meanwhile, Mary continued on to secondary school with the Sisters of Mercy in Longford town, where she boarded with a local family. On 8 June 1866, aged just seventeen, Mary entered the Sisters of Mercy Novitiate in Athy in Co. Kildare, some 70 kilometres south-west of Dublin. It was a long way from Longford where there was a Mercy Convent, so why did Mary opt to bypass Longford and several other convents nearby? Given her intelligence and winning personality, surely the Longford Sisters would have been very glad to have such a promising candidate.

The answer seems to be that Mary felt called to missionary life, and one place where she was certain she could achieve this aim as a Sister of Mercy was Athy. The Sisters of Mercy had come to Brisbane in 1861 with Bishop James Quinn. Faced with pressing needs and a lack of local vocations, the Bishop arranged with his brother Andrew, the parish priest of Athy, to have young ladies with a missionary spirit commence their religious

training in the convent at Athy. Only if they proved suitable and were willing to commit to missionary life, would they be brought to Brisbane, then very much a missionary undertaking.

We don't know how Mary Potter found out about this initiative, but she spent the next 18 months in Athy. While her father must have allowed Mary to go to Athy, he seems to have had misgivings about allowing his favourite daughter to sail to Brisbane with the possibility of never seeing her again. The Potter family still has a heart-rending letter Mary wrote to her father begging him to reconsider and allow her to go to Brisbane. The letter had the desired effect and on 24 April 1868 Mary, now SM Patrick,² set sail on the *Zealandia* with four fellow novices bound for Brisbane.³ They arrived on 4 July after an uneventful voyage, and SM Patrick spent the next few years in Ipswich where presumably she received her teacher training. She professed her vows as a Sister of Mercy on 6 July 1869 and in 1872 started what was to be the beginning of a fifty-year association with All Hallows' School.

She must have been overjoyed when she learned that her sister Lizzie and her brother Michael had decided to migrate to Brisbane. They left London on the barque *Northam* on 3 January 1878 and arrived in Brisbane on 1 March. The reason for their decision to migrate to Australia is not really clear, although the presence of their

older sister would have influenced their decision to come to Brisbane. Did they intend to become missionaries, or were they initially two young people seeking a better life in a new country? There is no definite evidence either way, but a few weeks after their arrival, Lizzie Potter joined her elder sister at All Hallows' Convent and four years later, Michael commenced his studies for the priesthood.⁴

The members of the Potter family, both in Brisbane and in Ireland, were great correspondents and letters flowed freely between the two countries. Michael Potter seems to have been a bit of a bower bird and he never destroyed any of the letters which he received, so when he died, a collection of nearly a thousand letters, many of which were from family members, eventually found their way into what is now the Potter collection at the Fryer Library. The letters give us a fascinating glimpse into the life of a middle-class Irish family. They also provide us with a lot of 'warts and all' information about the Church in Queensland, and there are doses of Irish politics as well. It is fascinating reading! I suspect the Potters didn't know that over a hundred years later, we would be eavesdropping on what would have been considered family business at the time. It is from these letters as well as from other sources, that we can trace the history of the family, and in particular the lives of the three siblings in Australia.



SM Michael (Elizabeth) Potter
1851-1902

As all three led very different lives after arriving in Brisbane, I will deal with them separately, beginning with Lizzie, who is really the forgotten member of the family whenever the Potter name is mentioned. Lizzie joined the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy on 22 March 1878, three weeks after arriving in Australia. Was it a hasty decision following her arrival in Brisbane, or was this the reason she had come to Brisbane in the first place? We simply do not know. In time Lizzie became SM Michael, and as a qualified teacher, she was appointed to All Hallows' School. She seems to have been very loved by the girls, and related well with them. There is a reference to her teaching needlework at one stage. She was artistically talented, so she may have taught art as well. The Irish

letters make reference to paintings that she sent home from time to time. But as early as 1888, one finds expressed in the letters concern regarding Lizzie's health. She herself writes frequently of being in great pain, and Mary's letters give the impression that her sister was in and out of bouts of ill-health for the rest of her life.

Mary, who was blessed with good health herself, sometimes indicates her impatience with SM Michael's condition. 'I cannot get her to take an interest in anything', Mary writes to her brother at one time; 'I wish she would think less of herself and her ailments'.⁵ It is impossible to diagnose her complaint from references in letters, but there is no doubt that SM Michael became more and more an invalid as the years went by. She seems to have continued teaching at the school when she was able, but eventually she was confined to her room. She died, peacefully we are told, on 17 May 1902, aged just 51. God alone knows what she may have been able to contribute to the Church in Queensland if she had been blessed with better health, but at least a generation of All Hallows' girls still remembered her fondly long after her death.

Her sister Mary, on the other hand, seems to have been cut from very different cloth. Blessed with good health, boundless energy and the endurance needed to carry a heavy workload, she guided the development of All Hallows' School and the expansion of the Mercy Congregation from 1879 until her death in 1927 – a period

of nearly 50 years. During this time, she was either Reverend Mother (a total of 28 years), Assistant Reverend Mother (a total of 14 years) or Congregation Bursar (6 years) – a remarkable record by any standards! She had been a few years teaching at All Hallows’ when she was appointed Rev Mother in 1879, following the sudden death of her predecessor. Until the 1930s, the Rev Mother of the Congregation was the *de jure* head of All Hallows’ School, but even when she was not in that office, M Patrick was really the *de facto* head of All Hallows’ from 1875 onwards.

Back then, there were no school secretaries or even typewriters. All her correspondence was written in her own hand. There are letters she wrote to parents, to government officials, to the Archbishop, to parish priests and to past students of All Hallows’ with whom she kept in contact over many years. In her early years as Rev Mother, she also taught regular classes at the school, preparing girls for both the Junior and Senior exams set by the University of Sydney. Until 1881, school classes were held in the parlours of the original convent, but M Patrick always took her class in the front hallway so she could keep an eye on visitors coming to the front door.

1882 saw the long-awaited opening of a dedicated school building. Mother Patrick had undertaken the supervision of the construction and she was not above confronting the builder when she considered the work was not up to

standard. It was the first of many building projects she undertook, and one of the leading lawyers of the time is recorded as having said that Mother Patrick Potter was one of the cleverest businessmen in Brisbane. (In pre-feminist days I presume that would have been considered a great compliment!) Although she was not musical herself, M Patrick recognised the importance of music in a well-rounded education, and she ensured that at the heart of the new school building was a magnificent concert hall. It is still in use today, although it no longer holds the whole school population as it did in former times.



*MM Patrick (Norah Mary) Potter
1849-1927*

M. Patrick presided over the development of the school curriculum as well as the building programme. She added

extensions to the school over the years and, in 1913, a swimming pool was opened – a first for any school in Queensland. She introduced Latin into the curriculum in 1889 at a time when the study of Latin was considered the preserve of young gentlemen. In an era when few women had much more than a primary education, she keenly promoted the idea of girls continuing with higher education. Needless to say, she applauded the move to establish the University of Queensland, and All Hallows' ex-students were prominent among its early graduates.

Even after the opening of Girls' Grammar in 1875, non-Catholic students still sought admission to All Hallows'. Mother Patrick ensured that they were marched off to their respective churches every Sunday, just as the Catholic girls were sent off to St Stephen's. During the period Mother Patrick had charge of All Hallows', enrolments increased from 63 in 1879 to 431 in 1927, the year of her death. This was due in no small measure to the reputation All Hallows' had acquired under her leadership, but also to the personality and popularity of the woman herself. I will conclude the story of M Patrick and All Hallows' School by giving a couple of quotes from her past students:

You had only to watch Mother Patrick with new children to understand how she grasped the child mind. From lonely, forlorn little mites enduring the first pangs of separation from home, her sweet,

joyous motherly way would transform them into normal healthy-minded students, eager to follow the school routine, proud of the school traditions and happy if they could earn from her one little word of praise or look of approval.

(Student of 1870s)

Mother Patrick always had the interest of the school and pupils at heart, an interest which extended into the after years of life. Nothing ever gave Mother Patrick greater pleasure than to hear her 'girls' praised, either when they were at school, or gone from within its portals.

(Student of 1890s)

If Mother Patrick was to be remembered only by her work at All Hallows' School, she would still have made a remarkable contribution to the Queensland Church. But we need to realise that while she was doing all the above, she was also for most of this time Reverend Mother of the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy with all the work and worries that entailed. The 50-year period which corresponds roughly with the time that M Patrick was at the helm of the Congregation was a time of great expansion of both state and Church. Brisbane was growing beyond the initial town boundaries to sprawling outer suburbs. The coming of the railway had meant closer settlement of areas both north and west of the capital. As new parishes were set up,

the demand for Catholic schools also grew. After the Josephites left Queensland in 1880 following a dispute between Mary Mackillop and Bishop Quinn, no other religious orders were invited into the Brisbane archdiocese until about 1916. Therefore, the burden of providing and maintaining Catholic schools during this time fell largely to the Sisters of Mercy.

Between 1879 and 1927, no fewer than 29 Convent schools (as they were known then) were founded by the Sisters of Mercy, in both suburban and rural areas. They ranged from Bundaberg in the north to Southport in the south and to Cunnamulla in the west. In all of these places, land had to be purchased and schools and convents built. While the parish paid for the building of the school, the Sisters of Mercy were usually responsible for expenses associated with a new convent. Regardless of whether she was Rev Mother or Assistant, Mother Patrick was the 'business brain' behind all these undertakings. It blows the mind to think of all the dealings she would have had with bishops, parish priests, architects, builders and bank managers! And then there was the effort of supporting the Sisters, particularly those in isolated places. Mother Patrick visited each convent regularly, and the glimpses she gives every now and then into her itinerary shows the job was not for the faint-hearted. Writing to her brother from Brisbane on 5 January 1900 she says:

I leave here tomorrow for Helidon, go to Dalby on Monday, return to Toowoomba on Tues. evening.⁶

(MM Patrick to Fr. M Potter, 5 January 1900)

Another time she writes:

I intend leaving here [Brisbane] on Wednesday for Stanthorpe, and shall return on Saturday to Warwick.... I shall be returning to Brisbane on the following Tuesday.⁷

(MM Patrick to Fr. M Potter, 9 May 1904)

It needs to be borne in mind too, that all these journeys were taken by train – no cars back then!

Despite this tremendous contribution to the development of Catholic education in the Archdiocese, many would consider that Mother Patrick's greatest work was the foundation of the Mater Hospital in 1906. Like many great works, it began small - in a rented house at North Quay. But Mother Patrick had big dreams. She wrote to a past All Hallows' student on 27 February 1906:

This, I hope, is the beginning of a great work which will do much good.

Mother Patrick was still at the helm in 1910 and 1911 when both a private and a public hospital were built on the present Mater site at South Brisbane. Although she did the preliminary planning for the Mater Children's Hospital,

she did not live to see it completed. It was opened in 1931 as a memorial to her. She could never have imagined what would grow from these small beginnings.

Mother Patrick had a saying: 'We are all of us useful, but none of us necessary.' She would certainly not have seen herself as 'necessary', but because of her courage, foresight and wisdom, her gentle but powerful leadership, and her length of time at the helm, the Church in Queensland has much to thank her for.

We turn now to the last of the Potter trio who came to Queensland, the Rev. Michael Potter, whose name was held dear for many years in the memory of Warwick people - Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

A qualified teacher when he arrived in Brisbane, Michael Potter taught for a year at St James in the Valley before enrolling at St Killian's Boys School in South Brisbane to further his own education. He began his studies for the priesthood at St Charles Seminary in Bathurst, and in 1885 he returned to Ireland where he continued his studies at the famous All Hallows' Seminary in Dublin. After his ordination in 1887, he returned to Australia and was assigned as a curate to Ipswich for four years before being appointed to Warwick in 1891. Here he was to spend the next 53 years, firstly as curate to the Rev James Horan, then for 39 years as parish priest.

Warwick back in the 1880s was a huge parish, stretching west as far as St George and Dirranbandi. There was a large Irish population, and many outstations where Mass was offered from time to time either in a small purpose-built church or in the home of one of the parishioners. There was plenty for an energetic curate to do, especially as James Horan aged and became rather difficult for his curate to deal with. It was probably with some elation that Potter arranged a great farewell event for Fr. Horan when the latter decided to visit Ireland in 1895. While his boss was away, he could give full reign to his energy for some new initiatives. He formed the Catholic Young Men's Society and supervised the building of a hall for their activities.

Back in the 1880s, the priest often performed more roles in the community than celebrating Mass and the sacraments. As a well-educated person, Fr. Potter would help his parishioners with their legal and financial affairs and would accompany them to the courthouse if they were in trouble with 'the long arm of the law'. As a man from a rural Irish background, he quickly endeared himself to all and when he finally became parish priest, he was already high in the esteem of his parishioners. Fr. Potter involved himself in the wider affairs of the town, although he tended to steer clear of town politics. One of his pastimes was breeding greyhounds and he had a degree of success at the local meetings, particularly with a dog

called Killashee whom he named after his home parish in Ireland.

One of his first acts as parish priest was to invite the Christian Brothers to Warwick. James Horan had left money in his will for this purpose, but it was Michael Potter who did the negotiations and planned the school buildings. He also continued his predecessor's legacy of building country churches, and he was responsible for the opening of churches in Lucky Valley (1906), Greymare (1907), Emu Vale and Pratten (1910), Killarney (1911), and Tannymorel (1915). He often rode out to the closer stations, or had his altar boy drive him in his sulky, while he sat in the passenger seat saying his prayers. Around town he rode his bike. He never owned a car. There is a story that Potter was taking the train one Saturday to an outstation and a few miles out of Warwick realised he had forgotten the altar breads. The driver reversed the train all the way back to town for him. None of the other passengers seemed to mind the delay! He had a way of getting on with everyone. Potter was made a monsignor in 1912. When he was asked if this would change his life in any way, he replied: 'I'll be little Father Potter on my bike till I die!'

If Mother Patrick's magnum opus was the Mater Hospital, then her brother's was surely the present Warwick Catholic church. The first church in Warwick was (and still is) a substantial brick building in Gothic style with a

shingle roof. It had been enlarged by Fr. Horan in 1894, but by 1910 it was becoming too small to house the growing congregation, so Fr. Potter decided to channel his energy into building a new one. His favourite saying was ‘Warwick leads the way!’⁸ and nowhere was this more apparent than in the grand Cathedral-like structure he planned for the town. Even today, almost 100 years later, it is still a Warwick landmark. The church was designed by local architects Dornbusch and Connolly, the style being described as Middle Pointed Gothic.

World War I delayed the project but the foundation stone was laid on 29 February 1920 by Archbishop Mannix of Melbourne assisted by James Duhig, then Archbishop of Brisbane. It seems to have been a momentous occasion, as we are told that nine trains converged on Warwick, the pubs were drunk dry, the cafes eaten out, and the Archbishop was chaired around the grounds. Towards the end of the proceedings, the parish priest was nowhere to be seen. He had hot-footed it down to the railway station to ensure that none of the trains would leave until he had taken up a collection.⁹

Legal problems and a dispute with the builders delayed construction, but after six years, the incomplete church was opened on 21 March 1926 at a cost of £40,000. It was built with local sandstone and granite. Sadly, it was never completed as planned. Even though today it still seems quite grandiose, the transepts and large apse surrounding

the sanctuary were never built, but its 29-metre tower is still a Warwick landmark. Father Potter had his church, but paying it off was to consume most of the rest of his life.



Monsignor Michael Potter
1857-1944

He took total responsibility for the fundraising to clear the debt on the church. He organised functions and travelled around the parish taking up collections and visiting all the catholic families in hope of large donations. It is said that farmers hid in their barns whenever they spied Mons Potter approaching their property.¹⁰ He shared his affairs with no-one and had no finance committee to give him

advice or reassurance. He kept all the business of the parish in small pocketbooks where he made entries in his spidery handwriting. Maintenance of parish buildings was neglected as all monies collected were channelled into paying off the debt. One of his former curates remembers the sorry state of the presbytery by the late 1930s with paint peeling off the walls, doors hanging off cupboards, and no sound chair in the whole place to sit on.¹¹ His filing cabinet was his office table which was piled high with every piece of correspondence he had ever received. There was only a space about a foot square where he could write, but it is said that he knew where to find anything on that table! When he died, his papers were bundled up and sent to Archdeacon Leo Hayes, a notable collector of anything and everything. Hayes willed his collection to the University of Queensland, and that is how the Potter letters and other memorabilia now reside in the Fryer Library.

Post WWI the world was beginning to change, but Mons Potter did not see that this called for a new type of church administration. There is the story that every Monday morning, he would set off for the bank with his faithful sidekick Jim Kelly. Mons would be dressed in his baggy trousers and long frock coat with his battered hat firmly on his head, following behind Kelly who wheeled a barrow of cash in front of him. What the bank tellers thought as this tableau appeared at the door is best left to

the imagination! It was not until 1943, the year before his death, that the debt on the church was finally paid off.

As he grew older, Mons Potter, like many a person before and since, found it hard to hand over some of his responsibilities. His curates knew that if they wanted anything done, it was best not to let the Mons know, as he might frustrate their plans. And it wasn't just the curates whose plans he scuppered. In 1938, a new Bishop was appointed to Toowoomba and he announced his intention of driving up from Sydney to take possession of his diocese. The administrator of the Toowoomba diocese was Mons McKenna, parish priest of Clifton, a small town between Warwick and Toowoomba. He arranged for the Bishop to be met by a motorcade some miles out of Clifton and escorted into town where he would be formally welcomed to the diocese. When Mons Potter heard about this, he decided that he was the senior priest in the diocese, and his parish of Warwick was much more important than Clifton, so he arranged his own motorcade on the southside of Warwick. The Bishop was escorted into town and given a grand welcome and a sumptuous lunch. What the Bishop thought when he arrived in Clifton, a few miles further on, and was treated to a duplicate celebration has not been recorded.

One wonders what the people of Warwick thought about the Mons' increasing eccentricities as the years went by. They seemed to take it all in their stride. He was as much

a part of their families as any kindly but slightly eccentric elderly relative. They took him as they found him and loved him to the end. He died quietly in his private chapel on the night of 1 February 1944 while saying his Office. His funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Warwick, and he has a fitting monument in Warwick cemetery.

This has been a very summary presentation on the Potter family. There is much more that could be said, but I hope that what I have given here backs up my initial assertion that few Irish families have given more to the Queensland church than the Potters of Longford.

¹ Sean Cahill, Jimmy Casey & John Carthy, *Primary Schools in County Longford 1800-2000*, 2000 (Place of publication not given).

² Her religious name was originally SM Patricia, but on learning that there was no SM Patrick in the Brisbane Congregation, she changed her name to Patrick.

³ The *Zealandia* had an interesting passenger list. Besides the five sisters, also on board were Bishop Matthew Quinn (Bathurst) and Bishop James Murray (Maitland), and their cousin, Fr. James Horan, who later preceded Michael Potter as the parish priest of Warwick.

⁴ It is possible that Michael Potter met Irish-born Queensland priest Matthew Horan when the latter was visiting Ireland. Horan may have recommended him to Bishop Quinn as a possible candidate for the priesthood. If so, Quinn must have wanted Potter to come to Australia first, rather than to join a seminary in Ireland immediately.

⁵ M Patrick Potter to Rev Michael Potter, 10 September 1900. (Letter 1/132 Potter collection, Fryer Library, UQ).

⁶ M Patrick Potter to Rev Michael Potter, 5 January 1900. (Letter 1/126 Potter Collection, Fryer Library, UQ).

⁷ M Patrick Potter to Rev M Potter, 9 May 1904. (Letter 1/156 Potter Collection, Fryer Library, UQ).

⁸ McKey, Rev J, *The Light of Other Days*, Stanthorpe, (date of publication not given), p.31.

⁹ Murphy, Father Peter, *Warwick and the Irish*, Toowoomba Diocesan Publication, 2005 p.28.

¹⁰ Murphy, p.30.

¹¹ McKey, p.41