

THE APOSTLE OF THE DIAMANTINA

The other Father Hanley – Fr. William Hanley 1851-1905

Ms. Judith Gardiner

December 2021

Family history research brought me to ‘the Apostle of the Diamantina’ – a Father William Hanley. One element of my family history has been the Catholicism that has been at the core of my family’s journey in this country since the 1860s when the first of my Irish ancestors, one John Walsh, came to the newly separated state of Queensland.

Each of my great-grandparents was Irish, and six of the eight were Catholic. Each was escaping poverty and injustice and determined to start a new life that would be better than the one they left behind. To some extent they clung to the ways of the past, especially in their faith, but in other ways they sought to change the ways of the past, adapting some of their social and political outlooks to their new reality. When I reflect on their lives it is clear to me that as well as their faith, they were moved by the spirit of egalitarianism that was evident in Queensland in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and that they had thrown off some (but not all) of the cultural and sectarian prejudices of Irish Catholicism.

Many people in this audience will be familiar with the Fr. Hanly who served in this Archdiocese from the time of his arrival in December 1843, the first permanent priest in the new settlement of Brisbane.

Indeed, we meet tonight in the Hanly Room. But my presentation is about ‘another Fr. Hanley’. A priest who knew some of my pioneering ancestors, shared the deprivations and hardships, and who supported them in their faith as they supported his endeavours with their funds and labour. Fr. William Hanley is in some ways the ‘connector’ of different parts of my family story.

Exploring the teaching career of my grandmother’s sister, Katie Therese Walsh, was my starting point – where I first meet Fr. William Hanley. Katie was born in Goondiwindi on 12 April 1876, the second child to John Walsh and his wife, Mary Ann (Kennon) Walsh, who had married in this very precinct in which we meet – the old St Stephen’s Church, ‘Pugin’s Chapel’ – on St Patrick’s Day in 1873.

Katie Therese Walsh

Katie Therese Walsh decided to become a teacher and did the only real training that was available to her, becoming a pupil-teacher at the Normal School in Edward St in Brisbane. Her first posting was to Dungeness, near Lucinda in 1896. She was 20. After one year, she was transferred to Muttaborra, 94 miles from Barcaldine and 123 kilometres from Longreach, which is today part of the Diocese of Rockhampton but at the time seems to have

been part of the Vicariate of Cooktown. When Katie went to Muttaborra it had a hospital, five hotels, a Catholic church, two principal stores and a courthouse. There was also a post office. Socially, there was a Turf Club and a Tennis Club. Muttaborra was a regional township serving the large and prosperous sheep stations of the Central West.



Katie Therese Walsh

Today, one can only imagine the difficulties faced by a young woman sent to the humid, tropical north and then the hot, dry Central West. Her later life endeavours indicate that young Katie Walsh shared the egalitarian spirit emerging in the Australian colonies evidenced in ‘a clear sense of democratic purpose’ in the state’s education system. Katie was by all family accounts a devoted Catholic. Being able to actively practice one’s religion in the Central West in the 1890s had its challenges. Fr.

William Hanley was working in the region attached to the Vicariate of Cooktown, and then later as the Diocese of Rockhampton was established in 1883, he serviced the western regions as the parishes of the Central West grew up. Like many of the early priests he moved from settlement to settlement regularly, and as we will later find, Fr. Hanley travelled far and wide in the service of his flock.

Father Hanley was in the Central West district from around 1893, but he had spent many years working in Queensland. William Hanley was born on 7 February 1851, at Aghinagh, Cloyne (alternatively in Macroom), Co Cork, Ireland. His parents were William Hanley and Hanna Fitzpatrick. According to sources held by the Diocese of Rockhampton archives, his seminary studies were undertaken, firstly at Sies in Normandy and then at All Hallows', Dublin (1874-1877), and on their completion he was ordained priest there, for the diocese of Dunedin (NZ), by Bishop Warren of Ferns, on 24 June 1876. Things do not seem to have gone to plan, however. He arrived in Australia on the *Saraca* on 14 December 1877 which landed in Maryborough.

Father William Hanley

It appears that despite landing in Maryborough, he was attached to the Diocese of Lismore. In 1879, just two years after his arrival he seems to have been in Bundaberg

and in 1881 we find William Hanley in Giovanni Cani's Vicariate of Cooktown.

Settlement and development in the central region was rapid. Mineral wealth and an influx of miners saw Mt Morgan parish created in 1884 - two years after the establishment of this gold town. In 1885, to support the influx of Catholics in the developing port city of Gladstone, the Star of the Sea church opened. Pastoral developments and the growth of the wool industry spurred church development at Barcaldine while the Great Northern Rail line connecting the coast to the booming pastoral west brought churches to Emerald and later to Longreach.

In 1890, the Sisters of Mercy founded a convent in Ravenswood from their congregation in Rockhampton, and the 1923 edition of *Petra* recorded that:

The Rev Father Hanley gave them a hearty welcome; he told them not to expect anything grand but that everything was “nate, plain, clane and dacent”. The sisters found a comfortable home awaiting them and – a good supper, which all heartily enjoyed. The town was small, the pupils few and consequently there was much that was discouraging to face, but they found in Father Hanley a kind and generous friend.¹

When Rockhampton became a separate diocese in 1882, Fr. Hanley joined its presbyterate and subsequently served

in Mackay (early 1886 and 1893), Blackall (Sept 1886-1888) and Ravenswood as parish priest (1889-1890). In 1960, Sr. M R MacGinley, PBVM, wrote that Fr. Hanley had been parish priest of Mt Morgan in the 1880s, though he is not listed in the parish booklet prepared for the centenary of that parish in 1984. Perhaps the answer lies in an entry placing him at St Joseph's Rockhampton in 1880. Mt Morgan at the time was sometimes supplied from the Rockhampton clergy.

By 1898, the rail line had travelled further west to Winton where the Catholic parish of St Patrick's was created. Cloncurry, including Longreach, was his next mission, where he was the first resident priest (1893-1902). He became the first parish priest appointed to Longreach in 1898. This is the year that Katie Walsh was in Muttaborra – and newspapers reveal that Fr. Hanley definitely visited Muttaborra during this year.

This opening up of the Central West with the rail serving the western towns with their mineral and pastoral wealth is the focus of another part of my family story in which Fr. Hanley features, along with another early priest Fr. Comerford. Fr. Comerford was the priest appointed to minister to those working and residing on the Central line. The publication, *The History of Longreach Parish* records that:

The Irish Catholic population of central western Queensland was high because Catholic railway

contractors, O'Rourke, McSherry and Aheme employed mainly Catholic labour. Families of those involved with the railway, from contractors to lowly lengthsman, remained in the area when construction ended. Many descendants still live along the railway.

Paddy and Jane Finn

It is here that the other branch of my family, Paddy and Jane Finn enter my story. My maternal great grandparents had come from Ireland (separately) and were married in Emerald at St Patrick's Catholic Church on 18 January 1886 by Fr. James Comerford. Together, Paddy and Jane decided that their future lay in the Central West and their prosperity was tied to the railway by providing some of the necessities of life for the railway workers - hospitality; or to be more specific - food and alcohol, and perhaps a bed in which to sleep for travellers. While the rail eventually extended to Longreach and then Winton, the Finns settled for a period in Barcaldine, then a growing and prosperous town. When in Barcaldine, which became a parish in 1888, the family continued their relationship with Fr. James Comerford who became the parish priest of a vast area based in the town.

Paddy and Jane moved further west to the railhead at a settlement that was to become the town of Ilfracombe in about 1890. Their first two children, James and John both baptized by Fr. Comerford. After some years in

Ilfracombe, the Finn family moved into Longreach. By 1899 Paddy and Jane had two more daughters, Mary Catherine in 1899 who was baptised by Fr. Hanley, and Johanna Ellen. Young Ellie, the youngest of the Finns, was born in 1903 and baptised by Fr. Hanley's successor. It was here in Longreach that the family finally settled, and having left their little bush pub in Ilfracombe, they took up hotel licences in Longreach.

It had become clear that Longreach, not Barcaldine or Ilfracombe, would become the main regional centre servicing the Central West, offering more opportunities and infrastructure. In this new town, Catholics were active in their faith, and the Finn family were like most - keen to have a permanent Church in which to worship, and keen for a school to educate their children. These people had persisted in the practice of their faith in difficult circumstances, aided by priests such as Comerford and Hanley.

By 1892, the rail extended to Longreach and finally opened for traffic. A newspaper article provides some interesting insights into both Father Hanley and the community generally, stating that:

The social [gathering] some time ago was very successful, but did not return sufficient money. Father Hanley accordingly waited on Mr. G. Gordon, to ascertain if the Longreach Amateurs (theatrical) would come to the rescue. Mr Gordon,

with his usual promptitude and energy, set to work, and it was decided to play that well-known piece “Aladdin”. There are to be no half measure about it, and there is no doubt that the cast of characters is a particularly strong one ... New songs, dances, and marches will be introduced and no pains are being spared to make the burlesque a success.²

St Brigid’s Parish became a reality in 1893 with a small, temporary iron structure for a church, and Fr. Hanley was the resident priest, but servicing a wide geographical area. Longreach parish had responsibility for Muttaborra where the small church of St Joseph’s served the local community and where Katie Walsh attended when Fr. Hanley visited.

In Longreach, Fr. Hanley ‘was actively supported by Longreach businessmen, diligent in their work for the Catholic community, who made determined efforts to raise funds. On 4 December 1894, the foundation was laid for a wooden church’.³ The completed church was opened and blessed by Bishop Cani, now the first bishop of Rockhampton, on 23 June 1895, the year that the Finns moved to Longreach.



Giovanni John Cani, Bishop of Rockhampton

Despite the many hardships these families faced as they lived through the droughts and the privations of working under very harsh conditions, they were committed in their faith, and priests like Comerford and Hanley supported them. The men were busy having meetings, raising funds and building, the women were teaching their children the popular piety of their faith: saying the rosary and the simple prayers of the household. As the great-granddaughter of this pioneering stock, I remember well these practices which were passed down to my generation. Imagine a house full of wriggling, fractious children kneeling down on an oppressively hot, dry afternoon or evening in Longreach with its flies and other flying insects, with a statue of the Virgin and Child, or a picture

of the Holy Family, praying the rosary! This was the stamina and commitment of these outback women. These women provided much of the labour at fundraising functions and were also very active in organising weddings, funerals and other celebrations, especially when the priest was away – which was clearly very often.

When Fr. Hanley was formally appointed as the first parish priest of Longreach in 1898, he had over 15 years' experience in the state of Queensland and a great missionary commitment to the people of the West, those who had struggled to maintain their religious faith and practice to bring up their children in the faith of their fathers. So what was Fr. Hanley like? Luckily, there is a good deal of information about him!

In 1917, the St Ursula's Yeppoon Annual declared that Father Hanley:

... is beyond doubt the pioneer priest of the Longreach district, and his wonderful popularity with all creeds and classes forms many interesting items of conversation even to the present day. He was blessed with a cheerful disposition, and a manner which won the hearts of all, and whenever the good work was to be done he was there, no matter what the sacrifice. Through Father Hanley's untiring energy the late Dr. Cani, the first Bishop to visit Longreach, was able to lay the foundation block of old St. Brigid's on Nov. 4, 1894, and the

same venerable prelate opened the church on June 23, 1895. Father Hanley's next work was to build the presbytery in 1898...It was during Father Hanley's pastorship that the Presentation Sisters were secured for Longreach, and the late Dr. Higgins made his first appearance in Longreach with the new foundation on February 13 1900.⁴

Education was a great need for the Catholic community. There was concern that large Catholic families were growing up 'in ignorance of the truths of their holy faith' so the impetus for a school was strong.



Convent of the Presentation Sisters in Longreach, circa 1920

In 1898, Fr. Hanley opened the new presbytery and, when the Presentation Sisters arrived in Longreach this building became their convent.

In an article in *Petra* in 1928 written by Father L.F. McLaughlin, it is said of Hanley that he:

... was always working at high speed and never easing up in his fervour, he reminds one very forcibly of that grand old pioneer Priest of Australia, Father Thierry. He needed a group of hard-headed business-men to aid him in the selection of the profitable from the unprofitable scheme. With his committee he was fortunate. They supplied the restraining sagacity which was so necessary. To illustrate Father Hanley's inimitable style and exquisite zeal one incident will suffice. When the Catholics of Longreach conceived the idea of having a convent, a meeting of parishioners was called to discuss the idea and to test the feelings of the congregation on the important move. The meeting was largely attended and the matter was debated from every angle. Eventually a motion was proposed and carried that Bishop Higgins be requested to secure for Longreach a community of Sisters to take over the secular and religious instruction of the Catholic children. As soon as the motion was carried, Fr. Hanley submitted to the meeting plans and specifications for a suitable Convent for Longreach. The meeting was called to discuss a moot point, but the Pastor came armed with plans and specifications for the convent building.⁵

According to another source, William Hanley 'was a live-wire, always pushing some new project with enthusiasm'.

This earned him the epithet 'The apostle of the Diamantina'. He travelled widely around the Central West and in 1898 he visited Birdsville and the remote western border regions. This travel must have taken him months, visiting the many small towns and outback stations.

In 1952, Bishop Andrew Tynan of Rockhampton addressed a congregation gathered in Emerald to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment there of the Presentation Sisters. He spoke of the contribution of the pioneering priests and 'recalled the name of the great Father William Hanley, the apostle of the Diamantina' who was in Emerald in 1885-86. It is of interest to me that he was in Emerald the same year that Paddy and Jane were married in Emerald, though it seems that Fr. Comerford had officiated at their marriage. Bishop Tynan stated that 'he was one of the most remarkable of the pioneering priests of Queensland. He came to the Rockhampton Diocese in 1883 from Lismore, and was appointed to Mount Morgan by Bishop John Cani.'

The same author goes on to say that:

Father Hanley was a man of unique personality, and jovial disposition, and a born optimist. He was loved by all, a friend to all, a rare cosmopolitan. He was known and respected from Birdsville to the Gulf. During his eight years in Longreach, his zeal did not confine itself to the spiritual and temporal interests of his own district but extended itself far

beyond its limits. Priests in the West were few in his days and he considered himself in conscience bound to assist spiritually and often temporally the scattered pioneers out in isolated places.⁶

In 1902 his appointment as parish priest was allowed to lapse and Bishop Higgins of Rockhampton who had succeeded Bishop Cani approved his transfer to Lismore diocese, under Bishop Jeremiah Doyle. In that diocese he was appointed to the parish of West Kempsey. He died there (it is said from 'drinking impure waters') on 5 January 1905, and was buried locally at the conclusion of a requiem mass on 6 January. He was aged 54. Terence McGuire, the future Bishop of Townsville conducted the funeral ceremony and reflected that 'Fr. Hanley was enthusiastic and his fervour was infectious amongst his congregation'.⁷

Fr. Hanley's obituary attests to his great contribution to the growth of the Church in Queensland and northern NSW. It is recorded that:

The death is just announced of the Rev, Father William Hanley, who passed away at the presbytery, West Kempsey, early on Thursday morning last. He went to Kempsey just over two years ago, having been compelled to seek a more genial climate, than that afforded by Queensland, owing to his health breaking down. His last illness began a month ago. The news of his death was

received with regret by all classes of the community, Catholics and Protestants alike, for the deceased priest had endeared himself to all by his kindly and charitable character. The late Father Hanley was born in County Cork, Ireland, 54 years ago, and came to Australia 29 years ago. For 27 years, he laboured in Queensland, being stationed at Maryborough, Cloncurry and Longreach. He left Queensland with a splendid record of good work done, and one of the most notable features in his life during his stay in the northern State was the esteem in which he was held by all classes and all denominations. During the time he was in charge of the Kempsey parish he succeeded in considerably reducing the debt. The funeral took place on Friday, and was very largely attended. — R.I. P.⁸

For the priests of the Central West, themselves of Irish stock, the egalitarianism of the working people must have caused some tensions with the businessmen, graziers and wealthy pastoralists. It was these men, many also Irish, who were at the forefront of the fund-raising efforts for the churches and the schools. No doubt the priests held a delicate balance as they navigated the social and political challenges of the times.

The women of both Finn and Walsh families raised their children in faith-filled homes, served in their parishes and supported the priests and religious. Both families

embraced the opportunities offered by a new country and embraced also the spirit of egalitarianism that was emerging in the Australian consciousness. While they were not without their prejudices, both families produced offspring that contributed to the Church and the State through their professions, unions, universities and personal lives. Priests like Fr. Hanley and Fr. Comerford, and countless religious sisters, found in them great support and faith.

[Author's note: I am grateful to Sr. Anne Hetherington and to Bishop Michael McCarthy, current Bishop of Rockhampton in whose diocese my story is set, for prompting and encouraging its development. My thanks go also to Mr Lyle Mitchell, archivist for the Diocese of Rockhampton for his assistance in retrieving documents for this research.]

¹ *Petra*, 5 August 1923.

² *Western Champion*, Barcaldine, Qld, 31 January 1899, p. 4 (sourced from Trove NLA).

³ *Ibid*, p.8.

⁴ *Catholic Press* (Sydney, NSW : 1895 - 1942), 8 March 1917, p. 45.

⁵ *Petra*, 7 October 1923.

⁶ *Petra*, 1923.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 439.

⁸ *Catholic Press* (Sydney, NSW : 1895 - 1942), 12 January 1905, p. 26.