

MARY MACKILLOP

By Vera Fisher

On October 17th Australia will have its very first Saint! A ceremony of canonization in Rome will focus the attention of the World press on Australia and 8,000 Aussies are heading for Rome to witness this unique event. The nice part is that non-Catholics seem as excited about it as the Catholics are. My mind goes back to the day of her Beatification when church bells of every denomination pealed out across the Nation. Sadly, the bell at St. Paul's famous church, Oatlands, was out of order. A small group of us gathered on the front steps of the church armed with hand bells and rang ourselves into a lather. Australia has always been out on a limb, while hundreds of other countries boast of their Saints through the centuries; now we have joined the Club and they can meet ours!



I am delighted that the date set is October 17th as I had a favourite Uncle born on that day so can easily remember when the big day will be. Like Mary he was a teacher, like Mary he was passionate that country children should have education. Years ago, he was posted to Parattah as Head Master of the State School, fell in love with a local girl, married and moved to the north east. He then became Head of Oatlands State School, but when in his 50's, working at a busy Hobart school, he decided to become a Catholic.

Mary Mackillop founded an Order of Nuns called the "Sisters of St. Joseph" and as her big day draws nearer, residents of the Southern Midlands will be taking a great interest because we have "connections". Years ago this Order conducted no less than 3 schools in our area - St. Patrick's School Jerusalem (Colebrook), St. Brigid's School in Tunnack and St. Paul's school at Oatlands. These gave children a great education, turned out some illustrious pupils. Tunnack convent school claimed 1 Judge, 1 Lawyer, 1 Lord Mayor of Melbourne, and non



Catholic boys and girls in Oatlands went to the Sisters to learn to play the piano, and when Oatlands State School had to be closed for some time for alterations, the kiddies went happily to the convent so they would not fall behind.

The school still stands in this town

The original school 1880's

and is being restored by its present owner, Mr. Geoffrey McBeath, whilst diagonally opposite is the old convent where the sisters lived and thereby hangs a tale! At the risk of having people in Hobart and Launceston turn



Restoration of verandah is slowly taking shape

green with envy, we were once the Head House of the Josephite Order for Tasmania. After the convent closed it became a private home for many years. During this time my school friend Jack Bailey who was 12, wanted to help his parents and siblings, so went out and got a huge log from the wood heap. He told me he threw it on the fire and saw "a shower of sparks go up, catch the roof which was shingles, and in a blink the top storey was gone".



The Convent as it stands today

The men of Oatlands, with virtually no fire brigade aids, saved the downstairs which went on being a home but it had an odd look as if the

iron roof was a hat down over the building's eyes. Some years ago a Hobart family purchased this premises. At the same time a lady in a nursing home in Hobart in her 80's wrote several pages by hand to her niece here, describing the upper floor when her family lived there. The new owners based their plans on her description, and Bingo, the old convent now stands as tall and impressive as ever.

It's a known fact that the first Pastor of Oatlands knew grave poverty, due to the government being reluctant to pay a "Catholic" chaplain to attend executions at our Prison and the needs of convicts at the east coast. Likewise the early Sisters here knew hunger and my Anglican Gran was one of the Oatlands ladies who would drop off food "for the Sisters".

During the 1967 fires of southern Tasmania (not Hobart fires as journalists now call them) the official Fire Report reads: "the largest and fiercest of all the fires that day was the one that destroyed Colebrook". They lost the state school and residence, but the convent was untouched. Josephite Sisters in Hobart contacted the Education Department and offered their classrooms at once. (Mary would have been pleased about that).

It would be wrong to think that Mary alone started her Order. She was greatly assisted by a clever priest called Julian T. Woods. He just happened to be the second Parish Priest at Oatlands. Arriving from the Mainland to spend a few weeks in Tasmania, he came to find the Priest of Oatlands was dying of cancer. Fr. Woods put a single bed in the church sacristy and slept there for 2 weeks, then the priest having died, he moved into the Presbytery and wrote to tell his superiors he wouldn't be home for a bit!

Some years ago, his biographer, Sister Margaret Press came down from N.S.W. To see the aforesaid sacristy and came to Parattah to question me as Catholic historian for the area. I love to imagine Fr. Woods sitting in the old Pugin designed house, since demolished, writing a letter to Mary, walking up Gay Street, turning into High Street and posting the letter at our local post box. Then I picture her in South Australia reading the letter to her companion Sisters, about the Oatlands parish; thus Mary knew all about us before most Mainlanders had heard of our town.

With its high altitude, its heavy frosts, we have a magical night sky and it would have delighted Fr. Woods who was a noted astronomer. Little did he know, standing in his church grounds here, that one day the young Nun he had helped to found an Order of sisters would shine more brightly in the firmament of any star! With 3 of her convents, 3 of her schools, the Head House of Tasmania, all being in the southern Midlands and her co-founder being our resident priest, excuse us one moment World, while we smirk with triumph!