

— Lilydale —

Date of foundation: January 1896

Founding members:

Mother Patrick Maguire	c.1851-1927
Mother Agnes Ryan	1860-1938
Sister Brigid Bradshaw	c.1865-1930
Sister Catherine Ford	c.1871-1954

Lilydale, in 1896 a struggling rural area, was chosen by Archbishop Carr as Mansfield's first convent offshoot. By that time the mother-house was firmly established, with nine professed sisters and two novices in training — Srs Xavier Pawson and Columba Neville. For the Lilydale undertaking M. Patrick Maguire, the former superior at Carrick, was the natural choice as leader; with her went three others: Srs Agnes Ryan, (one of the original founding sisters, and a secondary teacher of some standing), Brigid Bradshaw (who took charge of the primary classes) and Catherine Ford, the factotum. Mother Alacoque Ryan followed the custom set by the Irish foundress, Catherine McAuley, 'staying at Lilydale for a few days to superintend the necessary details in connection with the new branch'.²⁰ On the Sunday before school opened, the archbishop travelled by train to Lilydale for a public induction of the nuns.

The schools opened on Monday 20 January 1896 in the church and the basement of the presbytery which from then on was referred to as 'the Catacombs'. By the end of the first week they had sixty pupils between them. Cut off from Heidelberg six years previously, Lilydale was a comparatively new parish, having no convent building as yet; however, twelve acres of land had been purchased for this purpose.²¹ In the meantime, the nuns lived in the presbytery and carried on their formidable teaching task in the basement. By September of the next year the convent was ready for occupation and the pastor, Fr Hennessy, reinstated in his presbytery.

At the welcome held for the sisters, Carr assured them publicly of his high regard for their work in Mansfield.

The nuns had come from Mansfield, where they had made a wonderful change in the children. They had gained results there which could not be surpassed in the colony.²²

Sadly though, he extended his remarks, reflecting the sectarian bitterness surrounding the 1872 Education Act, to justify the Catholic system, while denigrating that of the state.

Unfortunately, in this country not a word about God was heard in the public schools. There was mention made of Caesar, of Alexander, of Napoleon, of Washington, but there was One whose name it was forbidden to speak in the schools — that was the name of Christ, and this too, in a Christian land. What wonder that the calamitous fact was being forcibly brought to the front — that the ranks of the criminal classes were largely recruited from the children of the public schools!²³

The focus of Catholic education had come to be its own religious health, not that of the general community. A difficulty inherent in Carr's offensive terminology was that a quarter of the state school teachers were Catholics — many of them previously employed in the Catholic system, but replaced by religious orders. His rhetoric was typical of the occasional sermon, and did nothing to dampen the religious — if nationalistic — fervour of the Hibernian Society and the Sacred Heart Confraternity, as they joined their children and now the three Irish nuns (and one New Zealander) singing in procession the hymn 'Faith of Our Fathers' and waving colourful bannerettes bearing the pleas 'St Patrick, pray for us', 'St Bridget, pray for us'. The nuns brought a new focus and maybe a ghetto mentality to the Catholic community.

Their school, however, was not the first Catholic school to open its doors in Lilydale. In the early 1860s, when schools under the National and Denominational Boards proliferated, especially in country areas, Lilydale had its own state-assisted Catholic school, along with the other denominations. It opened in the newly completed, wooden St Patrick's Church in 1865, with thirty-six children of various denominations and teacher Mr Dowling. Applications for government aid were prolonged, complicated and unsuccessful. Inspector Orlebar reported in 1865 that the school, although fairly well conducted, was below standard in some areas. The walls were only 9 feet 3 inches high: there was neither fireplace nor desks (but an abundance of good forms), only one good blackboard, one map and fifteen slates. When it eventually closed in March 1873 as a result of the Education Act of the previous year, the teacher, Mr John Long (1871-73), was obliged to leave and the children went to the state school. The case continued thus until the nuns came in 1896 and set it afoot again.

The Lilydale district, with its natural beauty and cultivated vineyards, became a tourist attraction in the 1870s and 1880s. On one Boxing Day alone no less than six special trains brought more than a thousand visitors to the town. Every summer, boarding houses and hotels, as well as stores — particularly wine shops — enjoyed a thriving trade. Then the depression of the 1890s shattered this optimism. The tourist trade dried up. Boarding-houses and businesses closed: land prices fell. The wealthy vigneron fared perhaps worst; as money became scarce, sales of wine (a luxury item) fell, and with the collapse of the large estates, employees were out of work. Ironically, it was the proverbially subsistence dairy farmer and the small fruit or vegetable grower who managed to survive; they supplied the metropolitan market, carting the products themselves. If Melbourne, which had kept the tourist industry viable, was viewed as the villain of the piece, it did nothing to redeem its good name with an action taken by its city councillors in 1892, at the height of the bust. Seventy-five families from Fitzroy and Collingwood were sent to the district, already suffering serious unemployment, to carve

out farms for themselves in the Dandenong Ranges. Inexperienced, they denuded the forest and eroded the already-overworked soil, leaving it 'useless clay'. In the volatile atmosphere of the depression years, not only Melbourne was an alien. The small farmers saw their supremacy as centres of supply challenged by neighbouring towns, particularly Wandin. Bitterness towards Melbourne and rivalry with surrounding districts became part of the character of the Lilydale that the nuns came to in 1896.

They do not seem to have been hampered in their educational or pastoral involvement by these parochial attitudes. Boarders were invited to the newly opened convent, with its triple attraction: 'the district is exceptionally healthy and very convenient to Melbourne. Terms moderate. Apply to Reverend Mother'.²⁴ Many applied; in fact the nuns accepted a few boarders when they were still living at the presbytery. (One of these, Florence Farrell, was from nearby Yarra Glen, where her parents owned a hotel. In 1956, as M. Canice, she was appointed superior at Lilydale, but died suddenly after only eight months in that office.) The Lilydale residents, both Catholic and Protestant, supported the nuns' efforts. At the beginning of 1897 two more sisters from Mansfield were applied for to cater for the increased number of students. Srs Magdalen Donnellan (a lay sister) and Columba Neville obliged; Sr Columba, a teacher trained at the Loreto Sisters' Training College (Albert Park) before she entered the Lilydale convent, took charge of St Patrick's primary school. Over the next three years M. Patrick resorted to employing lay teachers, as well as urging Carrick to send more sisters. In late 1900, with unexpected largesse, they sent out five volunteers: four young, enthusiastic professed sisters and a postulant. Both primary and secondary schools — particularly secondary — benefited from the increase of staff. The secondary school, appropriately called Mount Lilydale College, was originally a wooden structure on top of the hill near the convent; a two-roomed junior school was built nearby in 1944. Both were later demolished for construction of the existing college, a coeducational institution with an enrolment of some 1200 students.

The parish primary school, St Patrick's, was a small brick building at the foot of the convent hill. To facilitate their comings and goings, the young nuns cut steps from the convent door down to the school entrance. In 1916 St Pat's had but thirty-six pupils, but by 1935 the numbers had increased so much that the parish priest built a new brick school in Jones Street, away from the original site; more building became necessary in 1965. In 1975 the school reached a population of 325 pupils — 75 per cent of Italian parentage; they were predominantly children of small berry-growing farmers from the outlying districts. In 1985, the sisters withdrew from administration of St Patrick's, handing it over to a lay principal.

For over fifty years the entire convent community was supported by a team of lay sisters. At one stage they numbered five — Srs Magdalen Donnellan, Clare Coakley, Martha Hanrahan, Cyril McKendry and Felix McMillan. They performed the ordinary domestic chores and attended to boarders' meals and laundry and until 1944 looked after a farm and an orchard. Sr Martha superintended the livestock (poultry, a herd of Jersey cows, and pigs) assisted by various

male farmhands, who lived in huts on the property. Sr Felix, who inherited the cows and fowls from Sr Martha, commented that the latter knew about farming and was an efficient manager. Sr Martha was a country girl herself, one of the Hanrahan family immortalised by 'John O'Brien' in *Around the Boree Log*: '“We'll all be rooned,” said Hanrahan'.²⁵ She and Sr Felix enjoyed a small amount of independence each evening as they walked through the paddock down to the railway line, ostensibly seeking turkey eggs — the birds conveniently escaped each day, laying their eggs outside convent precincts.

Sr Clare Coakley, although hampered by a painful leg condition, worked in the kitchen from early morning till evening, retaining a keen sense of humour. Her friend Sr Magdalen Donnellan, one-time maid (some say waitress, others cook) at Buckingham Palace, had charge of the kitchen. She too had a sense of the ridiculous and a zest for living. At one stage, two orders were placed concurrently — for a load of wood and a supply of caraway seed — and through some mix-up, a hundredweight of each arrived; there was an abundance of caraway-seed cake for years after. At age eighty-six Sr Magdalen, still independent, climbed on a chair to adjust the kitchen clock; from her couch, Sr Clare remarked that it was either a brave or a foolish thing to do. Magdalen replied 'You might as well stay young while you can. I'll be old long enough.'²⁶

Sr Cyril dealt with the boarders' needs, and was a practical, common-sense housekeeper. Sr Felix, the junior of the group, was sent to Lilydale in 1933, when aged twenty-four; she stayed over twenty years. Before going to Rosanna, Sr Felix gained work experience in the office at Prestige Hosiery factory in Brunswick, checking piecework. Lay sisters were not integrated into the mainstream of community life. They ate either before or after the others, and they recreated apart; their half-hour of recreation was a precious respite.

In the 1930s the Lilydale nuns opened two parish primary schools in nearby suburbs, Ringwood and Mitcham. Seventy-five pupils enrolled at Our Lady of Perpetual Succour's, Ringwood, on 25 January 1932; many of them were brought in and taken home after school by interested mothers. A Mrs Mackay drove children in her old car from Mitcham, and Mrs R. Casey (mother of Rev. Michael Casey, Cistercian, Tarrawarra) transported youngsters from Warrandyte in a horse-drawn jinker. One family who travelled in a buggy tethered the horse to a tree in the schoolyard. Other pupils had the convenience of train travel — as did the nuns of which there were two, Srs Xavier McEvoy and Beatrice Richmond. Sr Beatrice, a tiny person, and at the time of writing a patient in St Joseph's Hospital, Geelong, came to Lilydale in 1932 and stayed on for twenty-six years, managing the infant department at Ringwood for most of that time. For years she and Sr Leo Willis spent their Sunday afternoons in the Silvan hall, giving the children religious instruction. Our Lady's school doubled as a church, with folding doors forming the two classrooms. By mid-year 1932 the pupil intake had increased to the extent that a lay teacher was employed, and the original parish church, then in disuse, was converted by Mr R. Casey (a builder) into a classroom acceptable to the Education Department. Twenty years later more building was needed and five new rooms were built at the end of the playground, but in the meantime the nuns taught in frontier conditions: Sr Rosaria Sinnott

had a class in the tennis pavilion and Sr Hildegarde Fitzpatrick taught in the priest's garage. The Mercy nuns remained at Ringwood until 1960, when Sr Dunstan Heywood (now Sheila) passed control to the Dominican Sisters from South Australia. Since then it has come under lay administration.

In 1936, four years after the Ringwood school commenced, two other sisters went to Mitcham to reopen St John's parish primary school, with some eighty pupils. Miss Hornsby, a lay teacher, had taught in the school for years until she retired in 1931 owing to ill-health. The school was then disbanded and the children absorbed into the local state school. The nuns who picked up the threads in 1936 were Sr Thecla Fitzgerald, an Irishwoman, and Sr André Smith (now Patricia), newly trained from Ascot Vale. Sr Thecla, the principal, taught Grades 5, 6, 7 and 8, while Sr André faced the impossible task of teaching forty or so juniors in the other classes — Preparatory and Grades 1, 2, 3, and 4. She survived only that first year, but Sr Thecla stayed until 1941, when the Education Department inspector remarked to the new principal that he marvelled at the work she had done in the school. It was composed of an amalgam of youngsters, gathered from the various state schools in the district. To get to Mitcham, the nuns travelled with their confrères on the train — in fact they took two trains; one went as far as Ringwood, where they alighted, crossed the overpass and waited for the connection to Mitcham. As it was a two-hour trip, the schoolday did not have a 9 a.m. beginning, but began at 10 a.m. Fortunately, the start and finish of their travel from Lilydale station to the convent was by taxi. The parish priests covered transport costs.

It was the parish priest and people who maintained every parish school. A plenary council of bishops in 1937 decreed that a parochial school was financed out of the ordinary revenues of the parish; the usual method was by 'school money' collected each week from pupils. It varied according to the financial circumstances of families — 6d, 9d, or even 1s. Frequently even this small contribution could not be met, and the parish undertook to make up by other means what was lacking for teachers' salaries. A sister recalled that during the 1930s Depression the children were not asked to buy books, but she suggested that they buy a monthly school paper, priced at one penny, which provided material for a variety of lessons — reading, spelling, dictation, poetry, composition. A note arrived from a father protesting that when a man had to provide shoes, bread and so on for a growing family, even one penny was a considerable amount. After that the nuns visited the family and helped them financially as far as they were able.

The nuns took much of the burden of parochial schools on themselves. Their material needs were scanty, and the payment they received corresponded; in one parish they were paid a stipend of £50 a year for many years. Vowed to poverty, they were maintained in frugal simplicity, receiving nothing more than the humble fare and sombre raiment that was considered consistent with their state. They taught large and often composite classes during school hours, and music before and after that. The principal took the highest grades in the school, to Merit Certificate, while administering the school single-handed; no office support-staff was afforded. The teacher-pupil ratio was far higher in nuns' schools than in

the comparable state schools — their classes (if indeed they had a single class) seldom numbered less than fifty. Sr Carlotta Keenan taught 112 children in Grades 5 and 6 at St Fidelis', Moreland, in 1930; they were packed into the classroom like sardines. Long forms built for six pupils accommodated eight. One child's book overlapped her neighbour's, so that she had to wait patiently to turn over the page. For correction of exercises in grammar, spelling and arithmetic pupils changed books, as was common practice, and held them up to 'show Sister',²⁷ but composition marking posed a problem — one could not transport a pile of 112 loose exercise books home in a crowded bus, train or tram. This continued to be the situation in large schools, and was exacerbated in the late 1950s and 1960s with the influx of European migrants, as the writer's own experience bears out.

Apart from their clientele, the nuns made other contacts. David Mitchell, one of Lilydale's most active civic leaders — a town councillor and a Scottish Presbyterian — lent his patronage. Nellie Melba, his brilliant daughter, followed his lead, looking on the nuns as friends and eventually bequeathing her carriage to them in 1931. It was a handsome one-horse, rubber-tyred, hooded, black vehicle, complete with her monogram, and comfortable to ride in. Nellie Armstrong (née Mitchell) was a personal friend of M. Gertrude Power, superior at Lilydale from 1932 to 1937, who was a personable, capable lady in her own right. She came from Carrick, and held positions of honour in the order for years — as superior in Healesville, Bendigo and Yarrowonga as well as Lilydale. Nellie, her contemporary, was born in 1861 in Richmond, the third of ten children born to Isabella and David Mitchell; he was a Scottish stonemason who made good in Australia as builder in 1880 of the Exhibition Building and who had substantial interests in quarries and sheep stations. Nellie's first music teacher was her mother, a pianist, organist and harpist; her general education was completed at Presbyterian Ladies' College, where she learnt singing, piano and organ.

When Nellie was twenty her mother died, and the sorrowing family moved to Mackay, then a remote frontier town in Queensland. Here Nellie met and married Charles Armstrong, despite her father's disapproval. The marriage did not last, and Nellie returned with her infant son, George, to Melbourne. Opera became her career, and the silver-sounding voice won her unsurpassed fame at Covent Garden and in United States and European opera houses. She was made a Dame of the British Empire in 1918 in recognition of the large sum of money (£100 000 by her calculations) raised for the war effort by her concerts. Her legacy to her countrymen was the teaching that she gave — and enabled to be given — to new generations; in 1916 a Melba scholarship was set up to support young, talented singers. When she died in 1931 in Sydney, of paratyphoid, her body was brought with pomp by train to her home town, Lilydale, and buried in the cemetery there. Dame Nellie's gravestone is engraved, 'Farewell, without bitterness'. The fortune she amassed was left to her sole grandchild, Pamela Armstrong, who came to the Lilydale convent to learn music from Sr Berchmans Murphy.

Melba's carriage, left to the nuns, was kept as a showpiece. Only occasionally

did one of them, able to handle a horse, take a party out in it, and then mainly for the novelty of riding in 'Madame Melba's carriage'. Sr Beatrice Richmond, writing in 1974, recalled that M. Magdalen Taylor, superior in 1954 and 1955, took her for a drive to Melba's country home, Coombe Cottage, designed and built in 1911 by John Grainger (father of composer Percy Grainger). George Armstrong lived there with his wife and daughter Pamela, when they were not in England. At the time of the sisters' visit they were overseas, but the caretaker allowed them to explore the grounds and look through the windows. By then the carriage had become a relic of the past, or so M. Magdalen thought. A practical woman, she considered it had outlived its usefulness and sold it, for the net sum of 10s. Its new owner, a Colac antique collector, later resold it, and its whereabouts have been lost to history.

The nuns owned their own phaeton; according to Sr Beatrice it was used to take the community to morning Mass. Apart from that, the superiors used it regularly. Mother Gertrude Power would be driven to Croydon to buy fruit in season from the orchard there; the convent and boarding school residents required ample supplies of fresh and preserved fruit. Her successor, the popular M. Ursula Slater, twice superior (1938-43 and 1948-53), had a yen for picking over goods that found their way to 'op' shops; when she got into the phaeton and set off, the horse would stop automatically at Hamer's second-hand shop. It became a community joke. As Miss Slater, M. Ursula was one of the Lilydale postulants; a girl from Essendon, Elizabeth Slater is reported in the *Advocate* of October 1903 as being received into the order by Carr at a ceremony in the convent chapel, called St Joseph's Mount. The ceremony, which 'occupied over two hours', was enhanced by Miss Slater's rendering a sacred solo, with violin accompaniment.²⁸

Mansfield and its branch-houses, Lilydale, Healesville, Seymour and a 'related' house, Kilmore, interchanged members. When Lilydale had been established for six years, it sent out a group to Healesville, later replacing them with another group of sisters from Mansfield.

