

The Foundation Years

As the second world war draws to a close and Bishop O'Collins, of the Ballarat Diocese, invites the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) to open a boys-only boarding school in the heart of the prosperous Western District of Victoria. The chosen location for the boarding school was to be the agricultural and cultural capital of the region, Hamilton.

A man of foresight, O'Collin's believed that country people, so important in the life of the church and the nation, should be able to access a good Catholic education and all that it could provide. The Western District was experiencing an increase in rural population attracted by post-war land settlement and migration schemes. With this came a changing faith demographic and O'Collins was intent on being able to provide Catholic educational opportunities for rural inhabitants.

The challenges of establishing a Catholic Boarding school in such a staunchly held Protestant region were many and so it was that Bishop O'Collins quietly entered into discussion with the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart who had successfully established Downlands College, Toowoomba - a boys boarding school on the Darling Downs of Queensland, a region both geographically and culturally very similar to the landscape of the Western District.

In 1947, after a somewhat long and secretive search for a suitable site, Melbourne property agents acting for the MSCs purchased a 900 Acre property, on the Port Fairy Road known as the Monivae Homestead. The cost was £21,809. The site was deemed highly suitable for a boarding school by the agent but the size of the property was far in excess of that required.

Architects immediately set to work drawing up a succession of plans for grand buildings on the site, but it soon became clear that this was not a good location for a school. Though problems with getting the phone reconnected were soon sorted out, there was no sewerage; water came only from a large underground tank and electricity from an old and ailing generator. The town was not growing in that direction, the prospect of improvement or connection to basic amenities were dim. It did not take long to realise the property would never support a large boarding school.

A period of inaction followed and it was decided to lease the land for farming and grazing purposes. Grateful for the small income this provided, the MSC priests initially assigned to assist in the establishment of the new school, helped in surrounding parishes while continuing to seek a solution to their problem. A search for a new site quickly begun and in 1951, through the generosity of their great friend Mr. Bob Strachan, the MSCs arranged for an exchange of land. With the exception of 65 acres around the Monivae homestead, which would remain in MSC hands, for the time being, Mr. Strachan agreed to exchange 120 acres of land on Ballarat Road for the Monivae estate.

It would still take some time to design and build the planned boarding school on the Ballarat Road site, and the need for the Catholic boy's school was becoming more urgent. It was therefore decided to open a small day school at the Monivae Homestead while the main school was being built. This was planned for 1953, but further difficulties meant that classes did not commence at the Homestead until 1954.

Classes began on Tuesday, 2 February 1954. There were thirty-eight students, eighteen in Form 1 and twenty in Form 2. Fr Bob Hyland, himself a Western District man, was the non-teaching Rector, and there were three priests teaching in the temporary weatherboard structure. The Spectator reported as follows:

'There is something appealing in a small intimate schoolhouse, consisting of three schoolrooms, one of which is the science department. This is the meat in the sandwich made up of the regular classrooms, one on either side. In its truly rural setting, the school is itself an incentive to think and to work. In the modern style it is 'all windows' and from one side and there is a splendid panorama of smooth fields - from the other the sight of tall, sighing pines behind which is the old Monivae mansion in its rugged bluestone beauty. The rooms are bright and airy, simply but adequately furnished, and with efficiency the keynote. The whole unit is compact, bright and entirely pleasing despite its almost severe simplicity'.

The teachers did not share the reporter's enthusiasm for the rooms were oppressively hot in summer and cold in winter, and also chafed at being isolated out of town with poor transport. But they were all men of learning, Fr. Mooney in science and history and a gifted sportsman, Fr O'Carrigan the dramatist and artist, Fr McMahan a gifted musician who was in charge of the school. All three found scope for their talents, and an outlet from the grind of daily classes and nighttime preparation, in the various town organizations of music, drama, history, and sport. Three MSC brothers cared for the property.

The boys also found ways of lightening the academic load. Monivae was out in the bush, so some things were different from other schools. One of the favourite sports was snake hunting along the banks of the Muddy Creek until some parents got wind of what was going on. There was organized sport too, but it was different; there was a half-pitch laid down for cricket practice, but there was no place for a proper cricket match, so there were baseball games. On the football field, if you won the toss you could choose to kick uphill or down. Then there were marbles on the avenue, and a sort of hybrid hockey game with pinecones and sticks - and not much chance of being sued under public liability in those days. In organized sport, the boys were successful in football right from the start, winning the Under 14 premiership in their first year. And from the beginning also, the boys were making a name for themselves in the town in drama and public speaking.

Each of the priests teaching in the first years made their contribution to the life of the city. Fr McMahan conducted many an evening programme for the music society, and wrote the music for Hamilton Ho; Fr O'Carrigan directed school dramatic performances yearly in the Hamilton festival; Fr Mooney was active in the historical society and in sports.

By 1955, there were fifty-seven boys in Forms 1 to 3, attending Day school at Old Monivae.

While classes continued at the small bush school at Old Monivae, Mr. Lionel Sam Miguel of Melbourne commenced designs for a new College on the Ballarat Road site. The building would cater for two hundred boarders, there would be a three-story main block, with wings that swept back on the east and west sides. Bob Strachan was the builder and excavation commenced in October 1953 with the project expected to take at least two years.

The foundation stone was laid on a Sunday in October 1954, with the Spectator reporting on the event and progress, describing it as;

'the biggest ever to have been undertaken in Hamilton. Great masses of concrete, in horizontal and perpendicular formations, are still the most striking features.'

The ceremony was performed by Bishop O'Collins of Ballarat, who spoke of the *'farming community being the backbone of the county'*. Many local dignitaries and representatives of state and religious educational institutions attended. Fr Bob Hyland was the first Principal the Provincial Superior of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart expressed the hope that *'the college will be true to its title, the Sacred Heart College, and educate our young people to be Fortes in Fide, strong in the faith'*.

While reporting on all this, the journalist from the Spectator was keen to find out when the new College would open. The sub-architect replied that it was expected to open in 1956, but declined to give a definite date for completion due to major delays in the delivery of materials and a shortage of carpenters at the time. In fact, the school did open on 14 February 1956 with an enrolment of sixty-five boarders and forty-six day students in Years 7 to 10, but one could hardly say that the building was ready.

Fr. Paul Power describes those first opening weeks at the College;

'The Fathers spent their first night in the new College on Saturday 11th, February 1956. There were rooms to go into but there were no doors or windows; the taps gave no water' the electricity was not on; the sewerage had not been finally connected. On Sunday morning, there was nowhere to wash, etc. so we piled into the old Chev sedan and utility and went back across to old Monivae to wash and say Mass.

The doors were put up during the second week of classes. The water and sewerage were turned on Monday 13th. Electricity for the classrooms and staff rooms arrived on Tuesday; there was none in the locker room for about two weeks. The wick lamps from old Monivae were brought into service.'

Much to Fathers' horror, four of the boarders arrived early on that Sunday: J.Cheesman, C.Finch, M.O'Dwyer, and G. Cross. The four boys were put in a large bare recreation room, with only a candle in a bottle, on a table, to serve as a light. What faith those parents had!

He similarly describes the opening days:

'The embarrassment of the first day is difficult to forget. The College looked only half built and was. The workmen were going like steam to get the dormitory floor down, and then they did not quite complete it. There were no real linings on the verandas; all the walls except the front one consisted of one brick only; there was no front door and the vestibule was plain cement, as were the front steps. At least this was swept for the incoming parents and boys. There was no floor in the corridor leading to the Rector's and Bursar's offices; some building planks kept people from tripping over the exposed floor joists. Somehow everyone survived the first night and classes began the next day.'

Inspectors came to visit the new school. One wonders how the approval of the Health Department was given in March. Mr. Wolfe from the Council of Education visited in June and approved the school for full secondary registration. He described the accommodation as ample, the buildings as massive and imposing but not yet complete;

'As there is a full staff of trained and experienced teachers, classroom teaching is carried out in a brisk, confident and purposeful manner with the good use of the illustrative material. Pupils are responsive and take an active part in the development of the lessons.'

These are the remarks of some of the students in that first year. John Roberts said to me;

'I don't know what would have happened to us if it hadn't been for Monivae....three quarters would not have gone to any college.' (The district inspector wrote in the Spectator of June 1956 about his concern for education in the district, whereof the 322 pupils who left state secondary schools in 1955, 129 had completed only Form 2, only 28 finished Form 6, 'these figures are devastating and tragic.')

Peter Annett said in an interview in the Spectator;

'I always remember the dormitory at Monivae....one high hall with beds everywhere. I didn't think it was rugged at the time. I enjoyed it...my recollections of Monivae are all extraordinarily positive. "The priests" were wonderful men in my opinion, in many respects well ahead of their time...a couple of them were skilled musicians, one of them was an artist/playwright...It was rare in those days for priests to be significantly involved in the wide community. However, Monivae's priests were an exception.'

In an earlier edition, Peter Borbiro recalled the cold and the crowded rows of beds and the three flights of stairs to the bathrooms and showers - but also, *'the boisterous behaviour and happy chatter that said we enjoyed it'*.

In another Spectator interview Bryan Roberts said;

'The MSCs were the greatest influence on my life. Without them, I wouldn't have received the education I did. They were men who gave a great example to the students in their commitment to religion - and their commitment to us.' And he wrote in the college paper; *'My abiding memories of Monivae College are of order, discipline, study, sport, peace, religious practice, affection and loving commitment'*.