

## A wander through 'Brigidinity': Coonamble 1945-1955 and Beyond.

I think we'll shine the torch on just a few of those years. Let's go back in time to the Brigidine Convent, home to about 14 Sisters at any given time — Irish, Australian, young and old. If those walls could speak! Those stairs, those corridors, classrooms and playgrounds!

Let's go in by the front door with its stained-glass panel. What can we hear? Well, there's Jeannine Colless practising, with cascading scales echoing through the house. From another room younger, tentative fingers are plonking out "Marche Militaire", while through a closed door comes the sound of an Art of Speech hopeful, declaiming "to be or not to be — that is the question - or is it "the horses were ready, the rails were down, but the riders lingered still"? Let's go on outside.

There on the verandah is Mother Agatha with her faithful dog and both are listening to a hapless 14-year-old struggling with Latin vocabulary. A well-educated dog, that one! There are enticing smells coming from the kitchen. Is it Mother Gertrude making toffees for the fete? Or Mother Martin making a good, big sandwich for the hungry chap at the door? Maybe it's Mother Mel and her scones, or our Sister Marguerita creating a curry to die for!



Here comes Mother Pius comforting a homesick little boarder: a glass of milk and a biscuit work wonders sometimes! I think I see Mother Perpetua surrounded by a couple of youngsters who have just had a shower, given some clean clothes

and some breakfast. We'll never know how many children started their day that way in the 60's. Pep could well have taken Mary MacKillop's famous words as her motto: "Never see a need without doing something about it."

The High School bell rings out and there's a clatter of footsteps on the stairs as a flurry of boarders fly by, perilously late for Assembly. Up the stairs we go to Second Year, and here's Mother Angela showing the girls the finer points of drawn-thread embroidery. I can hear Mother Denis' voice next door in First Year, patiently explaining something about "x plus y in a bracket to be squared", while Mother Clare is enthusing to the Third Years about the Cavaliers and the Roundheads, or is it the Australian explorers and the "Riddle of the Rivers".



A leap forward in time and here's Mother Dominic leading her French charges through the intricacies of Jones's Grammar. Around to Fourth and Fifth Year we go to find Mother Theresita (Therese Bonsor) deep into English Comprehension, or a little later, Mother Luigi bringing Shakespeare to life for the 'Leavings'. Mother Marietta, (Val McKenna), Mother Emerita (**Lorraine Gatehouse**) and **Mother Anita (Murray)** join the long line of Leaving Certificate educators who opened so many doors for so many

students. Morning break - play-lunch to us - but Mother Helen's out there, veil pinned back, striding up and down the sidelines of the boys' playground blowing her whistle: "Noel Kennedy, you're offside". And there goes Mother Monica heading towards the church with a troupe of trainee Altar Boys. (After Father Kelly's tuition they all spoke Latin with an Irish accent). What's that music I hear? No, it's not angels, just Mother Vianney's choir up in the gallery, dusting down some Latin motets for Corpus Christi.

And what's going on in St. Pat's Hall? Let's have a look. Mother Francesca's preparing a concert item. Is it "Glow Little Glow Worm" or maybe "Butterflies in the Rain"? All we know is that every child will be involved; the little girls will all be in pastel dresses to dream of - probably made from crepe paper or 'butter muslin': this was post-war, remember - and the whole thing will be a work of art.

Another leap through time and we hear strains of Sister Brenda's orchestra, miraculously formed, by dint of raffles to buy a trumpet, or a clarinet, or maybe a big bass drum! Genius, they say, is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration! And Brenda was living proof of that. Next door in the Supper Room the 6th class boys are practicing pyramids. The Occupational Health and Safety people might 'tut tut' these days, but big boys at the base, little fellows on the top, and a collective cheer when the last little chap stands up.

Over to St. Philomena's/St. Bernard's/St Brigid's with vivid memories of Mother Bernadette's assemblies; Mother Aidan's cricket team; Mother Clement's magical blackboard pictures; Mother Beatrice's spelling bees; Mother Leon's (Clare Riley) angelic First Communion class; and Mother Finian sorting out a vehement playground fight ("Mu'er, he hit me first").

Is that Mother Matthew we hear initiating First Class into the mysteries of "take aways"? (In those days they were sums and not hamburgers). And those refined vowel sounds we can hear would have to be Mother Stephen telling Second Class the story of King Alfred burning the cakes!



Jumping a few years, why here's Mother Cyril (Joan Bell) organising a bus load of miniscule footballers and netballers heading for some remote corner of the Bathurst Diocese. And here's Mother Edward (**Sheelah Mogan**) planning - yes it's an excursion. Where to this time? Let's go to Brisbane! There's "movement at the station". Mother Zita and Fourth Class are leading the way as the whole school trails across the bridge to the town swimming pool. Trotting along beside her are the Fourth Class debaters anxious to rehearse their speeches before they take on the 'Big Kids' in Sixth Class next day. I think the Nuns invented the concept of 'multi-tasking'.

Back to the Convent, and - who's that carrying a tray to the front parlour? It's Mother Patrick (Pat Nagle)! Guess who's coming to dinner? The Nuns became experts on Irish history, the prospects for the St. Pat's Day Inter-School Sports, and how to judge a good racehorse, over many years of entertaining priests. A carry-over from the tradition of hospitality extended to many a starving curate during the lean days of war-time.

On we go through the '70s, '80s and '90s and into the 21st Century. These scattered memories may well evoke your own. The Nuns impressed me as dedicated, resourceful, often humorous individuals who battled against huge odds - a severe climate, no money and few comforts, long hours and precious little equipment, not to mention yards of black serge, to give us the best all-round education and character-training that they could. Their love for God and their practical care for us, their interest in our families, our future, our faith, had a profound effect on me and on many I know. I'm grateful for this opportunity to voice my appreciation of some of those wonderful women who have made such an impact on this town. I pray that the seeds they have sown may continue to grow, droughts and floods notwithstanding.

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