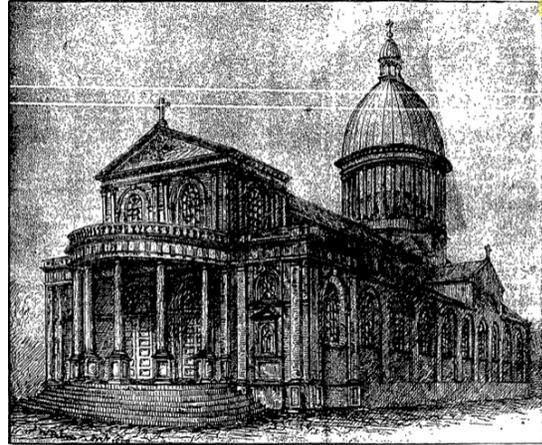


Where We've Come From, How We Got Here:

St Patrick's Basilica's 125th Jubilee

Greetings. Kia ora tātou. Feasgar math. Tá failte romhaibh.

First of all, I want to extend congratulations to the parish on the creative revitalization of the Basilica and its surroundings in recent years. It's no mean achievement for a Christian community in this city and this country to celebrate a century and a quarter of worship and witness. Investment in the church's restoration a few years ago attests to its standing as a prominent landmark, and perhaps the most impressive one architecturally on the whole Flat, making it a highly visible sign of the historic Catholic presence here.



COMPLETE DESIGN OF ST. PATRICK'S BASILICA, SOUTH DUNEDIN.
(Perspective view, specially drawn for this issue by the architect, Mr. F. W. Petre.)

As such it has also facilitated uncounted lives of faithful worship – 125 years of Masses, confessions, baptisms, weddings, ordinations, requiems – something which is in itself well worth celebrating. It stands in marked contrast to the slew of historic Presbyterian churches around the city that are currently being abandoned to possible demolition – at Maori Hill, in South Dunedin, Andersons Bay, Northeast Valley – a fact much to be regretted and one likely to impoverish the built heritage of our city as much as it diminishes the Christian presence here.

We need look no further north than Christchurch too, to see how easily a precious heritage of church buildings, as well as other civic treasures, can be lost before the vagaries of geology. The link is absolutely direct between this church, Frank Petre's first experiment in designing a church on the basilica model in 1894, and the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, which was the most impressive example of a sequence of such basilicas he built subsequently. Indeed that Cathedral was, in my opinion, the greatest

achievement in church architecture in the whole country, across all creeds and denominations, and one of the most sublime architectural achievements in New Zealand history. And yet today, its fate has been sealed, no doubt with much regret and sadness by our esteemed guest Bishop Martin, doomed to imminent demolition.

Nor can we be complacent here on the South Dunedin flat at the challenges posed by geology and climate. Will the Basilica celebrate its 150th jubilee, its 200th? Or will inundation by the sea make such a future unviable? Let's hope and pray it not be so. But let us also appreciate against that backdrop just how precious this building is to us, how much its very existence challenges us to remember where we come from, how hard it was to get to here, and how hard it will be to endure. That goes not just for the building, of course, but for the worshipping communities attached to the buildings too, as our Presbyterian friends can tell us. Nor let us forget the fate of our own abandoned churches, as old parishioners of St Bernadette's or St Brigid's would affirm.

So, having set that challenge, tonight I want to consider these questions. Where have we come from as Catholics in South Dunedin? How hard was it to get here; to Dunedin in the first place? And secondly to the status of a believing community with a beautiful basilica to worship in? In answering those questions, I want to share with you something of the life stories of two men that together tell us a lot about the origins of St Patrick's Basilica.

First of all, however, it's really important to understand how unwelcome Irish Catholics were in the original Otago settlement. The New Zealand Company's Otago scheme was designed to be a Scottish Presbyterian paradise. Ipso facto; Catholics were not wanted, Irish Catholics least of all. Captain Cargill's idea of selectiveness as Otago's founding father was so exclusive that he did not want English settlers, did not want Scottish Highlanders. Only Free Church Lowland Scots from between the rivers Tweed and the Tay fitted his ideal of the perfect Otago pioneer.

His colleague as the spiritual leader of the first settlers, Rev Thomas Burns, was equally hostile to Catholicism, an antipathy that was profound and often expressed publicly in early Dunedin. Irish Catholics were simply

beyond the pale for the founders of Otago. To be fair, many Scots emigrating to New Zealand were in fact leaving Scotland to get away from the flood of poor Irish Catholics who were flooding into that country from the late 1840s. Scotland's bitter history of sectarianism is rooted in social dislocation engendered by that mass migration across the Irish sea in the wake of the Great Famine.

The demand for labour in Otago was such, however, that by the mid-1850s its employers were clamouring for an increase in immigration. This led to a recruitment mission to Victoria in Australia that was not as fussy about a working man's origins as Captain Cargill would have liked. Amongst those who returned on the third boatload of recruits from Melbourne in 1856 were a number of men with Irish names, two of whom are identifiable as Irish Catholics in subsequent records in Otago. From small acorns ... one of those men was William Cavanagh from County Galway. Almost immediately, he took advantage of another loophole in the new immigration system by sending for his friends and relations from home, their fares to Otago being subsidised by the Otago Provincial Government.

A steady trickle of Irish immigrants, many from East Galway, began to arrive on each succeeding boat from Britain. The result of this chain migration was the development of a small and tight-knit Catholic community in pioneer Otago and Southland in the late 1850s. It was led by some notable English and Scottish Catholics but mainly made up of working class Irish, and ministered to from Wellington by French Marist priests, another nice point of connection for Bishop Paul being with us tonight. Yet they remained few and far between – Irish Catholics remained the least preferred immigrants from Otago's recruiters in Scotland.

The same was true in the neighbouring colony of Canterbury, its ideal being settlers who were English and Anglican. Irish Catholics were simply not welcome in either of the two southern provinces. The pioneer Marist priest, Father Petitjean, summed it up very nicely when he reported back to France how the arrival of Catholics in either Canterbury or Otago, "*could be compared to goods introduced by contraband*"; their presence a sort of accident that had seen them wash up on the southern coast in spite of the

hostility to their presence. Altogether, he reckoned in 1857 that there were no more than 600 Catholics spread right across the whole South Island.

Everything changed with the discovery of Otago in 1861, a watershed event that put paid to any remaining aspirations for Otago to be an exclusively Presbyterian zone. The gold rushes cracked the gates open wide and the Irish poured through, most coming across from Australia but originating in all the counties of Ireland. Men dominated the gold rush arrivals, in particular between 1861 and 1865, as Otago was swamped with young single men from all over the world. To balance the sexes, the Otago authorities initiated immigration schemes providing free or heavily subsidised passages from Britain for single females. Irish girls proved much more interested in taking up this opportunity than their Scottish sisters and large numbers joined the men in Otago between 1863 and 1870.

This was followed by the Vogel immigration schemes 1871-1888, the single greatest influx of new settlers in New Zealand history, in which the Irish were heavily represented. They made up over 25% of all the 100,000 plus immigrants who arrived in these years, a third of whom arrived in Otago. It was in this period, when Otago had expanded to be New Zealand's most populous province and Dunedin its major city, that the South Dunedin Flat was transformed from boggy swamps and open fields to the beginnings of the suburbs we know today. Central Dunedin had by then become both congested and terribly polluted. As the population grew, the town expanded onto the two large areas of flat land to the south and north of the centre.

South Dunedin occupies a central position here on 'The Flat', the low-lying area between the central city and its ocean beaches. As this area developed from the 1860s onwards, it became the most ethnically diverse part of Dunedin. There were fewer Scots here than in other sections of the city, and more English, especially in Caversham that developed into a suburb of solid workers' cottages. They were populated by skilled tradesmen, a large number of them metal workers and carpenters from English backgrounds. These skilled artisans dominated the growing number of industrial workshops on the South Dunedin Flat, the largest of which was the newly-established Railway Workshops at Hillside.

Those skilled men needed labourers to support their work. These 'unskilled' working men were more likely to come from the ranks of the Irish. They lived in smaller cottages on the cheaper sections of South Dunedin, a lower-lying swampier area of the Flat. It was here that the largest concentration of Irish Catholics in Dunedin could be found. By 1891 Catholics constituted 20% of the borough population, a much higher proportion than in any other area of Dunedin. The wealthy Maori Hill borough, up on the hills, by way of contrast had just 8% - a figure no doubt representing the servants who worked in its prosperous houses.

This Irish Catholic community developed as a working class religious-ethnic enclave whose communal life was centred by the late 19th-century on St Patrick's church in Macandrew Road and the adjacent school run by the Sisters of Mercy. A similar pattern, working class communities clustered around a church-school complex, could be found in many New Zealand cities at this time, Christchurch for one well researched example. These areas were not exactly Irish ghettos but neighbourhoods where Catholics were tightly networked both geographically and socially.

This brief overview gives us a 'big picture' idea of how Irish Catholics came to have such a strong presence in South Dunedin despite the best efforts of the city's founders. But it doesn't really give us a sense of what they came from, who they were as people. To do that, I want to focus on a man whose name is commemorated in the Basilica here thanks to his family's generous benefactions to the church, via the stained glass window of the Annunciation that is one of its beautiful set of windows added in the 1920s. His name was Thomas Heffernan, the original builder and owner of Heff's Hotel on King Edward Street, which at that time was one of South Dunedin's premier hotels and its owner a highly respected and fairly wealthy member of this parish.



But to get to that position, Tom Heffernan had travelled far. He was born in 1839 in County Mayo, one of the poorest counties in the west of Ireland. More than that, he came from Faulmore on the tip of the Erris Peninsula, the westernmost point on the Irish mainland and a desperately poor place. Its people still spoke Gaelic and practiced the ancient system of rundale agriculture, sharing tenancies to pool access to the best land and resources, and working it in common. In the twenty years before Thomas was born, the population of Erris had grown by one third. This put enormous pressure on the scanty resources of a place like Faulmore. It required further subdivision of farms that got smaller at every generation to provide for the young families coming through.

As plots got smaller and smaller, more and more of the land had to be devoted to the potato crop that alone was capable of feeding the growing numbers. The cash crops that paid the rent – oats and barley – became harder to make space for. By the time Thomas was born, County Mayo was the most extensively sub-divided county in Ireland and over 70% of all its farms were between one and five acres – mere subsistence holdings. The county also had the greatest rural population density and the lowest per capita income in Ireland. Unsurprisingly it also had the highest proportion of land devoted to potatoes – 30% of the total acreage under cultivation.

Disaster struck in 1846 when the potato crop failed – the beginning of An Gorta Mor – the Great Famine. Thomas Heffernan was seven years old. The fungal infection that caused the potatoes to rot in the ground hit again and again for the next three successive harvests. In the wake of these crop failures, came the ‘Famine fever’ – typhus – which was to kill even more

people than the Famine starvation itself. No official records were kept of Famine deaths but historians have developed various estimates of the mortality rates. Mayo had the highest, with perhaps 100 to 120,000 people perishing from hunger or disease in this one small county alone. A million died across the whole country, while another million emigrated on the so-called coffin ships to America.

Then came the evictions. Perhaps the worst facet of the Famine years in Erris, was the way that the landlord class turned on its tenants. Just before Christmas 1847, for example, in the worst winter of the Famine years, a landlord who was a lawyer in far-off Dublin, began evicting his tenants across three townlands in the area. His agents simply moved in on the clustered settlements and unroofed the cabins, turving the families who lived in them out on to the roads. Upwards of 80 families were evicted in one townland alone. A visitor from England recorded the scene just a few miles from Faulmore: *"Here were collected three or four hundred ... emaciated people in various stages of fever, starvation and nakedness; the ... evicted tenantry ... Many, too weak to stand, were lying on the cold ground; others squatting on the bare turf to hide their naked limbs."*

Other landlords followed suit. Across the Erris Peninsula, almost a third of the cabins of the poor suffered the same fate. Many of those evicted died on the roads in the bitter cold for want of shelter. Others fought back by immediately re-occupying their houses and patching up the ruined roofs. This process went on for years. Faulmore's turn came in 1860. The potato blight struck again that year, famine ensued and a new round of evictions and a massive surge in emigration followed. Most of the people who left Mayo still headed to America. But Thomas Heffernan, by then in his 21st year, took the longer route to Australia, probably earning the fare by working the harvest seasons in England as many farm labourers from Mayo did every year.

He came to Victoria's gold fields and from there followed the gold rushes of the early 1860s on to Otago and then the West Coast. Gold mining was hard, dirty work but it offered decent returns for effort and was an ideal vehicle for young men of little means to make their fortunes. Gold itself was seldom the way they made that 'fortune' but an apprenticeship on the

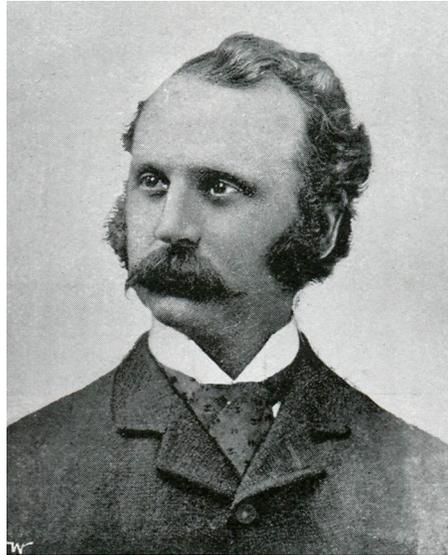
goldfields was often the way for a man of determination and self-discipline to get a start on some other career. For Thomas this would be, first of all, as a roading contractor, by which route he eventually amassed the capital to transition to his second and most successful career as a hotel-keeper.

In 1872 he married Margaret O'Malley, a fellow Irish immigrant from Co Galway and a woman who proved to be his ideal partner and soulmate. In 1874 they made their permanent home in South Dunedin. In 1876 Thomas was elected to the newly created South Dunedin Borough Council – his fellow Irish Catholic, the publican Nicolas Maloney being its first Mayor. In 1877 the two men were the leading contributors to a fund to help build the first St Patrick's church on the Flat. Then in 1880, Thomas and Margaret achieved their great ambition by opening Heffernan's South Dunedin Hotel. They eventually had eight children, prospered in their business, and worshipped in this church. They died within weeks of each other in 1912, leaving their family well provided for and easily able to fund the stained-glass window by which to commemorate their parents.

But if you think back to where Thomas had started from, and the great tragedies he had survived to get here – a life trajectory by the way that he would have shared with many, many of our Irish pioneers – that really is quite an epic tale of achievement. And it was families like the Heffernans, from humble Irish backgrounds, albeit most of them much less successful or well-heeled than Thomas and Margaret became, who paid for the building of this church and all the others like it across New Zealand.

Now to turn to my second subject, a man from a very different background. The first St Patrick's church in South Dunedin opened in 1878 as a combined school/chapel, with a plan to add a separate church at some point in the future. The man who designed it, and was already at work on designs for the future church proper, was a very active local Catholic, Francis Petre who lived at St Clair. Frank Petre was the first New Zealand-born architect. He came from a very distinguished and influential English Catholic family and his grandfather Lord Petre had been a leading member of the old Catholic aristocracy in that country.

Lord Petre had been one of the leading directors of the New Zealand Company, the English colonisation company that was behind the establishment of Wellington, New Plymouth, Nelson, and eventually Otago and Canterbury. The town of Wanganui was originally called Petre in his honour. When the first settlers came to Wellington in 1840, Lord Petre's son Henry was prominent among them. His son Francis, our architect, was born in Wellington in 1847. He was then taken back to England for his education in the 1850s, attending leading Catholic schools in England and France as well as the Naval College at Portsmouth.



After school he was apprenticed to a leading London shipbuilding and engineering firm where he learnt the latest developments in engineering, including the use of concrete in construction, which was to become his signature theme as an architect. Later he would be nicknamed Lord Concrete as a result. Petre returned to New Zealand in 1872 to work on the big railways projects then underway and settled in Dunedin, which was by then the leading commercial centre in the country and the place where its best architecture was to be found. He set up his own architectural firm in 1875 and made a splash immediately with his design for St Dominic's Priory. It was the largest mass concrete building in the southern hemisphere, constructed without reinforcement in a major feat of engineering. It is still with us today, of course, and is now considered one of the most important Victorian buildings in New Zealand.

His next big commission was St Joseph's Cathedral, like the Priory a Gothic-style building set on a very challenging site. These achievements pushed Petre to the forefront of Catholic architecture in New Zealand at a time when masses of churches and church buildings were being erected. He would go on to design over 50 Catholic churches across the South Island, having a greater impact on the public appearance of Catholicism via its buildings than any other person. Most of these early Petre commissions

were in the Gothic style that was considered the default setting for church design in the English-speaking world in the 19th century. Almost all of the significant Protestant churches erected in New Zealand in the colonial period, for instance, were Gothic in style.

In the 1890s, however, Petre changed tack. He turned to an alternative and distinctively Catholic style, the ancient Roman basilica form. This church, St Patrick's, is the earliest example of a Petre basilica. He discarded his earlier plans for the church, which had been for a Gothic-style building and came up with this. Actually his design was for a much more ostentatious edifice when you look at the plans, with a huge dome and a grand portico and steps at the entrance, but the essence of it is what we have around us today. It forms a sequence with other Petre-designed basilicas constituting a group of the most notable church buildings in New Zealand that includes St Patrick's Oamaru (1894), the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart Wellington (1901), St Marys Invercargill (1905), Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament Christchurch (1905), St Patrick's Waimate (1908), and my home church Sacred Heart Timaru (1911).

The basilica form was a very definite Catholic architectural statement, a Roman form that communicated immediately the church's Roman connection. And while local Protestants claimed to utterly despise the church's links with Rome and the Pope, I think they were actually secretly impressed with the pomp and grandeur that this style of 19th-century Catholicism, known as Ultramontanism, presented through its buildings and its liturgies. The latter were particularly elaborate as was evident in the opening ceremonies for the Basilica in October 1894; Haydn's Mass in B Flat sung by the combined members of three choirs, accompanied by an organist plus a full orchestra. Though Bishop Moran was too ill to attend, his place was taken by Bishop Grimes of Christchurch, supported by eight priests, all of them decked out in ornate and colourful vestments.

There was another side to the basilica form that Petre made so much his own: they had a simplicity in structure that was particularly suitable for concrete construction. Petre used highly-mechanised techniques for his poured concrete walls and then faced them with brick or Oamaru stone. This was a very quick process, especially compared to the more painstaking

stone construction required for Gothic churches. Concrete construction was also much cheaper than any other form of masonry but just as fireproof and permanent (earthquakes notwithstanding). This was really important because Petre was always under pressure from his Catholic clients to produce grand buildings that would make a powerful symbolic presence in their landscapes but they never wanted to pay what that cost. They demanded churches on a palatial scale but at bargain prices.

Even with his first Catholic commission, the Dominican Sisters are said to have struggled to pay his fees for their Priory and offered the then young and childless architect free education for any future daughters he might have. Petre accepted the offer and got his own back when he subsequently produced seven daughters for the Sisters to educate. And by the by, in 1881 he married Captain Cargill's granddaughter, a scandalous union across the sectarian divide that must have had the old Captain spinning in his grave!

Precisely for those reasons of cost versus ambition, when St Pat's was ceremonially opened in 1894 it was far from finished. Fundraising went on for years, squeezing the poor Irish working families of the Flat to be generous again and again, so that further work on the building could proceed. And generous they were, as attested by this amazing building and all the other impressive churches that similar pioneer Irish Catholic communities across New Zealand have bequeathed to us as their successors.

So there are some answers to the two questions I posed at the beginning of this discussion. Famine-wracked Ireland is where most of our Catholic pioneers in South Dunedin came from, that disaster dominating the formative years of every adult Irish migrant who arrived here before 1870. We have also established that it was pretty hard for them to get here too, pushing through barriers to Irish Catholic immigration that defined the nature of Dunedin and Otago in their early years. But get here they did and, on the boggy ground of South Dunedin, they formed a powerful believing community that utilised the skills of an outstanding architect in Frank Petre who could draw on a rich architectural heritage from Rome to create this beautiful basilica church to worship in.

Beautiful buildings build community spirit. Sacred ones feed the soul. For South Dunedin, St Patrick's basilica is one of the few truly historic buildings in the suburb. It is a beautiful, sacred building that both feeds the soul and builds community spirit. It remains, as described in the Historic Places Trust Register, *"an aesthetically imposing building that makes an important contribution to the streetscape of South Dunedin. Its history and large size emphasise the importance of the Catholic Church to the local community, and has been the focus of worship for [125] years."*

May it long continue to do so.