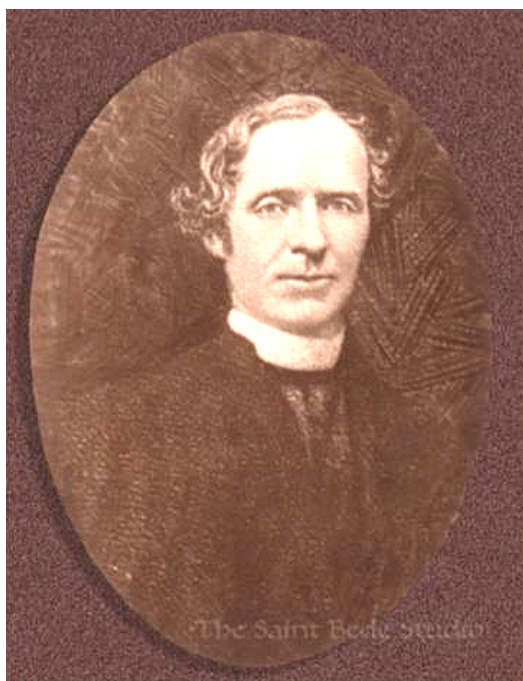


The 185th Anniversary of the Arrival of the Reverend John Rigney in the Illawarra: *Cometh the hour, cometh the man*

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Archivist
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During his homily at the Chrism Mass in Rome on 28 March 2013, Pope Francis called on the world's priests to stay close to the vulnerable, the marginalized and to be "shepherds living with the smell of the sheep. This is what I am asking you," he stressed, "be shepherds with the smell of sheep." Later, speaking to French priests in the Vatican in June 2021, the pontiff repeated the phrase adding "The priest is a man who, in the light of the Gospel, spreads the taste of God around him and transmits hope to restless hearts: this is how it must be." Reverend Father John Rigney¹ was such a priest. This twenty-four-year-old Irish priest was among the earliest gifts God gave to the Catholics of the Illawarra.

John had entered Ireland's St Patrick's College Maynooth in September 1834 to study for the priesthood. Here in 1837 on Pentecost Sunday the Vicar-General to Bishop John Bede Polding, Dr William Bernard Ullathorne OSB, spoke after Mass to final year seminarians about the needs of the 'spiritually destitute' Catholics in the colony of New South Wales for pastoral care. John Rigney responded to this call, was ordained on 23 December 1837 and on the morning of 23 March 1838, with seven other Irish priests recruited by Ullathorne, he boarded the ship *Cecilia* in London for the colony. Father Rigney came from County Galway, which covered 6,148 square kilometres; from 1838, his Illawarra Mission, from Coal Cliff to Moruya, comprised the present-day local government areas of Wollongong, Shellharbour, Kiama, the Shoalhaven, Wingecarribee and Eurobodalla: an approximate area of 11,730 square kilometres!

On Sunday 15 July 1838 after a sea voyage of 114 days the *Cecilia* arrived in Sydney Harbour. The eight priests were met by Bishop Polding and proceeded to the old St Mary's Church. After a couple weeks of recovery from their journey, acquainting themselves with the Catholic community and with their travel plans for their assigned appointments, John Rigney and four other priests from the *Cecilia* set out for Parramatta. Four hours later they arrived at Parramatta and parted ways with Fathers Michael O'Reilly and Thomas Slattery who rode on to Bathurst and Lithgow/Hartley (where there would be 26 Mass stations and no church) while Fathers Rigney, Fitzpatrick and Brennan turned south to Liverpool and their overnight destination of Campbelltown.

¹It was Paul, Cardinal Cullen (1803-1878), Archbishop of Dublin and Ireland's first cardinal, who in the 1860s started the practice of Irish priests wearing Roman collars and being called "Father" (instead of "Mister"). Hence the references in this article to Mr Rigney.

It was at Campbelltown the three priests met Father James Alipius Gould, (later Archbishop of Melbourne) who was newly appointed to the district and Father John Joseph Therry, who was about to depart for Port Phillip Bay and then Tasmania. Next morning Fathers Brennan and Fitzpatrick set off for their new missions: Goulburn and Yass, accompanying Father Rigney part of the way along the mountain range until he turned for the Illawarra coast. It was via the slopes of the southern side of Mount Keira and along O' Brien's Road that John Rigney would come to Figtree. Most likely he would have been met by Matthew Ryan, a prominent local Catholic, at his 'Figtree Farm' beneath that old landmark tree. Father Rigney then proceeded to Wollongong. Here he found a small slab chapel which doubled as a school during the week for the scattered flock of his Mission. Less than £20 had been subscribed to build a church.

What was the date of his arrival in Wollongong? The Archives have no other record than the parish register (known today as the *Rigney Register*) and, given his enthusiasm for his ministry, it may be the date of the first entry in this book: On 8 August 1838 Father Rigney baptised Thomas Henry Parramatta who was born on 8 December 1837, the son of Thomas and Maria Parramatta of Wollongong.² In his time as priest-in-charge of the Illawarra Mission, from 1838 to 1846, the register recorded 567 Baptisms; Father Rigney officiated at 467 of them.

An episcopal visit to the Illawarra in November 1838 allowed Bishop Polding to assess the recently arrived John Rigney and the local Church. On Sunday, 11 November the bishop administered the Sacrament of Confirmation to fifty people in the 'Catholic Chapel of Wollongong' in the presence of two hundred people, who

manifested by their demeanour unfeigned pleasure at the position religion now holds in a district hitherto an almost total stranger to its public observance; while their devout attention ... would do credit to the people of any country, afford ground for assurance, that the influence of religious principles, either now implanted or revived in the bosom of these people, will quickly raise them high in the scale of Christianity.³

The dedicated John Rigney faced many challenges as the pastor of the Illawarra Mission. He needed to be able to reach out to a scattered flock: to traverse, at times, difficult country to Catholics far away and to bring together those who lived near Wollongong in providing the Sacraments and his pastoral care. The Catholic children also needed to be instructed in the Faith and receive the benefits of a general education within schools. He launched into his pastoral work, wholeheartedly, but his zealotry apparently took its toll on his health. Bishop Polding was concerned for Father Rigney, though he admired what the young Irishman was doing for the Catholics of the Illawarra: "Mr Rigney has been ailing for some time. He is much too rash, and does not pay sufficient attention to himself. He has altogether produced a moral change in the district of Illawarra."⁴

² Further details can be found in Dwyer, N., *By the Light of Christ: How Catholicism came to the Illawarra*, 2013, Pp. 116-119

³ *The Sydney Monitor and Commercial Advertiser*, Wednesday, 28 November, 1838, p.15

⁴ Polding to H.G. Gregory, OSB, 17 May 1839 in Compton, Sr. M. Xavier, et.al, *The Letters of John Bede Polding, OSB, 1819-1843*, Volume 1, Fast Books, Glebe, 1994, p.137

The Building of a Church Commences

Father Rigney soon realised that the Faithful needed a more permanent place of worship: land (the current Harbour Street site) was bought from Charles Throsby Smith, on 19 November 1839 for £20. Smith, regarded as the ‘Father of Wollongong’ for his significant role in the early development of the town also agreed to stone on his Balgownie (Fairy Meadow) estate being quarried as building material for the new church. The task of raising funds, to which the colonial government would match in financial assistance, had already been initiated with the *Australasian Chronicle* reporting on 12 November that ‘A subscription has been set on foot here, for the purpose of building a more commodious place of worship for the Catholic community There is between six and seven hundred pounds already subscribed, and the greater portion of that sum is paid up.’⁵



Left: The original Church of St Francis Xavier before its enlargement in 1906.

Tenders were called in March 1840 with the following notice appearing in the *Australasian Chronicle*⁶ that “sealed Tenders for building the Roman Catholic Church at Wollongong are required, and will be received by the Rev. John Rigney, at whose residence the Plan and Specification may be seen.” In the *Catholic Magazine* for March 1841 readers were informed that £789 3s 2d had been collected for building the church and chapel house (presbytery) in Wollongong. The original presbytery was said to be a brick structure consisting of three rooms, thought to be a central hall with a room either side of it. Later two rooms were added and a verandah.

On 13 October 1840, Bishop Polding laid the foundation stone of the Church of St Francis Xavier and £55 was collected on the day for the building fund. John Rigney had done much to restore the spiritual health of the Catholics in his Mission: a church was being erected while the temporary chapel had a regular attendance of 200. In addition, Rigney celebrated Mass weekly at Dapto with 120 regularly in attendance, at Jamberoo monthly Father Rigney celebrated Mass with 80 attending and at the Shoalhaven he travelling monthly

⁵ *Australasian Chronicle*, Tuesday 12 November 1839, p. See Dwyer, N., *The Illawarra Flame: The Catholic Church in Wollongong District, 1839 to 1889* for full details on the building of St Francis Xavier’s Church

⁶ *Australasian Chronicle*, Friday 20 March 1840, page 4 of 4

with 100 regularly in attendance at Mass. In the course of his pastoral work John Rigney travelled 5234 kilometres in 1840 - and this reputedly good horseman had distances to travel!



Left: The original presbytery with verandas added after Rigney's time in the Illawarra – and in the foreground the presbytery dog!

To the Boundary of His Mission

The extent of the pastoral work of Father Rigney is not fully recorded in the parish archives (except for the *Rigney Register*): the Sacraments given, the Masses celebrated, the burial services conducted, the distances travelled nor what he perceived as the challenges in his work.⁷ When a priest could relieve him at Wollongong, he was able to venture out to the furthest reaches of his Mission. In late November 1844 he travelled for the first time to the Far South Coast. At 'Burril' (Burrell) he baptised two children on 20 November. Then it was onto the Clyde River to baptise one child on 21 November. By the 23 November Father John Rigney was at Broulee to baptise a further seven children. His presence in Broulee prompted further Baptisms: the next day it was six children to be baptised; then on 25 November it was three children to be baptised and finally one child on the 27th and another on the 28th. The age of these children confirmed the isolation from the Sacraments, though the thirteen-year-old John Larkin, baptised on 27 November, was the oldest. Father Rigney then went on to 'Merremorang' (Murramarang), where the first land grant had been made in 1840, to baptise two children.

This first visit to Moruya and South Durras emphasised the size of the Mission for which Father Rigney was responsible and that the 'Parish' of St Francis Xavier was not confined to the Illawarra.⁸ His visits to the southern extremities of his Mission resulted in only baptismal entries in the register, though it can be assumed this Sacrament was accompanied by the celebration of Mass, teaching catechism and Confession. When one accounts for the week spent in the South, the distance travelled on horseback (carrying at least altar stone, vestments, Mass kit, and presumably the register) and the privations of accommodation, there would have been little respite from ministering to Catholics scattered beyond the outposts of what passed for civilisation at the Shoalhaven and Wollongong. Father Rigney returned the following year, firstly to 'Merremorang', which included a Baptism and then onto Broulee (six Baptisms on 23 November and one Baptism on 24 November 1845).

⁷ More details on Rigney and his ministry in the Illawarra can be found in Dwyer, N., *The Illawarra Flame: The Catholic Church in the Wollongong District, 1839 to 1889* available from the Catholic Bookshop or Cathedral House.

⁸ Indeed, parishes did not exist at this time. The term 'district' was replaced in the Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia by 'parish' in 1928. Up until that time priests were appointed to districts.

He was back at Murramarang on 21 January 1846; Broulee from 25th to 27 January; and then on to the Clyde River community to baptise another child.

Father Rigney leaves Wollongong

Bishop Polding made two attempts to move Father Rigney to other, greater challenges. In 1843 the bishop sought to transfer Father Rigney to Moreton Bay, but was thwarted by the Catholic laity of the Illawarra, utterly opposed to the move. In 1846 Bishop Polding succeeded in his second attempt to remove Father Rigney and he was transferred from the Illawarra to be chaplain on Norfolk Island. This chaplaincy did not eventuate and he was appointed to Brisbane. Later Archbishop Polding recommended Father Rigney to Rome to be the bishop Ipswich. Father Rigney declined the episcopal office.

It was not a complex ministry that Father Rigney brought to Wollongong. Years later, he would recall, while providing religious instruction to children at Parramatta, “the old duty is still as sweet and as pleasant to me as it was when I first donned the cassock.”⁹ Father John Rigney came to the Illawarra and South Coast “*A young man in a young land... and foremost in the van of years, He sows the seeds of truth.*”¹⁰ He did not journey into some void: he went where the Catholic people lived, ‘spiritually destitute’ and starved of the Sacraments. In time other priests came, Father Pierre de Jong, OSB and Father Eugene Luckie the first among them; parishes were established, and schools built. In the simple recordings of the *Rigney Register* is the heritage, culture, and life of this Catholic community.

Today our challenges may be different, but few priests, increasing ‘flocks’ and determining how the Sacraments are delivered to the Faithful has a familiar ring. The significance of Father Rigney’s arrival in Wollongong should not be diluted by the passing of the years. The 15 July or the appropriate date thereafter when he arrived in Wollongong should be a memorial day, one marked in the parish calendar. In July 2023 we are celebrating how a dedicated saintly priest established and fostered the Catholic community of the Illawarra and South Coast. A devoted shepherd who deeply cared for his flock: “a man who, in the light of the Gospel, spreads the taste of God around him and transmits hope to restless hearts.”

⁹ *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW: 1888 - 1950), Saturday 4 January 1896, p3

¹⁰ Roderic Quinn’s *The Australian*, in Allsopp, F J, Hunt, O W and Mackarell, W J, *One Hundred Poems*, 1970, Angus & Robertson, Sydney