

# "To The Fore"

Snap Shots of St Columban's  
1928-2003



Albion 1928-1996  
Caboolture 1996-2003



by P. O'Shea

#### APPENDIX 4

##### Brother Francis Pius O'Driscoll (1897 - 1963).

When he celebrated his golden jubilee in 1962 he received congratulations from many different sources including the Prime Minister, Robert Gordon Menzies.

If one were to try and find a succinct epitaph for the man then perhaps it could be "...zeal for thy house has consumed me". (Ps. 68.9)

Francis entered the Christian Brothers Juniorate at Strathfield in 1912 having been born into an archetypal Irish Australian Catholic family of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century in 1897. The family lived at Highgate in Perth WA where Francis received his education at the CB schools. Thus at the age of 15 he left his family and was sent to the other side of the continent to train.

His training was thorough. The standards of the day distinguished clearly between right and wrong, justice and injustice, especially injustice to Catholics. The discipline was strict and the rules were clear. However by 1918 it was already out of date, by centuries.

Europe, already transformed by the French and Industrial Revolutions, underwent convulsive change due to the events of August 1914 and October 1917. On the other hand Catholic tradition hardly recognised any changes since the Council of Trent and the 16-Century. Even the Catechism we used was 300 years old.

This tradition continued throughout O'Driscoll's career. The "final solution", Stalin's Gulag, Mao's The East is Red and Great Leap Forward, the pill, the nuclear family, democracy, higher education etc., seemed to have little effect on the Church except to reinforce our convictions that we were right and the old ways were the best.

The order of the day was stability, the rock of certainty in a changing world. The metaphor was wrong, rocks wear out. A more apt metaphor was that we were living in museum and it took Pope John XXIII to point it out.

Francis is described by W. G. Hall in the Christian Brothers Educational Record as being "a vital, committed, and controversial Christian Brother". (P.229)

Aged 20 he was the "Abbot of Abbotsford"

(Victoria), a courtesy title for one in charge of a branch school, ie. Brothers came to teach each day while living in a central monastery. At the age of 25 after his final profession he was appointed to Park Street, South Melbourne as founder, Headmaster and Superior of the new Christian Brothers' Technical School. At 30 he was sent to Albion as founder, builder and Headmaster of the new school and Superior of the Monastery. After successfully completing this task he was sent to do it all over again at Rose Bay in Sydney.

He was to be the founder and Superior/Headmaster in two more colleges before he finished. Thus he was, in the fullest sense of the word, a pioneer. Building a Catholic education system in places hitherto lacking such amenities seemed to be his vocation. No wonder he was highly regarded by the general community, he must have been a tiger for work and a genius for organisation. In addition he was the Superior/Headmaster in two established Colleges.

At Albion he supervised the building of O'Driscoll Hall which was divided into four sections, one for each of the teaching Brothers. At the opening the Apostolic Delegate Dr. Cattaneo remarked that each of the four Brothers would be teaching about 50 students. These would be composite classes covering both Primary and Secondary schools. No record of the original classes survives but the total enrolment, according to contemporary accounts, at the start of the year was 120 and at the end 210 pupils.

By 1933 the total had risen to 240, according to the first College Annual which was published that year. This rather slow growth would be, in part caused by the Great Depression. By this time the classes ranged from 2nd to Senior, the latter one being the first for the school. These were extremely hard years and no doubt tested O'Driscoll's ability to keep the finances coming in, and the school viable. As usual, he did just that.

(One of the students was named Leslie Christ. I presume he was always called by his first name, especially if he was in trouble).

In 1933 Br O'Driscoll had rheumatic fever and this affected his heart, but it didn't seem to slow him down much. He was told he had to take a short walk every day and he did, for the

rest of his life. He did as he was told; he was trained to do that. But usually he was the one giving the orders.

The rest of his life was spent at the same hectic pace, sent wherever the struggle was hardest, wherever the need was greatest; the eternal warrior of Christ was to be found striving mightily, selflessly and autocratically to do the will of God - "fiat voluntas tua". He was a "true believer" dedicated to the Rule of his order. Weren't we all in those days?

He inspired people by his example, they flocked to his call. Money was raised, work was done, materials were found, time was spent, and magnificent buildings were erected "Ad majorum Dei gloriam". As children we always thought that AMDG was an acronym for All My Deeds for God. Well, the Laity did not learn much Latin that was for Priests.

He was a leader who led by example, no one worked harder than Pius he taught a full day in school every day and Saturday morning. At the same time he was a Brother living the prayer life, Headmaster running the school, fund raiser, working bee co-ordinator, sport coach, often Superior of the Monastery, etc. The achievement leaves one breathless; the man was a human dynamo. Today we would call him a workaholic, he must have loved his work, or he was dedicated to doing God's will or more probably, both.

Brother Bob Hardiman, an ex pupil of Pius at Albany, WA (another O'Driscoll foundation) in the 1950s, described Pius as "the last of the crammers" (p. 234). This might have been so but that was the method of those days, the boys were filled with information so that they could pass exams and get good jobs. Since most Catholics were working class, education was the way to improve the lot of the children, they would be better off than the parents - the Australian Dream.

Hardiman further describes O'Driscoll as "the kind of man you hated when he taught you; but as the years went by..... you came to revere him" (p. 235). He taught nine subjects to First Year (Grade 7) English, Latin, Christian Doctrine, Maths, Chemistry, Technical Drawing, History, Geography, etc. In addition he built part of the school, was Headmaster, Superior of the Monastery, etc. for six years. All the boys' work was handed up at the end of

each day, corrected and returned the next day "a masterpiece of modern art in psychedelic colours" (p. 237)

And lest one think he was slacking, most of the time he was teaching three classes in the one room. He probably used the strap in the usual proportions to help keep order. However one is inclined to think that the students were kept in order by the sheer dynamism of the man. If he could be described as "driven" then the students were certainly driven, they had no time in class to do anything but work.

While he might have been a terror to the boys, he was charming and popular with the parents, who, it seems revered him. Sometimes the "Irate Parent" would arrive to protest, but invariably left thinking that their boy was in the best of hands and that Br. O'Driscoll knew best. He probably did.

Albany was the last school he would set up and run. He went back to Perth and died there three years later, still working as hard as ever.

It would be impossible for a modern day Principal to operate as Pius did over his 51 years teaching. The modern schools are far more complex, parents do not have the time to work at the schools as they did, subjects are more complex, the old certainties are gone, even the new catechism is not above criticism (unthinkable in the past), the focus of education has shifted from knowledge based to skills based, students are taught to question and seek not just accept information as factual, class sizes have dropped markedly, many of the Brothers moved out of education and many have left the order, lay persons do the teaching etc.

Of his 51 years in the Institute, Pius spent 38 as a Headmaster and 33 as a Superior of the monastery. Thus he was a man accustomed to direct, he expected to be obeyed, and it seems he was seldom disappointed. In his last years when he was subject to Superiors he could be a trial to them because he kept them up to the mark, as he saw it.

He was sleeping badly and needed pills to sleep, but never missed a day's duty. Up before the others, he would complete the Stations of the Cross before Morning Prayer. At night, if he thought that recreation was going on too long, he would make his displeasure known by leaving the room. The Rule had to

be observed. This attitude did not endear him to the other members of the congregation but he was unswerving, he did what he believed was right even when it was unpopular.

If he gave advice he expected it to be followed so that there was a tendency not to include him in discussions. This may have had a depressing effect on him who had had so much experience. He seemed to think that the place was falling apart. This may have simply been the result of new ways that were coming in and he was not really able to change with them.

Death came quickly and cleanly at 3.30pm on Friday, 23 August 1963. It was in the term holidays and all the work of teaching had finished. He had been to visit his older sister Mother Augustine at the nearby Convent of Mercy and had just arrived home at Highgate. He was sitting in the dining room drumming his fingers on the table waiting for afternoon tea. Suddenly he slumped forward, dead.

Somehow it seems a fitting end for one who was so vigorous throughout his life. Everything was tidied up, school records were up to date, his Bursar's (Treasurer) Books were up to date and finances organised for the next fortnight, he was at recreation, time to go....so he went, no fuss just did it! I wonder whom he is keeping up to the mark now.

A man of his time, he did his duty, and did it to the best of his considerable ability. What else needs to be said? Anything else is superfluous. His monuments, human and physical surround us.

"welcome good and faithful servant".

A guinea was one pound and one shilling or 21 shillings (\$2.10). (100 pounds in 1928 equals \$2,340 in 1995 values.)

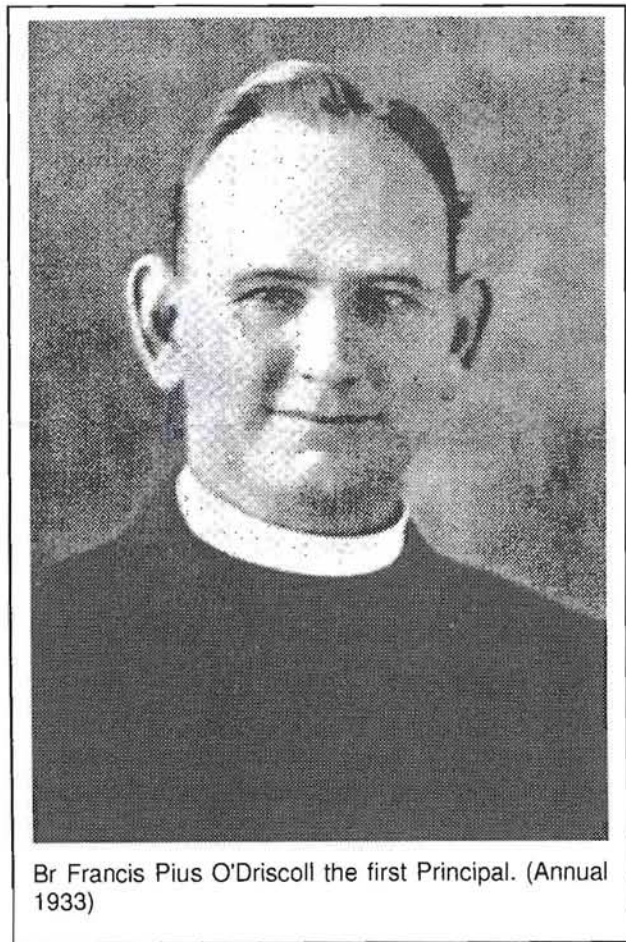
The school property consisted of Highlands, which was to be the Brothers' monastery (House), and the class block, later named O'Driscoll Hall, after the first Principal. It housed classes from Year 2 to Sub Junior. The primary and secondary classes were in the one building. The old coach house cum garage was later used as a Science Room. The toilets, complete with septic tank, were on the site of the later Parry Hall along with a shelter shed. (See Map, p.14)

It is worth noting that the young priest accompanying the Apostolic Delegate was Fr Norman Gilroy of Sydney who, in the early post WWII period would become Australia's first Australian-born Cardinal. He was also the first Australian-born Archbishop of Sydney.

#### **PIUS O'DRISCOLL**

The new school was to be staffed by four Brothers, one of whom, Br Francis Pius O'Driscoll, was the Principal of the school and Superior of the Monastery. He was only 30 years old and had already founded and managed one school in Melbourne. In his career he would perform this dual role four times. Francis is described by W. G. Hall in the Christian Brothers Educational Record as being "a vital, committed, and controversial Christian Brother." (p.229) He was all of these and more.

He was a leader who led by example. No one worked harder than Pius. He taught all day, every school day, as well as Saturday morning. At the same time he was a Brother living the prayer life, Headmaster running the school, fund raiser, working bee co-ordinator, sports coach and Superior of the Monastery. This achievement leaves one breathless - the man was a human dynamo. Today we would call him a workaholic; he must have loved his work, or he was dedicated to doing God's will, or more probably, both. (See Appendix 4)



Br Francis Pius O'Driscoll the first Principal. (Annual 1933)

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Dear John,

I apologise for the delay. Hopefully you and the other Old Boys find some interest in these pages. I feel Highgate and Columbians have a lot in common. Again, apologies.

Yours' Sincerely,

Eugene Waugh, President Et. Columbians PBA.