

**Annals of
St. Mary's College,
Castries, St. Lucia**

(To Our Lady of the Presentation, these Annals and the work whereof they form a record are filially dedicated).

1946:

Jan. Presentation members of the first Community of the Presentation Brothers on the West Indian Mission: -

Bro. Michael Canice Collins; Bro. Patrick Macartan Sheehy; Bro. Francis Lawrence Reynolds.

Ever since the brothers of the foundation Community met in England on their way to the West it had been resolved among them that records should be kept of the establishment and the early history of St. Lucia house. During our first months, however, at St. Mary's College work was so heavy and so demanding in time and energy, that no time could be found for this task. But exact records of events were kept, and during the first Easter vacation, while memories were still fresh, these events were woven into a descriptive account.

Establishment of the Mission:

On the occasion of his first visit to us in St. Lucia, we learned from His Grace, Dr. Finbar Ryan, that for close on nine years he had been advocating the introduction of teaching Brothers as the only effective way to save Catholic Secondary Education in the Islands. The matter became really urgent, he said, when during the Governorship of Sir. A. Grimble legislation was proposed that would make the whole education system subserve government policy and aims. And these aims to use his own words "were to turn out a class of state-educated 'gombeen men' to stand between the governing classes and the people. This legislation he fought courageously and successfully. But he realised that schools like St. Mary's College needed qualified masters, and above all the assurance of continuity in staffing. For many years its staff consisted of one qualified Headmaster, usually an Englishman, but not always a Catholic, and a number of local unqualified teachers. Changes in staff were very frequent and in consequence, the teaching and work of the College suffered. A decline in the late 1930s had continued through the war period.

In the Spring of 1946, the Archbishop approached the Presentation Brothers. His appeal met a ready response for in May of the same year the Superior General, Bro. Evangelist Griffin, and Bro. Berchmans (2nd Assistant), following a Visitation of the Canadian Province, proceeded by air to the West Indies. His Grace had already left for Europe, but they immediately undertook an examination of his proposals and an inspection of the schools in St. Lucia, Grenada, San Fernando and Belmont - both the latter in Trinidad. Grenada was really without a school, but it was proposed to hand over the Dominican Fathers Vicariate as a future College.

At home, these events were followed with the keenest interest, and among many Brothers, hopes were high that "something would come of it". They hoped that at last, we would have foreign missions of our own, something that would inspire in young (and future) Brothers that spirit of brave adventuring for Christ which counts for so much in the life of an Order.

Jul. Something did come of it. In late July all houses of the Institute were circularised by the Superior General in a letter which told of the proposed establishment of two House in St. Lucia and Grenada respectively, and which appealed for volunteers for these first Houses of the West Indian Mission. The response was immediate; some 50 Brothers answered the call. Within a few weeks choices were made. On my way back to Reading, England, after a holiday at home, I (Bro. Canice) received a wire from the Superior General. After a phone conversation with him from Dublin on August 23rd - when I first learned of the appeal for the West Indies - I phoned my acceptance to Cork on the following day. On September 7th, Bro. Macartan in the South Monastery, Cork, and Bro. Lawrence in the Mardyke House, Cork, received their calls for the West Indian Mission and for the Castries, St. Lucia, Community. Meanwhile Bro. Dunstan Curtin, then Provincial of England, received his appointment in general charge of the Mission. The Superiors of the two Communities were also appointed, Bro. Gregory in Grenada and Bro. Canice in St. Lucia. Bros. Liam Dromey and Leonard Dennehy were selected for the Grenada House.

Some months of waiting now ensued, the wait being protracted by the difficulty in getting shipping from war-controlled Britain. In October, however, Bros. Dunstan and Gregory sailed from London to make long term preparations in the two islands for the coming of the main Communities later on. They visited St. Lucia in December but concentrated their main efforts on the establishment of the new College in St. George's, Grenada.

Dec. Though the St. Lucia Community was scheduled to sail early in December, it was not till December 28, that a ship was available. Bros. Macartan and Lawrence left Cork on Friday, December 20th, for England where they spent the Xmas with the Reading Community. With rather scant knowledge of what awaited us in St. Lucia, we nevertheless wondered and surmised what our tasks might be beyond those 4000 miles of ocean. But of discouragement or doubt, there was none. If feeling there was, perhaps it was one of quiet pride that we should be among the first chosen of the Institute to work in the Foreign Missions.

Our ship sailed from Avonmouth on Saturday, December 28th. Bros. Benedict Fitzpatrick (Reading), Francis Langan (Superior, St. Vincent's, then in Devon), Charles Perrott (St. Vincent's) and Bro. Patrick Collins, S.C. were among those who saw us off. The voyage, on a 6,000-ton banana ship, was a rough one, spent by Br. Macartan entirely, and Bro. Lawrence for many days in the cabin bunk! Travelling conditions on board were good, the food especially being on a generous scale, then unknown in rationed Britain. Passing the Azores was a welcome break after days of wallowing and rolling through rough seas. They looked calm, sunny and beautiful, fantastic with windmills and neatly ordered plantations. Soon they were lost to sight, and we continued on our rolling way.

We were well into lower latitudes before we felt the tropic heat, but after a passing glimpse of Barbados with its sad - though it is believed erroneous - associations with Irish penal history, the heat came suddenly and overpoweringly. We entered the Bocas, Venezuela visible on our right, in real tropic heat, and disembarked at Port-of-Spain around midday on Friday, January 10th. Fr. Brett, Tipperary born Holy Ghost Father, from St. Mary's College, Port-of-Spain met us at the wharf and through his good offices we were soon at the College, and as hurriedly as possible taking off our sweat-drenched black suits. Only then did we realise how necessary were the tropical white habits.

1947:

Jan. Again, with the help of the hospitable Irish Fathers we were soon on our way, leaving Piarco Airport on Saturday morning by Pan American plane for St. Lucia. So anxious were we to reach St. Lucia that we were quite unconscious of the fact that our plane was putting us down 40 miles from Castries. No sooner had the familiar cones of the Pitons become visible to our eyes than we knew we had reached our goal - journey's end. We had landed at Beane Field, a point of call on the Pan-American run, at the S-E. tip of St. Lucia. Castries was 40 miles away to the N.W.! And a long and tiring journey over a bad road it proved that Saturday, January 11th, 1947. We reached the Presbytery at Castries, 5.40 p.m., where the French Fathers (Fils de Marie Immaculate) made us welcome. The Vicar General and Rector of the College, Fr. Harcourt, was particularly glad to see us. Shortly afterwards we were dining with the Fathers. Clad in greys of a rather miscellaneous character, subdued and tired after our journey, we must have looked strange indeed in the company of the white cassocked Fathers. We felt strange - strangers in a strange land. We retired early to rest, the odd chorus of whistling frogs and insects lulling us to sleep.

(This account was begun early in February shortly after we had moved into our house in Micoud Street. Then followed hard and exhausting work, as task after the task was taken in hand - none of us seemed to have the time or the energy to continue the record.....until September 1948 following a memorable Retreat conducted by His Grace, the Archbishop.)

(5 September 1948 - continuation of 1947)

Even after a lapse of nearly two years, the events of our first weeks in St. Lucia are still clear in the memory.

On the day following our arrival, Sunday, we received a Céad Míle Fáilte from the Irish Sisters at the Convent. Mother Gertrude, to whom we were to be so indebted in the months to come, welcomed us, and soon we were at home in the cheerful company of the nuns. They were a wonderful Community, cheerful, open-hearted and sincere - and very proud to have Irish Brothers taking over the work of the College. (A card received from M. Gertrude on Sunday, 12th, read: "To the dear Rev. Bros. - Céad Míle Fáilte). We learned much from them, even in this first meeting, of the background and life in St. Lucia, of the hopes and expectations of the people at our coming, and much else that was to prove useful to us.

In the afternoon, accompanied by Fr. Harcourt, we visited the College. The building looked old and dilapidated, its woodwork - native rough-hewn lumber - had not been painted for years. The equipment was scanty and piece-meal; the maps were in tatters (and very soon afterwards we had then thrown out) and the desks were very old, cut into and patched together. The upstairs, the 'garret' was a nightmare of naked woodwork and crisscrossing rafters and supports. The whole effect of the place was depressing. I returned to the Presbytery sobered and silent.

The vividness of first impressions, bad and good, were soon dimmed in our minds by the necessity for concentrating on the immediate problems. The school was re-opening in a few days. Mr. H. D. Boxill the only senior master with experience of the College - he had taught here for 18 years, and now was coming back again having gained a London 1st Class Honours degree in French - came to see us, and together we began work on the Timetable. His considerable ability and wide experience were of great value. Three Prefects also called (The Monplaisir brothers - Ornan and Kenneth and Matthew Beaubrun), and through them, we made our first acquaintance with the boys. I was very pleased to find the Prefect system here and these boys seemed to be dignified and responsible exponents of it.

The detailed etiquette of official life was soon evident in our call to Government House to meet the Administrator. We made calls, under the direction of Fr. Harcourt to other people of standing in the Community. All gave me the impression of expecting marvels as a result of our taking over the College. Among Catholics, there was a great relief at the prospect of the College remaining in the Church's hands, despite the violent disputes that preceded our coming - mostly in the local press.

London's Colonial Office since the war favoured a secularist education policy, set up the Col. Development & Welfare (C.D. & W.) organisation with funds to implement it and appointed Directors of Education (Englishmen all) to introduce it. Many West Indians were beguiled at the prospect, and in St. Lucia influential non-Catholics especially saw the prospect of secondary education being taken after half a century out of the hands of the Catholic Church. No opportunity was lost to point out the poor conditions at the College. Gratitude to the Church and to the F.M.I. Fathers were forgotten. However, His Grace had counter-attacked, and it now appeared that we were his weapon. In fairness, it must be said that we were given a chance to prove ourselves and no unfriendly criticism was levelled at us from any side. People were curious about us, treated us with formal respect and were anxious to help us. This they very generously did for example in making us presents of cutlery, chairs, tableware, and some linen to help furnish an empty house which the Fathers bought for us at 69 Micoud Street. A good deal had to be bought too, even to furnish it meagrely. Money for our first white habits had to be borrowed from Fr. Sivienné!

The College engaged our attention far more than the house. (All three of us were 'officers' by the way: Bro. Canice, Superior; Bro. Macartan, Asst. Superior and College Bursar; Bro. Lawrence, House Bursar. A formal opening, the entire school attending Mass of the Holy Ghost, took place on January 22nd, and before a jam-packed audience in the E-ground floor room. Fr. Harcourt introduced us to masters and boys. I had to say the first few words I ever addressed in public! Curious eyes surveyed us - and wondered what we had in store for them! We were as curious to know what they had in store for us!

Actually, we were agreeably surprised to find the boys well-mannered in a formal way, e.g. the class always stood when a master entered and left class, no boy would leave class to go to the Office or to another form room without donning his blazer; they were slow to speak but quite attentive. Many of them especially the senior form (some of whom stayed on to benefit by our teaching) were eager to work. We discovered too that the College had a remarkably sound and respected tradition which we were careful not to disturb. In interpreting this tradition, we were fortunate to have on the staff a five-men and a splendid teacher in Mr. Herman D. Boxill, who had come to St. Mary's as a young man in the late 1920s. After years of teaching, had taken his London B.A. degree with 1st Class Honours in French, the summer before our arrival. He had only recently returned from London. His advice and assistance were invaluable at this early stage.

Our "home" was still the Presbytery, and our community room and Oratory was the bedroom I occupied - the Visitor's room at the Presbytery! During Rosary there one evening we experienced our first earth tremor. In February, after Bro. Dunstan's arrival from Grenada and his efforts to get 69 Micoud Street furnished, we moved into our first "Brothers House". The handcart hired to move our trunks the few hundred yards from the Presbytery cost us \$3. Bro. Macartan soon learned, however; so, did the handcart men!

Early in the term, the decision was made to participate in the newly revived Inter-Schools Tournament. St. Mary's had not taken part in it since 1936. The senior boys set about their practices eagerly. College Sports Day, largely thanks to Mr. Boxhill's organising skill went off well. It was the Brothers' first public appearance. The people, Catholic and others, were friendly, interested in us and eager to help us. They contributed generously to the funds needed for the trip to Grenada for the Tournament Team. The trip down gave us our first taste of schooner travel, with abundant seasickness to Bro. Macartan; and an idea of how far away we were. Almost two days travel - from our nearest confreres. The reunion with them at this stage was refreshing and encouraging. And our team's fairly good performance put us in the public eye in Grenada.

Financially they were worse off than we were for they had no grant-in-aid from Government. But on the other hand, they were freer. They ran the school independently and had virgin soil on which to work. Our position was that an Ordinance of the St. Lucia Government regulated the management of St. Mary's. Some of its provisions seriously curtailed the independent character of the school. This ordinance was the condition of the Government paying a grant-in-aid of \$7,200. Until we came it had been ... \$. But our independence was further curtailed by the fact that the Vicar General, then V. Rev. Edwin P. Harcourt, F.M.I. was Rector of the College, Chairman of its Advisory Committee (as per Ordinance) and virtually our employer. In February Bro. Dunstan and I in session with him made this discovery, and incidentally discussed our salaries, our occupancy of 69 Micoud Street at a rental of £50 p.a., later raised to £92, with him, but gave notice of our desire and intention to place the Brothers control of the College on a more independent basis. This was to take somewhat longer than we then thought, for affable and gentlemanly though Fr. Harcourt was, he apparently was determined to see how we could manage things before relaxing his own control. At that time, I was not even a member of the College Advisory Committee! Bro. Macartan as College Bursar collected fees and kept the College accounts, but Grant-in-Aid was paid to Fr. Harcourt as Rector and actual financial control were exercised by him. In May or June, the Ordinance regulating Gov's. relations with the College received its final reading and was Gazetted. All its provisions had been agreed to by Fr. Harcourt in 1946 and early 1947. We had not been consulted at all.

On the day of our return from Grenada, His Grace the Archbishop arrived in St. Lucia. We met him briefly at the Presbytery for the first time. The following day, he walked along Micoud Street alone, to our 69 M.St. where he had tea with us and afterwards settled down to a lengthy talk. He was obviously pleased to be with us; he evidently saw in us the first fruits of his long and sustained efforts to bring Brothers to the W. I. He said as much. In his own inspiring way, he then went on to guide, counsel and encourage us in our work, in our relations with the Fathers and the people and in the care of our health and strength. He gave us a sense of significance and importance that in contrast with our small numbers humble beginning and isolation was a heartening antidote to discouragement. After he had finished and left us, we felt for fit for anything. We certainly felt we had in Dr. Finbarr Ryan a friend and patron. He was later to give repeated proofs of this.

During the second term of 1947, we began the physical overhaul of the College. Desks and blackboards were in a deplorable condition and the few maps and charts were in tatters. A new set of double desks in polished white cedar were made by M & C's woodworking shop. Maps and charts were ordered from the E.S.A. (Lon.) and sets of books to re-establish a College Library were also ordered. The teaching of General Science was already well begun, work on the ground floor western room, the new Science Laboratory had also started. The arrival of 21 cases of equipment from Philip Harris Ltd., of Birmingham, created a mild sensation. And during the long vacation, a determined effort was made to enlist the boys' assistance in decorating and painting the College inside and out. The idea of manual labour was a new one to them but with the Brothers and some masters joining in, they caught on. In two weeks, the job was done, not perhaps with a professional finish, but for £50 we had done a job, one foreman-contractor estimated as worth £200. Fatigued after 6 months of very strenuous work under tropical conditions, Brothers Macartan and Lawrence joined by Brothers Leonard and Liam from Grenada went for a rest to Soufriere, living in the Convent which the sisters had protem evacuated for their annual reunion in Castries. With recurrent stomach trouble, I went to Trinidad for X-rays. Fortunately, these did not reveal the duodenal ulcers which the English doctor had told me I was suffering from before leaving England seven months before. In Trinidad, I visited St. Benedict's College which our Brothers were to take over in 1948. Meanwhile, in the relaxation of Soufriere, Bro Liam had composed school songs for St. Lucia and Grenada.

During the term just finished the numbers attending St. Mary's and the prospect of a further increase revealed the inadequacy of the old building. I had to enquire into the plans for its future. None, I found, had gone beyond the talking stage. The Rector was not too enthusiastic, so I wrote His Grace. His letter is attached.

In October it was hoped that Bro. Dunstan would come during the time His Grace was due for another visit. In the meantime, Fr. Harcourt and I visited possible sites of a new College, e.g., on the Marchand Road above Victoria Park, on the Waterworks Road and overlooking the Vigie airstrip on top of the cutting about 2/3rds way down its length. Contemplating the prospect of a new College while very interesting was a trifle unreal, for no funds at all were available. Fr. Harcourt at this time also produced an older plan for enlarging and reconstructing the College on the same site.

Then one afternoon I visited the Vigie peninsula, at that time a military area that had just been evacuated by the war remnants of the W. I. Regiment and has reverted to its normal character as a mass of splendid buildings entirely empty and looked after by a War Office Agent. What I saw of the Hospital and of the Officer's Mess buildings gave a new turn to my thoughts. Anxiously I awaited the visit of His Grace and Bro. Dunstan.

However, when they did come the claims of Vigie as a College site were little advanced. Neither were enthusiastic. The prospect of a lease from London's War Office was not appealing and the distance from Castries was 2 ¾ miles. That seemed to be that. His Grace's letter of Oct. 25th further states the difficulties. Before the end of the year, a change in the situation occurred for the St. Lucia Gov. discussed the possibility of leasing the entire peninsula from the War Office for £36,000.

From conversations with the members of Council (Legislative & Executive), we would be sure of local support for the College, leasing of the Officers Mess building, and sure also of their support in our securing the lease at a nominal sum. So, matters stood at year's end - the Vigie prospect somewhat more attractive but still dependent on Government action with the War Office than with us; even then our claim no stronger than that of a 30-year lease. Bro. Anselm, on his way to San Fernando from Canada to join the foundation Community there, stayed with us for Xmas. I was in the hospital part of the time with tropical fungus infection - visited the Vigie building and explained the position to His Grace, whom he met in Trinidad. His letter of January 3rd, 1948, showed a change in favour of Vigie.

During the last term of 1947, our main effort was directed to two ends: the preparation of the boys for the public examinations, Camb. Junior and Camb. Senior, and the holding of Speech Day and Prize Distribution at Clarke's Theatre. Bro. Macartan had been appointed Camb. Local Secretary earlier in the year and on his shoulders fell all the organisation of these local examinations. He planned and carried out all arrangements most efficiently. The results (which did not come till the following March) were encouraging.

Our first Speech Day attained greater publicity than we could ever have anticipated, for the present that evening unknown to us was Patrick Fermor in whose book "Traveller's Tree" which he was writing, is a detailed description of the proceedings. The function itself, the entertainment and the Headmaster's Report were all well received locally and reported in detail in both papers. We faced 1948 enriched with the experience of a year's exacting work under strange conditions and in a difficult environment, but we faced it also confident of God's help in our work for Him.

Bro. Dunstan - was in St. Lucia from 27.6.1947 till 23.9.1947.