

Toast to Patrick Ambrose Treacy and The Irish Christian Brothers Who Migrated to Australia. Treacy Centre, Monday 19 November 2018 by John O'Halloran

“Enterprising Immigrant” is the sub-title of Br Regis Hickey’s 2012 Life of Br Patrick Ambrose Treacy. Few students of the Irish influence in the development of the Australian Nation since white settlement would disagree with that judgement. But the assessment could be applied equally to the many Irish immigrants to Australia. The Irish were the largest immigrant group, after the English, from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century. Even today Irish born people are numerous in this land. The 2011 Census indicated that in Victoria alone, 14,000 citizens were Irish born. And just over 10% of the Australian population are of Irish heritage.

Without following the script of the Monty Python sketch, “What have the Romans ever done for us?” we can answer with gratitude the question, “What have the Irish ever done for us?” Whereas the Romans spread an infra structure of water resources, sewerage, amphitheatres and roads the Irish have brought the Catholic Faith, learning, culture and the fight for justice through church, politics and family life. They also brought infrastructure in the shape of a Catholic Hospital system, Catholic schooling and Welfare Institutions that catered for the marginalised.

In one of his letters back to Ireland Treacy noted that there were no poor in Australia of the same indigence as there was in Ireland. However, the Australian Irish were not wealthy either and struggled in the manner that even today many lower middle-class families do. But what characterised them, by and large, was a generosity of spirit that supported the growth of the Catholic Faith through contributions to the building of churches, schools and hospitals. It is written that Ambrose told the Brothers that “we should never forget the poor. They are our true friends. They have contributed more than the well-off for the foundation of our schools”. And the dedication of Br Regis Hickey’s Life of Treacy is to “the unknown serving girl who, on learning that Ambrose was collecting funds to build his schools offered him the whole of her wages.”

The Christian Brothers in Ireland sent to the colonies and later the nation around 190 men. And about 35 Irish immigrants joined the Brothers here in Australia. A similar story would hold for the growth of women religious like the Mercy and Charity Congregations. Ireland’s gift was people and those people brought with them their understanding of life and its meaning. This is the essence of any acclaim that we might render to the Irish.

So, in what ways was Treacy enterprising?

- He had to deal with Bishop Goold who, whilst supportive of the Brothers in public, was unable to do so with much financial contribution.
- Treacy had the long-term view and established schools and institutions throughout this continent and New Zealand. In his first ten years he opened 10 schools.
- He and his companions were tireless in their efforts to solicit funds for their schools, riding horseback long distances to the gold fields and centres where the Irish population was strong. All this done during holiday periods.
- Not all his projects were successful. In 1873 he purchased 20 acres of wooded land in what is now Hawthorn East, bordering on present day Burke Rd and close to Toorak Rd. For three years he had the land cultivated to produce a daily supply of milk, eggs and vegetables for the Richmond and East Melbourne houses and also for the Jesuit community at Kew. But the costs became too much and he was forced to sell the land after eight years.

Two days after Edmund Rice died on 29th, August, 1844 Treacy celebrated his 10th birthday. Just over 7 years later he joined the Brothers Novitiate at Waterford where the memory of Edmund Rice would have been fresh in the minds of the professed Brothers living there. Edmund's magnanimity of spirit, his compassion for the poor and his business-like way of moving projects forward successfully would have been well known. These qualities were innate to Treacy's character and modus operandi also. Just as Brothers thrived in Ireland in the 19th century and later owing to the charism of Edmund so did the mission to Australia thrive following Treacy's arrival in November 1868.

But the Brothers have declined considerably in numbers and ministry involvement over recent years. Were Treacy to be the guest of honour at today's function would he feel proud of the legacy that he left? I suspect that he would.

Our Oceania Province is being led competently by five Brothers of diverse experience and personalities, with an understanding of the past and a vision for the future. I feel confident in saying that their pastoral care and administrative actions for us are appreciated by all within the Province. They are supported by Brothers in pastoral roles as Cluster Leaders and Health Care Coordinators who look to our well-being.

Over 50 educational institutions, including many devoted to caring for those who find mainstream schooling difficult are managed very successfully by Edmund Rice Education Australia. MacKillop Family Services continues to care for needy children and to support past residents of former Homes for Boys and Girls whilst Edmund Rice Camps throughout Australia and New Zealand, an effective Justice Centre in Sydney, the Mount Atkinson project and the Edmund Rice Community and Refugee Services in Melbourne's West are but some of the ministries that engage a number of employees and volunteers who assist migrants and refugees in their quest to understand the language and prosper in their schools, employment and daily life. As well, we have places across the Province engaged with Care of the Earth. And the work of the Edmund Rice Foundation in bringing education and good health to young Africans in Kenya and Tanzania is a wonderful outreach beyond our shores. There are many other ministries that continue to bring education, welfare and inspiration in the spirit of the gospel. Supporting many of these ventures and the Brothers generally is a well-functioning Finance Office and Resources Directorate. Our Professional Standards Office was one of the first in the field in the early 1990s and continues to bring healing where it is required. In brief there are many signs that the legacy of Treacy and the early Irish Brothers who came here to carry on the work of Edmund Rice is alive and strong. Treacy would feel proud of what he had begun.

The essence of Blessed Edmund Rice's venture was to raise up the poor so that they could enjoy the benefits of a good education and live in freedom. He was a man of faith in God and the ultimate destiny that awaits us after this life. He aspired to spread that same faith through his works and presence. Treacy was a man of similar mould. He, too, was for the other, especially the needy other.

So, I ask you to be upstanding and to join me in toasting Patrick Ambrose Treacy, the Brothers who accompanied him to Australia and those who followed.