

## Chapter 15 – Graaff Reinet

### *The Gem of the Karroo*<sup>1</sup>

On 14<sup>th</sup> April 1838, the first Catholic Bishop and Vicar Apostolic of the Cape of Good Hope landed at Cape Town in the person of Dr P R Griffith, O.P. and in July of that year he visited the Eastern portion of his vast Vicariate which lay sprawled across the southern extremity of the African continent. The Prelate's journal records that he reached Graaff-Reinet<sup>2</sup> on 21<sup>st</sup> August and was the guest of a Mr Abos. The Bishop had letters of introduction to W C van Reyneveld,<sup>3</sup> the Civil Commissioner and also to the district's Justice of the Peace. His Lordship thus described the town of the Karroo as it was in those days: "... This is a beautiful little place. The houses are neat, whitewashed and thatched. They are seldom more than one storey high and have a room and window over the centre of the front. Water, clear and limpid is conveyed in a cart along the streets for irrigation purposes. The whole town is surrounded by mountains, quite an oasis in the desert. One would never suppose that so neat a town could exist in such a lone and desolate country..."

Bishop ~Griffith celebrated the first Mass at Graaff-Reinet presumably in the home of Mr Abos, at which there were some sixteen persons present, half of whom were Catholics. On 27<sup>th</sup> of the month Dr Griffith left for Beaufort West en route for Cape Town.

In 1847 Father Aidan Devereux was consecrated Titular Bishop of Paneas and given charge of the Eastern Cape Vicariate. On his return from Europe in 1849 he brought with him several clerical students, three Belgian Priests and a couple of female Franciscan Tertiaries. Father Jean van Cauwerlaert, one of the Belgians, was accompanied by his two sisters who were prepared to help him by opening a mission school at Graaff-Reinet.

The year 1852 was tragic for the mission. "A malignant fever"<sup>4</sup> caused the death of the priest's two sisters. In July 1854, Father van Cauwerlaert obtained leave to return to his home at Grimbergen; but on his return trip, before he reached the coast, he died at Klipheuvel in the district of George. Bishop Devereux then realised the loneliness of the priest at Graaff-Reinet and so, when he sent Father J J de Sany to replace the late Rev van Cauwerlaert, he also appointed Father Hoendervangers as travelling priest with headquarters at Graaff-Reinet in 1853. In April of the same year Father Hugh Lennon became resident pastor there. This young man, who was only 27 years old when he arrived, laboured unremittingly in that district and died on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1864, while in the very act of celebrating Mass. At the time of his burial there was no Catholic plot set aside in the cemetery yet, so the Anglican Minister Kindly offered a place in the section of his flock. Four years later the body was exhumed and buried deep under the floor of the Catholic Church.

Some time after Father Lennon's demise Bishop Ricards arranged with the Superior General of the Jesuits in London that the mission at Graaff-Reinet would be taken over by the Society. They built a school near the church and, besides the usual curriculum, they taught French, German, Nederlands and Latin. Before the Jesuits left for the Zambesi Mission in 1899, some missionary ladies tried to do what Father van Cauwerlaert's sisters had done previously.

In 1893 Bishop Strobino's health made it necessary for him to live in a dry climate and he chose Graaff-Reinet as his residence. He asked the Superior General of King William's Town to establish a Convent there. Mother Euphemia Koffler sent a group of nuns consisting of Sister M Augustine Schaeffler, six

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<sup>1</sup> The word is derived from the Hottentot language, meaning "hard", from the hardness of the soil under drought. It is the name given to the vast arid tracts of clayey table-lands of South Africa in the Cape Province. That part is characterised by a dry climate and sparse vegetation, although much of it is fertile where irrigation is possible.

<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1786 and named after Governor van der Graaff, and his wife, Reinet. It was noted for general prosperity while it was the centre of the ostrich-feather industry. It now draws its main wealth from wool, fruit and the produce of irrigation schemes. It lies on the Sundays River.

<sup>3</sup> The Van Reynefeld Pass Lake perpetuates the memory of this official.

<sup>4</sup> Probably typhoid fever.

Choir Sisters and two Lay Sisters, who arrived on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1894. Troubles loomed ahead, for many of the people were hostile to the arrival of the Catholic nuns. The Sisters nursed their Prelate with loving care, yet towards the end of 1895 it was evident that the health of the much-loved Bishop had greatly deteriorated. The nuns and the people were edified but saddened by their shepherd's constant patience in intense suffering.

One might call Right Rev. Peter Strobino the complement of Bishop Ricards. Though known as the "Little Bishop" he was a man of gigantic administrative capabilities despite his poor health. He worked very hard to increase the number of priests in the vicariate and inaugurated the annual Priests'

Retreats. While giving his attention to the internal affairs of both parishes and schools, he succeeded in reducing the debt which had naturally been incurred through his predecessor's prodigious undertakings.

The ailing Prelate now solicited Rome to allow him to retire from his episcopal office. News came that his co-adjutor, Dr Hugh MacSherry, D.D. of Dundalk, Ireland had been ordained Titular Bishop of Justinianopolis on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1896. Bishop Strobino hoped he might still live to welcome his successor, but it was not to be. After three brief years his remarkable and important career was cut short by an early death at Graaff-Reinet on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1896. (Bishop MacSherry reached South Africa on 20<sup>th</sup> December of that year.) At Bishop Strobino's own request his body was laid to rest at Port Elizabeth next to that of his former friend, Father Patrick O'Donoghue.

The Convent started with only five boarders. One of the first names on the roll was Dolly Slabbert's. Paper money was in those days unheard of. Thus Dolly's brother used to make his sister's payment by pulling a handful of golden coins from his pocket. And how badly those early Sisters needed the money for pioneering this venture.

The chronicle says "the nuns were always eager to get new pupils. One day Dr and Mrs Hudson announced that they had brought a new scholar, Patrick Hudson... He came in a sack and turned out to be a live piglet – a gift to the Sisters from the kind couple."

Despite fierce opposition the convent school made progress in the number of pupils and buildings. Soon there were two schools: the private Convent Institution and the State-aided School. The pupils of both were housed in the convent's only hall and in the class-rooms built by the Jesuits. Mother Udalrica Schneider, a later Superior, started regular commercial classes. The Sisters continued their educational labours and even had pupil-teacher classes for a time. Needless to say this progress was attained through much labour and unremitting devotion.

The convent annals of 1932 relate that the travelling priest, "Rev P Ahearn, who had left Cradock before the heavy rains started, was able to return for Sunday Mass only with greatest difficulty. He had to swim through a river in flood and got into trouble. A kindly farmer saw him struggling for life and came to the rescue. But for this help the priest would not have reached the bank in safety..."

Graaff-Reinet was unique in that a Meteorological Station was established there in 1934 by the Government Authorities in Pretoria. Beautiful instruments were set up on the convent property and three times each day a Sister had to dispatch a telegram to Pretoria announcing the condition of the weather. After some years these instruments were replaced by more modern equipment and the result of the readings then telephoned to the Meteorological Station at Port Elizabeth. The nun who probably performed this duty longest was Sister Florentina Richtsfeld, who did it for eighteen years up to her unexpected death on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1968. This lady was an outstanding needlewoman who taught this art to numerous pupils and through her teaching the work of her scholars was distinctive. The inspectors of needlework always collected Sister's samples to show to other schools how things could and should be done.

In 1936 the school term had re-opened only for a few weeks when tragedy struck. A pupil, Andrew Swanepoel, climbed on to the school roof to retrieve his ball. While aloft his foot slipped and he grasped at the nearest object – the electric wires. For a few moments the child could not let go. One of his companions quickly climbed up intending to pull him away from the wires but fortunately Andrew had

slid down on to the roof before his friend reached him, or there might have been a worse calamity. A play-mate ran to the Superior bearing the shocking news. Mother Pachomia Bucher acted with the utmost speed, summoning the parents and the doctor who arrived almost simultaneously. But, of course, nothing could be done anymore.

The regular visits of the Sisters and the Priest since 1934 to the Coloured People's sector began to bear fruit. Not only were the dying baptised and the poorest given help where possible, but many families became interested in religion. By 1939 there was quite a nucleus to start a Coloured Congregation. At this time the plans were made and everybody took a keen interest in raising funds for the Mission School and Church.

When the building was finished the Priest applied to Mother General Augustine Geisel for Sisters to teach there. But to everyone's disappointment no Sisters were available. In order to help, Mother General offered to pay the salaries of two secular teachers in place of the nuns she would have loved to supply. This she did until the mission school became State-aided and self-supporting. The mission was dedicated to St Teresa of Lisieux because it was chiefly through her intercession that the plans for the venture succeeded so well.

Owing to the fact that the Teachers' Training College at King William's Town was later suppressed, the Sisters sought admittance to the College at Graaff-Reinet. The first Dominican students were joined by two Sisters of the Sacred Heart Congregation from as far away as South West Africa. From then on the convent school at Graaff-Reinet also served as a hostel for all the nuns attending the local Afrikaans Medium College. The Principal, Mr W E Pienaar welcomed the Sisters and soon made them feel at home in their new surroundings. The Sisters' attendance at this College did much to dispel the prejudice against the nuns that still lurked in some quarters. (In the early years the Sisters obliged to go into the town on business did so at the cost of much personal sacrifice. They often returned with their black cloaks bespattered with mud hurled at them in derision by naughty boys.)

A new building to house the Sisters was begun on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1949, as the old house had become unsafe. Twenty years later it was announced that the convent at Graaff-Reinet was to be closed down at the end of 1970. The last inspection of this institution was performed by Mr J F van der Merwe who gave it a glowing report. Statistics proved that the school had been conducted on the co-educational principle.

Besides administering a Primary and a High School the nuns concentrated also on arts, music, languages and commercial subjects. This school had been officially examined since 1903. Mr van der Merwe urged the Sisters to write up a synoptic account of the work done there since the beginning, which he copied into his file to be preserved in the archives of the Education Department.

When the school finally closed its doors after 75 years of service to the public, 4786 pupils had passed through the Sisters' hands at Graaff-Reinet... an excellent contribution to the moral and spiritual advancement of youth in South Africa. At the list prize-giving the Principal said that "This school was the product of slow growth. It revealed a genesis of gradual development: a root, a sapling, stem, leaves, flowers and finally the fruit and seeds." Sister continued to liken the pupils to "precious seeds" to be dispersed in the world. She expressed the hope "that each of these may be sound to the very core and bear the expected harvest of the sound Christian education." Touching letters of farewell came to thank the Sisters who have ever worked at the Sacred Heart Convent, for their achievements there and not less for the pleasant memories the nuns have left to those privileged to know them.