

Chapter 18 – Queenstown

A New Buttress

When Europeans first ventured into the country lying to the North of the Cape Colony beyond the mountain barrier of the Elands and Katbergen, they found it occupied by Hottentots,¹ like the rest of the high tablelands south of the Orange River. But during the 1820s disturbances caused by the warring hordes of the Zulu King, Chaka, inflicted great losses among the Tembu or Tambookie tribes living near the Natal borders and cause many of these clans to migrate southward to the Zwart Kei and Klipplaat Rivers.

In 1852 a Land Commissioner was appointed to undertake the planning of a frontier town on the Komani River and the allocation of farms in the surrounding country. Thomas Holden Bowker's lay-out of Queenstown² differed from that of other towns. It comprised a hexagonal-shaped open market place in the centre from which six streets radiated. The Hexagon could serve as a laager in which the inhabitants could take refuge and from which an enemy attack could be repelled at whatever point it might assail the town.

Within the first years Queenstown already had fifty brick-built cottages, six shops and the market place. The houses were very simple in construction. Most of these had earthen floors and ceilings of calico.

Three-legged pots were used in open fire-places for cooking. Light at night time was provided by tallow candles until paraffin was imported in 1859, so that lamps could be used. A grand pool in the Komani River, deep and lined with willow trees, fulfilled the need for bathrooms. Queenstown enjoys a very healthy climate and it has been said that the town has "champagne air." It became a gardener's paradise and one of the best rose-growing areas in the world.

The district was surveyed and allotted to farmers under a system of military ownership. The Burghers were obliged to live on the farms granted them; they had to be well armed and to be prepared to serve in the defence of this frontier district.

For twenty years the position of the small town on this inland plateau was a lonely one, for there was no other town nearer than 100 miles. A weekly post brought on horseback from Alice did it long service. But in 1874 the telegraph reached Queenstown and its long period of isolation was over. On 4th May 1880 the first passenger train steamed into its station from East London.

During the visitation made by Right Rev Peter Strobino, as co-adjutor to Bishop Ricards of all the missions in the Eastern Vicariate in 1891, the Auxiliary Prelate made this entry in his journal: "... In the course of enquiry I find lost in Queenstown thirty per cent of our Catholics. In order to render our work more fruitful, lasting and certain of success a convent ought to be established there without delay. I must press this strongly on Mother Prioress at King William's Town. Children are growing up without instruction and adults are losing their Faith..."

However, the matter remained dormant for six years due partly to the intervention of the Anglo-Boer War and partly also to the fact that the number of Sisters in the Mother House had been depleted by their many Branch Convents. Meanwhile Dr John Allen, the resident priest, was building St Dominic's Church; and as he had formerly been convent chaplain at King William's Town, it was natural that he would look to these Dominicans to assist him in his missionary labours.

¹ *One of the aboriginal races in the Cape; A yellow race of Mongolian appearance. They were fond of cattle and were nomads by instinct. Pure Hottentots have become practically extinct, having been decimated by outbreaks of smallpox and later by interbreeding with their neighbours.*

² *Called after Queen Victoria.*

Queenstown³ was, for a long time, served by a travelling priest. The first official Catholic document here is the baptismal register where one finds the first entry on 20th May 1876. Whoever was priest there certainly needed help, for he was alone responsible for the Catholics of the town, as well as for those scattered over the vast district, as far as Aliwal North and Barkly East. No wonder Father Allen's health broke down under the strain.

In 1902 this new buttress to support the Catholic Faith was at last erected at Queenstown. In September of that year, in the presence of the Mayor and a considerable gathering, the foundation stone of the Convent of the Sacred Heart was laid. Rev Patten represented the Anglican community and Mr S O Naude that of the Dutch Reformed Church. The Mayor extolled the praises of conventual teaching and quoted the well-known saying of Victor Hugo: "When schools open, prisons close". The Architects were Messrs Cordeaux and Walker of East London. By July in the following year Mr A Soby and his workmen had completed the building and on 15th of the month Mother General Jacoba Zirn arrived at Queenstown station with the pioneer staff for this foundation. Mother Claver Reisch was named the first superior. It was at seven o'clock in the morning that a number of the leading Catholics of the town and Father Henry Frese had gathered there to welcome the Sisters.

This convent consisted of a double-storey building of finest Queenstown stone for the solid porch, the façade and the two sides of the main building. The other walls were of brick. Six rooms were on the ground floor and four above. School opened on 21st July 1903. The first Boarders were Miss Edith Nezeman (Lately Mrs Crowley), Alice Jamieson and Daisy and Eileen Holliday; and 26 day pupils attended the first day. Numbers rapidly increased so that it became necessary to hire rooms from the presbytery. At first the Sisters took only one room; but later Father Frese suggested that they should take the whole house and pay him the rent of eight pounds a month for it. This arrangement lasted for 2 years.

In 1907 Mr Bushel, the owner of the property adjoining the convent, died and Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler purchased the house and the large garden for the Sisters. This would have been an ideal arrangement but it was later decided to exchange the newly-acquired house for that which belonged to the Priests. Thus a large part of the garden was lost to the convent.

The year 1911 opened tragically for Queenstown, for on January 5th the great Gaika Loop railway disaster occurred. There were many casualties. Father Edward Crowley, S.J. of Grahamstown was killed. Mother Teresa, Provincial of the Holy Cross Sisters was seriously injured and her companion, Sister Eugenie was badly shocked and bruised. The two Sisters received hospitality and nursing care at Queenstown Convent before they were able to return to Aliwal North.

It had now become increasingly difficult to accommodate the many boarders, so in 1912 a wing was added to the convent. At the end of 1914 it was judged advisable to hold an external examination in school subjects for all the classes that were not working for public examinations. Dr Logie, the Inspector of Schools, being unable to oblige, Mr H. Wilkinson, Headmaster of the local Boys' School, agreed to examine the pupils from Standard Two to Standard Seven. Mr Wilkinson gave an excellent report.

During the first 25 years in Queenstown the Sisters were helped by the diocesan priests of the Port Elizabeth Vicariate. But in 1929 the Pallotine Missionary Society was appointed to take over the part of the Eastern Vicariate with Monsignor F J Vogel at its head. Queenstown was chosen as headquarters and a call was immediately made for more helpers. A Priest⁴ and a Brother arrived and, after settling down, they soon began visiting the surrounding indigenous peoples and to interest them in the Faith. Mission schools were built, usually in such a way that the classrooms could be thrown open on Sunday to serve as a temporary church. Gradually Sisters from King William's Town arrived to take over the kitchen, school-room and hospital. So the mission grew slowly with the addition of another Priest, Brother and

³ *It became the chief town of the Cape Midlands and the commercial, administrative and educational centre of a good farming area which extends over a radius of nearly a hundred miles in all directions.*

⁴ *The first Pallotine Priest to arrive for Queenstown was Father Rackl, P.S.M.*

Sister.⁵ The untiring Monsignor Vogel went from station to station, encouraging and inspiring all and meeting

difficulties as they arose. His death in 1936 was a severe blow to the whole Prefecture. Father JB Rosenthal⁶ was appointed to succeed him. In 1951 he became the first Bishop of the Diocese of Queenstown, when the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy was established in South Africa by the Holy See.

A story is told of a time when houses were constantly being burgled at Queenstown. Mother Johanna Pflaum and her Sisters invoked intercession of the Twelve Apostles for the protection of their house. One day a policeman asked the Prioress who was guarding her convent at night, for the convent had not been attacked by the bandits. "Well," she replied, "we have no one really except that we pray for protection every night." The policeman then told Mother Johanna that a burglar who was caught said they could never rob the convent because at every door they "always found a tall, powerful man on guard."

Improvements were constantly being made at the convent to keep abreast of the times and growing demands. The School Inspectors' reports gave evidence of the excellent work being done. "The classrooms are models of neatness, airy and adequately equipped. The grounds are all that can be desired. The tone of the school is one of earnestness and is the natural result of the firm yet kindly discipline..." wrote Mr M Palmer, M.A.

During the 1918 influenza epidemic this school was also temporarily closed and the Sisters offered their services to nurse the sick in town.

Almost yearly, an exhibition of the pupils' work was held. In days prior to the cinema and similar entertainments, the Queenstown Convent had made quite a name for itself with its annual school concerts. These were both cultural and entertaining. The teachers selected operettas and dramas which provided something the young actresses could carry with them through life as an accomplishment, such as elocution, music and dancing.

When General JC Smuts visited Queenstown and all the schools turned out to greet the Premier, he called the Queenstown Convent girls "The Bluebirds" because of their attractive blue uniforms.

An unforgettable headmistress of this school was Sister M Calasanz Heckmann. On 7th October 1927 she died with almost tragic suddenness. Some eighteen months previously, through a bad fall, she sustained a compound fracture of the leg. Though never robust, she rallied, and with indomitable strength of will she came to school on crutches at the opening of the new year to shoulder the responsibility of her work until the end of September. She then had to undergo a small operation on the old wound. This was successful and Sister was already preparing for the last busy term of the year when pneumonia struck her down and she passed away after a week's illness. A born teacher, Sister Calasanz excelled in the management of senior girls. She loved children and they warmly reciprocated her affection.

In the meantime the old presbytery had been demolished and a fine new hostel building replaced it. In 1953 past pupils from all over the country came to celebrate the golden jubilee of the opening of this school. The Deputy Mayor, Clr WE Temlett, told the packed audience at the social held in the Convent Hall that not only was the convent a credit to the borough educationally, but it had helped further the progress of the town itself. In this jubilee year the roll numbered three hundred pupils. Thus, from the feeble beginnings in 1903, had developed a flourishing convent school, from the influence of which girls have gone forth in their thousands to face the duties of their several lives...

The announcement to close Queenstown Convent resulted in a spate of telegrams, telephone calls, letters and messages from many areas of Southern Africa. All these paid tribute to the school for its achievements in many different fields since its inception. A last-minute unsuccessful attempt to save the school from closing was made by a special Parent-Teachers Association Meeting, which was described by the Chairman, Mr P Lawlor, as "one of the most moving meetings ever held in the town connected with

⁵ *In time the Schoenstatt Sisters also came to the diocese.*

⁶ *He was at first consecrated Titular Bishop of Syedra in 1948.*

education... The lack of teachers in the Congregation would mean employing staff from outside and this would defeat the aims of parents wanting a convent education for their children.” He added that, “the public generally does not realise the number of deserving cases this Convent and others have educated at reduced fees, or even free-of-charge, over the years... Education at this school has never been confined to the classrooms. The pupils’ difficult years of adolescence have always received special attention and understanding from the Sisters who have helped the parents also, when advice has been sought...”

“The Convent has witnessed many changes in examinations, sport and all school activities during its existence of seventy years: But one thing has not changed – and that is the love and loyalty the parents and scholars have had for their school – and ‘Veritas’ is still their motto...”

Sister Nativitas Hillebrand had now been Principal of this school for so many years that people came to think of her as the very personification of Queenstown Convent. When the Convent finally closed its doors in December 1974, three members of the community were assigned to take up residence at St Catherine’s Nursing Home from where they could continue their apostolic work: Sister Bonavita Baumeister joined the staff of the Girls’ High School in the capacity of Vice Principal. She teaches Literature and imparts Religious Instruction, while Sisters Rosalie Vernon-Jones and Marcella Gareis work as Parish Sisters for the White and Coloured communities of the town.