

Chapter 20 – Cradock

Crown of the Midlands

Lovers of the Karroo say that God, not finding the earth a pleasant scene after the deluge, created a dry, sunny spot, the Karroo. Bishop Strobino also liked this part of South Africa and, in 1892, he visited Cradock.¹ There he found a small chapel and a congregation of about forty Catholics. There was, as yet, no fixed mission nor did any priest visit the place regularly. As a result the people were careless and indifferent. However, as the Bishop stayed over Sunday, they all came to Mass and fifteen received the Sacraments. At the evening devotions too, the little church was crowded. Before leaving His Lordship promised he would see to it that a priest called on them at least every two months and they, in their turn, agreed to pay the pastor's expenses at each visit. Fathers Henry Frese, Bernard Schmidt and John Ryan acted as visiting priests coming in turn as often as they could.

In October 1903 Mother General Jacoba Zirn and Sister Raymond Whyte came to Cradock with a view to founding a Convent there. They procured two small cottages to be used as a temporary convent. At the same time a large piece of vacant ground was bought. This was opposite the public gardens at the north end of the town. This quiet, restful spot was thus considered suitable for a school. For the present they would make a start in a humble way in the cottage in Hospital Street. There, in 1904, came three nuns who paved the way for the convent-to-be.

For the building to be erected on the vacant plot, Mr Abercrombie Mitchell was engaged as architect and Mr O'Brien was the contractor. The foundation stone was laid on 23rd January 1906 by the Mayor, Clr DJ Michau. It was blessed by Bishop MacSherry who had come from Grahamstown to grace the occasion. Several Priests were also present and Mother Lucy Kaltenstadler, who had succeeded Mother Jacob as Prioress General.

This Convent, also named for the Sacred Heart, was a large double-storeyed brick building with balcony and verandah facing Stockenström Street and the public gardens only a stone's cast away. Along half the frontage on the right of the entrance was a large room which served as the Sisters' chapel. It was placed at the disposal of the parishioners until such time as they could build their own church. Father John Cummins' presbytery was in Adderley Street.

The Sisters had lived in their cottage in Hospital Street since October 1904 but, now, two years later, their new premises were nearing completion. Yet the painters took longer than anticipated to finish their task;



Convent of the Sacred Heart, Cradock

so each morning, for a fortnight, the nuns trudged down the untarred streets of Cradock, armed with provisions for the day, and returned to their cottage at night, until at last the workmen vacated the new building.

Mother Antonina Dowd, the Superior, helped the Sisters as they set about cleaning and furnishing. In the evening lessons for the coming school day were prepared. Nederlands had especially to be studied now. For this the Nederlands teacher of the Boys' High School was engaged to help them.

¹ *Founded in 1816 and named after Governor Sir John Cradock, it has also been called "the Crown of the Midlands". One of those nearby hills guards the grave of Olive Schreiner, the South African writer.*

Pupils came and soon it was necessary to have new classrooms. The building was arranged with rolling partitions so that some schoolrooms could be transformed into a hall when occasion demanded. In June 1910 Bishop MacSherry visited the school and administered confirmation to fourteen children who had been prepared by the nuns.

When, in 1918, Mr JC Krige became Speaker of the House of Assembly, he changed his residence to Cape Town and “Welgelegen”, his home, was put up for sale. As the property adjoined the Convent grounds it was bought by the nuns and named “St Mary’s”. This afforded classrooms for the art and commercial pupils.

When the ground at the back of Mr Thal’s house was offered for purchase the Sisters bought that also to serve as a hockey field. Later the parish church of white indurated stone occupied part of this plot; so the convent chapel was turned into a dining-room for some eighty boarders. This largely added to the convenience of both the nuns and their pupils.

The convent was already in 1910 a going concern, competing with other High Schools. Its pupils took both the University Joint Board and the Departmental Examinations. Music under Sister Claudia Kusterer² made wonderful progress. Her candidates from Port Elizabeth and other larger centres, as well as local girls, had excellent results in their examinations and formed the Convent Senior Musical Band, a combination of players with piano, cello and several violins.

On the 26th April 1963 Dr and Mrs JF Verwoerd paid a visit to Craddock. Thousands of people welcomed the distinguished guests at the aerodrome. In the evening the guests of honour were escorted to the Masonic Hotel where they spent the night. Next morning two Convent girls ventured to the Hotel to ask for Dr Verwoerd’s autograph. A waiter told them to follow him and he ushered them into the lounge. Not only did the Prime Minister give his signature but he also spoke to the girls and both, Dr and Mrs Verwoerd, shook hand with them before they left.

The years passed more or less uneventfully until at the end of 1967, owing to the lack of Sisters, the school had to be closed down... In view of the fact that it was to be a sad ending to the year no prize-giving was held. The pupils themselves staged a small concert after which the Sisters gave a gift to each child. On the following Saturday night the parents of the pupils held a farewell party for all the sisters. Thus ends the long history of a school that had played such an integral part in the history of Craddock.

² She composed the “Veritas” Song for the K.C.B.U. (The past pupils’ union.) Words by Fiona Doran.