

Chapter 29 – Mother Eleonore Petitpierre, O.P.

She lights a Candle

“It is better to light one small candle, than to complain of the dark.”

A list of the remarkable women of British Kaffraria would be incomplete without the name of Mother Mary Eleonora Petitpierre, for this lady shared with Miss Martindale¹ the honour of being among the pioneers for the higher education of women in the Eastern Cape District.

Marie Petitpierre was born in the ancient Roman city of Augsburg, Bavaria, on 17th August 1851. She was of French extraction, her paternal grandfather having come from St Malo in Brittany. Miss Petitpierre was educated at St Ursula's Convent in her native city and at Nancy in France. She often, in the course of her life, related interesting details of the siege of the latter town during the Franco-Prussian war, and other incidents of the same period, notably of her adventurous return to Augsburg in a troop train.

After qualifying as a teacher, she joined the Dominican Sisterhood at Wattenhausen under Mother Aquinata Lauter and made her religious profession on 21st August 1872, to Mother Hyacinth Schippert at St Ursula's Augsburg. Here she taught French and Commercial subjects and also assisted in the teachers' training institute connected with the convent.

When Bishop Ricards asked for Sisters to staff his school in South Africa, Sister Eleonora volunteered her services for the distant educational field. In 1877 she arrived with Mother Mauritia Tiefenboeck and five other nuns at the Sacred Heart Convent, King William's Town where, for 22 years, she ably filled the position of headmistress. A born teacher, she threw herself with great enterprise in the work of training others when the opportunity offered and in 1882 opened the first class of pupil teachers at the Convent, thus inaugurating the work of training teachers in the Eastern Cape. This venture reached its completion in 1914, when a Teachers' Training College² at King William's Town by the State, thanks to the united forces of the Girls' High School and the Convent.

About 1884 Sister Eleonora launched her little educational barque on the uncharted sea of higher education for girls in South Africa, successfully presenting her students for the “Honours” Examination, since defunct. It was then superseded by the School Higher, and later by the Junior Certificate, Examination. A decade later she made what was considered a much bolder venture, when she entered her first girls for Matriculation, which at that time was considered to be the very acme of glory for young ladies in this country, where schools were still few and far between. Many were the teachers, religious and secular, whom she trained. She strove, not only to put on them her own stamps of thoroughness and efficiency but, to give them a high idea of their profession and of a teacher's power to aid in spreading the Kingdom of God.

In 1899 Mother Eleonora was appointed Superior at Potchefstroom Convent where she lived through the years of the South African War.³ Upon her arrival in the old Transvaal Republic she immediately set herself to perfect her knowledge of the Dutch language and, with her exquisite tact, at this period even wrote the Convent annals in faultless Nederlands.

With Mother General Jacoba Zirn she visited her native land in 1904 to help found a recruiting house at Schlehdorf, some sixty Km from Munich. In 1907 Sister Eleonora became Prioress of the convent at Albany Street, East London. She returned to King William's Town in 1911 where, for many years, she held the post of Sub-Prioress and Directress General of the Congregation's schools. In 1923 she was elected General Bursar of the Institute and despite her three score years filled this responsible position with great exactitude until her health gave way in 1931.

¹ She was headmistress of the Girls' Collegiate School.

² The College was closed down when the State decided to centralise the colleges in 1949.

³ cf. Chapter 9.

Sister Eleonora was graceful and tall. In keeping with the elegant manners and noble appearance of the lady were her finely chiselled features and the dark eyes in whose depths lay something visionary.

Not many are possessed of such universal sympathy as was hers. She took the whole world to her heart. People of every race, colour or creed were given a share in her Christ-like love. One of her greatest delights was to procure an annual treat at Christmas for the Coloured children of St Joseph's Mission School in Durban Street, King William's Town. For this she prepared months before the time by writing to her past pupils and also her friends in Germany for contributions. She did not ask in vain.

Her life-long ambition was to be a true Dominican and for this she mingled prayer and work. The chime of the clock would remind her of the presence of God and she would pause briefly for a silent prayer. She had trained herself so well in prompt obedience to every summons as coming from God that she would stop her work at the first stroke of the bell so that, when writing, she would leave a letter half formed until she could return to her desk.

In addition to the work of teaching and administration she was often called upon to write artistic addresses for personages all over the Cape Colony. Added to this she was an indefatigable correspondent with the Press for various societies. Thomas Carlyle said genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains. Judged by that standard Mother Eleonora was a genius few have ever equalled and none surpassed. Her motto was "Age quod agis", whatever you do, do well! Thoroughness distinguished all she did no matter how trivial the work may appear to others. Proof of this unfailing sedulity is preserved in our Convent Archives where there are many manuscripts filled with her splendid copper-plate handwriting.

After three months of suffering Mother Eleonora passed away peacefully to her eternal reward at 7 o'clock in the morning of 29th October 1932, the eve of the Feast of Christ the King. Her mortal remains lay all day in the choir, in presence of the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar – fitting reward for one whose whole life was practically an unbroken act of adoration of Jesus and of devotion to His Holy Mother. She lies buried at the Mater Infirmorum next to Mother Mauritia who had taught her in the Kindergarten and who had moulded her life as a religious.

"... Highly educated and refined, an accomplished linguist, an artist of no mean talent, a woman of indomitable energy and outstanding business capacity, with the simplicity and faith of a little child, Mother Eleonora was a personality so unique that all who knew her said: 'We shall not look upon her like again' ..."⁴

⁴ *This eulogy came from the pen of none other than the brilliant Sister Alacoque Brien.*