

The Church in New Zealand

MILTON MEMORIES

(By ONE ILL KIWI.)



VERY REV. FATHER JAMES O'NEILL, PASTOR OF WAIKIWI.
Who was appointed to the charge of the Milton Parish in 1884.

When asked to contribute some pages in reference to the Milton parish, I asked myself is it worth while? Then I remembered that there are all through the Dominion Catholics who hail from Milton parish to whom a glance at old times would be interesting.

Besides there is the certainty that the matter would be taken up by persons to whom imagination would supply the facts, which only one person can know adequately. Of this I saw an instance in a recent issue of the *Tablet*, in which a far-back resident of the Taieri portion of Milton parish, treated the readers to a half truth, called in some parts of Ireland a "Ballylanders", the equivalent of which in Australia is a "Rouge-

mont", and in the rest of the world a "Munchausen." I will refer to this matter in its proper place. If I am charged with adding to the dictionary by this use of the word "Ballylanders" I might justify myself by pointing to the addition made by Father Edmund Lynch, a Dunedin priest, who in Palmerston North recently exposed the pretensions of a State professor of history named Manders, and added the word "Manderise" to the dictionary.

Many people regard the writers of reminiscences as giving thereby proof of incipient or developed dotage. With this view all do not agree, many preferring to refer to this stage of man's career as anec-dotage, where we may leave it.

The Milton parish, in 1884, extended from Green Island in the suburbs of Dunedin to the farthest outpost of the Catlins Raver bush country, thus taking in the whole of Bruce county, the whole of Taieri county, and a portion of Clutha county.

Two large plains—Tokomairiro and Taieri—were included in this territory. The earliest settlers found these plains waterlogged, undrained, and unhealthy, and some of the wisest took to the hills. By degrees the cultivation of the swamps was undertaken, the Maori heads grubbed out and an attempt at drainage made, and thus a grudging living drawn from the inhospitable soil. As the years rolled by improvements continued but the malaria was never entirely banished.

The consequence of this damp and fog was visible in the characteristics of the inhabitants. From the days of ancient Greece's glory down through the ages the denizens of swamps and marshes bore unmistakable signs of the physical, mental, and social peculiarities of this environment. Baeotia, one of Greece's divisions, was enclosed by mountains in a huge basin, and though the land was fertile the climate left its mark upon the cultivators of the soil. They were different from the alert, keen, go-ahead Grecians of the other parts of the most cultured of ancient nations. When we add that an excessive dose of Calvinistic gloom was brought by the early settlers of Otago when they came we can form an idea of the unsociability and dourness that met the first Catholic settlers who made their abode in these plains.

To some extent Irish good humor dispelled the fog, but as long as bogs and marshes retain their saddening effects there will always be a notable difference between their inhabitants and those in more elevated surroundings.

In 1873 the first resident priest took up his abode on a property purchased by Bishop Moran with money received from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. The house was small, but those who remembered the condition of things in 1873 state that the grounds were amongst the most neatly kept in the district. Soon the health of the priest became affected, and though of a most genial, humorous disposition, he gradually lost interest in his surroundings, and when in 1884 he resigned the presbytery and grounds were in a condition that beggars all description. Father Jas. O'Neill, who had been ordained in old St. Joseph's Church, Dunedin, in 1882, and spent part of a year on the Cathedral staff, going subsequently to Queenstown, was appointed to the charge of the Milton parish in July, 1884. One of the first matters that engaged the attention of the young parish priest—who was then in his twenty-fourth year—was the improvement of the presbytery grounds.

Willing workers came in relays to help clear the wilderness that surrounded the house and let in the sun and fresh air. Giant gum trees had to be cut down and cut up. Broom and gorse and wild thorn bushes had to be grubbed up. Old silk hats, boots, old clothes had to be reverently disinterred and placed on a temporary funeral pyre. Dock weeds that had been shedding their seeds

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