

From the Archives

Mother Mary St Domitille rmdm

(Mary Margaret Hickey M.A., D. Litt.)

Perhaps some of you reading this will know much more about Mother Domitille (Dom) than I do. I remember her as a rather severe-looking, austere woman who used to sleep in a room over the Chapel, at the end of the Novitiate corridor, and of whom we were more than a little in awe. But I recently had occasion to look at her



life for someone writing a book about Catholic education, and I came to realise just what a remarkable woman she was. I am indebted amongst other sources to her nieces, Marie Gabrielle Wright rmdm and Dame Stella Casey (nee Wright), and to the reminiscences of a group of her past pupils in the Sacred Heart Christchurch Centenary magazine for much of the information I have about her.

Mary Hickey was born on 13 April 1882, and died in Christchurch on 20 June 1958, just 76 years later. Not such a long life by today's standards, but she managed to fill it with some remarkable achievements. She liked to boast that she was born in a whare at the foot of Mt Egmont (Mt Taranaki), but in fact she was born in a military camp at Opunake where her father was serving with the Armed Constabulary during the Land Wars. She was the eldest of eleven children of Irish immigrant parents, and learnt very early to care for her younger siblings. The story is told of the child Mary, then five years old, being sent into the dark and windy night to find and bring back a woman to help at the birth of her sister, Stella. The woman didn't want to venture out into the wild night, but Mary stood and knocked, and knocked, until her persistence was rewarded and the woman returned with her.

Mary attended the local Opunake School until Std VI, whereupon she was given an appointment as a pupil-teacher at the same school, moving later to a similar position at a school in New Plymouth, where she first met the Mission Sisters. She sat and passed her Teachers' Examination, and joined the staff of the Stratford District High School. In 1905 she was received in Christchurch as a Postulant, and after Profession began studies at Canterbury University College. But first, she had to pass the Matriculation Exam – and failed in Arithmetic on her first attempt! Her University career was brilliant. She was Senior Scholar in History, was awarded an M.A. Degree with First Class Honours, and achieved the distinction of being the first woman in New Zealand (and some accounts say Australia) to be awarded a Doctorate in Literature, with a four-volume thesis on the History of Canterbury up until 1857.

In 1975, during the International Women's Year, an exhibition featuring 36 Outstanding New Zealand Women was held in Christchurch, and Mother Domitille was featured there, amongst such distinguished company as Kate

Sheppard, Katherine Mansfield and Jean Batten. She was largely responsible for beginning the Catholic Schools Journal in New Zealand, and wrote many articles for it, and for the Teachers' Bulletin which accompanied each monthly edition. On one of her journeys overseas to attend a General Chapter she met and was impressed by Madame Maria Montessori, and upon her return home had a Sister trained in the Montessori method and introduced it into the Infant class of Sacred Heart College, Christchurch, and later others of our schools. She was a moving force behind the annual Catholic Women's Conferences, held in Christchurch for many years.

However, for all her personal achievements, Mother Domitille was first and foremost an educator. For many years she was the Principal of Sacred Heart College, Christchurch, and her many pupils remembered her with affection and gratitude. A voracious reader herself, she ranged widely in her classes, often forgetting the syllabus topic in her interest in some point which had come up, and nudging, cajoling and relentlessly forcing her students to broaden their horizons – “Canterbury mutton”, she called them, and it wasn't meant as a compliment. Oliver Duff, one-time editor of *The Listener*, recalled his first contact with her, when she reproved him for his “sentimental and undemocratic attitude to sheep”. A cow, she said, was worth 20 sheep. Sheep were leading New Zealand to ruin. One must remember that M M St Domitille was a daughter of Taranaki!

Two of her past pupils, working at the time in the Prime Minister's office, tell of the occasion when Peter Fraser was expecting an important doctor – the visitor was to be shown in immediately, and he was not to be disturbed. Along the corridor came M M St Domitille, and although very glad when she stopped to chat to them, they were also anxious about the expected visitor. Out came Peter Fraser and greeted “Dr Hickey” warmly, and ushered her in to his office, leaving her pupils open-mouthed.

Old age and ill health must have been a burden to M M St Domitille. She lamented the fact that in a busy community she had few with whom to discuss her ideas and the books she was reading. The death of M Xavier Donnell, a long-time friend and her successor as Principal at Sacred Heart, was a great grief to her. For a time she tutored the Sisters who were studying for their Teacher's Exams, but by the time I knew her, even this was beyond her. The mind was as vigorous as ever, but the body gradually weakened. She died quite suddenly, on her way to Chapel for Evening Prayer. Marie Gabrielle's description of her is a fitting tribute – “A tall woman, large of frame, with grey eyes, her face was frequently drawn and stern but sometimes expressed wry humour. Her smile, however, was unforgettable; then delight and charm lit her face and her happiness shone forth.”

Margaret Purdie rmdm