

A Wretched School of the Worst Bush Type

The Nelson Denominational School

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1848 was a turning point in the establishment of a general system of education in NSW. Four years earlier a Select Committee of Inquiry had found that 50% of children aged between four and fourteen were receiving no education. In an effort to redress this, a dual system of schools based on the Irish National system was established under two separate boards - a Board of National Education and a Denominational or Church School Board. The Denominational School Board created four separate administrative units representing each of the main denominations. At the time denominational schools were far more numerous than secular schools.

Just prior to this, the popular and visionary Irish priest John Joseph Therry and the settlers of Nelson and Rouse Hill contributed £13 8s for the erection of a chapel at Vinegar Hill which was to be known as *St. Cosmos and Damien*.¹ There is no evidence that the chapel was ever built. However, in 1865 Archbishop Polding (the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney), Patrick Hallinan, (parish priest for Windsor) and Samuel Mason (a local farmer and a Protestant) purchased $\frac{3}{4}$ acre from Samuel Henry Terry for the erection of a school house which was also to serve as an occasional place of worship.² The land which was part of Terry's *Copenhagen Estate* was located in Old Pitt Town Road adjoining Samuel Mason's farm, *Iron Bark Park*. The purchase price was ten shillings.

Twelve months later the school house and teacher's residence were completed and the Denominational School Board approved the transfer of James Cusack and his stipend from the Cattai Creek Denominational School.³

According to family tradition, James Cusack was one of the Irish teachers recruited to teach in the colony by Archbishop Polding but like most family stories this is only partly true.⁴ Cusack did become a school teacher and taught several generations of children at Nelson and Cattai. However, there is no evidence to support the belief that he was recruited for this purpose in Ireland. Cusack arrived in Sydney as an assisted immigrant on board the bounty ship *Fortune* in 1853. He was 29 years of age, single, and although he identified himself as a farm labourer, he was able to read and write - skills which were sufficient for him to be accepted by the Denominational School Board as a pupil-teacher and after seven months training as the teacher at Cattai Creek.⁵

The new Nelson school cost £140 to build – a substantial sum in those days, and although a grant of £50 was sought from the Denominational School Board the Board only agreed to pay £40.⁶ The school room “was 12 foot x 17 foot [about 3.6 metres by 5.2 meters] in the clear and [the attached teacher's residence] had four large rooms”.⁷ It was built of “Posts and slabs, [had] 2 stone chimneys, [and a] roof [of] shingle.”⁸ It also had a 5 foot wide verandah along its long side and a detached slab kitchen with a bark roof. On 22nd February 1867 J. Cobur inspected the new school for the School Board and provided a more detailed description:

“This school was established in December 1866; and was opened on 15th of that month. The number of scholars - of both sexes - present today was 30 - out of a total of 34 on the roll. The building is quite new, is used for Divine Service occasionally, constructed of wood,

sufficiently large, well lighted and contains a dwelling - house of four rooms under the same roof. There is also the necessary offices at the rear.

The school furniture consists of two desks and six forms; of apparatus there is no sign; the stacks of books and map is very fair.

The work of teaching is carried on by a master [James Cusack], with the occasional help of his wife [Mary Brady]. Considering the short time the school has been at work and the backward state in which most of the pupils were found by this Master, his method of teaching and maintaining order may be called fair.”⁹

By the standards of the day the Nelson School was reasonably well equipped. Not only did it have books and a map but in 1867 James Cusack requisitioned “*a blackboard and small easel, 1 dozen 8 inch x 6 inch slates and a box of slate pencils*”.¹⁰

In 1880 the *Public Instruction Act* took effect - severing the tie between the church and state school systems and withdrawing state aid from church schools. As a consequence many church schools were transferred to the state. The Nelson School was no exception and late in 1882 Dr Sheehy, parish priest for Windsor, advised the Department of Public Instruction that the church was prepared to lease its Nelson school to the Department provided James Cusack was retained as its teacher. The Department agreed and a two year lease at an annual rental of £12 was signed on the 1st January 1883.¹¹

Six months later James Cusack retired and subsequently built a cottage in Sydney Road Riverstone where he lived out his life. His contribution to the development of the Nelson-Cattai children is impossible to assess. However, one of his daughters and quite a few of his grandchildren and other descendants went on to follow in his footsteps by becoming teachers. Another of his grandsons, Frank Mason, was the long serving Town Clerk of Windsor.

Cusack was replaced by Mrs Sarah Sheehy. Sheehy did not adapt to conditions at Nelson very well. Six days after her arrival she wrote complaining that the Nelson school:

“...was a denominational school of the worst bush type and the wretchedness of itself and surroundings can scarcely be imagined...

A slabbed half roofless miserable hut for a school and no residence for me, except one slabbed room covered with calico to prevent a full view of the heavens above.”¹²

Mrs Sheehy's claims were refuted by the District Inspector and she was censured for gross misrepresentation. However, it is noteworthy that less than two years later when the school lease was being renegotiated the Department reported that the school buildings “*are so wretched a character and so dilapidated [they] should not be leased for more than a year*”. Notwithstanding this the Department agreed to lease the school for a further three years at an annual rent of £26.¹³

Throughout this period the school was under constant threat of closure because it could not achieve a satisfactory level of attendance - a gross enrolment of 40 and average of 30. As early as 1878 the local Board was warned that the school's certificate would be withdrawn. This may have been what prompted Mrs Sheehy to falsify the school attendances - a misdeed she was charged with only two months after her arrival. In her defence she wrote:

*“There are three families, brother's children named Mason, and two families of Smith's brothers children coming to this school, each family of children bearing the same Christian name as their cousins, then I being a stranger and did not know one from the other and in my sad state of health the mistakes must be made in these cases.”*¹⁴

The Department was not persuaded by her excuse and transferred her to Lower McDonald Public School. At the time there were 44 pupils enrolled at Nelson - 27 Catholic and 17 Anglican and Wesleyan.

Pressure continued for the closure of the Nelson School. In 1888 a new school was opened at nearby Rouse Hill and the Department of Public Instruction was keen that the Nelson children should attend there. At the same time the lease on the Nelson School expired. The District Inspector reported:

*“families of P. Hession, R. Smith, T. Hession, John Mason, James Mason and Robbins are clustered around the [Nelson] school, the children of the families of school age amount to, including R. Smith's children, to 20; of these 17 would have to walk a little over two miles by road [to the new Rouse Hill Public School] but not so far across the paddocks.”*¹⁵

However, the Nelson community continued to resist all moves to close its school and as a consequence the lease was renewed.

In 1890 Robert Smith jnr wrote on behalf of the local community advising that it now supported the establishment of a new school at Nelson and that a one acre site was available at the *Swinging Gate* (in Nelson Road near Mark Road).¹⁶ The Department of Public Instruction acted on this advice but purchased a larger site of four acres from Bridget Hession and her son Thomas.¹⁷ It also accepted a tender of £328 10s from a Parramatta builder to construct the new school.¹⁸

The new school was soon ready for occupation and on 30th June 1891 the old Denominational School closed and according to family legend, was dismantled and the timber slabs used to build Thomas Hession's house in Nelson Road. However, in 1935 the Windsor & Richmond Gazette published an obituary for Annie Mason [the last of the Mason family to live at *Iron Bark Park*] in which it reported that *“her parents Samuel and Harriet Mason, had built a school room and living room for a teacher...The old school still stands, strong and sound, after over 90 years.”*

It is unlikely that we will ever know exactly what happened to the school, however, it would be surprising if it survived the disastrous 1939 bush fire that swept through Nelson and Box Hill destroying a number of farms including the *Iron Bark Park* and its out-buildings. We do know, however, that the school site remained in the ownership of the Riverstone Catholic Parish until 10th March 1984 when it was sold by public auction as a house site.

Student numbers at the new Nelson School declined and in 1902 the school's inspector recommended that it be closed and the children transferred to Rouse Hill.

This was not, however, the end of the Nelson community's struggle to retain its own school. In 1903 a scheme of Subsidised Schools was introduced to assist isolated families. To obtain a subsidy of up to £25 two or more families had to engage a private teacher and to provide the teacher with lodgings and a place to teach. In most cases the teacher was a young girl just out of school. In the early 1920s some of the Nelson settlers took advantage of this scheme and a Subsidised School was opened in the home of Mrs James Hynds jnr (formerly Carrie Roberts) – a feisty campaigner for the retention

of a local school for the Nelson children. However, most subsidised schools had only a brief life and this was the case with the Nelson Subsidised School. The teacher at the school was a Riverstone girl and cousin of many of the surrounding families - Monica Mason. Monica taught for about two years before leaving in 1923 to pursue a career in nursing. She left with the good wishes and encouragement of William Kennedy the Parramatta Inspector of Schools who described her new career as "*no nobler profession for a girl*".¹⁹

¹ List of subscribers for the erection of the Vinegar Hill Chapel, Sept. 1847, St. Patrick's College Archives, Manly, Information supplied by Mary Rachael Mason.

² NSW LTO, Book 96, No. 670, dated 29 December 1865.

³ NSW AO, Denominational School Board, Miscellaneous Correspondence, Application to establish a Den. School at Nelson, 14 December, 1866.

⁴ Oral Information supplied by Cass Mason (1891-1985), grand daughter of James Cusack and Rose Brady.

⁵ NSW AO, Miscellaneous Letters - Denominational School Board (185255), Minutes dated 7 December 1853 from Archdeacon McEncroe, 1/313.

⁶ op. cit.

⁷ op. cit.

⁸ op. cit.

⁹ NSW AO, Council of Education - Misc. letters, Vol. 14, 1/748, Report by Inspector J. Cobur, 22 Feb. 1867, p. 268.

¹⁰ *ibid*, Requisitions for School Materials, 2 October 1867, pp. 269270.

¹¹ NSW AO, Nelson School File, 5/17086.1

¹² *ibid*, letter dated 16 July 1883, Mrs. S. Sheehy to Dr. Forrest of Balmain.

¹³ *ibid*, Inspector's Report dated 2 March 1885 and Agreement dated 25 April 1885.

¹⁴ *ibid*, Evidence by Mrs. Sarah Sheehy dated 10 September 1883.

¹⁵ NSW, AO, Nelson School File 4/17086.1, Inspector's Report dated 18 October 1888.

¹⁶ *ibid*, letter dated 4 July 1890.

¹⁷ NSW, LTO, No.314, Book 461.

¹⁸ NSW, AO, Nelson School File 4/17086.1 Inspector's Report dated 28 August 1890.

¹⁹ Letter from William Kennedy Inspector of Schools to Monica Mason dated 7 April 1923.