

GRAHAMSTOWN'S ASSUMPTION CONVENT

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At the end of 1982 the Sisters of the Assumption closed their convent in Grahamstown. The occasion was a sad one because that convent — on the corner of Beaufort Street and Hill Street — was the first such institution ever established in Southern Africa. The first pupils were admitted on 15 January 1850,¹ and for 133 years the Assumption Sisters taught not only the requirements of the syllabus, but served the wider community of the city in a variety of ways. The convent buildings themselves exuded an atmosphere of Christian worship and European culture.

The convent was opened in response to a request from Bishop Aidan Devereux, the Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern District of the Cape of Good Hope. He was particularly concerned about the education of young people in the harsh environment of the Eastern Cape frontier and he approached for help Mother Marie Eugénie who had recently founded the Assumption Order in Paris.² The order seemed to him to answer appropriately the needs of the community in the Eastern Cape. For one thing, the Assumption Sisters had decided to put aside the grills and cloistered walls of the traditional convent in the execution of their Christian ministry, in order to be more aware of the needs of the people. In particular the Order aimed to regenerate the Church in France and that its work might be extended throughout the whole world and render immense glory to God which meant, in effect, a commitment to missionary effort.³ In the war zone of the Eastern Cape this had peculiar meaning: the Sisters were expected not only to regenerate the Christian faith among White colonists but to cut across racial lines to win converts. They were called upon to communicate the Christian message of faith, hope, and charity in an area of violent cultural clash.

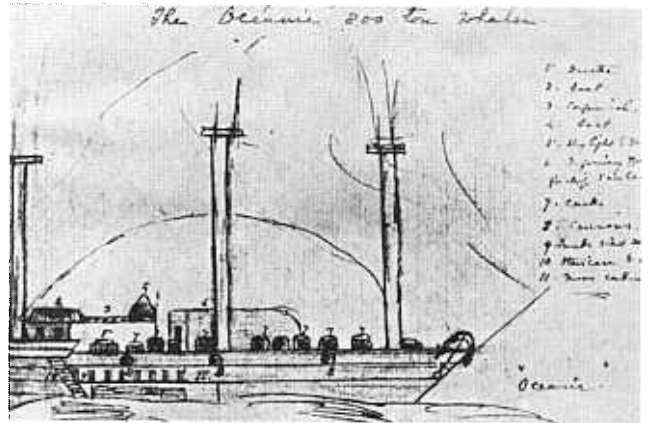
Bishop Devereux described the poverty and hardships to be encountered in the Eastern Cape.⁴ This challenge attracted rather than repulsed a young nun of 27 years and only four years professed. She was Sister Gertrude, born Josephine Amelia de Henningsen⁵ and eventually to be known throughout Southern Africa as Notre Mère. Sister Gertrude and her little party of two fully professed sisters, an English novice, and three young Irish women arrived in Grahamstown on 15 December 1849.⁶ They had travelled out to the Cape on a whaling vessel, the *Océanie*, and completed the six day journey from Port Elizabeth to Grahamstown by ox-wagon. The hazards of the journey,

Sister M. Gertrude (born Josephine Amelia de Henningsen), known throughout southern Africa as Notre Mère — on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of her first profession, 25 April 1870.

PHOTOGRAPH: K.S. HUNT



* I should like to acknowledge the research assistance of Sister Anne Mary MSA.



The whaling vessel *Océanie* (800 tons) on which Sister Gertrude and her little party of nuns had travelled from Europe to the Cape.

PHOTOGRAPH: K.S. HUNT

however, were balanced by the warmth of the welcome they received from a Mrs Ford who from all accounts ran the only good school in the town. She was more than a friend to the sisters: she accommodated them until their own house was ready; she handed over her school to them; and eventually, taught in the school for a while when conditions were pretty desperate.⁷

The initial year must have been a very difficult one. Sectarian prejudice had to be overcome. The sister who it had been intended should take charge of the school deserted her post; however, this was balanced by the admission to the Order of two Grahamstown women, Elizabeth Heavyside, daughter of the local Anglican Colonial Chaplain, the Rev. John Heavyside, and Annie Bertram, sister of the Wesleyan minister, the Rev. John Bertram.⁸

Bishop Devereux was clearly delighted with the sisters. "I look to it as the beginning of great good," he wrote in 1850. "The female children will get a real Christian Catholic education. There will be a happy change wrought in the morals of the rising generation and the face of this unfortunate portion of Africa will be renewed."⁹

The beginnings were simple and initial accommodation was inadequate. Bishop Devereux bought the property from a Mr Rutherford for £900 payable over three years.¹⁰ Two

1. *Memoirs* of Rev. Mother M. Gertrude de Henningsen, p. 69. Limited typescript in the possession of the Generalate of the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption (hereafter referred to as *Memoirs*).

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

3. A. O'RILEY, *Notre Mère: a record of the life and times of Soeur M. Gertrude du S. Sacrament, foundress of the first community of nuns in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1922), pp. 104 and 113-114.

4. *Memoirs*, p. 49.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 71 and 73.

9. O'RILEY, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 199.



Part of the interior of St Catherine's School Hall in 1865.

PHOTOGRAPH: K.S. HUNT

stables in the garden were converted into a free school which was named St Joseph's.¹¹ A small thatched cottage — nicknamed Uncle Tom's Cabin — accommodated the sisters. At first, fee-paying scholars received instruction in the largest room in the cottage but within six weeks they were able to occupy a new brick classroom 6,7 by 4,3 metre with a loft above it where the lay sisters were to sleep.¹²

The furnishings were very simple. The sisters bought tables and benches for the classrooms, refectory tables for the children, and "a few folding wooden and canvas bedsteads." According to Notre Mère the sisters themselves slept on planks laid on two trestles upon which they placed "hard, lumpy, flock mattresses." Their packing cases they converted into "book-shelves, ottomans, divans and cupboards."¹³

When the schools opened more than a hundred pupils enrolled at St Joseph's Free School and thirty in the fee-paying school which was named St Catherine's. By the end of the first year the number of pupils at St Joseph's had increased to 156 and at St Catherine's to 36. The children attending the schools were not necessarily Catholics. Among the 156 at St Joseph's 46 were Protestant, and 27 of the fee-paying students attending St Catherine's were Protestant.¹⁴ From its inception to its close it was the policy of the sisters to serve all who called upon them and not to confine their activities to people of their own religious persuasion. And as the numbers in the schools increased, so indeed did the buildings to house them.

Among those buildings still in use in 1982 was a cottage built in 1852/3, and the Refectory with a dormitory upstairs which was built between 1854 and 1857. St Catherine's School Hall with a dormitory upstairs was built in 1865. The front entrance, parlour, library, and additional accommodation for the sisters were built in 1882/3. New school accommodation was built in 1953 to celebrate the

centenary of the foundation, and a splendid new chapel and additional accommodation wing were completed as recently as 1962.

An event which indelibly linked the sisters with their new environment was the Frontier War of 1850-53. The war began with a Xhosa attack on the three military villages of Auckland, Woburn, and Juanasburg. One hundred children were orphaned that day. Some were tiny tots, others were teenagers. Bishop Devereux asked the sisters to accommodate these children and the loft over the new schoolroom was converted into a dormitory for their use.¹⁵ Moreover, additional demands were made upon the sisters by an enormous increase in the numbers of children sent to St Joseph's Free School. Some of these were children of farmers who had sought refuge in Grahamstown and who were anxious "to get their children away during the day from their crowded dwellings, wagons and tents."¹⁶

The expense of maintaining the Convent establishment during these difficult war years seriously taxed the financial resources of the Community. To obtain money the sisters took in needlework and sold garden produce. Their own diet was particularly frugal. Notre Mère records in her *Memoirs*:

"At one time our meal ran so short that we had to use boiled pumpkin, potatoes, and rice to make our bread, so that the little we had left might last as long as possible. We baked this bread on a pot-lid, under a cow-dung fire, which gave it a peculiar flavour. Fortunately for us, there was an abandoned kraal across the river, at the bottom of our garden, from which we were able to procure this fuel. Before the town was astir, we would sally forth, pickaxe and shovel

11. *Memoirs*, p. 76.

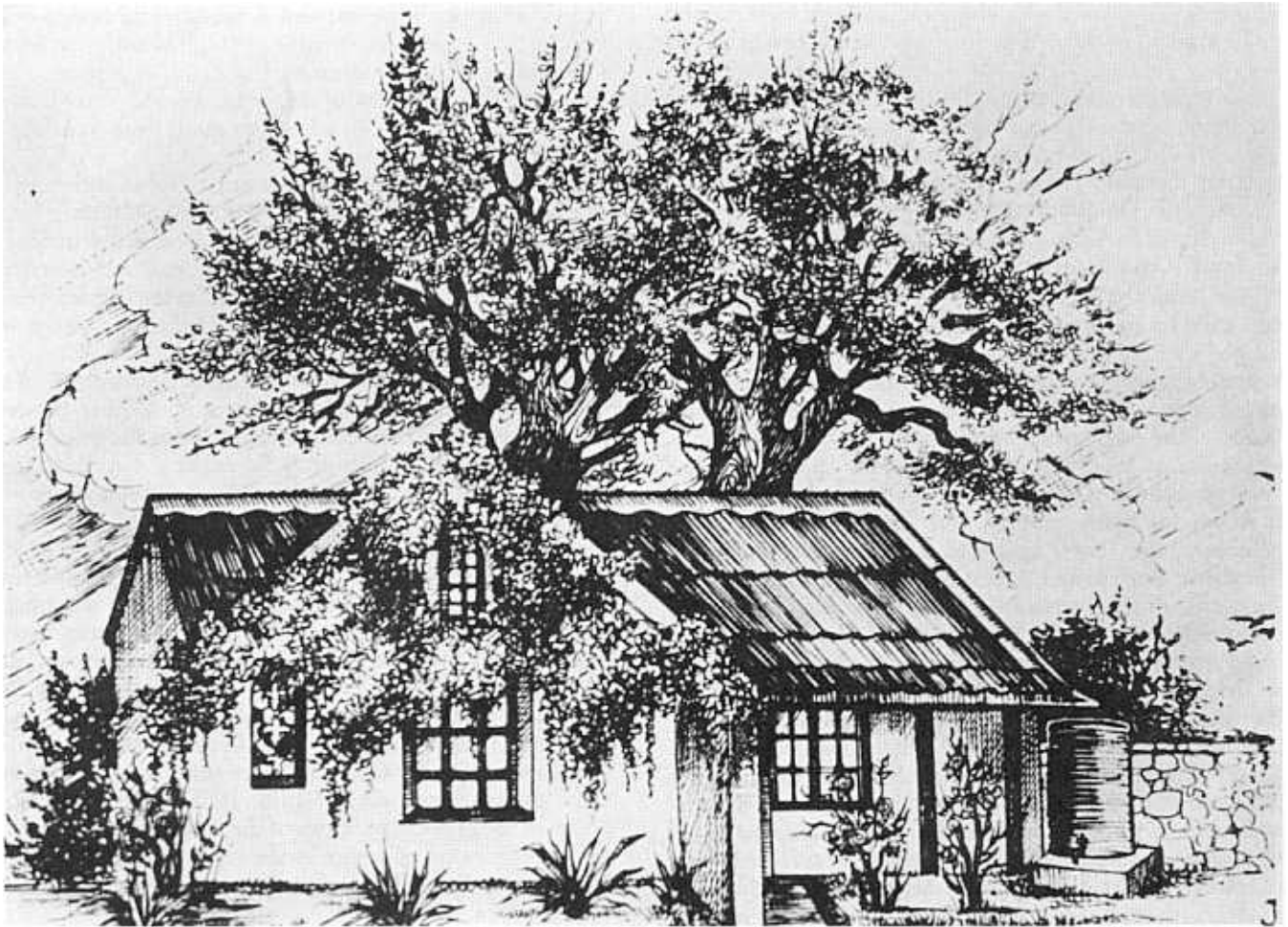
12. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

16. *Ibid.*



"Uncle Tom's Cabin", a small thatched cottage which accommodated the sisters while the largest room was used as a classroom until a new brick classroom was completed.

PHOTOGRAPH: K.S. HUNT

in hand, to fill our gunny bags, because wood for fuel was not to be thought of. When our meal was finally exhausted we had to fall back on sago for tea and breakfast, as we had a large provision of this. Before the war it had been received in part payment of the fees of one of our boarders from Cape Town. A large saucepanful was served up at both meals with a little brown sugar to make it palatable. There was not much sustenance in this kind of food," added Notre Mère.¹⁷

When Grahamstown itself was threatened with invasion there was concern that the Xhosa might set alight the several thatched-roof houses of which the convent was one. Bishop Devereux therefore fortified St Patrick's Church and the women and children of the town were required to rendezvous there at night.¹⁸ Notre Mère used to lead her brood from the convent to the Church every night. She must have looked quite formidable for she always led the procession with a sword in her hand, her brother having taught her how to use it when she was a child.¹⁹ A Captain McDonald had provided her with one,²⁰ and from all accounts she intended to put it to good use.

The crises of revolt and rebellion were not unknown to Notre Mère. In 1830 her family had had to flee from Brussels in the revolts of that year,²¹ and in the revolts of 1848 she was already an active member of the Assumption sisters in Paris. War, however, is not confined to the land, and the sinking of the *Birkenhead* while en route to the Eastern Cape frontier carrying troops, aroused the sisters sense for compassion. The people of Grahamstown decided to collect money to help the survivors and the families of the men who went down with the ship.

The sisters were too poor to give money, so they earned some £30 by the sale of their own and the orphans' needlework. Among those who had perished were soldiers of the 27th Regiment (the Enniskillings) whom the sisters thought had a special claim on the Catholics of Grahamstown, for men of that regiment had largely been responsible for the building of St Patrick's Church. By the time the sisters were able to contribute their cash, the subscription lists had closed, so they spent the money on the erection of a confessional which Fr James David Richards designed and Messrs McDonald and Caples made.²² That confessional served Grahamstown Catholics for more than a hundred years before it was removed to the Albany Museum where it is now kept.

Reports of the shortage of cash and of the dangerous and difficult circumstances in which the little community found themselves alarmed the sisters of the Mother House in Paris and Mother Marie Eugénie in particular.²³ Misunderstanding eventually led to severance. The small group of nuns in Grahamstown perceived that they had already taken on responsibilities from which they could not retract. It was a bold move but totally within the caveat of the foundress to go out into the world to give witness to Christ's ministry. Inspired by the zeal and dynamism of Notre Mère, the

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

23. S.M. YOUNG, *A critical edition of the memoirs of Amelia de Henningsen (Notre Mère)* (MA, Rhodes University, 1984), pp. 43-52. See also O'RILEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 257-272.

Missionary Sisters of the Assumption, (as the new order came to be known) responded to every immediate need and call on their generosity and self-sacrifice. Notre Mère, with characteristic largeness of heart, despite her slender resources, reached out to help all whose purpose was the glory of God and the spread of his Kingdom. She liberally assisted Secular Priests, Trappists, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Dominicans, and the Jesuit Fathers who came first to found St Aidan's and later pioneered missionary work in South Central Africa.²⁴

The Jesuits have been attributed with the saying: "Give us a child for the first seven years of its life and the principles taught it will never be eradicated." This may be an exaggeration, but there is no doubt of the importance of communicating sound principles to the young; and the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption have played a vital role in Catholic education in Southern Africa. Besides developing the Convent School in Hill Street, Grahamstown, they opened a school for Black children and another for Coloureds. Moreover, the Sisters have had schools in Bedford, Port Elizabeth, Port Alfred, Adelaide, De Aar, and Somerset East; two mission schools in Zimbabwe; then Maryvale, Malvern, Johannesburg; Bank near Carletonville, Durban, and Pretoria North. Their influence extended across the sea to Ireland where a convent and school were established at Ballynahinch and to the diocese of Steubenville, Ohio, USA.

While the quiet unobtrusive educational work was in progress, the Sisters accepted other challenges of which the laity and the South African public have been totally unaware. In 1958 they established two hospitals and three secondary schools in Nigeria. The schools were closed when the Biafran War broke out in May 1967, but like the pioneers of 1850, the nursing sisters stayed at their posts

until the horrors of the war were over. After that two sisters went to Sao Tomé to nurse Biafran children suffering from kwashiorkor. Others have served in Zambia, Malawi, and the Transkei. In 1975 one of the Sisters responded to Madam Sadat's invitation to join a team to run a Faith and Hope Rehabilitation Centre in Cairo.²⁵

The Sisters have always given a great deal of time to the care and attention of the aged and infirm. Soon after their arrival in Grahamstown, Notre Mère's *Memoirs* record that every day before school she mixed and administered medicine for the poor while another sister dressed their wounds. After school was over the two sisters went in different directions to visit the sick.²⁶

The convent in Grahamstown has closed, but the Sisters continue to work in Grahamstown and in other centres among the young, the needy, the aged, and the infirm. As a Congregation the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption have remained true to the aims of the dual foundresses — Mother Marie Eugénie and Mother Gertrude. They both required that the Order of the Assumption should be wide-versed and should look to the needs of those beyond the walls of their convent. They wished them to be outgoing, to be keenly sensitive to the needs of the contemporary world in which they live, and always ready to make their own the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of their day, especially those who are poor and in any way afflicted. This is the spirit that inspired Mother Marie Eugénie and Mother Gertrude more than a century before this ideal was prescribed by Vatican II. It remains the inspiration of the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption in fulfilling their ministry of service in the building up of Christ's body — the Church.©

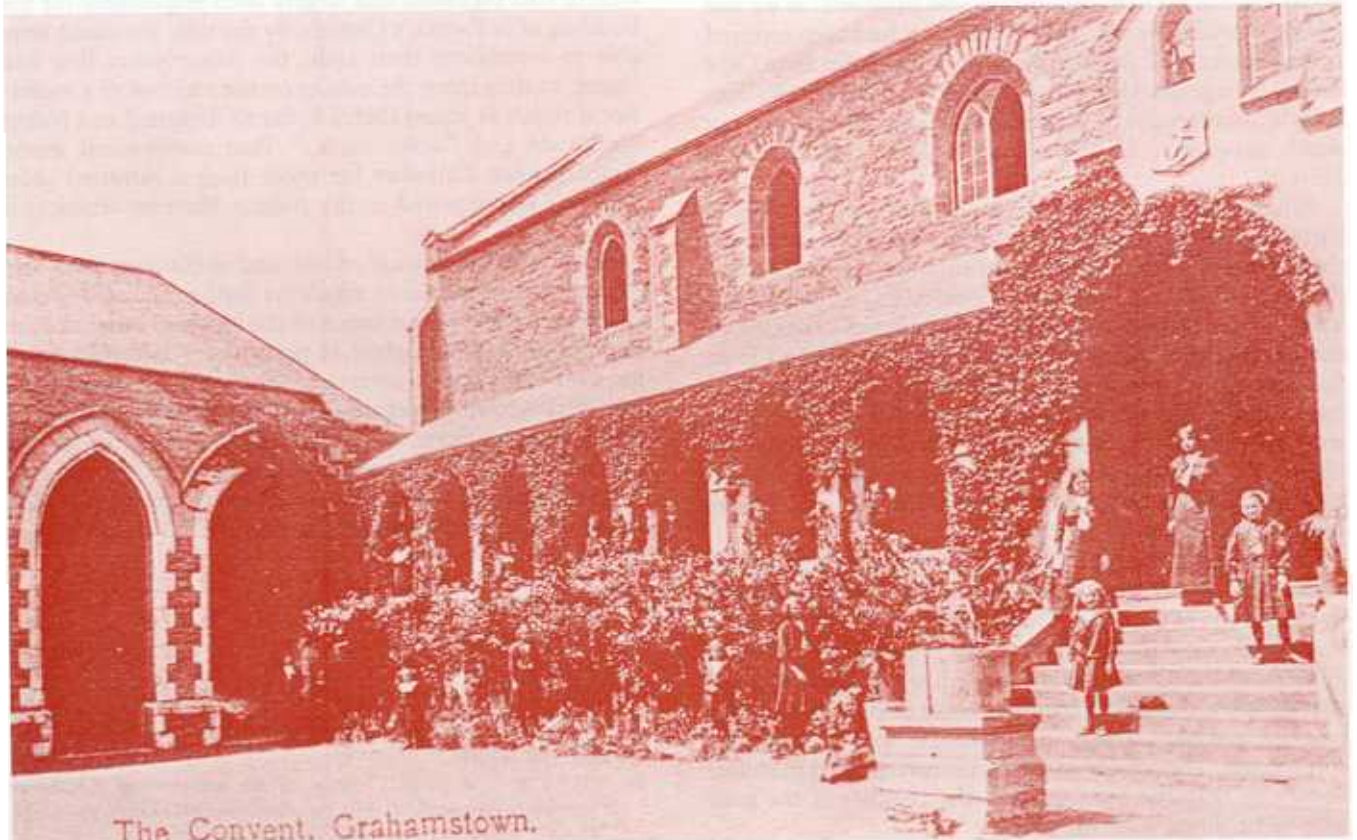
St Catherine's School Hall with a dormitory upstairs, was built in 1865. The photograph was probably taken in 1885.

PHOTOGRAPH: K.S. HUNT

24. *Memoirs*, pp. 108-110.

25. Fact paper entitled *Apostolic activities of the Assumption Congregation*.

26. *Memoirs*, p. 72.



The Convent, Grahamstown.