‘A Catholic Will Case’

In 1925, Reverend Father Parker of Saint Brigid Catholic Church and Mary O’Brien, Reverend Mother of the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Heidelberg, Victoria became trustees of the wealth of finances, property, and land that had been left by the former farmer, Patrick Finn. Finn’s last will at his elderly death of around eighty years, quickly generated contestation amongst his relatives and angered the most animated of his nieces; Mary Beatrice Byrne. She adamantly exclaimed that her uncle had been ‘mentally incapable of the will.’ He had left two of his nieces a relatively meagre £30 pounds each and entirely excluded Mary Byrne from his inheritance. This caused outrage and resentment within the family, as Finn had inordinately favoured the Catholic church above the interests of his family, even sending Father Parker, a non-relative, £200.
Finn had previously owned £3000 - £4000 worth of land in Greensborough, Victoria which he also placed in trust of the Roman Catholic Trust Corporation for ‘£5 a week for life.’ The excess wealth after these dividends were drawn, of ‘£280 realty and £388 personally’ were donated to the Catholic church, which clearly showed his devotion and support of the Catholic church and the Sisters. Although this caveat or objection to Finn’s will became representative of his family’s shock and animosity, it retrospectively reflected the immense expansion of the Roman Catholic Church in Banyule City. This transaction placed Sister O’Brien in charge of the land on 206-260 Rosanna Road, Rosanna which would be kept in trust for the building of a convent in subsequent years. Finn had been elemental in advocating for the Catholic Church and its other domains, by also donating his remaining funds to Saint Vincent’s Hospital, St Vincent de Paul’s Orphanage in South Melbourne, the Sisters of Mercy Orphanage in Surrey Hills and the Foundling Hospital in Broadmeadows.

Figure 2: A Glass Negative, circa. 1928-1930 (rear view of convent) by Charles Daniel Pratt. Sourced from Trove.

Where is it found?
The neo-Gothic Convent is found on 206 Rosanna Road, Rosanna and was completed on November 3, 1930. The convent or ‘novitiate’, as it was also called, was opened with a procession of religious bishops, Sisters of Mercy and a huge congregation of two thousand children. Its bluestone exterior, ‘marble altar’ and high ceilings represented the grandiosity of its European-inspired, Italianate architecture.
The novitiate is coveted, as it was built many metres from the road. Today it continues to reflect this private lifestyle, shown by the row of tall pine trees located alongside the road. Moreover, its high stature of three stories beckons many from neighbouring suburbs to exhibit its exquisite, well-kempt, gothic architecture. Due to the hilly nature of the area, it can be easily noticed and is visually outstanding, which was perhaps the reason as to why Finn believed that this allotment was appropriate to feature a convent.

At the opening of the convent, ‘The Rev. J. Norris, parish priest at Heidelberg, spoke of the need of the new novitiate.’\(^12\) This represented the increasing appeal and significance of Catholicism to families in the region. Historically, the Sisters of Mercy had originated from Dublin, Ireland, which thus represented the expansive domains of Catholicism internationally and colonially.\(^13\) Rosanna came to represent an increasingly opulent and relevant region in Victoria in which religious influences and connections were precipitous and intrinsic to the community. The Sisters of Mercy were furthermore successful in expanding their religious dogma through education, and taught at many nearby schools. The Mercy Sisters’ active encouragement to teach families in this area was also aided by their convent’s close proximity to the Rosanna Train station, and the nearby Austin Hospital.\(^14\)

*Figure 3: Photograph taken by myself, September, 2016.*

*Figure 4: Lower Plenty Road in Rosanna, an adjacent road circa. 1914. Sourced from the Yarra Plenty Regional Library and digitally on Trove.*
Furthermore, the convent was established during the years of the Great Depression, and acted as a religious stronghold in the community by organising charity events. The Sisters of Mercy nuns were inherently relied upon to counsel and educate a desperate and woeful population. Their social work had been tumultuous and emotionally burdensome during the years of the Great Depression, which is perhaps not acknowledged due to the convent’s grandiose façade. The novitiate cost £50,000, which in today’s currency would amount to $3,962,361.68. The building would have perhaps created distance between the outer, less extravagant farming and suburban society and the nuns. Yet these designs were typical of the Catholic structures found across the world. They were thus typically expensive and extravagant. There was, however, a chapel that was open to the general public, which is still in use by private groups today. Additionally, their excessive support and funding were exemplified by the upmarket materials such as bluestone and tiled roof slates. The original building plans at the Public Records Office of Victoria were lost or destroyed, however, which limited the thoroughness of my analysis on the building’s historical changes.

Education and Healthcare: The Sisters of Mercy strengths and weaknesses and their community efforts

The Sisters of Mercy were notable for being positive and headstrong. This was shown by their vows taken to adhere to poverty, chastity and obedience written in the 1987 book ‘Rule and Constitution’. They opened the new novitiate in February of 1931, and introduced twelve new novices into the convent, who had recently taken their ‘final vows’. The fact that ‘The new novitiate [had] accommodation for 100 novices, who will be trained mainly for educational work in Roman Catholic schools’ represented the increasing reliance and ‘need’ for religious education. These Mercy Sisters were often tertiary educated, which reflected their innate ambitiousness and high intellectual capabilities. The Mother Superior, Sister Agnes Doogan of the Rosanna convent, graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1880. Her work was furthermore reflective, of the historical commonality of women to continue working in private, home-based spheres.

Their focus on education became emblematic of the reverberating healthcare and education movements, and were exemplified by the establishment of Mercy Hospitals, Saint Vincent’s Hospitals and dozens of Catholic schools across Victoria. When serving as a novitiate the building was referred to as the ‘Institute of the Sisters of Mercy’ as it was considered a prestigious teaching school. Nuns were thus instrumental in the shaping and motivating of prospective nuns and educators during this time. The Rosanna region’s expansive Catholic figures led to the business agreement to install an adjoining Mercy Hospital next to the historical Austin Hospital, which had been established since 1882. In 1971, the Mercy Hospital for Women was completed a few roads away from the Rosanna Convent. The Heidelberg Mercy Women’s Hospital continues to function as a high-quality teaching hospital for prospective nurses and doctors which had been a key factor in the work of the Sisters of Mercy across Victoria.
Another notable Catholic venue; Our Lady of Mercy College in the neighbouring suburb of Heidelberg is still functioning as a Catholic College today. It was established in 1910 by Sisters of Mercy based in Fitzroy, then at Heidelberg. It was headed by Sister Madeline Duckett during the 1970s’ and 80s’ renovation, which showed the prevailing influence of Catholicism in outer-Melburnian society. The nuns’ work were conscientious and collectively became representative of movements for gender and pay equality. During the era of the Rosanna Convent under the Catholic clergy and nuns, the roles of mothers multitasking their family and work lives progressively became socially acceptable. Thus nuns were able to educate others on their religion, prayer and be devout to their God, and start families of their own. However, those who chose to start families would henceforth need to denounce their nun-hood. They therefore represented single and less conventional lifestyles, without actively seeking to. Their inspiring influence, was therefore uncontested during the period of WWI until the 1970s, as the building continued to function as a convent until 1991; when it was sold to an Aged Care company.

**Widespread Italian immigration:**

Italian immigration expanded dramatically, as from 1941-1960, 330,000 Italians immigrated to Australia. Italians represented the largest immigrant nationality, as only 20,000 returned during this period. They were also the largest non-Anglo group in Australia. Italians held similar Catholic traditions to the predominantly Irish-Australian Mercy Sisters of the 1930s. They were thus representative of an increasingly Catholic community in Australia, and therefore justified the use of buildings such as the Rosanna convent. Its less formal name, ‘The Assisi Centre’ became more commonly used during this time, as it was related to the Italian monk and Saint; Saint Francis of Assisi. Italians were predominantly instrumental in establishing Catholic churches and schools by becoming members of the clergy and Mercy Sisters.

**The Decline of the Sisters of Mercy and Catholicism in Australia**

Although there was widespread Italian and Irish immigration during the post WWII years, Australian society experienced a deconstruction and general decline of Catholic teachings. The decline became intrinsically linked to the increasing ‘secularization’ in Australia, along with the newfound occupational opportunities for women through higher education and other training facilities. These changes were directly linked to the ‘fair go’ policies that enabled many women to attend university and work in higher-paid occupations. It became socially acceptable for women to support themselves, or live in de facto households, and thus the dominance of Catholic traditions decreased.

The decline of Catholic religiosity was, to a large extent, due to structural and industrial changes and changed the contemporary occupations of women in society. The Catholic church, in a large sense was shaped alongside the progressions of modernity which was marked by the closure of many churches and convents. However, their embedded institutions such as hospitals, schools, churches and convents form the basis of the history and memory of Catholicism in Australia. The societal and cultural changes have become emblematic of the diverse ways in which people now participate in the teachings of Catholic saints, of God and Jesus through writing, education, and art.
The Assisi Centre: The Decline of the Rosanna Convent And Selling the Property

The convent was eventually sold to an Aged Care company in 1991, which planned to cater for elderly Italians. Prime Minister Paul Keating even attended the opening of the Assisi Aged Care Centre and another prominent figure, Sir Frank Little stated that, “Over the decades, the Italians have gained leadership roles in every branch of society... but one of the most important things has been their strong family ties.” Although the Rosanna Convent is used less intensively for religious purposes, it continues to represent the past and present cohesiveness of Italian and migrant populations. They have thus continued to uphold the semblance of religion and the Catholic church by catering for Italian populations and requiring that their employees speak Italian. The building will furthermore inherently exhibit a religious presence due to its ornate crosses and church altars. Moreover, the building exemplifies both the old and the new in society, through its religious and wealthy history, which is connected to the Catholic Church’s overarching financial, spiritual and educational success. Today, it continues to support the Aged-Italians who lived in the area, and garners widespread appeal to prospective dwellers due to its grand and historical roots.

Figure 6: Photograph taken by myself, September, 2016.
Bibliography:

Pictures:

Figure 1: A March 6, 1950 photograph by Lyle Fowler. Sourced from Trove.

Figure 2: A Glass Negative, circa. 1928-1930 (rear view of convent) by Charles Daniel Pratt. Sourced from Trove.

Figure 3: Photograph taken by myself, September, 2016.

Figure 4: Lower Plenty Road in Rosanna, an adjacent road circa. 1914. Sourced from the Yarra Plenty Regional Library and digitally on Trove.


Figure 6: Photograph taken by myself, September, 2016.

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