

## **Australia's first female Catholic teacher: Catherine Milling (Fitzpatrick) (1785-1861)**

*DJ Gleeson*

Rightly acknowledged as the 1818 founder of the choir of St Mary's Chapel Sydney<sup>1</sup>, Catherine Milling (1785-1861) has received less coverage for her tenacity, which included offering Catholic education to her sons and other families in Sydney in the unofficial era, i.e., before the 1820 arrival of accredited Catholic chaplains to New South Wales. This paper, which seeks to build on an earlier work by Professor Edmund Campion<sup>2</sup>, aims to position Catherine Milling in terms of her Irish heritage and achievements in the colony, despite a difficult marriage.

Born in Dublin in 1785 to John and Catherine Milling (a variant of McMillan), Catherine appears to have been well educated and worked as a schoolmistress. Her paternal ancestral line may have been Protestant, and it appears that for a period, at least, her father was a Freemason. Given Catherine son, Columbus Fitzpatrick would later write: 'My mother had been reared a strict Catholic in times of persecutions in Ireland and had imbibed all the prejudices of that time against Government schools'<sup>3</sup> it seems likely that Catherine's mother was the dominant Catholic influence, and her father was either a Catholic with masonic

---

<sup>1</sup> N. Fitzpatrick, A Family and Colonial History, *Tintean*, <https://tintean.org.au/2019/05/07/the-best-choir-in-the-anglosphere/>. This article mistakenly says Catherine was born in 1775.

<sup>2</sup> E. Campion, 'A tradition in voice: Catherine Fitzpatrick' *Great Australian Catholics* (Richmond, Victoria, David Lovell Publishing), pp: 14-16.

<sup>3</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, 'Reminiscences of Catholicism in the early Days of the colony', *Freeman's Journal*, 25 November 1865, p. 741.

membership (which the Irish Catholic Church permitted at the time) or possibly a convert to Catholicism.

In May 1806, Catherine, of Coles Lane, Dublin, married Bernard (Barney) Fitzpatrick (1783-1839) of Hamming Lane.<sup>4</sup> The couple had two sons born in Dublin: John (1808-1882) and Columbus (Cullum) (1809-1877).<sup>5</sup>

Christmas 1808 would have an anxious time. Catherine was pregnant with Cullum while Barney was in gaol. Barney a 'letter-carrier' at the Dublin General Post Office, stole some mail, cashed securities for money and then absconded from his position and family.<sup>6</sup> A £100 reward was offered for either information or his apprehension: Fitzpatrick was described as having sandy-red hair and whiskers, about five feet four inches, and squat and chubby. His abode was listed as no 3 Erne Place, Merrion Row.<sup>7</sup> On 23 December, after a tip-off, possibly from a woman who had a connection to the Fitzpatrick family, an 'active peace officer' apprehended Fitzpatrick. Barney appeared before magistrates on Christmas eve charged with embezzlement.<sup>8</sup> Fitzpatrick was sent to Newgate Prison for trial, where he was found guilty and (initially) sentenced to be executed on 25 March 1809.<sup>9</sup> This was despite a character reference from leading Protestant, Sir William Cusack Smith, a former solicitor-general and baron of the exchequer.<sup>10</sup> Smith's involvement suggests either the Fitzpatrick or the Milling family had middle class connections. Five days before the scheduled execution however,

---

<sup>4</sup> Cited in *Hibernian Magazine*, 1813.

<sup>5</sup> *The Goulburn Herald and Chronicle*, 10 November 1877, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Freeman's Journal* [Ireland], 15 December 1808, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> *Dublin Journal*, 22 December 1808, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 28 December 1808, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Freeman's Journal* [Ireland], 7 March 1809, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.libraryireland.com/biography/SirWilliamCusackSmith.php>

Fitzgerald's fate was 'suspended', and he was commuted to life transportation.<sup>11</sup>

His wife, Catherine, with their two young sons, displayed devotion and courage to accompany her husband on the over-crowded convict ship, *Providence*, which arrived in Sydney in mid-1811.<sup>12</sup> It was a difficult voyage with six convicts dying on route and Catherine may have suffered the humiliation of her husband receiving 50 lashes, after he argued with authorities.

In the colony, a third son, Ambrose Fitzpatrick (1814-1904)<sup>13</sup> was born at Windsor. A tenacious Catherine was not satisfied with rural life at Sackville Reach and moved her family to Parramatta, where her last son, Michael (1816-1881) was born. Indicative of Catholic loyalties she remained concerned her sons would be forced to attend Protestant schools and therefore she removed the family to Sussex Street, Sydney, where she opened a small school in ca 1817, nearby to the homes of two prominent Catholic emancipists, James Dempsey and William Davis. Columbus Fitzpatrick says his determined mother took:

... any and all risks to keep her children from schools where their Faith might be tampered, with, and as there were none but Protestant schools in those days, she was under the necessity of keeping us at home and teaching us herself...<sup>14</sup>

Catherine, who has the distinction of being the first female Catholic teacher in Australia, received solace from the unauthorised arrival of Fr Jeremiah O'Flynn. It is possible that it was her school that Michael Hayes referred to in correspondence about O'Flynn to his brother in

---

<sup>11</sup> *Freeman's Journal* [Ireland], 23 March 1809, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Sydney Gazette*, 6 July 1811, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Freeman's Journal* [Australia] 30 April 1904, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, *op. cit.*

Rome in 1818.<sup>15</sup>

In 1817 Bernard petitioned for mitigation of his life sentence.<sup>16</sup> A year later he received a Conditional Pardon. Bernard gained employment with the police, and despite some issues<sup>17</sup>, remained there for nine years, after which he was appointed chief bailiff and cryer in the Court of Requests' Office.<sup>18</sup>

The Fitzpatrick-Milling marriage resembled many a colonial relationship: difficult periods followed by long separation. Unlike the relationships of contemporary prominent Catholics, such as James Meehan, deputy surveyor general, and William Davis, the hero of Church Hill, who publicly aired unhappiness through the *Sydney Gazette*, Catherine remained dignified. Nor did Catherine jump into a new relationship as so many did in those fluid early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Catherine seemed to put her considerable energy and talents into educating her sons and her various work for the church – especially music and teaching.

In 1838, after 22 years public service, Bernard retired 'to enjoy a green old age in quiet and retirement'.<sup>20</sup> He moved to be with his eldest son<sup>21</sup> in south-west Sydney. Life became more difficult for Catherine and her sons when Barney in 1839 committed suicide. He was buried, as per church custom, in an unconsecrated grave at Campbelltown's St John's Catholic cemetery.<sup>22</sup>

Catherine, who outlived Bernard by more than two decades, was recorded as a schoolteacher

---

<sup>15</sup> Hayes letters, A 3586, MSS, Mitchell Library, NSW.

<sup>16</sup> Fitzpatrick, Petition for mitigation of sentence, Fiche 3177; 4/1851 p.108, SRNSW.

<sup>17</sup> *Sydney Gazette*, 3 June 1820, p.1.

<sup>18</sup> *Sydney Monitor*, 6 October 1830, p.2.

<sup>19</sup> DJ Gleeson [forthcoming] 'Catholic marriage in early colonial New South Wales'.

<sup>20</sup> *Sydney Monitor*, 8 August 1838, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> John Fitzpatrick married into one of Parramatta's oldest Catholic families: his wife Alice, being the daughter of John lac(e)y at whose home Mass was probably first said in Parramatta.

<sup>22</sup> *Campbelltown Burial Register*.

until her final years.<sup>23</sup> Whatever transpired during her marriage, Catherine's death notice read: 'Fitzpatrick – On the 31<sup>st</sup> ultimo [July 1861], at her residence Union-Street, Catherine, relict of the late Mr Bernard Fitzpatrick, aged 76 years'.<sup>24</sup> Catherine was initially buried at the (former) Devonshire Street Cemetery. In 1901 her remains were reburied at the Field of Mars Cemetery with her son, Ambrose and his wife, Julia (Maher).

Her sons demonstrated independence of thought in their respective careers—a testament to Catherine's determination that Catholic education and values were central to life. Had she been alive, Catherine Milling would surely had stood up to the disgraceful clerical decision to refuse to hear Michael's Fitzpatrick's confession in the weeks before his death<sup>25</sup> and then a further (initial) refusal of a Catholic burial service funeral for this astute and thoughtful member of the NSW Parliament.<sup>26</sup>

The noted historian Errol Lea-Scarlett fittingly concluded that 'there is ample evidence of Catherine's strength of character, while the devotion of her sons testified to her qualities as a mother'<sup>27</sup>. Catherine Milling was a gifted Irish Catholic woman of early colonial Australia.

&&&

---

<sup>23</sup> Census returns, e.g 1841.

<sup>24</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 1861, p.1.

<sup>25</sup> *Evening News*, 15 December 1881, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Freeman's Journal* 17 December 1881, p. 13. *Kiama Independent*, 20 December 1881, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> EJ Lea-Scarlett, 'The Fitzpatrick Family', *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, v. 2, pt. 1, 1966.