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A Catholic nunnery in a thoroughly Protestant neighbourhood



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Images:

Cover: Aerial shot of Auchenflower and Toowong, Brisbane, c1916 to 1922 (University of Queensland Library; [Henry William Mobsby Collection, UQFL181](#); Copyright expired). Auchenflower House and its associated outbuildings (stables etc.) is the hilltop structure above Ridley Street, which runs from the right-hand margin across to Auchenflower Station.

Sketch of Auchenflower House, Brisbane, 1891 (John Oxley Library, [State Library of Queensland](#), Photographic print : black & white, August 1891, Negative number: 19273; Out of copyright).

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At this point, matters concerning memory come into play because I'm working from a minimal set of possibly unreliable assumptions.

When I dug into *Tyneside's* history, I found that the Blakeys had high church Anglican connections. I'm unsure about the neighbours. However, a snippet of conversation from my family's only return visit to Tyneside suggests an entirely Protestant enclave.

When we returned to Ridley Street at the end of 1965, we'd been away just under two and a half years. I don't recall which of two apparent marvels produced greater astonishment: I had grown, ¹ and *up there in Townsville, Alan and Val* ² were *positively surrounded by Romans*.

I found this more than passing strange. Less than forty metres from where we were sitting, a battleship grey metal wall shielded a Catholic bastion overlooking the neighbours' properties. Forty-something years later, people would refer to someone ignoring *the elephant in the room*. The wall around the *Carmelite monastery* would undoubtedly qualify.

Looking back on it, I suspect my brother and I were more familiar with what lay inside the forbidding enclosure than any of the neighbours. From time to time, we would walk around to the entrance on Burt Street, step inside, ring the bell and deliver a polite request for footballs or cricket balls that had found their way over the fence.

However, as far as I can recall, no one had ever intimated that the building inside the enclosure had once been one of Brisbane's social hubs.

Another forty years would pass before I stumbled onto a reference to Auchenflower House while we were sorting out an itinerary for a trip from the Gold Coast to Stanthorpe. [Albert River Wines](#) was more or less along the way. An earlier incarnation of their website included the intriguing detail that the ballroom and billiard room from Auchenflower House had ended up there after a stint as the centrepiece of the Early Street Historical Village at Norman Park.

A brief stop at the winery revealed a structure I didn't quite recall ³ and an inclination to dig a little further.

That inclination would always be part of my **Recollection, Reflection and Reminiscence** when I started writing **About the North**. However, the results go slightly

¹ Really? Were they expecting me to shrink?

² My parents.

³ That's hardly surprising. My brother and I encountered a small section of an extensive combination of structures on our quests for missing footballs and cricket balls.

further than expected in a reflective reminiscence because the investigation revealed links to significant strands in Australia's history.

Sir Thomas Mcllwraith was one. The man behind Queensland's annexation of New Guinea's business interests in The North included Inkerman station; Ayr is named after his home county in Scotland.

Mcllwraith bought the thirteen-acre (five-hectare) hilltop property on the river side of Milton Road from an ironmonger named John Ward for £2700 on 30 June 1880. Ward had built "one of the most substantially built and elegantly finished residences in or out of Brisbane". The new owner redesigned and extended the existing structure, adding stables, a coach house and other features. He named his semi-rural retreat after the Mcllwraith family estate in Ayrshire.



When Mcllwraith resigned as premier in late October 1893, his treasurer, [Sir Hugh Muir Nelson](#), succeeded him and moved into Auchenflower House after Mcllwraith left for England in January 1895. However, Nelson did not own the property. Mcllwraith had signed it over to his wife; she passed it on to her brother-in-law, [Sir Arthur Palmer](#).

After Palmer died in 1898, his son, Carl, inherited the property, which may have served as the headquarters of a preparatory school associated with the Church of England Grammar School ⁴ before another Queensland premier, Thomas John Ryan, bought it in 1918.

⁴ Firmin Mackinnon, *Auchenflower House Knew Many Secrets*, **Courier Mail**, 5 April 1947 ([Trove](#)) page 2. Other sources give Chelmer as the preparatory school's location before amalgamation with the Church of England Grammar School.

Around this point, the facts seem straightforward, but motivations are muddy. Ryan bought the house, switched from State to Federal politics and seemed destined for the Federal leadership when he set out to campaign for the Labor candidate in the by-election for the Federal seat of Maranoa. He died of pneumonia at Barcaldine on 1 August 1921.

However, that straightforward statement of seemingly unremarkable facts leaves out Ryan's role in the two Conscription referenda during World War I and the establishment of state enterprises in Queensland after Labor won the 1915 election.⁵

It seems Ryan and his family lived in Brisbane's central business district, possibly in George Street, during World War I and the turmoil associated with the conscription referenda. They may well have wanted to find somewhere slightly quieter.

In any case, if and when Ryan switched to federal politics, there was no guarantee he would live within his electorate. Throughout his state parliamentary career, he represented the western Queensland electorate of Barcoo. He entered federal parliament as the member for West Sydney.

An article in Barcaldine's **Western Champion** notes that the Ryan family shared the premises with "Mr. Hunter, the man who just missed becoming governor of Queensland", and their families lived in it quite comfortably.⁶

We'll probably never know how Auchenflower House's new owner got on with his predominantly Protestant neighbours. Things might have been more than merely *interesting* despite Ryan's reputed affability.

The basic details are clear. The Ryans bought the property in 1918 and travelled to England the following year. While there, Ryan almost became another victim of the influenza epidemic; the illness weakened him. The hectic lifestyle he returned to effectively killed him.

After Ryan's death, the house was leased "to several persons, including the manager of a theatrical company,"⁷ If a delegation of parents whose children attended the newly established Auchenflower Infants School had their way. In that case, Auchenflower House might have become Auchenflower State School.⁸

⁵ Given a subject that warrants a much more thorough investigation, much of what follows is hypothetical, based on limited research and a few passing references. I hope to make substantial revisions in the future.

⁶ **Western Champion** (Barcaldine) 11 December 1926 ([Trove](#)). Mr Hunter was "John Hunter who attended to many of the ministerial details of the Premier's Department; this allowed Ryanto to concentrate on supervising overall government legislation and political tactics" (W. Ross Johnston and D. J. Murphy, *Thomas Joseph (Tom) Ryan (1876-1921)*, **Australian Dictionary of Biography**), during the wartime political turmoil. See D. J. Murphy and *John McEwan Hunter (1863-1940)* in the **Australian Dictionary of Biography** for biographical details.

⁷ Firmin Mackinnon, *Auchenflower House Knew Many Secrets*, **Courier Mail**, 5 April 1947 ([Trove](#)) page 2.

⁸ See, for instance, *School Needed. Successful Fete at Auchenflower*, **Daily Standard** 10 November 1924 ([Trove](#)) page 7; *Auchenflower Infants' State School*, **Brisbane Courier** 4 February 1925 ([Trove](#)) page 6.

However, those proposals fell through despite the Minister for Education's favourable response ⁹ and Ryan's widow's wish that Auchenflower House should be used for *scholastic or community purposes*.

Perhaps the asking price was too high; maybe the Catholic Church made a better offer. Brisbane archbishop James Duhig reputedly had an eye for prime hilltop real estate. ¹⁰

As far as I can recall, the nearest Catholic ecclesiastical and educational institutions were in Toowong, Bardon or Petrie Terrace. ¹¹

Still, the bitterly contested Conscription referenda exacerbated long-standing sectarian divisions in Australian society. Mrs Ryan had to deal with her husband's voluminous mail. One suspects she would have encountered much that was spiteful, inflammatory or derogatory. She may not have shared her husband's generosity of spirit.

Our Protestant neighbours might have acted as if that steel-grey barrier behind our place wasn't there; some distinguished Catholic dignitaries thought it would be transparent. Opening a fete in the grounds at the end of May 1927, Monsignor Byrne ¹²suggested that *the sweetness and charity which characterised the lives of the sisters would become manifest in many ways ... Essentially their work was of a secluded nature, but the beneficial influence of it would be felt*.

It seems the wall was not in place at that point since "the grounds presented a gay appearance on Friday evening and Saturday afternoon and evening with gaily decked stalls, numerous ropes of coloured electric lights, huge flags, and throngs of gaily dressed people who were there to contribute to the Carmelite Monastery and Chapel Building Fund." ¹³

⁹ He "agreed that it was essential that the school should be built to meet the demands of the district, but the question depended on the price asked for Auchenflower House ... he would recommend the erection of the school in that vicinity, and would submit the matter to the Works Department." (**The Telegraph** (Brisbane) 23 February 1925 ([Trove](#): A New School. Auchenflower's Request. Minister's promise), page 5; **Daily Standard** (Brisbane) 24 February 1925 ([Trove](#)) page 2

¹⁰ Archbishop Duhig's sixty years in office saw the Church acquire much of Brisbane's high ground while the Archbishop set about advancing his largely Irish-descended flock through the ranks of Queensland's professions and public service. The Micks had colonised certain departments of state, most famously justice, but some power circles were closed to them. Catholic barristers tended to have a criminal practice, and many commercial chambers were Anglican and Presbyterian redoubts. Mark Bahnisch, **Queensland: Everything You Ever Wanted To Know But Were Afraid To Ask**. Loc. 883.

¹¹ "... the residents of Auchenflower in particular ... will have added opportunities of hearing Holy Mass, which will be said daily at the Convent Chapel, and the presence of the devoted Carmelite Sisters will inspire Catholic hearts and minds to accomplish greater things for the glory of God, the advancement of religion and culture, and the general welfare." (**The Catholic Advocate** (Brisbane), 18 November 1926 ([Trove](#)) page 42.

¹² Archbishop Duhig had other commitments in Charleville.

¹³ *Crowning Effort Carmelite Convent Fete At Auchenflower*, **Sunday Mail** (Brisbane) 29 May 1927 ([Trove](#)); "Bettina", *Carmelite Monastery Fund. Fete At Auchenflower House*, **The Catholic Advocate** (Brisbane), 2 June 1927 ([Trove](#)); *Auchenflower House, Brisbane Carmelite Convent Fete*. **The Catholic Press** (Sydney) 9 June 1927 ([Trove](#)).

After a final fundraiser ¹⁴ *alterations ... preparatory to the entry of the Carmelite Nuns* began immediately, and by the end of the month everything was done and dusted.

Thirty-something years down the track, I don't think anyone on our side of the fence gave any thought to whatever happened over there. It seems to have been a case of *east is east, and west is west*. Things might have been different if we'd lived elsewhere before we moved North. ¹⁵

So, as I recall it, we blithely went about our own business; Catholic Brisbane went about theirs. Along the way, the young picked up subtle indications about what constituted acceptable behaviour ¹⁶ or implied them from the behaviour of those around them.

Perhaps that's why a particular incident at the Haig Road/Birdwood Terrace end of Rathdonnell Street stuck in my mind.

I don't recall much about the two years I spent at Auchenflower Infants' School or why my parents decided to send me to Milton rather than Toowong State School. However, I do remember sitting next to Frank Norris, who didn't make the move to Milton.

When I spotted a familiar face close to that intersection, I might not have greeted it as a long-lost brother. Still, I recall expressing a sentiment like *Long time no see. Good to see you*. The response was a decidedly frosty response along the lines of *I've been told that Catholics shouldn't mix with people of other origins*.

¹⁴ A jazz evening on Friday, 8 July 1927 (**Daily Standard** (Brisbane), Wed. 6 July 1927 page 2 ([Trove](#)) When Archbishop Duhig officially opened the convent on Sunday 31 July. Toowong's parish priest, Father J. R. Murphy S.J., noted that the building had cost the Church £5500, with another £300 spent on *alterations and improvements*. Toowong's parishioners had raised about £2200 *against this sum*, and contributions received at the opening amounted to £500. (*Neglect Of God. Dr. Duhig's Warning. Carmelite Monastery Opened. Brisbane Courier* 1 August 1927 ([Trove](#)))

¹⁵ Before marriage, my parents boarded with (presumably Protestant) families on Brisbane's north side towards Stafford and Kedron. But for their *major stroke of luck*, I suspect we would have ended up over that way.

¹⁶ Despite a decidedly working-class background, Dad favoured the conservative side of politics, but we still took the tram into Brisbane's CBD to watch the Labour Day procession. As the Labor dignitaries in the procession's vanguard approached us along Queen Street, I joined in the general applause around me. A *sotto voce* admonition indicated that this was not appropriate. However, polite applause was deemed appropriate as the red-clad printers' devils approached.