

Fr Nolan SJ, Founder of the Immaculate Conception Church, Hawthorn

Edward Nolan was born in Dublin on 10th May 1826. At an early age he attended college in Dublin with the intention of studying for the priesthood. He made his novitiate at Angers (France), took his degrees of theology at Louvain (Belgium), and entered the Society of Jesus on September 20th 1850.

After long and active service in teaching at different colleges in Ireland, he arrived in Melbourne in 1866, where he was assigned to teach at St. Patrick's College, East Melbourne. On weekends he ministered to the people of Hawthorn. Here he came in contact with the redoubtable Michael Lynch who was determined to have a proper church built in Hawthorn and he had friends with wealth. In Fr Nolan he found someone who would extract it from them. With the land already donated by Mr. Lynch, fundraising plans to build a church were swung into action. Subscriptions flowed in, not only from the enthusiastic and generous Hawthorn Catholics, estimated at only 60 households at the time, but from non Catholics and from those outside the area. On this basis, the farsighted Fr Nolan planned a church to seat 1200.

Fr Nolan had little taste for set sermons in big churches, but had the quiet knack of addressing small groups in any situation. He had considerable knowledge of botany and some ability at medicine. Of engaging address, he had the knack of accommodating himself to all classes, and was equally at home in the mia-mia of the fossicker and the mansion of the squatter. He rode a horse called "Tobin", which carried him everywhere. "Tobin" had a peculiar amble, which was a well-known warning to Catholics who were not what they ought to be. Father Nolan was a good religious man but it was his zeal, gentle piety and simplicity that won over the people of Hawthorn.

In 1871-72 Fr Nolan was sent on a begging mission to raise money for the new Xavier College to be built in Kew. He toured eastern Australia and even New Zealand, raising substantial funds and persuading many families to commit their sons to the new college. After 6 years as the first Rector at Xavier, and a short time in Sydney, he returned to Hawthorn as Procurator. Strange to say, he was never Superior of the Hawthorn community.

Even when in his declining years, he collected enough money to purchase a peal of bells to ring out across Hawthorn. When he died on January 11th 1893, from a 'disease of the heart' the bluestone church of the Immaculate Conception was as fitting a memorial as anyone could wish. Fr Nolan is recognized as the founder of the church, with an inscription in Latin on the front of the altar.

