

## From the Diary of Bishop John Francis Norton – 1925

### Inscription....

*Diary kept for my dearest Mother  
on the P. & O Steamer "Mongolia"  
by John F. Norton  
With the Australian National  
Pilgrimage to Rome & Lourdes 1925.*

9th April, 1925

When I woke this morning, I knew at once that we had berthed in Hobart, for the throbbing of the ship's engines had ceased and the rolling of the vessel. In their place we could hear the rattling of the chains and the cries of the crew, preparing the loading machinery for the work of the day. Presently, there was the bark of a dog, then the whistle of a railway train - Welcome sounds of land were heard after nearly two days at sea. As soon as I got on deck, my eyes were feasted with the beautiful sight that met my gaze. We were moored to the Ocean Wharf, right in the middle of the city of Hobart, and it lay all along the shores of the Derwent, and it extended backwards to the foot-hills of Mount Wellington, which is several thousand feet high, and formed a fitting and majestic background to so beautiful a scene. Away to the North and South the mighty river extended its reaches, seeming more like a succession of great lakes, than a single river. Away beyond it on all sides, there were hills and other hills, so far off some of them seemed to be lost on the horizon.



Many a good Irish man has gazed on this scene of beauty for the first time, in far different circumstances from that in which it first came into my view. It is hard to believe that this earthly paradise should have been chosen by the British Govt as the scene of its most brutal penal settlement. Yet all during the early half of the last century all the scum of the English cities, as well as all those unfortunates who were the victims of the savage penal system that gave monstrous punishments for what were really trivial offences were all herded together, first in vile prison hulks, and then dumped on this fair spot, to be degraded further by the floggings and other brutalities that marked the convict settlement. The brutes from the English streets, the murderers and highway robbers, were in the same chain gang as poor unfortunates brought up in decent homes, but caught by the law in some petty theft and condemned to this life of torture. In an old Hobart paper in the Museum, dated 1837, I read a list of the sentences at an Assizes – so and so - stealing a bottle of value 2d - seven years penal servitude. Into this living hell numbers of Irishmen were cast, first those implicated in the '98 Rebellion, then that of Emmet, in a never ending stream, till the men of '48. Hence, I could not help thinking when I first saw the beautiful surroundings of Hobart seen from the Derwent, how different must have been the feelings of all that long procession of Irishmen, who after a weary three or four months voyage in a foul convict ship, chained away in a smothering

rat-hole of a cell, devoid of light and air, at last came to anchor in the middle of this earthly Eden, and saw what I saw. Little time indeed would their brutal wardens give them for sight-seeing. They would be tumbled into boats dragging one and other by the manacles that bound them together, ashore to work in prison gangs, under the constant lash of the overseers' whip. For the slightest offence, real or imaginary, they received a number of strokes of the cat o' nine tails, and this was the punishment meted out to those, who in the early part of the century, refused to attend the Church of England services.

Into such scenes as these came the first Tasmanian priest - Father Connolly. For fourteen or fifteen years his only congregation were convicts, with handcuffs and leg irons. One of his main occupations was going from one place to another to attend executions, which often occurred with five or six men at a time. For it can easily be understood that if the taking of a bottle valued at 2d brought a penalty of seven years of penal servitude, the death penalty itself was in frequent use for what were deemed capital crimes. Later on, when Archbishop Ullathorne came and did not find everything working with the precision of the Benedictine Monastery, he found fault with poor Fr Connolly for many things, instead of thanking God that a man had been found who was brave enough to live in the middle of such a scene of evil surrounds as in the horror of a nightmare. However, poor old priest, worn out with labours, now reaps, let us hope, the reward of the just, and his frail clay rests before Our Lady's Altar, in St Mary's Cathedral, Hobart, waiting the Resurrection morn.