All For God’s People

100 Years
Dominican Sisters
King William’s Town

Convent of the Sacred Heart, King William’s Town.
(from an original etching by Sister M Digna Guenthner, O.P.)

1877 – 1977
All For God’s People

What they did for God’s people

“will be borne on the night wind of the past
Through all our history to the last…”

Compiled by

Sister Mariette Gouws, O.P.

chiefly from

the writings of Reverend Sisters
  M. Eleonora Petitpierre
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  and other archivists

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Contents

Prologue  Early Dominican Mission in Africa  Convent of St Ursula
Chapter 1  Catholicism at the Cape in the early 19th Century
Chapter 2  Rising to the Challenge
Chapter 3  Harbingers of the Good News (‘King’ Convent)
Chapter 4  The Seventh Frontier War
Chapter 5  Growth of the Community
Chapter 6  Early Expansion (East London)
Chapter 7  Extended Activities (Motherhouse)
Chapter 8  To the Garden Province (Natal)
Chapter 9  Northward Ho! (Potchefstroom)
Chapter 10  On the Banks of the Schoomspruit (Klerksdorp)
Chapter 11  An Epic of Nursing (Rhodesia)
   A. Helping to found a Nation
   B. A Promise to keep –
   C. With the Ship of the Veld
   D. By Mule Coach to Rhodesia
   E. Their Baptism by Fire
Chapter 12  A Castle on a Hill (Izeli)
Chapter 13  Matushka (Mother Mauritia Tiefenboeck)
Chapter 14  A Power House (Mater Infirorum Convent)
Chapter 15  The Gem of the Karroo (Graaff Reinet)
Chapter 16  A Lodestar to Many (Maris Stella)
Chapter 17  The Tenth Daughter-House (Fort Beaufort)
Chapter 18  A New Buttress (Queenstown)
Chapter 19  A Citadel of Prayer (Schlehdorf)
   Gaildorf
   Petersberg
   Holdorf
   Schorndorf
   Johanneskolleg
   Cologne
   Riehen
Chapter 20  Crown of the Midlands (Cradock)
Chapter 21  More precious than Gold (Belgravia)
Chapter 22  Falling petals (Mother Euphemia Koffler)
   A True Gem (Sr Gertrude Walter)
   Champion of the Faith (Monsignor Fagan)
Chapter 23  A Mottled Sky
   Influenza
   Education
   Masters General
   FEDOSA
   Lay-sisters
   Musicians
   Golden Jubilee, New Constitutions
   Eucharistic Congress
   Prioresses General
Chapter 24  A Prayer is heard (Witbank)
Chapter 25  On the Great North Road Again (Potgietersrus)
Chapter 26  Strong in Faith (Ermelo)
Chapter 27  The Promised Land of Tomorrow (Stutterheim)
Chapter 28  The Spirit Blows where It will (Springs)
   Brakpan
   Nigel
Chapter 29  She Lights a Candle (Mother Eleonora Petitpierre)
Chapter 30  Named for a Dominican Pontiff (Cambridge, East London)
Chapter 31  A Hand to Rock the Cradle (Hinckley, England)
   Stoke Golding
   Nuneaton
Chapter 32  A Vessel of Election (Mother Jacoba Zinn)
Chapter 33  Silence Around Me (St Vincent School for the Deaf)
Chapter 34  Life-long Care (San Salvador)
Chapter 35  The Last of a Gallant Band (Mother Clare Huber)
   Mother Reginald Fischer
Chapter 36  A House of Providence (Venlo)
Chapter 37 “... Go and do likewise.” (Nursing revived)
St Catherine’s Nursing Home (Queenstown)
Chapter 38 A Jewel in the Mountains (Umlamli Mission Hospital Aliwal North)
Chapter 39 Malon Miryam (Mater Dei Nursing Home East London)
Chapter 40 An Enterprise for Good (Glen Grey Mission Hospital, Lady Frere, Queenstown)
Chapter 41 A Pearl among Women (Mother Augustine Geisel)
Chapter 42 Far and Near Yesterdays
Marydale Nursing Home (King William’s Town)
Red Light over Loreto (Hostel at ‘King’ Convent)
K.C.B.U. and the Silver Star (Past Pupils)
Marian Year
A New Generalate (Lourdes Convent, Parktown)
Hillcrescent School (King William’s Town)
St Anne’s (East London)
Keiskammahoek (Amatola Mountains)
Rustenburg
Zeerust
Peddie
Groblerdsdal
Chapter 43 Called to the Emerald Isle
Upton
Bandon
Tralee
Chapter 44 A Spring Idyll (St Mary’s, Springs)
Chapter 45 Something Attempted (Welkom)
Part 2 – Missionary Endeavour
i. Holy Family Mission, Keilands
ii. Woodlands Mission
iii. St Joseph School, King William’s Town
iv. St Francis Xavier Convent, East London
v. Holy Rosary Convent, Cradock
vi. St Louis Bertrand Mission, Potchefstroom
vii. M’Phatlele Clinic (Molepo)
viii. Subiaco Mission
ix. St Theresa Mission, Queenstown
x. St Joseph Mission, Fort Beaufort
xi. Vleeschfontein Mission
xii. Indwe Mission
xiii. Noodshulp (Magoebaskloof)
xiv. St Scholastica Mission (Setali)
xv. Umhlanga Mission
xvi. St Peter Claver Mission, East London
xvii. Qoqodala Mission
xviii. Lumko Mission
xix. Pimville Mission
xx. Klipfontein Convent
   a. Power Park (St Martin’s Convent
   b. Chinese School, Klipfontein
xxi. Evaton, St Francis Xavier Convent
xxii. St Mary’s Clinic, Stutterheim
xxiii. Payneville and Kwa Thema Convents
xxiv. St John’s Convent, Middelburg, Cape
xxv. Zigudu Mission
xxvi. St Patrick’s School, King William’s Town
xxvii. St Thomas’ College, Village Main
xxviii. Berejeena Mission
xxix. Matibi Mission
xxx. Marapyane Mission
xxxi. Ramanchaane Mission
   a. Bolivia - Forestal
xxxii. Ecuador – Canelos
Conclusion
Vatican II
Renewal Conference
In Memoriam
To the following my gratitude is warmly expressed:

His Grace
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Right Reverend Bishop J.P. Murphy, D.D., of Port Elizabeth, gave permission to gather information from the Diocesan Archives;

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Sister Mariette Gouws, O.P.
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I think it was Monsignor Kolbe, who, speaking of Bishop Simon and his work in Namaqualand, said: “He made the desert blossom as the rose.” Surely something similar might well be said of the King Sisters who are celebrating the Centenary of their arrival in South Africa. They, it is true, did not labour in a desert. The Border area where they commenced their work was then as it is now, as beautiful as any other part of Southern Africa. However, spiritually it was almost a desert. Few and far between were the Mass Centres and few Churches, Schools or Mission Stations had been opened.

I remember Bishop MacSherry saying on a rail journey from Port Elizabeth to the Transvaal in those days he had passed only eight places where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved. With the coming of the Sisters – first the Assumption and Irish Sisters – and then the King Dominicans, schools, hospital clinics and mission stations were opened and the Gospel proclaimed to the Blacks and the few White Catholics in the Cape.

It is highly desirable that we should know more about the Pioneer Priests and Nuns and their labours, not only in the Cape but throughout Southern Africa. This book is a tale of zeal for souls, of love of God and the neighbour, of heroic courage and trust in the Providence of God. It will be an inspiration to the Missionaries of today when they read of the achievements of the Pioneer Sisters in the service of God and the Church. It should stir up a desire in the hearts of South African youth to carry on the good work for souls that has been laid on such solid foundations.

Thanks to the zeal and courage of the Pioneer King Dominican Sisters their work has spread to the Transvaal, Rhodesia and even to South America and has mothered other Congregations of Dominican Sisters at Oakford, Newcastle and Rhodesia. Nor must we forget houses in Europe especially Schlehdorf that trained the missionaries and contributed so generously to the upkeep of the mission.
Tribute must also be paid to the many Catholic parents who gave their daughters to the service of God without hope of ever seeing them again in this world. On the occasion of the Centenary we pray God to bless abundantly all those who are carrying on the good work. May they increase in numbers and still more in perfection. May God grant eternal rest to all those “who have borne the burden of the day and the heat” building up the Church in Southern Africa.

+ Hugh Boyle
Former Bishop of Johannesburg.
Introduction

It is common knowledge that most people do not read prefaces, and those who do, read them in a cursory manner; nevertheless these few sentences are intended to clarify the meaning and purpose of this book.

An attempt has been made to give an account of that institution popularly called “the KING Dominicans” on the occasion of its centenary, as a humble, heartfelt tribute. That there should be a record of the works of an Institute well known in several countries will be conceded by all. That I should be the chronicler may not be so evident. But the work was undertaken solely at the request of the person most entitled to make it, our Prioress General. However unequal to the task I knew myself to be, I felt that the prospect of inadequacy is not a justification for remaining silent.

The narrative is written expressly for the members of the Sisterhood and does not purport to be a history of the Congregation, but comprises a series of vignettes, each of which contains some fascinating historical material which should appeal to the reader. I, therefore, cherish the modest hope that it may be readable by my religious family.

Sister Mariette Gouws, O.P.
Let us now praise illustrious persons,
our predecessors in their successive generations.
The Lord has done great things by them
through His mighty power from the beginning…
Some of them left a name behind them,
so that their praises are still sung…
whose good works should not be forgotten.

(From Ecclesiasticus)

To obtain proper perspective of the events which have gone to build up the Dominican Congregation of King William’s Town, South Africa, it is necessary to take a look at the past. Therefore, no apology is offered for the brief review of history or of the Institute’s origins.

Part 1
PROLOGUE
Early Dominican Missions in Africa

Before telling the story of how the Dominican Sisters came to King William’s Town and the consequence of that coming for the growing Catholic Church in South Africa, it may be well to outline briefly some of the earliest mission work of the Order of Preachers on the African continent.

The call to Africa came early in the Order’s history. Saint Dominic de Guzman, born in 1770 at Calaruega, Spain, of illustrious family, he was at first an Augustinian Canon Regular, and later worked as a missionary among the Albegensians in Southern France. At Prouille he founded a convent whose first nuns were converts from this heresy. Later some young men joined him and there followed the foundation of his Order of Preachers. His biographers tell us that he was a man of irresistible charm, great compassion and wonderful holiness. He taught his followers to hand on to others the fruits of their contemplation. He died in 1221, and is buried at Bologna.

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2 A society devoted to the rescue and redemption of Christians taken captive as slaves by the Moors, 13th century.
The blight of Islam, extending rapidly over Northern Africa, caused the disappearance of almost every trace of the Christian religion in those regions by the close of the 16th century. But before that period, by God’s law of compensation, newer and wider fields had been opened, and the closing decades of the 15th century gave fresh impulse to Dominican missionary enterprise in Africa.

In response to an appeal made by the King of the Congo territory to Diego Cam, a large party of Dominican Friars, with workmen and agriculturists, arrived at the mouth of the river. After baptizing the King’s Uncle, who governed the district, they built a church in honour of the Blessed Trinity, and then proceeded to the royal headquarters. The King and his consort were baptized and large numbers of the people soon followed their example. A grandson of the King, educated in Portugal, was ordained Bishop, but died before reaching his native land. In 1520 missionaries of other Orders reinforced the Dominicans, and continued with them to work for the firmer establishment of the Faith in these parts of the continent. Unfortunately their labours did not continue to bring forth the fruit the mission had first promised. The vices of many Portuguese traders brought religion into disrepute. Political, social and religious disturbances in Europe exercised a paralysing effect on the missions, which gradually declined in the West. The Belgian Province of the Order of Preachers revived these missions in 194. The most flourishing centres of Christianity in Africa were those in the East, especially in the Zambezi region. At the end of 1541, St Francis Xavier passed seven months of enforced waiting at Mocambique for the change of the monsoon. An iron cross on a marble pedestal marks a spot on the shore, where tradition says the Saint spent many hours pouring out his burning supplications to God, to send labourers into that part of His vineyard.

In 1560 Father Gonzalo de Silveira, S.J., and two companions came to be the pioneer missionaries of Southern Africa. On 15th March 1561, Father Gonzalo was strangled in his hut, and the apostolate which had promised so well came to an untimely end. But the blood of the proto-martyr of Southern Africa was not shed in vain. In 1565, the King of Portugal made a gift to the Dominicans of the Church of St James at Tete. In 1569 a number of Jesuits and twenty Friars Preachers accompanied an expedition under Francesco Barreto for the conquest of the gold mines of Africa. The expedition failed in its first object, but was the means, under Providence, of opening up the interior to missionaries. The first organised attempt to christianize the aborigines was made in 1577 by two Dominican Friars who founded a convent at Mocambique, dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary.

This house became a place of shelter and recuperation for religious of all Orders, passing to the missions in India. It was the residence of the Bishops of Mocambique, who were nearly all Dominicans up to 1830. Friar John of the Saints, one of the best known missionaries in these parts, computed from registers that 36000 Natives had been baptized by the Dominicans before 1593. This priest was the author of a book “L’Ethiopia Oriental”, which was long the chief authority on East African geography and ethnography. It was printed at the Convent of Evora in 1609. At Sen, which to a Dominican mind naturally recalled Siena, the first church and mission were dedicated to Saint Catherine. The largest convent of the Order in these regions was afterwards built there, the conventual church being dedicated to the patriarch, St Dominic. From this centre Dominican missionaries following in the wake of the traders, spread all over the interior. Through Portuguese Africa, and probably in parts of what was to become known as Rhodesia, there are still to be found wild lemon trees, which, according to a tradition among the Africans, are derived from those originally planted by the early Dominican missionaries.

Among the interesting African converts made by the Friars are Manura, known after his baptism as Don Fillipe, who greatly favoured the missions; his successor who, on becoming a Christian on St Dominic’s Day 1652, received the Patriarch’s name, and was called Don Domingos. His heir, who had been given

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3 Now known as Zaire
the name Michael, eventually entered the Order of Preachers, was ordained priest, and acquired the degree of Master of Theology. He was afterwards sent to Goa, where he died in 1670. Such were some of the fruits gathered for God by the Dominicans during nearly two-hundred years of missionary labours in this region of the African continent. Several of the missionaries like Father Nicholas of the Rosary, Father Louis of the Holy Spirit, and Father John of the Trinity, sealed their labours with their blood.

In 1893, the ecclesiastical authorities of Mocambique stated to the Portuguese Government that “the Fathers of the Dominican Order rendered most material help to the development of Africa, founded most houses, and administered the largest parishes, and created most of the African Missions” – The second half of the 18th century almost extinguished the last spark of the fire which had been kindled by St Dominic’s torch along the banks of the Zambesi. Instead of these many flourishing centres of Christian life, planted by the Friars, ruined churches and convents alone remain as mournful witnesses to the present time, of a glory that has departed. The laws against the Jesuits and other religious Orders led to the expulsion of the missionaries from the Portuguese colonies. On the departure of the Dominicans in 1765, five years after the banishment of the Jesuits, the native Christians rapidly degenerated. The last of a long line of Dominican Vicars of Tete, remained faithfully at his solitary post, striving singlehanded to stem the tide of barbarism and infidelity, looking in vain for the help which never came. In 1838, this lonely sentinel of the Faith laid down his arms and gave back his soul into the hands of Christ, his King and Lord.

The same year saw the arrival at the Cape of Good Hope of another of Saint Dominic’s sons, who was to hold aloft the torch of Truth at this southern extremity of Africa. A hundred-and-fifty years later, the white habit of the Dominicans and the black robe of the Jesuits were once again to become familiar sights among the Natives of the Zambesi – the white habit worn, not by the sons of Dominic but by his no less heroic daughters, sent from the Mother House at King William’s Town, to build up again with the sons of Ignatius Loyola the once flourishing Church in the Zambesi region.

The Dominicans of the “Congregation of St Catharine of Siena of King William’s Town” stem from the historic Convent of St Ursula, Augsburg, Bavaria, which at the time of its South African foundation already had several daughter houses in Germany. The Augsburg Convent was founded in 1335, at first as a Beguinage by six pious women falling themselves the “Sisters of Voluntary Poverty”. This community was affiliated to the Third Order of St Dominic in 1334. The Sisters spent their time in prayer, pious exercises, lace-making, other needle-work and nursed the sick in their homes.

5 By about the middle of the 20th century the Dominican Sisters reached the peak of some 2000, composed of various Congregations – spread from the Cape to the Zambesi.
6 Beguines flourished on the continent of Europe for some centuries. The Cistercians and Premonstratensians stopped the admission of women to their Orders. As there were many vocations, those who were not of noble birth could at best be servants in the Abbeys. Thus a priest, Lambert le Begue (d. 1177), founded this semi-religious order for women of humbler birth and means. They promised chastity and obedience to the Mistress of head of the Beguinage while they lived in the community. They could leave again and get married, if they wished. They shared their property and some were engaged in teaching or nursed the sick in their homes. At the Secularization of Church Property during the Reformation most Beguines were dissolved. Some adopted an approved Religious Rule and remained in community. Those of St Ursula’s became Dominicans under the direction of Bishop Burkhard von Ellerbach, 1394. A few Beguines are still extant in Belgium and Holland.
The Convent of Saint Ursula

In the 15th century they managed to build a modest convent and a chapel for their own use. In 1516, this humble place of worship was replaced by a magnificent chapel in Baroque style, made possible by contributions from members of nobility as well as from generous friends.

At the time of the Reformation there were those who employed every possible means to induce the nuns’ defection from the old Faith, but without success. In 1528 Pope Clement VII sent the Sisters a letter congratulating them on their faithful resistance.

It read: “… God bless you, beloved daughters in Christ, who have surpassed men in steadfastness and who are in no way behind the other nuns of your Order in your undertakings. From by heart I send my blessing to all your community…”

In 1536 the community was expelled from St Ursula’s by authority of the State under notice to leave within eight hours. They took refuge with the Franciscans at Dillingen: first as guests of those kind nuns, and then in a house put at their disposal by a benefactor. They were allowed to return to their loved home in 1548, but alas, only three of the original ten survived to see Saint Ursula’s again. On their departure from Dillingen six recruits joined them. On reaching Augsburg the community immediately resumed their former occupations.

The Thirty-Years’ War (1618-1648) also brought many hardships to this community: heavy taxes, the quartering of soldiers, starvation and deprivation of divine services and the sacraments. After 1635 at the request of their Bishop the Sisters undertook the education and religious instruction of young girls; but later they relinquished this. Their work of teaching and of visiting the sick became increasingly more difficult owing to the unrest of the times. So in 1695 they passed to a completely contemplative life with strict enclosure and the obligation of reciting the Divine Office.

Cloistered from the world and publicly engaged in no active tasks, these Sisters may be regarded with disdain in ages weak in Faith. Yet it is still true that “more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of”. For a whole century this was their peaceful mode of life until its calm was again shattered by the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1799 with its repercussions even in other countries.

In 1802 by order of the Government this community of 23 was dissolved and their property confiscated. Each nun was allowed a very small pension, and they were permitted to remain in their convent – but only so long as it might please the Government. In spite of these trials they maintained to the best of their ability their community life and the Divine Office. They lived in great mutual charity, sharing their inadequate income with those poorer than themselves.

King Louis I, of Bavaria resolved in 1828 to restore the Religious Orders of women in his realm, provided that the nuns undertook some active work useful to the State. The four surviving members of the community accepted these conditions. In the following year seven novices joined them and the Dominicans of St Ursula’s began to devote themselves with zeal to the education of youth. Their school flourished and the number of vocations increased rapidly so that they were able to assist in the restoration of other Dominican Convents in Germany. It was at this time too, that new convents were established by them at Donauwoerth, Landsberg, Woerishofen and Wettenhausen.

This latter foundation was only 12 years old when an appeal reached Augsburg from Bishop Ricards in South Africa, for a staff of nuns to assist him in his vast vicariate comprising half of the Cape Province.

The Bishop had previously applied to the Sisters of the Assumption and to the Dominicans of Cabra, Ireland, but both lacked personnel for this venture. Chevalier Max Anton Fraundorfer, K.S.G., a merchant

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7 The beautiful chapel and the old convent were completely destroyed during World War II.
of Port Elizabeth, South Africa, visited his home town Augsburg in 1877, commissioned by Bishop Ricards to ask the Prioress of St Ursula’s for Sisters to staff his new convent at King William’s Town. The nuns of Augsburg already had a teaching tradition of several centuries. Mr Fraundorfer laid Bishop Ricards’ request before Mother Hyacinth Schippert and her community of 3rd May, the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross. The Sisters referred the matter to Bishop Pancratius von Dinkel of Augsburg who was at the same time the representative of the Master General of the Dominican Order.

The Prelate gave consent to their acceptance of this challenge. Out of those who generously offered themselves for the distant mission the following were chosen to be the pioneers of the new undertaking:

Sister Mary Mauritia Tiefenboeck – Prioress;
Sister Mary Euphemia Koffler – Sub-Prioress and Music Teacher;
Sister Mary Eleonora Petitpierre – Head-mistress;
Sister Mary Clare Huber – Teacher;
Sister Mary Reginald Fischer – Mistress of Needlework;
Sister Mary Gertrude Walter – Lay sister;
Miss Marie Zirn, as yet only a postulant and assistant music teacher.

In a letter to Father Fagan, Mr Fraundorfer wrote from Augsburg on 11th June 1877: “… The Reverend Mother Prioress has told me that the Sisters who have volunteered to go to the Cape are among the most accomplished nuns in her Convent. They form a complete set of teachers for a Primary School… I was over three hours with Mother Hyacinth, talking over the project and can assure Your Reverence that the ladies willing to go out will be an ornament to their Order wherever they come…”

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8 A Knight of the Order of St Gregory.
9 St Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, made a pilgrimage to Rome in 326. By order of the emperor excavations were made on the supposed site of the holy sepulchre where the Holy Cross was found.
10 Vol III, Diocesan Archives, Port Elizabeth, South Africa