

VAL NOONE: PRIEST, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHER, HISTORIAN, ACADEMIC

"St Albans: Dormitory Suburb with a Wide-Awake High School"

Introduction



I grew up in South Melbourne and Bentleigh in an Irish-Australian working-class family during the 'forties and 'fifties. My father was Mick Noone, a fitter, and my mother was Margaret Brennan, a dressmaker, and I had four siblings. In our experience the Catholic Church was central to our sense of community, and the work of the priest in worship and in community affairs seemed to offer a young man a good way to both serve God and to contribute to society. So at age sixteen I went and studied for eight years at Corpus Christi College at Werribee and Glen Waverley to become a Catholic priest.

On a hot Saturday morning in January 1965, my Dad gave me, my cases, and a couple of boxes of books a lift out to St Albans in his EH Holden. I was coming to work as assistant Catholic priest in the Sacred Heart parish. It was my first full-time appointment after finishing theological college and one of my duties, I soon found out, was to teach religious education (RE) at St Albans High School.

I was struck that day how there were a couple of miles of empty paddocks between Sunshine and St Albans. It turned out St Albans had open land on all sides in those days, making it a dormitory suburb, unusual in Australia. There were about 18,000 people in it and about 90 per cent of them had been in Australia less than 15 years. We were multicultural before the word became popular. Getting to know so many people from Poland, Malta, Yugoslavia, Germany, Italy, Egypt, Ireland and so on was a huge education for a 25-year-old lad from working-class Melbourne.

Unusual Catholic Percentage

Most of the people in St Albans were Catholics whereas the national average was only about 25 to 30 per cent Catholic. Errington Road was a gravel track, the night cart took away the sewerage from many homes, and you had to be careful driving down Main Road because there was a five-centimetre ridge down the middle. The northern half of the surface was maintained by Keilor Council and the southern half by Sunshine Council. Since St Albans was on the edge of development for both of them, they thought they could get away with neglecting such matters. Local councillors from both migrant and old Aussie families took up the issue and eventually got it fixed.

In those days, before the globalisation of the 1980s, Massey Fergusons still made grain harvesters at Sunshine where the shopping complex is now; and there were plenty of factory jobs in the area in the manufacturing industry. Lots of people did shift work and a surprising number of them, it seems to me, died in accidents in cars and on bikes coming up St Albans Road from Albion in the dark.



Father Con Reis

I was given a terrific welcome by Father Con Reis, the parish priest who had founded the parish in 1954. Father Reis was, and is, something of a legend. Grandson of a German migrant, with Irish and Spanish ancestors as well, born in Albury, former World War II chaplain in New Guinea, Father Reis had an enormous heart and gave many of the best years of his life to building a better life for people in St Albans. He deserves a book of his own for his contribution to the town.

And I was given a generous welcome from the parishioners, old and young. The first one I met was John Gigacz of Sylvester Crescent, from Slovakia, who later gave me an open-ended loan of his old Ford Prefect.

Matthews, Gliddon Outstanding



About the High School, well St Albans, as I said, was different because it had a vastly greater number of Catholics than anywhere else in Australia. And since there were initially no Catholic secondary schools in the area, about half the students at the High School, if not more, were Catholics. Later, Catholic secondary schools were built at West Sunshine, Marion College, and Braybrook, St John's.

A couple of days a week, as a young priest, I spent time teaching religious instruction at the High and the Tech. I started under the guidance of Father John Nicholson, an experienced teacher, and a great promoter of a youth group called Young Christian Workers.

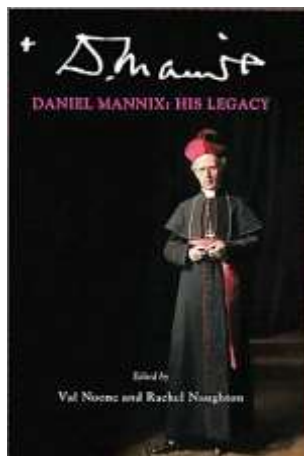
Mr Torpey was the principal and he did all he could to help us with any programs we had for the young people. He had two brilliant assistants in Mr Matthews and Mrs Gliddon, two of the most outstanding teachers I have met in my life.



I learned a lot from St Albans High, a lot about how young people were thinking about life and the universe. One striking example of how they influenced me is the case of a Year 12 discussion around 1966. Mr Matthews, who was teaching English, if I remember rightly, organised a panel on the topic of conscience and the law, or something similar, which was connected to the syllabus that year. Perhaps they were studying "A Man for All Seasons", or a similar text.

This story ties in with the Vietnam War. When asked to contribute to this history project it was suggested that, since the issue was so pertinent in that era and since I became publicly involved, I should include some points about it.

Pushed to Take a Stand

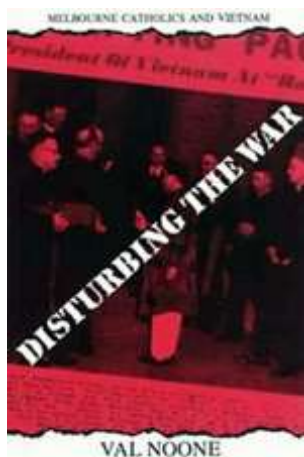
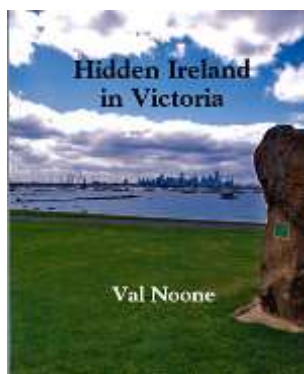
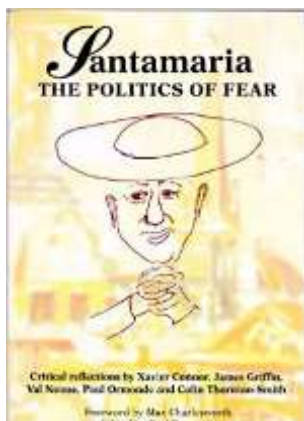


So, as an Religious Education teacher, I was invited to take part in a forum on conscience and rights. When it came to talking about the call up and ballot for Vietnam, which was confronting the students at that time, students asked me what I would do if I was called up. Being trained to be careful not to promote one's own views on such matters, I gave reasons for and against obeying the call up.

But the students would not let up. One of them, Marin Gunew, was insistent. I found myself saying out loud that I personally would not go. I was sort of surprised to hear myself saying it.

Thus, students at the High had asked me questions that more or less forced me to develop my initially private objection to conscription into a public one. The point I want to make here is that the experience of working alongside young people in St Albans contributed greatly to changing me for the better.

During those years I became increasingly concerned about the war in Vietnam, as most of us did. I found that very many people in St Albans, though living in surprising harmony, suffered overwhelming effects from fighting on various sides, or living under various occupying powers, during World War II. Students would report that Mum or Dad had regular nightmares about the war. Although this encouraged me to become more anti-war in outlook, I regret that I took so long to publicly oppose the war.



Several locals were conscripted, and a few went to Vietnam. When one, John Buhagiar, was sent there against his wishes shortly after arriving in Australia from Malta, leaving his widowed mother to provide for the family, I gave a sympathetic ear but ambivalent advice. I felt implicated in something I did not want to be part of, angry but powerless. At the time, I was ignorant of many practical details of lodging conscientious objection or of resisting the draft. As time went on some refused to go, some went up the bush, others were helped by their families to go and stay with relatives in Europe for the duration of the war.

One of those who conscientiously resisted the war was Marin Gunew who I mentioned above and I am proud to have been a supporter of his. Incidentally, at the first Moratorium in May 1970, the big protest march against the war and conscription in Bourke Street in the city, I was delighted to meet former students from St Albans. One name I remember was Natalie Launikonas. I really knew Australia was changing when I realised that the sons and daughters of people who came here as anti-communist refugees had taken a public stand against the war. [Val was on the organising committee for the Moratorium march, and also wrote a book *Disturbing the War: Melbourne Catholics and Vietnam* (Melbourne, Spectrum, 1993) about the anti-war movement.] There are dozens of stories to tell about St Albans and the High School but I will make do with three more points. Firstly, the staff room there was home to an exciting and committed group of go-ahead teachers. In later years I have been in contact with Moira Farrell and Joan Butler to name but two. Moira went on to be a leading figure in the peace movement in Newcastle, New South Wales, and died a few years ago of cancer. Joan, of course, who put so much effort into St Albans High, is involved in this publication. Her brother and I have been friends since we were fifteen. One of the teachers there used to sing and give detailed explanations of the words of all the Bob Dylan songs: he was especially good with "Boots of Spanish Leather".

Successful Rock Dance

Second, I would like to mention with pride, a claim that we used to make at the time, and I think it was true, that the St Albans Catholic youth group was running the only successful and peaceable rock dance in the western suburbs. It was called CY Junction. CY stood for Catholic Youth but we were open to all comers, well just about. A lot of St Albans High students and ex-students were involved in CY Junction.

There was a group of young people who showed leadership in organising this and other activities. Some of those who come to mind were from the Freeland, Barnard, Galea, Bolger, Kun, Borg, Landrigan, Ermstrang, Pokorzynski, Marciniak, Kalkbrenner, Camilleri, Metha, Saliba and Launikonas families. If we had time, we could remember many more.

Once a month on a Sunday night, rock bands performed in the parish hall and neighbours were remarkably patient. I think we had an 11.30 p.m. curfew. One small thing that comes to mind is that Mrs Mary O'Brien used to sometimes open the

Tuck Shop for light drinks and snacks for the CY Junction. Mary and Bill O'Brien and family were from Liverpool.

And, of course, Lorna Cameron and the youth club in Main Road also did a great job as you have recorded in the first volume.



Third, through my work with youth groups, I became aware of the number of young people getting into trouble with the law and being sent to jail or youth detention centres. Our YCW group found a small practical way to do something about this. The young leaders of the parish group and I would visit some of those who were locked up to have a chat and share some news. We could not do much but it did let those inside know that others were interested in them. It is my impression that links made that way helped a few of them to re-enter society on a better basis when they got out.

There are many more things I could say about St Albans, the High School and the friends I made there but these paragraphs will give the reader a sample of some of the highlights from what I remember. I ask people's pardon if my memory has let me down in a few spots.

After St Albans

In 1968, the year after I left St Albans, I was working as a priest in Frankston but for some months I continued to play basketball at Albert Park stadium in a team of mainly St Albans' High School old boys. The basketball team which had started in 1967 was David Dusting, Henry Goralski, Graham Snooks and Joe Ribarow, with a few such as Glen Brochie and me who played from time to time. We had good times together and, if I remember rightly, the team was sponsored by St Albans Building Supplies, a Stevens' family business. Our results used to get written up in the local paper.

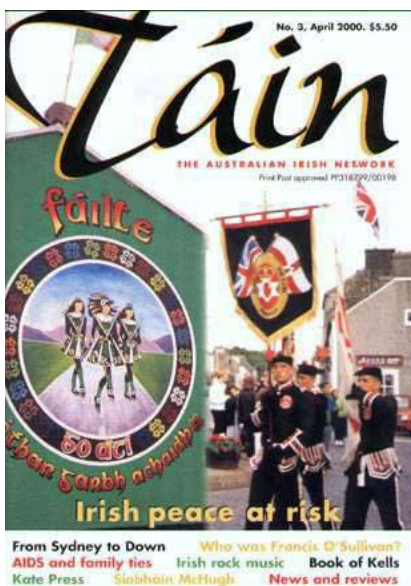
My three years in St Albans from 1965 to 1968 were among the most exciting, mind-widening and rewarding years of my life. After that I worked in other Catholic parishes around Melbourne. I found the work of a priest in a parish stimulating and rewarding. I had disagreements with bishops about Vietnam and the pill and so on which made me a restless worker in the ranks but in the end the deciding factor in formally resigning from the priesthood was my decision to get married. However, the wish to earn my own living rather than depend on parish support was a factor, as was my increasing involvement in the anti-war movement.

In an unusual connection, in the 1970s, I was in a share house with Yong Ah Chot from Malaysia who had been taught by Rosemary Keegan, a student of the St Albans High School Matriculation class of 1964, who went to Malaysia with Australian Volunteers Abroad.

I had known Rosemary from St Albans days, and for many years my wife and I enjoyed having Rosemary Kiss from that same Matric class as a neighbour in Gore Street, Fitzroy. I left the priesthood in 1974 to marry Mary Doyle, formerly a Sunshine girl. We have two grown children. I have worked as a driver, builder's labourer and printer, was active in an open house for homeless people in Fitzroy and then I went back to study, gained a PhD and taught at university level at Victoria University, St Albans, and also at Melbourne University. I am now retired and working in a voluntary capacity as editor of *Táin*, a magazine about Irish Australian history and culture.

St Albans made me aware that each of the ethnic groups in Australia has much to contribute to building a multicultural and harmonious society. To state the obvious, we need to look critically yet with respect at traditions to see if and how they apply these days, and we need to do that in dialogue with the Indigenous culture and all the immigrant cultures including the latest.

Irish Connections



The more I have lived with and worked with migrant communities, the more convinced I am that the better a person understands their own heritage the better they are able to relate as equals with people of other cultures. Hence, my work as editor of *Táin*, a magazine of Irish Australian culture. It is put together by volunteers from the Australian-Irish community.

In the 'nineties I was one of the executive members of the Melbourne Irish Famine Commemoration Committee, remembering the arrival of boats transporting young women in their escape from the great famine in Ireland. There were six ships that brought orphaned girls from the Irish workhouses to Australia during the Famine, and it was the last of these ships, the *Eliza Caroline*, that landed in what is now Hobsons Bay. In December 1998 the Committee erected a stone memorial to the Great Irish Famine on The Strand, Williamstown, which includes the names of the young Irish women who landed there in

1845. Even here there is a connection with St Albans, as one of Lorna Cameron's ancestors, Dorinda Saltry, is listed as a passenger on that ship.



Debra Vaughan and Val Noone, Irish famine memorial, Williamstown.

In Conclusion



On the same line of thinking, I would like to congratulate all who are collecting the history of St Albans High. In these days of global culture it is important and difficult to remember local history which is what makes us more than simply bland producers and consumers of the media-inspired version of an international way of life.

A booklet about St Albans High School based on recollections of ordinary people, warts and all, will be an example of history from below; and that will help us all to take pride in ourselves.

Apart from my commitment to Táin, I am currently working on a history of Irish immigration to Victoria, which I hope will also contribute to a better understanding of Australian heritage.

Val Noone, 2005.

2014 Update:

Fr. Conrad William Reis died in his sleep on 29 November 2006, and Val Noone wrote a very moving eulogy for his funeral service.

Val has continued his career as a Melbourne-based academic, writer and historian, and holds an Honorary position at the University of Melbourne in Historical and Philosophical studies. Táin magazine ceased production in 2007, but Val completed his history of the Irish immigration, which was published in 2012 under the title "Hidden Ireland in Victoria", an overview of the history of the Irish language in the State of Victoria, Australia.

Valentine Gabriel Noone was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia in June 2009 for service to education as an academic and historical researcher, and to the community.

In 2013, the Senate of the National University of Ireland (NUI) conferred the Degree Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on Dr Val Noone, a fellow of the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne. Dr Noone was honoured "for his contribution to Irish Studies in Australia". The Chancellor of NUI, Dr Maurice Manning, conferred the degree on 2 December 2013 at the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin.

Article prepared by Joseph Ribarow in 2006 and updated in 2016.