

a centenary of canberra's catholics

Valiant woman who stands tall in our history

When Margaret Lyons died aged 92 in 1998, she failed to reach the new millennium, but she and the other members of her Morrison family were an integral part of the history of Canberra, whose centenary we are about to celebrate.

Margaret's husband, Les Lyons, writing in the Canberra Historical Journal in September 1974 details the Morrison family's place in Canberra's history. Margaret's parents, John and Elizabeth, built up the well-known station property of "Tralee".

Margaret was the third of 10 children, the eldest of whom, Isabel, was to become Sr Mary Stanislaus in the Sisters of Mercy. The oldest and the youngest sons, John and Vivian, were to become notable priests in the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn.

Three of Margaret's brothers, Edmund, Francis and Patrick died in accidents on the land while twin brothers, Bernard and Leo, were prominent local identities. If Margaret's younger sister Clare were still alive, her claim to fame would be in her being the grandmother of Michael Maguire, the successful coach of the South Sydney Rabbitohs. (A little irony, there, as Michael's forebears spent a deal of time hunting rabbits!).

Frank Boyle gave the eulogy at the funeral of Margaret Lyons. He spoke of Margaret being born in 1905 at Bulga Creek when her parents were living in a slab hut at "The Angle" some distance from Tharwa. Frank goes on to relate how her rich life unfolded: "Margaret's earliest years were spent in the bush at 'The Angle'. One story Margaret was fond of telling was how her little mother used to wrap all the young children tightly in one blanket to sleep in order to protect them from brown snakes which were abundant. Imagine the excitement of a trip to Queanbeyan by horse and buggy.

"When the growing family moved to 'Old Tralee', Margaret soon joined her sister and brother at Tuggeranong School. The teacher during the years 1902 to 1927 was Frank McGee whose wife, Mary, was Margaret's aunty. As a teenager Margaret became an accomplished horsewoman, and had many ribbons to attest to this.

"She accompanied her father to sheepdog trials, learnt how to keep bees (her mother was an expert beekeeper),

helped cook for the shearers, and, most importantly, helped to raise her twin brothers who were 16 years her junior. In later life, Margaret became a keen bowler. However, her greatest and abiding interest was her own family and garden.

"Leslie Dennis Lyons moved to Canberra with the location of the Federal Government in 1927. Les was a senior public servant in the Attorney General's Department, the rare owner of a motor car, who, with other public servants at the time, were invited to 'Tralee' after Mass on Sunday for 'tennis and music'. Les' interests obviously went beyond tennis and music – he and Margaret were married on 15 August, 1929, at St Gregory's Church, Queanbeyan by Fr P O'Riordan."

Les and Margaret were blessed with five children, John, Basil, Edward (who died in infancy), Margaret and Leslie. I remember Les Jnr as one of the "big boys" when St Edmund's College opened in 1954. He is pictured in the "First Fifteen" along with his cousin, Ted Maguire. He is also recorded as receiving the history and the economics prizes for his year.

Both Frank Boyle and Mgr Alexander McGilvray (writing in "The Hallowed High Adventure") recount the active part which Les and Margaret Lyons played under the leadership of Mgr Patrick Haydon, in the burgeoning St Christopher's Parish. Frank writes of Margaret riding her horse to the building site of the Prime Minister's Lodge, selling raffle tickets to the workmen to raise funds to build St Christopher's Church which was opened in 1939 and would be extended to become St Christopher's Cathedral in 1973.

In the eulogy at Margaret's funeral Mass in 1998, Frank Boyle noted that Les had died in 1979 after 50 years of marriage to Margaret. He pointed out how the Morrison-Lyons story was very much entwined with the early history of St Christopher's parish.

"Margaret was an active member in the Catholic Women's League, serving as president in the early years of the parish, and for some 11 years ran the piety stall after Mass every Sunday. The bell tower and the bells of St Christopher's Cathedral are the result of a bequest from the Morrison family. The bells are named 'John' and 'Mary' after Margaret's

In the 20th in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power pays tribute to Margaret Elizabeth Lyons and other members of the Morrison family



ABOVE: Margaret (far right) with her sisters Isabel and Clare at the Cotter in 1920s. BELOW: Family group on Tralee verandah. Margaret with her husband Les on right holding first born baby John.



parents. Les was an active choir member and many a function and sing along were held at 'Loretto'."

As a young priest in the St Christopher's parish in the 1960s, I was often welcomed into the Lyons family home in Bougainville Street not far from St Christopher's. I enjoyed Les' wit and wisdom and was the grateful recipient of Margaret's hospitality. We didn't use the word feisty in those days, but it would aptly describe Margaret today. I remember, too, the admiration I had for her caring for her brother, Fr Vivian Morrison, when he was going through a rough patch. From Frank Boyle's eulogy, it is clear that Margaret would have

enjoyed the current build-up to Canberra's centenary.

"Margaret had an encyclopaedic knowledge of early Canberra and a willingness to share that knowledge and her memorabilia with one and all. Recent historians were constantly on her doorstep and were always welcome. She had a great love of her garden through all the seasons and took great pleasure in growing things and sharing them with one and all."

Margaret Lyons, is surely now standing tall among the valiant women described in the scriptures. Canberra's history is the richer for her being a significant part of it.