

a centenary of canberra's catholics

A faithful friend of the forgotten

In the 23rd and final article in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power pays tribute to one of Australia's most inspiring leaders.

Sir William Deane, arguably Australia's most loved and respected Governor-General (1996-2001), has called Canberra home for most of his life.

Born in Melbourne, he moved with his family to Canberra as a two year old when his father was relocated with the Patents Office.

All his primary schooling took place with the Good Samaritan Sisters at St Christopher's, Manuka, not far from the family home in Griffith. Among his classmates were future priests, Adrian Cork, Tom Wright and Vincentian Xavier Barry and Marist Brother John Reilly.

He fondly recalls among his fellow students David Cusack and Causeway residents Colleen Noonan and Tom McAppion, whom the young William regarded as the brightest lad in the class.

The Barry family were the Deane family's closest friends. In that family of six children, four of the five boys went on to become Vincentian priests and the only daughter joined the Daughters of Charity.

William Deane's father sang in St Christopher's choir while William had a fond association with the larger-than-life parish priest, Fr Patrick Haydon, serving as his altar boy, often accompanying him to outlying Mass centres.

He recalls Ernie Cork taking his son, Adrian, John Reilly and himself to Sydney as they began their secondary education at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill.

There he gained a sound academic grounding, honed his skills as a GPS debater and developed a love for rugby union. Because of his size, he only played in the weight teams as a half-back.

Returning to Canberra to work in the Attorney General's Department after his Sydney University studies, he played first grade as a winger for Easts. A serious eye injury in his last game against RMC Duntroon could have had life-changing consequences.

As it was, the arts-law graduate was able to continue with his plans for further study at Trinity College in Dublin and The Hague Academy of International Law.



He was called to the Bar in Sydney in 1957. William Deane met wife Helen Russell while they were at law school together and the couple married in 1965. It was clear to the nation during Sir William's tenure as Governor-General that he saw Lady Deane's contribution as integral to Australia's highest office.

In 1977, William Deane was appointed judge of the Supreme Court of NSW and a judge of the Federal Court of Australia. Before his appointment as Governor-General, Sir William Deane served as a judge of the High Court of Australia from 1982 to 1995.

This represented another homecoming to Canberra for one of its favourite sons. On the High Court, he formed part of the majority which recognised native title in the famous Mabo case. Was this experience to help shape his convictions which were to become a hallmark of his term as Governor-General, when he consistently gave support to the rights of Australia's first peoples?

In May, 1997, both Sir William and Lady Deane made important speeches at the Australian Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne. Jesuit priest Fr Frank Brennan described them at the convention as "the first couple of reconciliation".

Throughout their tenure at Government House the vice-regal couple spent much time visiting Aboriginal communities, invited indigenous people to their home and were articulate advocates for the historically dispossessed people.

In later times, Sir William would support his alma mater, St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, in granting scholarships to Aboriginal students from the country.

Following the Port Arthur massacre in 1996, the Governor-General took the initiative in encouraging church leaders to call a national ecumenical service of mourning in St Christopher's Cathedral.



ABOVE: Second from right middle row in a rugby union team at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill.

FAR LEFT: In first year arts law at Sydney University. LEFT: With Lady Deane, "the first couple of reconciliation".



He would take a similar role in the wake of the Thredbo tragedy where 18 people lost their lives the following year. As I preached at that service, I saw Sir William give great comfort to those who mourned for the 18 people each represented by a lighted candle.

The vision of Anglican Bishop George Browning, with the support of Aboriginal leader Lowitja O'Donoghue, Archbishop Francis Carroll and other church leaders to set up in Barton what has become known as the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture was blessed by the patronage of the then Governor-General.

Sir William would say that experience and ongoing encounters with other Christian churches have broadened his own life of faith, being mindful of the richness of the ecumenical movement. Jesus prayed at the Last Supper that "all may be one". Sir William will always be fondly remembered for his great capacity

to bring people together, often in a climate which would be otherwise divisive.

One of his favourite sayings is that a society is best judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable members. He was asked to be patron of countless organisations over the years, but in conversation about this article, he asked me to give particular prominence to Fr Peter Day and HOME in Queanbeyan which gives support to people suffering mental illness.

This inspirational project, which enjoyed the support of Anglican Fr Michael Cockayne and the wider community of Queanbeyan and its surrounds, was opened by Sir William in 2010 with the guest speaker, Australian of the Year Prof Patrick McGorry.

It was thus endorsed by its patron: "The provision of long-term, supported accommodation for the mentally ill who are presently unable to live with the dignity to which every human being is entitled is not simply a 'good idea' but an absolute must."

Still living in Canberra, Sir William and Lady Deane continue to be active in their retirement but wisely limit what they undertake. They are conscious that even in comparatively affluent Canberra there are many people who struggle to enjoy the basic necessities of life.

In accepting to be patron of the Canberra Centenary Committee, Sir William expressed the hope that the centenary program would take into account those citizens who are less fortunate and that their lives would be enhanced by Canberra's 2013 celebrations.



Supporting parish initiatives

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