

a centenary of canberra's catholics

A favourite son remembered for his kindness

In the 15th in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power tells of the contribution of Gerry Kilmartin, a pioneer mover and shaker with sterling qualities.

Gerald Joseph Kilmartin hailed from Sydney where he was born at the beginning of the 20th century, but he will be long remembered as a favourite son of Canberra. He had qualified as a fitter and turner when he arrived in Canberra in 1925. He returned to Sydney to marry Maud Elizabeth Kelly on 13 February, 1926 after which Canberra was to become their family home town.

Like so many newcomers to Canberra, Gerry Kilmartin was in for a shock. Son John describes those beginnings: "My father told me that on his initial arrival, he was met at Queanbeyan by Matt Campbell (later of Bungendore) and then walked out to Molonglo Camp and single men's quarters where he first experienced a Canberra winter, sleeping in a tin shed on a rough bed with one thin blanket. He reckoned it was the coldest night he had ever spent. The Molonglo Camp was sited where Bunnings hardware presently stands at Fyshwick."

By the time Gerry brought his new bride back to the area, he had a flat for them to occupy in Queanbeyan. Shortly after, they moved to Causeway which was the starting point for many of the national capital's pioneering families. Mgr Alexander McGilvray's history of early Canberra, *The Hallowed High Adventure*, names some such Catholic families: the Kilmartins, Bourkes, Gowings, Noonans, Kellys, Malones, Peads, Scotts, Dogans and McAppions.

Part of my 2010 Canberra Day Oration reads: "Gerry Kilmartin, a great family man, who went on to become an astute entrepreneur in Canberra, cut his

teeth in Causeway. Significantly, from the outset he was a leading figure in the St Vincent de Paul Society whose members, along with the Salvation Army, cared for the poor in Causeway as well as in the rest of Canberra."

Mgr McGilvray elaborates on Gerry's sterling qualities: "For over 45 years, he was destined to play a leading part in Catholic affairs. Like so many of his time, he became one of Fr Haydon's band of dedicated parishioners resolved to work for the spiritual and material advancement of the Church."

"In the small Catholic community of those days, an infectious spirit of devotion to a cause seemed to inspire every individual. Soon after his arrival, Gerry Kilmartin became an active member of the St Vincent de Paul Society. There were many needy families at the Causeway in those days, and Fr Haydon managed somehow to collect food and clothing at Queanbeyan for distribution in the Federal capital (remembering that Canberra was still part of Queanbeyan parish until 1928).

"In a quiet and unostentatious way, Gerry and his friend, Terry Simonds, did the rounds of Causeway, locating those in need and distributing what Fr Haydon had gathered."

John Kilmartin reports that his mother, Maud, attended as a guest the opening of the first Parliament House in 1927 and in 1988 at the invitation of Prime Minister Bob Hawke the current seat of Government.

Gerry could not attend the 1927 ceremony because he was busy working that day helping to put in the place the domed roof, which he had helped to build, for the Mt Stromlo Observatory.

There was a long-standing interest in horse racing on both Gerry and Maud's side of the family, so it is not surprising that Gerry was part of the formation of St Patrick's Racing Club at Tuggeranong on the McCormack family property. Daughter, Anna Vincent, tells how her father was



Gerald and Maud Kilmartin with daughter Joan Kilmartin and future husband Lieutenant Robert Joshua at his December 1954 RMC graduation, with chaplain the then Fr John Hoare in foreground.



Gerry Kilmartin's sheep grazing in front of Old Parliament House in 1951.

approached by Mr Sim Bennett to instigate what was to become the ACT Jockey Club.

"Dad did the background work and paperwork, after visit-

ing the AJC in Sydney to estab-

lish the club and allow it to race under the auspices of the AJC.

"Our mother was the de facto secretary prior to the appoint-

ment of Mr George O'Neill who was the front man."

In typical fashion, Gerry then stepped back and assumed a simple membership role.

People who knew Gerry Kilmartin remember him as a man of great kindness.

When he found out that the Good Samaritan Sisters were being subjected to the extremes of Canberra's winter he took steps to provide heating for the convent with the help of his plumber brother-in-law Jack Kelly.

Once the Kilmartins moved to their property at Mugga Mugga, they provided produce for the Sisters. One of their daughters, Loretta, would become a Sister of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart after attending St Christopher's School along with her five sisters and brother, John.

When the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary arrived in Canberra in the 1960s to establish Marymead, Gerry and Maud Kilmartin were on hand again to help the Sisters and the vulnerable children they were caring for.

Anna Vincent speaks of her father sending a weekly sheep or lamb from the abattoirs to the butcher for delivery to Marymead as well as providing boxes of fruit and vegetables.

After Gerry's death in 1970, Maud continued to be involved with the Marymead auxiliary and for many years helped count the money raised from the walk-athon.

During my seminary holidays in the 1960s, I did some work for Jim O'Malley, manager of Thomas W Green's Wool and Skin buyers. Part of my work with Jim's son, James, took us to the Canberra Abattoirs then owned by Gerry and John Kilmartin.

There could not be a better summary of a great life than that provided by John Kilmartin. "Gerry Kilmartin was a pioneer of the new city of Canberra, being involved in its early construction and in community and church activities. He was a lecturer and instructor at Canberra Technical College especially to servicemen in the war years. He prospered as a farmer, grazier and meat wholesaler.

"He was a great character, absorbing raconteur, generous to all, and in his commercial career, a mover and shaker despite being always short of resources. He is remembered with much affection."