

A Sheffield Brother: Brother Wultan James O'Connor

[Br Ignatius Martin](#)

The ancestral home of the O'Connor's was Ballinruane, where the family had a big farm. David O'Connor was born in Ballinruane, Kilmeedy, Co. Limerick, Ireland on 17 August 1875. David had an elder brother called James who was born in 1873. The two boys were the sons of Michael and Ellen O'Connor (née Reedy). When they had completed their education at the local school James and David worked with their parents on the family farm. In 1892, both young men left home and went to the Brothers Novitiate in Castletown. Later in 1892, James aged 19 and David aged 17 received the Habit of the Brothers. James became Brother Amandus Bishop and David became Brother Wultan James.

Brother W. James was bright and intelligent. Usually his confrères enjoyed his natural spontaneity; a few would be annoyed occasionally. His Novice Master, Brother Presidius (from Montreal, Canada) had to tell him off for his off-handedness. Nevertheless Brother Presidius noted his progress in a life set aside for prayer and study. By comparison, Brother Amandus was a quiet, retiring type of person.

In August 1893 the two novices made First Vows and entered Castletown Scholasticate for the two-year course of studies. Brother W. James did not have any difficulty with his studies in the Scholasticate. One year was ample time for his preparation to enter the De La Salle Teacher Training College in Waterford. So in 1894, Brother W. James left Castletown for Waterford, while Brother Amandus continued the usual second year at Castletown.

From 1894 to 1896 Brother W. James followed the prescribed courses of study at the Training College when he obtained the Teachers Certificate, he was sent to St. Joseph's College, London in 1896. St. Joseph's had been in Tooting from 1888 and in 1895 the Superiors closed down the College and sold off the land and buildings. The College Old Boys Committee sent a deputation to Paris in order to save the College for the pupils. In September 1895 the college re-opened at Upper-Tooting near Wandsworth Common Station. It was a small house called 'The Grange' on Trinity Road and another House in St. James Road. 54 boys were on the school roll, the Grange formed the school and the other house served as dormitories. Brother

W. James moved in 1896. Then in August 1897 the Brothers moved the College to Denmark Hill. In his first teaching post Brother W. James showed an excellent ability in dealing with young children.

Shrewd, amiable and with an habitual smile, he gained and kept the attention of his classes. His success suggested a promising future. Out of school hours he was very active, and played a great part when moving house from Upper Tooting to Denmark Hill.

In 1898, Brother W. James went back to Waterford to teach in St. Stephen's Street School. By coincidence, he was replaced at St. Joseph's College, Denmark Hill, by Brother Amandus Bishop – his brother! So from 1898 to 1903, Brother W. James taught boys aged 11-13 years. They were slow learners and difficult to manage. However the results obtained by Brother W. James were so remarkable that everyone said he was a born



teacher.

From 1903 to 1907, Brother W. James was in Newtown House, Waterford. In 1896 Newtown House became De La Salle National School, Waterford. The Brothers still referred to it as 'Newtown'. It was a special school in so far as it was a fee-paying school. The school fees were used to provide games equipment, books and a day out for the pupils. The Community got no benefit from the fees. The school was used for demonstration lessons and teaching practice for the trainee teachers at De La Salle Training College, Waterford. The Community at Newtown House became the Scholasticate of the student Brothers at the Training College. So Brother W. James taught pupils in preparation for a career in commerce from 1903 to 1905, and then took care of the Scholastics from 1905 to 1907.

In 1907 Brother W. James moved from Newton to the Training College building and was the professor in theoretical and practical methodology until 1913. Brother W. James and his contemporaries were not guided by 'child-centred' education which is a feature of some schools today. Instead all pupils were expected to be industrious, well behaved and reliable, and to take their religion seriously. So education methodology included such things as class control, lesson preparation, proper use of the blackboard and visual aids. Teachers taught and pupils

learned. The content and practice of the lectures of Brother W. James were highly appreciated by the students. The comments of his confrères of that time are enlightening. As a Brother living in Community Brother W. James was a genuine religious. He never allowed anyone or anything to distract him from his spiritual exercises. He used his time so well that he continued to develop his own academic studies, in spite of long hours in the lecture room. All this won for him academic recognition. In spite of 'put-on' airs which seemed affected, and having a certain outspokenness, he was an excellent confrere. In 1921 he was appointed to Dublin and moved there in 1913.

Brother W. James was at De La Salle University Hall, Ely Place, Dublin from 1913 to 1919. On 28th February 1912 the Commissioners of education in Ireland arranged for a third year in training for teachers who were headmasters. The course of study at University College Dublin led to the Diploma in Education. Brother Kieran, Provincial, bought three houses in Ely Place for chosen students called King Scholars. At the opening there were 19 such students all trained in Waterford. In charge of Ely Place were Brothers Stanislaus, Berchan and W. James. While Brother W. James tutored these students he followed the University Courses. He not only achieved the Diploma in Education but also the Master of Arts in two years. He was appointed Director of Ely Place in 1915 and became a distinguished educator throughout the whole of Ireland. During the Easter Rising of 1916 he showed tact and reserve during the troubles. He preserved the houses from danger and damage. In 1919 Brother Kieran resigned as Provincial due to ill health and was replaced by Brother L. Benedict Feore. In the summer of 1919 he appointed Brother W. James as the headmaster of the London St. Joseph's Academy, Blackheath.

St. Joseph's Academy opened in Kennington in 1860 – an off-shoot of St. Joseph's College, Clapham. The Academy was moved to Camberwell in 1907 and remained there until 1919. Brother Berchan (formerly of Ely Place) supervised the move to Blackheath and Brother W. James was the first headmaster in the new premises. He was now in his early forties, a man at the height of his powers, faculties and education experience at all levels. A good administrator, he made savings which were needed to provide money to extend the college buildings. In later years, an old boy of the Academy wrote in the Easter 1926 edition of 'Signum Fidei' (the school magazine): "It is when one is when one longer is at school that one understands how great the qualities of a schoolteacher are." This old boy, Mr. Fred A. Perret added that Brother W. James was "loved by the pupils, esteemed by the parents and respected by everyone who knew him." In fact, Brother W. James had been directing the Academy

for only two years when the Superior General for the Brothers and his Brother Assistant sent Brother W. James to take over the establishment of St. Benedict's College in Ceylon. At the same time he was named Auxiliary Brother Visitor for all the Ceylon Communities.

From 1921 to 1924, Brother W. James was headmaster of St. Benedict's, Colombo. He made a great impression on all associated with the College. An education historian of that time wrote about Brother W. James: "he was an accomplished Irish scholar, an idealist, an education visionary. He improved the College boarding department and the kindergarten. Brother W. James stood for a type of education which suited the genius of the Ceylonese. He advocated vocational and agricultural education and a wider use of the vernacular. The refined Singhalese and the hard working Jamils welcomed the forward looking policies of Brother W. James. Unfortunately due to the condition of his health following an attack of malaria, he was forced to go to Hong Kong, then back to Ireland.

In the spring of 1924, Brother W. James set sail from Hong Kong to the British Isles. He spent several months recuperating in Ireland. In October 1924 he felt well enough to resume teaching and Brother L. Benedict appointed him to De la Salle College, Sheffield. The College was opened in 1923 for boys to sit for School Certificate and Higher School Certificate. It catered for boys from the whole of South Yorkshire. Brother W. James taught part-time. He was delighted to be back in the classroom and took great care with lesson preparation. The boys he taught were the first group to be entered for School Certificate in the history of the College. But the malaria he contracted in Ceylon forced him to miss lessons now and again. He taught until July 1925 and restarted in September after the summer holidays. However complications arose when he caught bronchitis in November due to the black industrial fogs of Sheffield. The snow, frost and cold air of December 1925 and January 1926 caused his health to deteriorate. On 2 February 1926 Brother W. James received the Holy Viaticum and then he became unconscious. The Community (Brother Kevin Hayes, Director, Columban, Albeus, Lawrence O'Toole) gathered round his bed to recite the Prayers for the Dying. On 4 February 1926, Brother W. James died peacefully from the affects of malaria and bronchitis.

The funeral took place on 8 February 1926. Sung Requiem Mass at St. Catherine's Church was offered in the presence of the clergy of the deanery, the Brothers from Sheffield, Market Weighton, Pendleton, Liverpool, St. Helens and the staff and pupils of the College. After Mass, and prayers for the deceased, the cortège left St. Catherine's to St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery on Rivelin Road,

Sheffield. Brother W. James was buried in the plot prepared for him.

That Monday evening the Sheffield Star paid tribute to the respect and esteem in which brother W. James was held by the Sheffield people, especially in education circles. In London, on hearing of the death of brother W. James, Rev. Father J.B. Ward, the parish priest of Lewisham (Blackheath) announced a Requiem Service for the repose of his soul and invited his parishioners to Solemn High Mass. The church was packed with Brothers and boys of the Academy and with parishioners. The parish



priest based his homily on "We have loved him in life, let us not forget him in death".

Postscript. The Brothers went to Sheffield in 1919 and taught in St. Marie's Boys School, St. Vincent's Boy School and De la Salle College. The Brothers withdrew from the all-age schools in 1948, and withdrew from the College in 1978. Brother W. James was 51 when he died. His brother, Brother Amandus Bishop lived to 1958 and died aged 85 in Waterford. He is buried in Castletown Cemetery, Co. Laois, Ireland.