

‘THE DAY WE CELEBRATE’: ST PATRICK’S DAY, WARWICK, QUEENSLAND, 1872–1972

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In 1972, after at least 100 years, Warwick’s iconic annual St Patrick’s Day celebrations ceased. This paper considers the history and evolution of these celebrations and the memories of Ireland they evoked for several generations of Warwick people of Irish descent. The paper is largely derived from the author’s personal memory, oral interviews and research in a century of newspaper coverage of the event. Particular reference is made to the narratives associated with St Patrick’s Day dinners, luncheons and processions. The paper is also informed by research about St Patrick’s Day in other places, including Melbourne and South Australia.

An ‘Irish’ Catholic Childhood

I am a fourth-generation descendant of Catholic Irish immigrants. My eight great grandparents were all Irish-born Catholics. I grew up on a farm at Swan Creek, near Warwick, that had been established by my great grandparents, George and Mary Ann Booth, after their arrival from County Tyrone in 1876.¹ In the 1960s our Irish Catholic heritage was integral to our sense of who we were. A school friend believed the national anthem was ‘Hail Glorious St Patrick’ and was surprised to learn as a child it was ‘God Save the Queen’.² We understood subconsciously that wrong had been done to the Irish and that our Irish Catholic ancestors had suffered for their faith.

My great grandfather, George Booth, who died in 1916, apparently never missed attending the St Patrick’s Day festivities in Warwick.³ This family tradition and my childhood memories of St Patrick’s Day are the starting point for this paper. In my recollection, each year began with preparations for Swan Creek’s entry in Warwick’s St Patrick’s Day procession and the opportunity to win the much-coveted Father Mahon Shield presented each year to the best float. Our mother, a fine seamstress, would set about sewing yards of crepe paper and we children would wait to see if we had a place on the Swan Creek float. In Warwick during the 1960s, great pride and many hours and weeks of preparation went into these floats. This memory differs from Patrick O’Farrell’s reflections about St Patrick’s Day processions in Australia, which he claimed saw ‘floats cobbled together, often with the labour of older school children and little pride in the work’.⁴ In contrast, locals, visitors and special guests enjoyed and were proud of Warwick’s St Patrick’s Day celebrations. In 1969, the local newspaper reported that: ‘Warwick is unique in Queensland for its spectacular celebration of the Feast of St Patrick and for the beauty of its decorated floats’.⁵

The Early Years, 1872–1900

The history of St Patrick’s Day has to be seen in the context of the significant numbers of Catholic Irish immigrants who settled in and around Warwick from the 1850s onwards. By 1911, it was estimated that about 40 per cent of the area’s population were Irish-born or of Catholic Irish descent.⁶ They were well served by many Catholic churches and schools.⁷ The Sydney *Freeman’s Journal* in October 1899 pronounced Warwick a place where ‘a better class of Irish people have been settled down’. The people, who were said by the paper to travel great distances to go to mass on Sundays, were described as ‘gay-hearted, buoyant, and with the tenderest susceptibilities’.⁸

The first mention of Warwick's St Patrick's Day festivities appears to have occurred on 23 March 1872, when a local paper, the *Warwick Examiner and Times*, reported that a successful ball and banquet had been held to celebrate the 'festival of St Patrick, the patron saint of the "green isle"'. Central to the decorations was 'a flag with a neatly worked Irish harp upon it'.⁹ Almost a hundred years later, this flag, in earlier years closely associated with the Irish home rule movement, was still being flown in Warwick's St Patrick's Day processions.¹⁰ The 1872 event was attended by 'all classes of society', including special guests, such as the mayor of Warwick, Samuel Evenden, and the Catholic parish priest, the Rev. S.H. McDonough.¹¹

As in South Australia and other places, Warwick's 1872 festivities were under the auspices of the local branch of the St Patrick's Benefit Society. The town's celebrations commenced considerably later than those in South Australia, where the first St Patrick's Day gathering, an expensive banquet, was publicly advertised by an Irish Protestant in Adelaide in 1840. Settlement at Warwick began in the late 1840s, so 1872 seems relatively late by comparison with South Australia for the commencement of St Patrick's Day festivities, particularly in light of the large numbers of Irish immigrants attracted to the Warwick area. However, festivities in South Australia started with banquets and sports events, parades did not begin in Adelaide, for instance, until the late 1860s.¹²

By 1876, Warwick's celebrations were being held under the auspices of the Catholic Young Men's Society (CYMS). The president of this organisation was Irish-born Father James Horan, the newly appointed parish priest. Horan, an Irish nationalist and champion of St Patrick's Day, continued in office until his death in 1905. Under his leadership in the 1870s and early 1880s, the celebrations grew and a highly successful sports day with traditional Irish games was added.

In 1876, the speech that accompanied the toast to 'The Day We Celebrate' was typical of the discourses at the banquets that evoked Ireland's ancient bards and kings and its poets and heroes. Tanja Bueltmann says of St Patrick's Day banquets in New Zealand that, more than parades, banquets were 'especially potent sites of memory in that they provided space for discursive memory narratives in speeches and toasts'.¹³ The same was true of Warwick banquets. The 1876 banquet speech was delivered by the local member of parliament and newspaper proprietor, James Morgan, an Irish-born Protestant. According to a press report:

He talked of St Patrick and St Patrick's mother, and the island of saints ... He said something about 'Brian, the brave', the Dane, and the 'lass with the carrot hair', about Sarsfield, about Wellington and M'Mahon, as well as about 'the Blakes and O'Donnells', about 'Grattan, Curran, Sheridan, all those who bound the bar and senate in their spell', about O'Connell, Canning, Bourke, and Plunkett ...¹⁴

Sentiments about the love for and greatness of Ireland, such as those of Father T. O'Connell in the toast to 'The Land of our Birth' in 1880, were repeated year after year:

If there was one passion more conspicuous, one passion which had outlived all others in the breast of an Irishman, it was his inborn love for Ireland, for Ireland's greatness, for Ireland's glory.¹⁵

The establishment in the early 1880s of St Joseph's Branch of the Hibernian Australasian Catholic Benefit Society (the Hibernians) was an important milestone in Warwick's 17 March commemorations. By the late 1880s, the Hibernians were the main organisers of the day. There was initial tension between Father Horan and John Healy, then president of the Hibernians, regarding whose idea it was to establish a branch of the society in Warwick.¹⁶ This tension spilled over into the St Patrick's Day luncheon in 1888, when John Healy was Hibernian president and

Father Horan was noted as absent from the luncheon. Perhaps the priest was concerned about losing control of the day's activities. In his speech, F.B. Woods, the founding president of the Hibernians, expressed the hope that the friction between his organisation and Father Horan would soon be ended.¹⁷ At the 1891 banquet, with Healy present, Father Horan proposed a toast wishing: 'Success to the Hibernian Society in the celebration of St Patrick's Day'. So it would appear that a resolution of the problems had been achieved.¹⁸

Overall, the clergy and the Hibernians had a good working relationship. The Hibernians and their leaders, men such as John Healey, Francis Woods and John McInieri, were passionate about the cause of Irish nationalism, especially home rule, and St Patrick's Day reflected this. Father James Horan and Father Michael Potter, Warwick's Irish-born parish priests between 1876 and 1944 were also nationalists and saw no contradiction between the religious and political aspects of St Patrick's Day. After Cardinal Patrick Moran took over the organisation of the celebrations in Sydney in 1896, he made changes so that St Patrick's Day became more religious in tone. This included abolishing the procession.¹⁹ Warwick's early approach to St Patrick's Day was more similar to Melbourne's experience under Archbishop Daniel Mannix's leadership from 1917, when 'Irish nationalism and Catholicism were strongly promoted in unison' at St Patrick's Day. But, there was an important difference in that, after the 1916 Rising, Mannix abandoned home rule and instead used the 17 March parades to support the Irish republican cause.²⁰ In Warwick, the Hibernians used St Patrick's Day to draw attention to Irish political issues, but, like the local Catholic parish priests, they were advocates for home rule until 1916 and then self determination up to the signing of the Anglo Irish Treaty and the formation of the Irish Free State. An indication of the close links forged between the Hibernians and the church is shown by the fact that funds raised on St Patrick's Day were donated to church-related activities. In 1893 and 1895, for example, funds were given to the Sisters of Mercy and, in 1908, the concert was put under Father Potter's control in order to raise money for the Christian Brothers and the Presbytery Fund.²¹

The forerunners of the grand procession for which Warwick became famous began during the 1870s, when parishioners, led by the parish priest, marched from the 'old' St Mary's Church to the sports ground.²² From the late 1880s, under the management of the Hibernians, the procession evolved into a great parade of Irish kings, queens, poets, heroes, religious images and representations of Irish political issues. As Mike Cronin and Daryl Adair point out in their history of St Patrick's Day, parades were an important means of communication, 'providing images, symbols and messages to observers'.²³ The numbers taking part in the parades were bolstered by schoolchildren from Warwick's Catholic schools, a practice that continued up to 1972.

By the early 1900s, with occasional variations, the programme included: a banquet and/or luncheon with speeches and toasts; a procession of floats, marchers and bands; a sports event; a full race meeting; a concert; occasional dances; and various special events. A mass was also part of the programme by at least the early years of the twentieth century.²⁴ The only time the procession was not held during 1872-1972 was between 1944 and 1946, when materials were in short supply because of the Second World War.

The Political Years, 1886–1921

St Patrick's Day celebrations appealed to a broad cross section of the Warwick Catholic community, and they provided a public platform for Irish nationalists to advocate for Irish causes. The formal toasts to 'The Day We Celebrate' and 'The Land of Our Birth' were accompanied by fervent speeches about home rule. In 1886, when the first home rule bill was introduced into the British parliament, Father Horan gave a carefully worded 'passionate defence of Home Rule', arguing its necessity to the British Empire.

... those who demand Home Rule for Ireland are not the foe but the friends of the unity and prosperity of the Empire ... Those who denied Ireland that right were the cause of this national discontent ... moreover denying to her that which was in strict keeping with the British Constitution itself ...²⁵

Politicians of all persuasions and religious and community dignitaries attended the official luncheon or dinner each year and many were given the opportunity to speak. In 1893, the year a second home rule bill was introduced into the British parliament, the Queensland colonial secretary, Horace Tozer, was a special guest at the banquet. During his remarks about the state of the colony and the recent serious floods, Tozer commented that he hoped the people of Ireland would enjoy similar liberties to those ‘they in Australia enjoyed’.²⁶

Efforts were made at the 17 March celebrations to demonstrate cross-community goodwill by inviting members of other ethnic and religious societies. This sometimes extended to public endorsement of home rule for Ireland by members of these groups. In 1911, when a third home rule bill was highly anticipated, James De Conlay, ‘chief’ of the Caledonian Society, told the gathering: ‘Every country ... should have Home Rule, and he hoped to see Scotland have it before long’.²⁷ Decorated cars in the processions carried representations of heroes of the Irish struggle and of home rule. In 1910, one of the cars featured Robert Emmet with the slogan *Erin Go Bragh* (‘Ireland Forever’) and the question: ‘When will Robert Emmet’s epitaph be written?’.²⁸ In 1912, according to a local newspaper, a motor car was ‘beautifully decorated so as to typify “Home Rule”’.²⁹

In 1914, the advent of home rule was keenly anticipated. In March, the *Warwick Examiner and Times* reported: ‘... this year – Home Rule year – pregnant with glorious possibilities for Ireland ... will be celebrated with greater enthusiasm and in grander style than ever before’.³⁰ In September, the third home rule bill did finally become law, but only to be immediately suspended for the duration of the war. In March 1915, Father Potter proposed the toast of the ‘Pope and the King ... under the aegis of Home Rule’. He spoke of ‘a united British Race’ joining with the French and Belgians in the Great War and of his pride in the contribution of Irishmen to the war effort.³¹ In his toast to ‘Kindred Societies’, E.J. Brennan echoed this sentiment and said ‘that the combination of English, Irish and Scotch made up the finest Empire the world had ever seen and this was proved in the present struggle’.³² A number of the decorated lorries in 1915 were in support for the war effort. There were Belgian and French motor cars and a lorry that ‘finely delineated the Allied cause, and bravely showed the Allied flags’. The Irish cause was not forgotten, however, and John McEnery carried the ‘green flag’ in the procession.³³

In 1917, the year after the Easter Rising and with growing community division over the Irish question, the mayor of Warwick failed to attend the official St Patrick’s Day luncheon. This broke a long-standing tradition of politicians of all persuasions attending the formal luncheon or banquet. The mayor’s failure to appear was taken as a slight by Alderman John Allman, who referred to the mayor as ‘thin skinned’.³⁴ Proceedings at the 1918 luncheon started on a light-hearted note. Father Potter presided and, in a reference to the 1917 Warwick egg-throwing incident, he related a funny story about going to Melbourne and Sydney and being asked what Warwick eggs were like. Councillors P. McMahon and E.J. Brennan, both of Irish descent, were more pointed and political in their speeches. They spoke about the unjustness of the laws in Ireland and about sectarianism in Australia. McMahon was reported in the press as saying:

There were times when Irishmen were twitted with not being as loyal as they ought to be ... If the Irish people who lived in Ireland were disloyal, it was because the laws they lived under were not just ...³⁵

Brennan’s comments were in stark contrast to his patriot words at the 1915 luncheon.

He [Brennan] was very surprised the man [Prime Minister W.M. Hughes] at whom that egg was pelted was allowed to leave Queensland alive after the things he had said ... he [Brennan] objected to any man going on a platform and saying that because another man was a Roman Catholic that the other man was also a pro German.³⁶

Brennan then declared that any Irishman who had voted for the opposition Queensland state Liberal Party in the recent elections 'has no right to be classed as an Irishman'.³⁷ Premier T.J. Ryan and his Labor Party government had been returned at the elections, but Warwick's local Labor candidate, J. Moir, in attendance at the luncheon and warmly received, had been unsuccessful in his campaign for re-election.

In the middle of the ranks of the Hibernians in the 1918 procession was a lorry carrying a memorial to the 'Sinn Féiners' shot at Easter 1916. It was in the form of a Celtic cross, surmounted by the words 'God Save Ireland' and with the names of those executed inscribed on the cross.³⁸ Melbourne's 1918 St Patrick's Day procession, presided over by Archbishop Mannix, also controversially included a tribute to the 'martyrs of the Easter rising'.³⁹ In 1921, Father Potter addressed St Patrick's Day crowds about the treatment of the people of Ireland, making reference to 'Bloody Sunday' in Dublin in November 1920, when British forces fired on an Irish crowd attending a football match.

They [the people of Ireland], could not meet as they were meeting in Warwick to-day, for, if they only met for a football match machine guns would be turned on to them, and not only men, but women and children, would be shot down as if they were wild people.⁴⁰

At the request of Archbishop James Duhig of Brisbane, two resolutions were put to the March 1921 gathering. After being passed, the resolutions were forwarded to the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, and to Éamon de Valera, president of Dáil Éireann.⁴¹ A Mr E. O'Mara moved the first resolution calling for the cessation of 'outrages' against the Irish people. He spoke in emotional terms of his recent visit to Ireland and his concern that he would 'come to grief', especially at the hands of 'those fine gentlemen, the black and tans'. He said that 'eighty-five percent of [Ireland's] people were fighting only for the principle of self-determination'.⁴² The second resolution, moved by James Buckley, called for self-determination for Ireland. Dan Skehan seconded the resolution, likening the Irish cause to the British soldiers fighting for the liberty of Belgium during the war.⁴³ At Brisbane's St Patrick's Day festivities, the first resolution calling for an end to 'outrages' in Ireland was moved by Queensland's then Labor premier, Edward (Ted) Theodore.⁴⁴

At the 1922 St Patrick's Day parade, the first since the signing in December 1921 of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, its endorsement in January by a majority of Dáil Éireann and the establishment of the Irish Free State, the tricolour flag was held aloft towards the head of the procession, flanked by the Irish national standard and the Australian Flag. But the luncheon was more muted than in 1921. Father Potter expressed the hope that 1923 would see further cause for celebration among the Irish people, but he went on to add: 'their friends in Ireland should be left to decide their own internal affairs for themselves, and they in Australia would backup whatever was decided on'.⁴⁵ This was a period of developing conflict in Ireland between pro- and anti-Treaty forces. The change of tone at the luncheon may reflect the views of Archbishop Duhig, who was pro-Treaty and stressed the 'reasonableness' of the Free State constitution. By early 1923, with a civil war raging in Ireland, Duhig was encouraging 'Irish Australians' to 'turn their minds to the many important problems in Australia'.⁴⁶ It is fair to assume that Father Potter, in arguing in March 1922 that the Irish should be left to sort out their own affairs, was already reflecting his archbishop's views. Whilst passion for Ireland remained strong among Warwick's Catholic Irish-Australian community, there was less overt evidence of Irish politics at St

Patrick's Day events from 1922 onwards and, as a consequence, the parade became more religious in character.

The Transition Years, 1923–1945

Despite the depression of the 1930s and the Second World War, Warwick's St Patrick's Day remained a popular and successful annual celebration of the memory of Catholic Ireland. This period saw a generational shift and the establishment of a parish committee to oversee the day's programme. By St Patrick's Day in 1923, Father Potter had become Monsignor Potter.⁴⁷ At the time of his death in 1944, he had been parish priest for 39 years, while serving in the parish for a total of 53 years. He was a staunch champion of St Patrick's Day throughout this half century. The transition from a Warwick community dominated in the late nineteenth century by Irish-born immigrants to a community dominated in the early twentieth century by second- and third-generation Irish Australians did not appear to diminish the popularity of St Patrick's Day. In 1932, Monsignor Potter noted that, although there were only two Irishmen on the St Patrick's Day Committee, the future was in the 'good hands' of 'Irish Australians'.⁴⁸ In 1937, at the St Patrick's Day luncheon, Potter reflected that he was 'inclined to think that young Irish Australians were more Irish than those born in Ireland'.⁴⁹

In January 1928, it was the Hibernians who had proposed that 'town and country parishioners' join with them on a new committee to organise the St Patrick's Day programme. They further suggested that the proceeds of the day be put towards paying off the debt on the new St Mary's Church, Potter's priority project.⁵⁰ The proposal was agreed and Potter was appointed chairman of the committee. The debt on St Mary's was finally paid off in 1943, the year before Potter's death. For many years the Hibernians continued to play a major role in organising St Patrick's Day, but the formation of the committee opened up the opportunity for other Catholic organisations, local districts and individuals to contribute.

The floats featured sentimental Irish, Australian and religious themes, with titles such as 'The Last Rose of Summer', 'Australia—Land of the Southern Cross' and 'The Little Irish Mother'. An indication of the popularity of the procession throughout the parish was the increase in the numbers of country floats, noted in 1932. The 'true old Irish flavour' was represented each year by an Irish jaunting car, often carrying Monsignor Potter and the 'grand old Irish pioneers'.⁵¹ Important religious milestones were also increasingly celebrated on St Patrick's Day. In the 1932 procession, the 1500th anniversary of St Patrick's first visit to Ireland was acknowledged by a float entitled 'Erin's Faith'. In 1929, special mention had been made of the Lateran Treaty, by which Italy recognised the Vatican city as a state and the pope as its ruler. In 1941, St Patrick's Day coincided with a 'Double Golden Jubilee Celebration': fifty years since the laying of the foundation stone of Warwick's first convent and fifty years of 'faithful service by Monsignor Potter' were both recognised. The organisers aimed to 'thank God and St Patrick for the light of Faith granted to the Irish people'.⁵²

A striking theme of the speeches at the luncheons throughout this period was the importance of everybody pulling together for the sake of Australia. In 1932, Potter illustrated this sentiment in his comments about the 'Kindred Societies'. He said that the 'Scotsmen, St Georgians and the Hibernians were like the three leaves of a Shamrock'.⁵³ In 1939, a Mr McCawley of Brisbane echoed this idea when he said: 'We can treasure the memory of the Irish people who would not submit to persecution, but that is no cause why there should be any diminution of cordiality in our relations with others'.⁵⁴ Although the procession was suspended in the war years between 1944 and 1946, the remainder of the programme, including the race meeting, concert and sports day, were successful in attracting large crowds.

Faith of our Fathers: 1946–72

Father Michael Mahon, who was of Irish descent and a supporter of St Patrick's Day, was Warwick's parish priest from 1948 until his death in 1969. He was credited with revitalising Warwick's St Patrick's Day procession after the war, so that it became recognised 'as the largest national day procession in Australia'.⁵⁵ Father Mahon was a deeply spiritual man, and he continued the work of Fathers Horan and Potter in building schools and other church infrastructure. St Patrick's Day took on even stronger religious overtones during his time as parish priest. In many respects, Warwick's post-war St Patrick's Day celebrations mirrored Melbourne's experience under Archbishop Mannix. Like Melbourne, after 1945 St Patrick's Day in Warwick came to feature strongly Catholic and anti-communist rhetoric.⁵⁶

Beginning in 1946, the heightened religious tone of the time was reflected in the toast to 'The Day We Celebrate' given by Bishop Joseph Roper of Toowoomba. He spoke of St Patrick's Day as a religious festival established by the 'law of the Catholic Church', not by 'any gathering of Irishmen'. He argued that 'Australia had been taught by St Patrick's Day to be and to remain a Christian nation', and he went on to suggest that the rehabilitation of Germany or Japan and achievement of peace and 'international happiness' could only happen if Christianity was accepted by all nations.⁵⁷

At the 1918 St Patrick's Day luncheon, E.J. Brennan had declared that no Irishmen should vote for the conservative Queensland state Liberal Party. By contrast, in 1952, the Rev. P. O'Donnell, coadjutor archbishop of Brisbane, in giving the toast to 'The Day We Celebrate' at the St Patrick's Day dinner, called on those of Irish blood to reject communism, saying:

We have sensed the poison of Communism here within the shores of our own Australia ... let me assert in the face of 1500 years of a glorious past that any man of Irish blood who would lend countenance to this evil thing betrays at once the noblest traditions of his race.⁵⁸

In 1954, Bishop Brennan of Toowoomba stressed the importance of St Patrick's Day to the Catholic Church and to Australia. He talked about the 'love of country' the Irish had brought to Australia, which had translated into 'wonderful patriotism to Australia'. He emphasised the importance of celebrating St Patrick's Day because, if 'St Patrick was forgotten', it would be 'a sad day for Catholic Australia and for the whole Australian nation'.⁵⁹ 1954 was a Marian Year, and six out of the ten floats in the procession had religious themes. All four of the country entries were of a religious nature, illustrating the strength of the Catholic community in their areas. The Swan Creek float was titled 'The Marian Year' and featured 'Our Lady' in her various manifestations.⁶⁰ In 1958, on the centenary of the apparition at Lourdes, Swan Creek won the Father Mahon Shield with a float that commemorated this event. Seventeen visiting priests were present at these celebrations, including Dean Herbert, parish priest of Roma, who had recently returned from Ireland and who was accorded the honour of riding on the jaunting car.

St Patrick's Day in 1960s' Warwick: A Personal Recollection

This brings the story to the 1960s and my memories of St Patrick's Day in Warwick. I recall the day starting with mass to 'thank God for the Gift of Faith our Ancestors brought from Ireland'.⁶¹ Then the crowds, reported as in their thousands, gathered in Warwick's main street, Palmerin Street, to watch the procession.

Reflecting the continuous efforts at demonstrating the goodwill towards the 'Kindred Societies', during the 1960s the Scottish Thistle Pipe Band marched towards the front of the parade. Behind the band came the iconic Irish jaunting car driven by Irish-born Jim McCarthy.⁶² In keeping with the importance of the day to Warwick's Catholic calendar, Bishop Brennan of Toowoomba and Warwick's parish priest, Father Mahon, reviewed the parade from a podium,

often set up at the intersection of Palmerin and Grafton streets, near the statue of Queensland's Catholic Irish-Australian premier, T.C. Byrnes, who had held the office briefly in 1898.⁶³

A glimpse at a few of the floats in the 1960s gives a flavour of the religious and nostalgic themes of the time. In 1961, as a nine-year-old, my first experience on the Swan Creek float was as one of the three wise men on a 'religious' float. Entitled 'St Patrick's Message for Ireland', the float showed St Patrick and the birth of Jesus. On one side were silver rays stretching across the world from Ireland and symbolising the spreading of the faith.⁶⁴ I appeared again in 1963 as a young 'Irish girl' when the theme of Swan Creek's entry was derived from the Irish poet Thomas Moore's 'Love's Young Dream'.⁶⁵ The 1964 float of the Christian Brothers college, 'Mass Rock', depicted 'the long years when the Catholic Faith was outlawed in Ireland'.⁶⁶ At the front of the float was a miniature representation of Warwick's St Mary's Church, whose foundation stone had been dedicated in 1920 by Archbishop Mannix, 'a great son of Ireland and friend of Australia'.⁶⁷ The pupils of the Christian Brothers marched behind their float.

Gladfield, about 20 kilometres north of Swan Creek, was another community with strong Irish Catholic links.⁶⁸ Its 1968 float was in the form of a large sailing ship with the title, 'O! Steer my Barque to Erin's Isle, for Erin is my Home', evoking the recurring theme of returning home to Ireland.⁶⁹ At the front of the float was the green flag with the golden harp featured in the 1872 St Patrick's Day celebrations, and remembered as the 'Irish flag' by some Warwick locals of the 1960s, including myself.⁷⁰ The Grand Irish National Concert, with its programme of nostalgic Irish songs and dances, was held in the Warwick Town Hall on either St Patrick's Day itself or a day on either side of it. The words of 'Hail Glorious St Patrick' and 'God Save Ireland' were included in the programme so that all could join in singing these songs so replete with cultural memory.⁷¹

As had been the tradition since 1872, many, including local dignitaries, attended the Grand Irish Dinner, held a few days either side of St Patrick's Day. Like several generations before them, the guests toasted the queen, the pope, 'The Day We Celebrate' and the 'Kindred Societies', and they listened intently to a special guest speaker evoking links to Ireland.

The Last Years, 1969–72

Father Mahon died unexpectedly in 1969. His successor, Father J. Bergin, appointed in 1971, made the decision that the 1972 St Patrick's Day week-long celebration would be the last. Father McKey believes the cost of the event was the main reason for Bergin's decision.⁷² Certainly, by the time of Mahon's death, the parish was in serious debt and St Patrick's Day, which had been subsidised by the parish, was considered no longer viable. There were also other religious and social factors that may have been behind the decline in the popularity of St Patrick's Day. Patrick O'Farrell suggests that St Patrick's Day was out of keeping with the 'nature and tone of Vatican II Catholicism'.⁷³ Father Hal Ranger, a young curate in Warwick in the 1960s, echoes this view. He says that Vatican II sought to make the church more relevant and open.⁷⁴

By the early 1970s, St Patrick's Day in Warwick seemed in many respects to represent a holding on to the past. Increasing numbers of the younger generation, including myself, moved away from Warwick for educational and work opportunities, eroding Warwick's closely-knit Catholic community. Many of us also left the Catholic Church. All of this is worthy of more discussion at another time. Perhaps the parish community's loyalty to Father Mahon had to some extent masked these social changes that would eventually have seen the relevance of St Patrick's Day questioned. Father Bergin replaced the traditional celebrations with a parish festival, initially called St Patrick's Festival and later simply the Parish Festival. It was held on the Saturday closest to St Patrick's Day and was a cornerstone of Bergin's fundraising plans. Once again the parishioners supported their parish priest and the festival raised significant funds. Today a mass is held at St Mary's Church to mark St Patrick's Day. There has been an occasional

St Patrick's Day dinner or other Irish event, but unlike places such as Brisbane no regular celebration has re-emerged to mark the day.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that St Patrick's Day was a rallying point for the large numbers of early Irish-born immigrants in and around Warwick. As Oona Frawley reflects: 'Migration away from home ... heightens and throws into acute relief the idea of one's homeland'.⁷⁵ That the celebrations survived across several generations partly helps explain why the young Irish Australians of the 1960s retained a strong sense of connection to their Irish ancestry. St Patrick's Day, underpinned by support from the clergy, the Hibernians, the local districts and the Catholic schools, was able to evolve through generational and social change. It reinvented itself as times changed. This is clearly evident in the shift from the political preoccupations of the 1880s and 1914-21 to the religious focus of the 1950s.

Of particular note is the consistency of support for St Patrick's Day given by Warwick's Catholic Church leaders between 1872 and 1972. With the exception of eleven years, three parish priests, the Irish-born Father James Horan (1876-1905), and Monsignor Michael Potter (1905-1944) and Irish-Australian Father Michael Mahon (1948-1969) led the parish throughout this period. They were largely responsible for developing the Catholic infrastructure in and around Warwick and thus creating an environment in which Catholicism was 'central to people's lives'.⁷⁶ St Patrick's Day was critical to this process. Father Hal Ranger recalls the day as elevated to 'arguably the most significant celebration in the church calendar'.⁷⁷

The Hibernians, particularly in the early days, were also crucial to the success of St Patrick's Day in Warwick. Their Irish-born leaders, and the generations of Irish Australians who followed, were passionate about their Irish heritage and were respected in the broader community. Their work during the late nineteenth century laid the foundations for the continued success of St Patrick's Day celebrations into the twentieth century. The local Catholic schools also actively participated, bolstering the processions and concerts with large numbers of their pupils. In addition, Catholic schools, as Elizabeth Malcolm and Dianne Hall have pointed out, exposed students to the 'Irish accents, viewpoints and values' of their clerical teachers.⁷⁸ This helps to explain why in the 1960s fourth-generation Irish Australians, like myself, had a strong sense of being an 'Irish Catholic'.

St Patrick's Day received strong backing from Catholic leaders and sometimes non-Catholic ones, including premiers, local mayors and councillors, state and federal MPs, as well as archbishops and bishops.⁷⁹ During the 1960s, local businesses got behind the event taking out advertisements in the press, and many closed their doors for the procession even though the day was no longer declared a public holiday. All these factors combined to create the context in which Warwick's St Patrick's Day maintained its popularity and meaning for a hundred years. The result was several generations of Warwick people, stretching from the 1870s into the 1970s, with a strong sense of connection to Ireland.

Postscript

Ironically, it is the 1917 Warwick egg-throwing incident that has shone a light on the Irish of Warwick in more recent times, with commemorative functions in 2007 and 2017 marking the 90th and 100th anniversaries of the event. Fast forward from the 1960s to Easter 2018: I'm back in the Swan Creek School of Arts, once a centre for local Catholics. But I'm there now for a gathering of the descendants of my great grandparents, George and Mary Ann Booth of County Tyrone. The third-, fourth-, fifth- and sixth-generation descendants live in all corners of Australia; many are not Catholics; only a few would have heard of the Irish home rule movement; and most would not recognise 'Hail Glorious St Patrick', let alone think it was the national

anthem. However, I suspect that they could all happily live with ‘The Day We Celebrate’ the ‘Irish of Warwick’, now remembered as 29 November 1917, when Paddy Brosnan of Irish Catholic parentage, in an act of defiance, threw an egg at Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes at Warwick’s railway station.

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- ⁷⁰ Slides of the 1963, 1964 and 1968 floats mentioned in this section are part of the Marie Booth slide collection held by the author, her daughter. In many respects the slides were the inspiration for this exploration of St Patrick's Day.
- ⁷¹ Grand Irish National Concert programme, 18 March 1967, Father Joe McKey Archives and Museum, Warwick, Queensland. The programme includes the words for 'Hail Glorious St Patrick' and 'God Save Ireland'.

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