

## Brother of the Month Brother Cronan Curran 1915-1980

William Curran was born in Barretstown, near Fethard, in County Tipperary, Ireland, on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 1915. He received his early education at his local Primary school. A recruiter for the Brothers must have arrived because we next see young William joining the Juniorate in Castletown when he was about fourteen or fifteen. On the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1931 he entered the Novitiate and took the habit on the 8<sup>th</sup> December of the same year.



In those years, young Brothers were asked to volunteer for the missions, especially to the Far East. In the spring of 1933 Brother Cronan together with nine other volunteers were

assembled in Castletown for a sendoff ceremony. They were escorted by a senior Brother to London and eventually to Marseilles where they boarded a large passenger boat bound for the East.



On arrival in Penang, Malaysia, Brother Cronan was posted to St George's Taiping. He was 18 years old and was asked to teach in the higher classes. At the time it was customary for the Brother or teacher to teach all subjects in his class. For one so young and inexperienced this must have been a major challenge. Fortunately Brother Cronan was blessed with a happy disposition and he got on with the work. Just as he was growing to like Taiping and his students he was told he was needed in Hong Kong and arrived there in February 1934.

His new posting was to St Joseph's College, already well established and respected after nearly sixty years existence. The contrast with peaceful Taiping was evident since his new community and school was situated cheek by jowl with the rapidly developing commercial centre of Hong Kong. All in all he was to serve three terms in Hong Kong and it was there he would end his days. This first stint was to last until 1937 and he was put teaching Class 6, the equivalent of Form 1.

It so happened that St. Joseph's was celebrating its Diamond Jubilee in 1935 so that Brother Cronan's early interest in scouting and games was appreciated.

Brother Cronan, middle of front row,  
with his 6A class in 1935-36.



His next assignment was to St. Joseph's Institution, Singapore under the principalship of Brother Stephen Buckley. The school had no less than 18 Brothers on the staff. Then in 1941, he was transferred to St Xavier's Institution, Penang, which had been founded in 1852. For a while all went well following a well established pattern in both school and community. The events of the 8<sup>th</sup> December 1941 were to change all that, with the bombing of Penang and Singapore and other towns. Japanese forces also made their first landings on the same day and by the 17<sup>th</sup> December Penang was invaded and occupied. After some time schools were reopened but the medium of instruction switched from English to Japanese. Brother Cronan was transferred to St Patrick's Community Singapore, to a house that was reputed to be haunted! During the day The Brothers were allowed to teach in a government school through the medium of Japanese. In the evenings they attended further classes to deepen their command of the language.



Staff of St. Joseph's Institution, Singapore, 1937. Brother Cronan is standing second from the right, beside Brother James Dooley.

Then came the fateful decision by the Bishop and some of the Catholic population of Singapore to leave for a camp in Malaysia for better safety and security. Hundreds of Catholic religious and families were transferred hundreds of miles to a jungle clearing in Bahau, Negri Sembilan. The Japanese had painted a rosy picture of this camp. In reality the picture was bleak and living conditions barely good enough to survive.



Brother Cronan, left, with  
Brother Ignatius Barry

Brother Cronan was one of the jungle inhabitants. When it came to division of labour, he undertook to lead a team to deal with the problem of mosquitoes, the “Mosquito Brigade” as it were. Each morning they set out to spray all the stagnant water they could find. The area that had to be covered was extensive and since stagnant water could lie hidden in the undergrowth the task was well nigh impossible. Every day the war went on between man and nature. Clouds of hungry mosquitoes would descend on the living quarters at sunset, frustrating the team’s best efforts. Most of the inhabitants, including Brother Cronan, got malaria and two Brothers died of the virulent cerebral variety. That so many survived is somewhat of a mystery and perhaps the “Mosquito Brigade” could take some solace from that.

In later life Brother Cronan took on a somewhat plump appearance but when he emerged from the jungle in 1945 he was extremely thin and haggard looking. A year or so later he was allowed home for a long leave that was badly needed. On his return, at the age of thirty-three, he was posted back to St Joseph’s College, Hong Kong. He was to spend ten years there, in the prime of life. Among his students at the time would have been the recently awarded Nobel Laureate, Charles Kao. Apart from regular teaching duties, he became heavily involved in scouting and football. He not only helped the College’s 1<sup>st</sup> Hong Kong troop but, in 1951, was appointed by the Governor as the first Scout Commissioner of Victoria, the official name of the city on Hong Kong Island.



In these same years he helped pioneer the setting up of the Hong Kong Sports Association which was to be the organizing and coordinating body for all Inter-School sports competitions. This Association has now grown into a massive body comprising 1,083 schools, catering to 126,812 students and coordinating 36 sports. Brother Cronan himself became the chairman of the Hong Kong Schools Sports Football Competitions, the most popular of all Inter-School sports. Such Inter-School games can be very competitive and rouse the passions at times. Brother Cronan, on more than one occasion, had to mediate in disputes but in the end calm was usually restored. Those

ten years in St Joseph's were perhaps the most exciting and fulfilling in his career.



By contrast his next appointment was back to the relative tranquility of Taiping but then, after three years, he was appointed headmaster of La Salle School in Petaling Jaya, a growing satellite town of Kuala Lumpur. At first he was in charge of the Primary school and then, in 1962, of the Secondary school as well. It was a challenging task because he had to commute from the city

every day, the school was still in its infancy and there were few facilities and little or no money to hand. The school field was not properly turfed and former pupils recall spending PE lessons clearing the field of stones and weeds. Brother Cronan made good progress wooing parents and well-wishers who would later become a potent force in helping La Salle Petaling Jaya become one of the best schools in the state.

In 1963, Brother Cronan set up a Scout Troop in the school with an enrollment of 80 cubs, 64 scouts, 22 senior scouts and he himself was GSM. After only one year the Troop received an award for collecting the highest amount for the Petaling Jaya Job Week. The Scout troop thrived and many more awards were to come. We know that acorns grow into mighty trees. It can be truly said that the scout acorn that Brother Cronan sowed in La Salle has spread its branches all over Petaling Jaya.

During these years many will remember him as the organizer in chief of interesting programmes for the Brothers who gathered on Penang Hill or the Cameron Highlands for their summer breaks. He seemed to have a natural aptitude for setting up games competitions and, on one memorable occasion, even managed to organize a fancy dress parade. In these ways he played his part in the bonding of the Brothers.

From 1965 to 1969 he was sent to help Brother Robert O'Sullivan in a Lasallian school in Muar, a pretty lonely outpost, far from the excitement and activity he was used to. He therefore much appreciated going to the Brothers' Community in Malacca for the weekends.

Perhaps these were the most challenging three years of his career and he was therefore overjoyed when he received the news of his transfer back to Hong Kong, to the newly opened school and community of Chan Sui Ki (La Salle), Kowloon. Much work had to be done to get the school ready for the first intake in September. When school did open Brother Cronan, in addition to his class-work, took charge of the

school prefects. Under his direction they were of great assistance in maintaining good school discipline. Always ready to lend a helping hand, he next took charge of the school library as well as organizing the school Scout Troop and becoming the first scout leader of the 205<sup>th</sup> Kowloon Scout Group. In 1974, he was also presented with the Chief Scout's Award by the District Commissioner.



The four pioneer Brothers in the Community were Herman Fenton, Eugene Sharkey, Paul Hackett and Cronan. Brother Herman was Director and he asked Brother Cronan to attend to all that was necessary for furnishing the Community quarters. He took this responsibility seriously and chose durable but elegant furniture. He took particular interest in the chapel and bought beautiful vestments. He always had a deep interest in everything connected with liturgy such as decoration of the altar and looking after the altar servers and this interest stayed with him to the end.



In 1974 he was transferred to St Joseph's College where he had first started his teaching career and where he was destined to end his days. He continued to teach and to help out in both scouting and the library. On reaching the age of sixty in 1975 he retired from full-time teaching but taught catechism in Forms 1 and 2 as well as in the parish.

Throughout life he had a warm regard for his pupils and related pleasantly with parents, two very Lasallian characteristics. He took his religious duties seriously and could be relied upon to be at prayer at prescribed times. His piety was unostentatious and he seemed to be at home in the chapel. He has left a fine example of dedication to the training of youth and of devotion to duty.

Although he had had somewhat indifferent health for some time, his general condition did not raise undue alarm. He had been hospitalized a few times but never for long periods. The Brothers of St Joseph's were therefore taken aback by the speed of the final events. This is how they were described by the Director, Brother Patrick Tierney: "On the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> November he was up as usual for Morning Prayer and indeed we remarked afterwards that Brother Cronan seemed to be in stronger voice

than usual. Mid morning, however, he was asking to see the doctor, who, when eventually contacted, said to send him to St Paul's Hospital by ambulance.

The ambulance took him off before noon, accompanied by Brother Brendan Dunne. Brother Cronan had to be given oxygen in the ambulance and Brother Brendan said he was failing fast en route. He lapsed into a sort of coma on arrival, was pumped and injected into the heart and placed in the ICU where he lingered for a few hours until about 3.00pm. He did not recognize anybody during that period. The doctor and the Sisters said he could not have suffered much pain." He had succumbed to a heart attack and died peacefully, fortified with the rites of the Church.

The burial took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> November in the Catholic cemetery in Happy Valley with many Brothers and friends attending. One Brother noticed that there was a group of students from St Joseph's College each holding a small bunch of white flowers. They stood for a moment by the grave and then dropped the flowers on the coffin and went away. It was their small but eloquent tribute to a person who had spent his life with such dedication for the benefit of others.



Brother Raphael Egan paying his last respects

### Brother Cronan's Postings

St. George's Institution, Taiping	1933-34
St. Joseph's College, Hong Kong	1934-37
St. Joseph's Institution, Singapore	1937-41
St. Xavier's Institution, Penang	1941-42
St. John's Institution, Kuala Lumpur	1942-43
Bahau Jungle	1943-45
Home Leave, Ireland	1946-47
St. Joseph's College, Hong Kong	1948-58
St. George's Institution, Taiping	1958-61
La Salle Primary and Secondary, Petaling Jaya	1961-65
St. Andrew's School, Muar	1966-69
Chan Sui Ki (La Salle) College, Hong Kong	1969-74
St. Joseph's College, Hong Kong	1974-80