

June 18

Fr EDWARD BIEHLER

29 May 1861 – 18 June 1927



Edward Biehler is one of the better known of the early Jesuits because of the bands he set up in Chishawasha and in Empanjeni, and because of his rather authoritarian, even autocratic, ways. Born in Guebwiller, Alsace, he was expelled, as were Lallemand, Nicot, Johanny, Goetz and Erhart, when the Germans took over that province from France after the Franco Prussian war in 1870. Educated by the Marist brothers he eventually arrived at Roehampton, the Jesuit novitiate in London.

In 1886 he was in St Aidan's where his musical gifts were used in the choir. After theology he came via Beira to Salisbury, no easy journey in those days before the railway. It was 1894. Chishawasha had been founded and the first Chimuranga had not yet happened. He threw himself into school work and had considerable success until the rising. He took a belligerent approach in response to it being, in succession; a scout, a stretcher bearer, an interpreter and even a trooper.

After the rising, he returned to the schoolroom and the students returned in increasing numbers. Gradually his band took shape. He recognised the talent of many local young people and begged instruments from Europe. Public

recognition came when Earl Grey invited the band to come to Mafeking to welcome the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, in 1902. It also came from Dame Clara Butt, a contralto and one of the most popular English singers at the turn of the century. On a visit to the colony at the time, two things stood out for her: the Victoria Falls and the Chishawasha Band.

After 15 years at Chishawasha, Biehler moved to Empandeni for the following 17 years. Again his great contribution was in the schools which he used to visit regularly where his 'fatherly' ways were expressed in his usual stern fashion. As mentioned, he also started a band there. The move meant he had to start from scratch with a new language. Nothing daunted, having produced a dictionary in Shona in Chishawasha he went on to produce one in Ndebele.