

18 August

Fr HENRY SCHOMBERG KERR 15 August 1838 – 18 August 1895



Many Jesuits of Southern Africa are vaguely aware of the names of the early leaders of the Zambezi Mission; Depelchin, Weld, Alphonse Daignault and Henry Schomberg Kerr. What they may be less aware of is their distinguished history before they came on the mission. Henry's obituarist seems to enjoy the succession of aristocratic titles that float around his ancestry. Fr Kerr (the Schomberg is a first name, confusing as 'double-barrelled' names are usually surnames), joined the Royal Navy, as did Augustus Law, and rose to the rank of commander by the time he was 28. His ship was the *Bellerophon*, but not the ship of the same

name on which Napoleon surrendered to the British. Kerr saw service in the Crimea war and later, one harsh winter, off Halifax, Nova Scotia, after he had joined the Catholic Church, when a large group of sailors claimed they were Catholic so as to go on shore 'to church' but in reality, to warm out in the winter cold in a Canadian Bar, he caught up with them and had them stand to attention for two hours in the snow and ice. He did the same! "Heroic leadership"!

He was poised for a promising career in the navy but he gave it up to join the Society in 1867. But he did not give up the deep friendships forged over those early years. He taught at Mount St Mary's and Beaumont but his military career was not forgotten and he was soon sent as chaplain to the British troops in Cyprus. He later went on to be chaplain to the Viceroy of India arousing Protestant suspicions. But he carried out his work with a delicacy that impressed the Viceroy. He was attacked by typhoid fever in 1880 and nearly died.

On his recovery, he returned to England and became socius to the Master of Novices and later became superior in the parish in Bournemouth. But, when they were looking for an Archbishop of Bombay, his name came up and he was actually chosen. But for health reasons, there was a change of mind much to his relief.

His obituary in *Letters and Notices* runs to 22 pages but it says little about his time as Superior of the Zambezi Mission. Another article, by Fr Colley, aids us

here. Fr Weld, who succeeded Depelchin, wanted to build a province of which St Aidan's would be part. He set up a novitiate and a house of studies and even a tertianship. But he was moving too fast and his successor, Fr Daignault, had to dismantle some of the structures and the young Jesuits, who were sent out from Europe to build the new province, were sent back to Europe to complete their studies. It was the turn of Kerr to consolidate these changes (they seem to have been of one mind) and he brought his military training and organisational skills to bear on this task. He started with St Aidan's, Dunbrody and Vleisfontein and gradually moved his focus to the work north of the Limpopo following the three Jesuits who went there at the time of the Pioneer column (1890). It was Kerr who supported the founding work in Chishawasha, Fort Victoria (Masvingo) and Bulawayo. Colley calls him 'the founder' of the mission but it is not a title that can be given to any one person. Many were involved and Bishop Ricards, Frs Depelchin, Weld and Daignault all played their part.