

IRISH JESUITS IN HONG KONG

— Mrs Rose Goodstadt

I am sure you all have heard of Hong Kong (HK). It is a city with great natural beauty: high mountains, a deep harbour and dozens of small islands. It is a tourist destination, an international trading centre, and the world's third largest financial hub after New York and London.

But has HK always been like this over the past 80 years? Was this mission field dotted with 5-star hotels and luxury yachts? What were the conditions under which these Irish missionaries lived, worked, and died. [And to what extent had this city benefitted from these missionaries.](#)

In 1945, HK could not be more different from what it is now. It was the end of WWII, the end of four years of brutal Japanese occupation. The city was badly bombed, and a million people had fled or been deported. The remaining 600,000, traumatised, injured and starving, struggled to rebuild their lives, together with those returning from their exile. Their urgent task was to find food and shelter and to avoid epidemics like cholera. TB and polio were rampant, but even rudimentary medical care was lacking. [Social, financial and legal structures were destroyed during the war.](#)



Bio: Mrs. Rose Goodstadt and her family have supported Missionaries in China and Hong Kong for over 100 years. She studied Social Sciences & Public Administration in New York and Oxford. She returned to Hong Kong in 1961 and devoted her life to serving the community. Rose was Deputy Director of the Social Welfare Department and Head of the Hospital Services Department. She formulated social policies and provided welfare services across a wide field and was more of a trailblazer and social reformer than a typical civil servant. She has been heavily involved with NGOs serving people with disabilities, cancer and AIDs etc. She devised the local sign language for the deaf in 1972. She was a member of the Hospital Authority responsible for all Hong Kong's public hospitals. Rose is an authentic person, living out of the Ignatian ethos of 'men and women for others.'

Former British Government officers who had survived the four years of captivity in Japanese '*Prisoners of War*' camps, struggled to restart governing the city.

Unfortunately, the rebuilding efforts became much more difficult barely four years later. In 1949, the Communist Party became the legitimate ruler of China. This led to two million people flooding into HK. That was the situation the Irish Jesuits faced in their first 20 to 30 years.

I must mention three other challenges for these young Irishmen. The first was to master the local language. Chinese language does not use alphabets; each written word is represented by a unique pictogram. These young missionaries had to acquire a vocabulary of 4,000 to 6,000 words to enable them to teach in secondary schools and universities and hold discussions on religious topics. The spoken language – which in HK is Cantonese – is just as complicated if not more so. Each sound can refer to 20 different words, and a sound has up to 9 tones, each of these again can refer to another 10 different words. In brief, if you cannot distinguish the tones, any sound can mean up to 100 different things. Learning to speak and write Chinese well, even for a highly intelligent Jesuit, can be martyrdom.

The second challenge was the heat, the humidity and the teeming crowds that are everywhere. For large parts of the year, temperatures can be in the high 30s, with

humidity near 100%. There were people everywhere – pushing through crowds on the pavements, squeezing onto buses, battling for space with unlicensed hawkers. There were coolies with heavy cargos, women queuing for water at public water hydrants, and hundreds of children coming out the school gates as hundreds of other children were pushing in at the same time. Most schools in those days operated on a three-shift basis. When Government started to build resettlement housing in 1954, the standard space allotted to each adult was 24 square feet, or about the size of a double bed, with two children counted as one adult. The Government was pushed into launching a public housing programme only after a squatter fire on Christmas eve of 1953 swept through squatter huts that housed 68,000 people. In that one night, tens of thousands of families lost everything they had built up. I remember watching the whole sky turning red.

To understand just how crowded HK is, let us compare the population density with that in Ireland. Here, the density is 77 persons per square kilometre; in HK, it is 7,150.

So, these missionaries from the Emerald Isle found themselves in brutally hot & humid weather, squashed in on all sides by big pushing crowds, struggling to grasp one of the most difficult languages in the world.

The third challenge sounds rather odd but caused considerable difficulties. For many years, there was not enough water for the sudden influx of 2 million or more people. Water rationing was the normal condition and in the worst year, this was limited to four hours on every four days. My husband, a Welshman, joked that the first survival skill he had to learn was how to take a bath in a teacup!

For a large part of this period, I worked as a civil servant in the social and medical fields and

as a volunteer in many NGOs. I was privileged to be able to enjoy the friendships of many of these extraordinary Irish Missionaries and to be inspired by them. This morning, I only have time to mention a few, to show you the wide range of innovative services they provided to meet the unique situation in HK.

One of the very first Irish Jesuits I met in 1950 was **Fr John Collins** and some 30 years later, I served with his brother, **Fr Edward Collins** on the *HK Catholic Marriage Advisory Council*.



Lucy Franks of Lucy Franks Consulting and John K Guiney SJ, IJI Director

My vivid childhood memory was listening to Fr John Collins discussing Catholic doctrine with my father in perfect classical Chinese. My father was only willing to hear God's sacred words from him because he was impressed by Fr Collins's Chinese.

This attraction to Irishmen speaking perfect Chinese was not restricted to my father, but also in other 'conversion' stories. Their interest in Christianity, in this 'foreign God', often started with their admiration of the priests' linguistic skills. They were touched by these foreigners who so warmly embraced Chinese culture, in the same tradition as Matteo Ricci in Beijing in the 16th century and Castiglione in the 18th century.

In 1961, when I returned from my education in the US and England, this same Fr John Collins asked me to work in the organisation he had just founded, *The HK Society for Rehabilitation*. This was a bold and ambitious project for 1961. This Society quickly established the first modern residential centre for 80 victims of industrial accidents. Without this kind of intensive rehabilitation to help the severely injured return to work, their families would have starved, as a social security scheme was not set up until 10 years later. Another innovative service started by Fr Collins in 1961 was the credit union which prevented low-wage workers falling into the traps of loan sharks. He also successfully convinced the Government to bring in legislation for its operation and control.

His credit union became the model for others to follow. I understand it was around this time that credit unions were started in Dublin.

Such vision and bold initiatives were particularly evident in the first 30 years of the Jesuit Mission in HK. By 1961, the population had increased to 3.1 million, half of it were refugees from mainland China and most of them struggling for survival in slums and squatter huts.

According to the 1961 census, only 2% of people in Hong Kong had post-secondary education. There was a serious lack of qualified manpower to build up the city and establish good governance. The 50 or so young, talented, well-educated, and totally dedicated Irish Jesuits immediately filled this gap. They were eagerly sought after to serve on councils and boards, for family welfare, workers, fisherman, seamen, ex-prisoners, and even on wholesale markets and agriculture. Never was there a city where priests were so widely involved.

Fr Thomas Ryan, in 1946, was the first Jesuit to become the Government's Director of Marketing and, later, Superintendent of Agriculture and Botany. During the Japanese occupation, most trees were cut down for fuel. The Bishop of HK was forced to cut down wooden structures in the Cathedral for this purpose. The tree-bare hills posed serious landslide problems and Fr Ryan planted thousands of trees imported from Australia.

One of the first priorities for the Jesuits was to care for children without schooling, more than 100,000 of them. **Fr Joseph Howatson**, in 1952, founded the *Boys and Girls Clubs* to provide basic care and training for children not attending school. It was only in 1978, nearly 30 years after the refugees crowded into the city, that there were sufficient facilities to provide nine years of education for all children. Fr Howatson's clubs also eased the worries of their parents, most of whom worked till 9 or 10 p.m.



Ruth Douglas, Irish Jesuit Province Assistant Education Delegate, Elizabeth Clarke, Clongowes Wood College Ethos Director, Joe Munnelly, IJI Communications and Research Officer

My first duty in the Social Welfare Department at the time was in children and youth services. I was amazed at another of Fr Howatson's imaginative schemes, started in 1949, his 'shoe-shine boys', modelled on the 'Belvedere newsboys' of Dublin. Each boy aged 10 or 12, were provided with a small wood box containing shoe-shine materials and with a footrest on top. This scheme gave the boys a small income and a sense of usefulness.

The Jesuits are, of course, most famous for their excellent schools. Their first task after WWII was to reopen their secondary school, the Wah Yan College, followed quickly by building another equally impressive one where my two brothers and my son were educated. *At that time, it was harder to find a school place than it was to win the lottery.* My brother's successful admission showed the human touch of the Jesuits. On hearing him say that he had only one younger brother but five older sisters, **Fr Patrick Cunningham** exclaimed, 'Oh, you poor boy, we must take you in!'

Fr Cunningham was very keen on traffic safety and was instrumental in starting the road safety scheme for school children. It was a strange coincidence that he died on a plane explosion over Vietnam. His death, however, did not distress me too much for I could see him in my mind, quietly praying with his Breviary when the fatal accident occurred. As with my other Jesuit friends, including **Fr Matthew Brosnan**, he was a very prayerful man.

Fr Brosnan was specially gifted as a spiritual director and retreat master. He was aware that the HK Diocese had begun to flourish and mature, and it was crucial to train an informed laity. In 1969 HK had its first Chinese bishop. Fr Brosnan conducted regular prayer groups for young men and women, especially those struggling to bring up children in a highly competitive environment. He inspired them to develop a lively faith of prayers and meditations and cultivate detachment from worldly things. [The number of Catholics in Hong Kong has now reached 5% of the population, nourished by the Jesuit spirit.](#)

The Jesuits' educational endeavours extended to universities, particularly Ricci Hall in HK University. Over these 80 years, young refugees from China as well as several generations of post-war HK-born children, were able to receive the very best education, and were guided and cherished throughout their formative years. Life-long friendships developed. [The two Wah Yan Colleges and Ricci Hall produced many community leaders including high court judges, barristers, medical consultants, heads of Government Departments etc.](#) Three well-known Wah Yan graduates are Sir Donald Tsang, the first Chief Executive of HK after its sovereignty was returned to China; Archbishop Dominic Tang of Guangzhou and Cardinal Stephen Chow, the current Bishop of HK.

I will now tell you about **Fr Patrick McGovern** whose contribution was in an entirely different area: helping the Government to formulate policies and to enact laws. He had a great understanding of HK affairs and a wide range of social contacts. In 1976, he was appointed by the Governor to the Legislative Council, which is the city's law-making body. Its members were top government officials and heads of big businesses. Media interest in this appointment was huge, not only because it was the first time a priest was appointed, but also because of the colourful way he arrived at the Council, in his noisy motorcycle, amidst chauffeur-driven Bentleys!

Fr McGovern went on to be a member of the Executive Council, the city's top policy advisory body to the Governor. In these important capacities, Fr McGovern was instrumental in improving Hong Kong's laws and policies, on housing, worker's welfare, child protection, etc. He was able to guide Hong Kong to develop into a caring and enlightened community.

Ricci Hall's chaplains included **Fr Alfred Deignan** and **Fr John Russell**. When these two well-loved priests were in hospital during their final illnesses, the daily roster of visitors always included a *Riccian*, in addition to members of the *Catholic Women's Guild*, the *Serra Club*, the *Thomas More Society* for Catholic lawyers, *The Guild of St. Luke* for Catholic doctors, and staff from *Hospice Care*, of which Fr Russell was a founding member and board Director.



Mrs Rose Goodstadt, Joe Munnelly, IJI Communications and Research Officer and Rutsuko Matsumoto, IJI International Grants Officer

The most significant venture founded by Fr Deignan is the *HK International Institute of Education and Leadership* established in 1997 to promote basic human values. Fr Deignan was deeply concerned about young people growing up in a progressively secular society where there is no belief in objective truth, little respect for ethical standards and personal freedom is seen as being without constraints. Very often, young people must choose between profit and honesty. Teachers feel inadequate in finding ways to guide these confused students or to provide them with a moral framework.

Fr Deignan had reason to feel proud of this new Institute. It offers a certificate course for teachers providing 90 hours of formal training on moral issues. Teachers, parents and students are also able to discuss their worries through seminars and social activities. Fr Deignan was convinced that improvements in human behaviour and relationship are key to the future. For his contribution in the social and educational fields, **he was awarded a Badge of Honour by the Government and Honorary Doctorates by The HK University and The Chinese University.**

Fr John Russell was noted for his brilliant mind, logical and clear analysis, and great spiritually. He helped to formulate the Diocese's new approach after Vatican II and helped the bishop to solve controversies among priests and religious groups. His 30 years of work as Spiritual Director to Catholic lawyers and Catholic doctors ensured that these important professionals always discharge their duties with justice and Christian compassion. On every occasion when he met a lawyer friend, even when that person is in business law, he never failed to urge 'be merciful, be merciful.'

Despite his busy schedule, he never failed to comfort a dying friend with his prayerful presence, be it 5 a.m. or midnight. His death 18 months ago saddened me greatly for it marked the end of my 75 years of association with these wonderful men who had my great admiration and deep affection. There is now only one Irish Jesuit left in Hong Kong.

Most Irish Jesuits in HK chose to end their lives in their mission field, to 'leave their bones there' as Fr Russell said. A few came back to Ireland when independent living was no longer possible.

Fr Peter Brady returned to Dublin in 2002. In Ireland, he was very homesick for HK where he had spent 45 long years. My husband used to spend every Wednesday morning with him. They must have presented quite a spectacle: an Irishman and a Welshman speaking Cantonese all morning, discussing HK affairs.

Fr Brady's book on moral theology, written in Chinese, is still widely used in China.

Another of my Jesuit friends who came back to Dublin for health reasons was **Fr James Hurley**. He was gravely concerned about the plight of factory workers. Until the mid-1980s, HK was largely a manufacturing city. Working hours were from 9 to 10, seven days a week, with little legislative protection. Fr Hurley worked in a garment factory for a year and moved to live with the workers in cramped factory premises. He relentlessly used the media to publicise the plight of the workers. He also produced two books in Chinese. Here in *Milltown*, he regularly offered Mass in Cantonese for us ex-HK residents. I was moved to see his former parishioners visited him from the US and HK, including an ex-prisoner whom he had helped to rehabilitate and whose son won a scholarship to a British university.

I will tell you a little tale on an interesting connection between Ireland and Hong Kong.

In your 1916 Easter Uprising, the Commander of the Volunteer Forces in St. Stephen's Green was Commandant Michael Mallin. The night before he was executed, his pregnant wife visited him in jail together with his two-year-old son, Joseph.

This Irish hero said to the baby boy, 'Joseph, my little man, grow up and be a priest if you can.' He became **Fr Joseph Mallin** and a teacher and a supervisor in Wah Yan College where my son was a student for eight years. Fr Mallin also taught him to play the flute, and 30 years later, when he came to Dublin in 2016 for the Centenary Anniversary of the Easter Uprising, one of his first questions to me was, 'Does Leo still play the flute?' Fr Mallin lived till aged 104. Until the year before he died, he was at the school gate every afternoon, to ensure that all the boys boarded the school bus safely. Through him, generations of students and their parents experienced the tender love of Jesus.

Throughout the past 80 years, the anniversary of which we celebrate today, HK never ceased to struggle, first to survive, then to build and build: a new school completed every week, and some 20 new hospitals established, and public housing for 2.6 million people. HK people continuously aspire for stability, for prosperity and better opportunities.

At the same time, they are keenly aware of the political changes in Communist China just across the border. They remember the local riots in 1956 and 1967 when more than 100 died and about 1,400 injured. They knew the



John Punch and Fr Joseph Hao Wanhui SJ

change of sovereignty to China was inevitable and were concerned about their future. In their journey of uncertainty and changes, they were accompanied by the unwavering love and dedication of these missionaries who shared their hopes and fears and showed what was possible in the human spirit.

The Jesuits provided the first group of talents at the beginning of HK's success story and set up imaginative and innovative programmes to suit various conditions at various times, ranging from 'shoeshine boys' to policy advisers, from grammar schools to a teacher's training Institute. Their efforts helped Hong Kong with a refugee population in 1945 to grow into the modern, thriving financial hub it is today. This city is now the 8th wealthiest city in the world, with 156,000 millionaires. St Ignatius' salutations to his 'sons' was never so well fulfilled: 'Go forth and set the world on fire'.

But we must remember that these missionaries were not politicians or educationalists or social workers. They were first and foremost priests of God; they travelled 6,000 miles to the Orient in response to Christ's call, 'teach yee all nations, baptising them....' Their work was the means to bring the Good News to the city. They were the conduit of Divine Grace into a changing and complex society, in ways appropriate to the time and the unique situations. They were 'the light to the gentiles' reflecting Christ. Their motto is 'Honor of God, Salvation of Souls'

In these 80 years, many Wah Yan graduates, Ricci students and Jesuit friends were baptised and their Faith often extended to their families and friends. Those souls were not won by Irish talents and skills, but by these priests' heroic virtues and personal sanctity. Witnessing their total dedication to the people, for the greater glory of God, '*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*', and experiencing their compassion and spirituality, the Chinese came to believe that Christ is the Son of God and received Salvation through Him.

But conversions were not just the baptisms, they had to include the continued growth in Christian principles and moral values. The Jesuits' presence in HK has made positive impacts on the citizens' personal lives and provided the moral fabric for a secular society.

I like to think that a city, rich or poor, must have a moral framework to develop. I believe that the Irish Jesuits' 80 years of Christian education, promotion of human values, spiritual guidance, personal examples and long years of warm friendship gave the city its true value – its soul.