



Archdeacon Adolphe Joseph Lecaille
(*Cathedral Chronicle*, August-September 1935)

Lecaille, Adolphe Joseph (1826-1908), was born 23 September 1826. In one of his wills, Lecaille stated that he was from the town of Marbais in the province of Southern Brabant, in Belgium. Brabant was a province of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands from 1815 until 1830 and a province of Belgium from 1830 until 1995, when it was split into the Dutch-speaking Flemish Brabant in the north, the French-speaking Walloon Brabant in the south and the central bilingual Brussels-Capital Region. Research has as yet failed to identify if Lecaille's early training in Belgium may have assisted him to gain his later proficiency as an 'architect' and builder.

Lecaille was ordained a Catholic priest at Propaganda College, Rome in 1856 and on 11 February 1858 arrived at Fremantle, Western Australia on the *Lochnagar*. He was soon appointed to Bunbury, and with the absence of finance and alternative 'architect'-builders, constructed the first presbytery at Bunbury and the first chapel at The Vasse (Busselton). To assist with his efforts in WA, Lecaille was naturalised as a British subject in November 1859 by the assent of the Legislative Council.

Professional architectural practice requires certain affluence, or a market, to exist. With the impoverished days of the early British colony at WA, a place battling for survival, little could be spared for enriching the built environment. Early buildings were generally crude and, away from Perth and Fremantle, often owner-designed and built. In the difficult economic surroundings, 'moonlighting' government-employed professionals did the majority of the scarce private design work available.

There were of course individuals involved with Catholic Church work, who through their love of God received little or no financial reward for their design efforts, and with Protestant government architects such as Richard Jewell (1810-1891), ensured that private architects could not sustain a practice and compete for various Church

projects. Lecaille, Italian mason Joseph Ascione (1819-1888), and Irish carpenter Joseph Nunan (1842-1885) may all fall into the category of 'love of God architects' who produced designs, often simple, that none-the-less were fit-for-purpose structures. With a lack of private capital limiting domestic works, the fact that the government only used its own employees for designing its buildings, Jewell's eminence, and the unpaid 'architects' removing the possibility of any residual church projects, prior to the 1880s there was little or no work left over for professional architects in WA.

In this context, when appointed to the Geraldton area in early 1865, it is not surprising that the energetic priest again took responsibility for the design and construction of his own church buildings in the region. Lecaille arrived at the little town of Greenough on 25 February 1865, where he was to remain until 23 March 1900. While at Greenough he looked after his flock at the 'Back, Front, and Central Flats'; and also the people at many other places including Geraldton, Northampton, Dongara, Yarragadee, Strawberry, Mt Erin, Mullewa and Gullewa - each of these being many miles apart. He literally laid the foundations of the Catholic Church in the district and completed construction of the original St Peter's Church at Greenough (1866-1867), the original Sancta Maria in Ara Coeli Church in Northampton (1867-1868) and the original St Francis Xavier's Church in Geraldton (1869-1872), all now demolished.

With recognition of many enduring years of work and achievements, Bishop Martin Griver appointed Fr Matthew Gibney as Vicar General and Fr Lecaille as an Archdeacon in 1873. Lecaille also built St John's Church, Bridgid Road, Bootenal (North Greenough 1874), and St Thomas' Church corner McCartney and Nabbeja Roads, Bradley's Crossing (East Greenough 1878). These two little buildings at upper Greenough remain today in modified form, as they are no longer used as churches.

Lecaille was renowned for his hardy bush ways and horse riding skill. In a report of February 1879, Lecaille noted that: 'Between Fr Delaney and myself we attend 5 churches; we attend 10 stations [Mass places] in private houses ... there are two larger churches and three smaller chapels, all five without any foundation revenue; all five are used also as schoolrooms. ... There is a temporary chapel at Dongara in timber and clay with straw roof and 5 Catholic schools attended by about 215 pupils.' Lecaille eventually built a small stone chapel at Dongara, where he is also credited with building a presbytery (extant), and another rudimentary structure of his is mentioned as having being located at Nabawa.

It has been noted that Lecaille was offered the Bishopric of the new Diocese of Geraldton, but that he declined, and soon after the arrival of first Bishop William Kelly in 1898, the Venerable Archdeacon returned to Bridgetown and Busselton in the South-West. Eventually showing the weight of his labours, it became necessary to relieve Lecaille of hard missionary toil, and to locate him in comfortable surroundings. In the early 1900s Gibney, by then Bishop of Perth, advised the increasingly eccentric Lecaille to retire to the St John of God Hospital, Subiaco where the Sisters did their utmost to make the last years of his life as comfortable as possible, and he died there on 7 May 1908.

In 1936 Geraldton's Bishop James O'Collins and Monsignor John Hawes had Lecaille's remains transferred from Perth to the Hawes-designed cemetery chapel at Utakarra, near Geraldton, where Lecaille is now entombed. Fr Lecaille's efforts are recognised in one of the stained glass windows in the narthex of the Hawes-designed St Francis Xavier Cathedral at Geraldton. The window, also designed by Hawes, depicts the first St Francis Xavier's built in Geraldton by Lecaille, the priest saying mass, and riding on his horse. Lecaille Street, Dongara and Lecaille Court, Dunsborough are named in his honour.

References:

- 'Clerical', *The Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 17 October 1873, p.3 (became Archdeacon).
'Correspondence – A Contradiction', *The Express and Murchison and Yalgoo Goldfields Chronicler*, 20 December 1901 (letter to editor from Lecaille noting his buildings, and duration at Greenough).
'The late Archdeacon Lecaille', *The Geraldton Express*, 15 May 1908 (Bunbury and Geraldton detail).
'Father Lecaille', *Cathedral Chronicle*, August-September 1935.
'A Pioneer Priest', *Cathedral Chronicle*, September 1936 (including entombment at Utakarra).
Lecaille's wills are kept at the archives of the Archdiocese of Perth.
James, Ruth Marchant, *Cork to Capricorn. A History of The Presentation Sisters in Western Australia 1891-1991*, The Congregation of the Presentation Sisters of Western Australia, 1996, pp.66-73 (the Nabawa building is mentioned at p.266, and in the *Cathedral Chronicle*, August-September 1935).
'Father Lecaille', *Geraldton: 150 years, 150 lives*, Geraldton Regional Library, 2001, p.101.
Shire of Irwin, *Municipal Heritage Inventory*, place numbers 16, 110.

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Heritage Committee meeting approval date: 9 June 2011

Last updated: 9 June 2011

Citation details:

Taylor, Dr John J., 'Adolphe Joseph Lecaille (1826-1908)', Western Australian Architect Biographies, <http://www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=13453>, accessed DATE.



St Peter's Church, Greenough (1866-1867)
(*Cork to Capricorn*, p.66)



St Mary's Church, Northampton (1867-1868)
(Battye Acc. No. 816B/B501).



St Francis Xavier Church, Geraldton (1869-1872)
(*Cork to Capricorn*, p.71)



St John's Church, Bootenal (1874)
(*Cork to Capricorn*, p.194)



St Thomas' Church, Bradleys
(John Taylor July 2000)



St John's Church, Bootenal
(John Taylor July 2000)