

Reverend William Phelan



A life of wonderful activity in the cause of God came to a close, on Saturday May 7th, when Reverend William passed away at the Charlottetown Hospital. The deceased, familiarly known as Father William, was born at Kilcraggen, County Kilkenny, Ireland upwards of eighty-five years ago, and made his preparation for the priesthood, in his native country. In the autumn of the year 1864, he came to Prince Edward Island, and received ordination at the hands of the late Bishop MacIntyre, on the 23rd of October of that year. For several years he filled various positions in the Diocese, according as his services were required, and in the fall of the year 1872, he was appointed pastor of Sturgeon, to which parish were attached the missions of Iona and Montague Bridge. Here he labored for well-nigh forty years, and devoted himself to the welfare of his flock, with a zeal and earnestness that charmed and edified the people under his charge. During those years, he was particularly active in the cause of temperance, and was usually spoken of as the Father Matthew of Prince Edward Island. Any movement having for its object the welfare of the community, always found in him an ardent advocate, but the temperance cause, was first last and always in his mind, and never did he spare himself fatigue or inconvenience in his efforts to put down the traffic in strong drink. Some there were, who would not approve his methods, and not a few, who were ready to condemn his enthusiasm, but no one ever impugned his motives nor questioned his sincerity, and even those, against whom these efforts were directly levelled, would down in their heart of hearts admit and proclaim that he was right. It is a strange commentary on the boasted mentality of the present age, that the prominent workers in the cause of temperance are usually regarded as hypocritical and insincere. Those, who are anxious to carry on the unholy traffic in strong drink seek to justify their position, by

casting suspicion upon their opponents, while many others, quite convinced of the harm that accrues to society by intemperance, show little sympathy with those, who strive to promote sobriety amongst the people. But no one ever doubted that Father William was sincere. He was the one Apostle of temperance in Prince Edward Island, whose motives were never questioned, and hence he was able to stand for a half a century in the forefront of the movement, without losing hold on the respect of classes and creeds.

Father William spent the last nine years of his life at the Charlottetown Hospital, under the care of the devoted sisters, who saw to his comfort in every way. Advancing years necessarily brought many infirmities and the once stalwart and uncompromising champion of every good cause, glided gently down a path of mental obscuration on his way to the grave. His interest in external affairs gradually diminished, and it seemed as if the only thing that would recall him to the brightness of his better days was the presence of Our Blessed Lord in the Sacrament of the Altar. When the priest in surplice and stole entered his room to give him Holy Communion, the aged priest's eye grew brighter, and a smile of radiant joy lighted up his wasted countenance, and in happy consciousness of the sublime act he was performing, he opened out the portals of his heart to receive the heavenly visitor. Thus he was able to receive Holy Communion up to the very end, and died with his grasp firmly set upon Him, who had been the companion and support of his long priestly life. Beloved and revered by a grateful people, he sleeps his last sleep at Sturgeon, under the parish church, which he himself had erected, and which stands in stately grandeur over his resting place, as a monument to his zeal and devotedness.