“FATHER CON”
(Father Cornelius D. Coghlan, first Parish Priest of Dapto)

Born in Clonmel, Galway, in 1792, Cornelius Coghlan studied in Spain and later returned to Ireland. He was Prior of Dundalk in the 1830s. There he established the National School, one of the first in Ireland. A forthright man with the courage of his convictions, he was often at variance with men of opposite views; amongst them was the Archbishop of Armagh, who was incensed at the Prior’s excessive zeal for his school-building. When Dr. Polding visited Ireland in 1841 (a visit undertaken on account of the desperate need for priests), Fr. Coghlan decided that he could do more good for souls on the Australian Mission. He reached Sydney at the end of 1842, having come to the Colony without permission of the Secretary of State. On 30 January 1842 he was appointed to Brisbane Water as its second resident priest . . .

He is reported to have been a genial pastor, who won the affection of Protestants and Catholics alike. His superb sense of humour was his mainstay, though in the light of the following story recounted by a Dominican nun in Maitland, one might doubt its successful application on all occasions: When “Father Con” was an old man, worn out by tireless labours, he was at last granted an assistant, a young priest fresh from Ireland. When they met for the first time, Fr. Coghlan exclaimed with fervour: “Glory be to God, I’ve been waiting for you for forty years and here you are at last.” The newcomer was rather nonplussed, as well as somewhat flattered at his importance, but the old man continued: “I’ve been waiting for forty years to see a fellow uglier than myself, and at last I’ve succeeded.”

At Brisbane Water he owned and lived on an island near Woy Woy known for many years as Coghlan’s Island [later Kinnane’s Island]. Here the man of many parts managed a banana plantation . . . From the “island fastness” he used to row across the water to say Mass at Kincumber.

In 1863 he was moved to Port Macquarie, a parish that embraced the Manning and Hastings district . . . After six years in that wild coastal region, Fr. Coghlan, who was loved far and wide for his zeal and open-handed giving, was brought to Dapto, where he died on 2 June 1872.

[A legacy left to the Maitland Dominican Convent] was necessarily small, for every tramp in the bush and every down-on-his-luck settler had drawn on Father Con’s resources. The tombstone at Dapto reads, “Pray for the soul of Rev. C. D. Coghlan O.P. Missionary Priest of this diocese (sic) of Dapto who died 2 June 1872 aged 74 years and in the 50th year of his priesthood. R.I.P.”

(Based on “Dominican Pioneers in New South Wales,” by Sister Assumpta O’Hanlon)