

Charles O'Neill

Founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia



Charles Gordon O'Neill was born in Glasgow in 1828. He was an engineer who led the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Western Districts of Scotland between 1859 and 1863. He moved to New Zealand in 1863 and became then one of the foremost civic engineers in the colony. He was also a New Zealand colonial parliamentarian from 1866 to 1875. He was instrumental in helping found the first conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society to be aggregated in New Zealand in 1876.

O'Neill's faith-based charitable mission to Australia was undertaken during 1881-91 at the request of Society's President-General Adolphe Baudon (1819-88), who wrote to O'Neill in 1877 concerned that the first Conference established in Australia by Father Gerald Ward in 1854 had dissipated. O'Neill was unable to galvanise sufficient interest among local laity to re-establish the Society when he travelled to Sydney and Melbourne several times between January 1880 and May 1881.

Despite Baudon's concerns about freemasonry, more serious was the sectarian ill-will directed at the Irish-Catholic minority in NSW, where O'Neill's mission finally gained a foothold in July 1881. The mission successfully established the Society in NSW beginning with St Patrick's Church Hill Conference and provided a Catholic alternative to the then flourishing evangelical slum missions. O'Neill served as President of St Patrick's Church Hill Conference and from 1884, President of the Particular Council of Sydney. He successfully gained Catholic acceptance of the Society and recruited volunteers from among the male Catholic laity in Sydney. By 1891, the year of

O'Neill's resignation from Society leadership, the Society had 20 active conference with over 300 members undertaking almost 11,000 visits to people in need annually. The Society was consolidated under a Superior Council of Australasia in Sydney in 1895.

O'Neill's mission coincided with a heightened campaign for Home Rule for Ireland peaking in 1883-84. It was a cause that O'Neill, as a prominent member of the Irish National League of NSW, supported passionately himself. O'Neill remained a bachelor and was supported in his charitable work by unmarried siblings, however the end of his life was dogged by destitution and such he is regarded as both a heroic and tragic figure.

He died in St Vincent's Hospital on 8 November 1900 at the age of 72 and was buried in Rookwood cemetery in Sydney. In accordance with his wishes, in 1961, O'Neill's remains were moved to the Society's burial plot for the destitute in company of those he served so well.

Source: Captain Charles, Engineer of Charity, the remarkable life of Charles Gordon O'Neill by Steve Utick was published by Allen and Unwin in 2008 and <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/oneill-charles-gordon-4333>