

BISHOP FRANCIS RUSSELL NIXON

by

Reg. A Watson



Bishop Nixon as displayed on his desk at Runnymede. Reg Watson photo

Bishop Francis Russell Nixon was the first Anglican Bishop of Tasmania who was good looking with coal black hair. Clashing with members of his own church together with the Governor of Tasmania and those in favour of continual convict transportation saw his time in the colony controversial. Nonetheless, he was also a humane man, a scholar and toured extensively throughout the colony even to the Bass Strait Islands.

He was born in Kent, England in 1803. Francis was well educated and after ordination served in the British Embassy as clergyman in Naples Italy. Returning to England he took up further church duties and authoring various church publications and books, one going into six editions.

In 1842 he was appointed the first Bishop of Tasmania and with his wife and children he set sail stopping over at Cape Town where there was no Anglican clergyman. As a result he confirmed over 400 people, appointed a priest and consecrated a church.

Arriving in Hobart Town June 1843 he was welcomed by everyone who was anyone. He went to work with enthusiasm, making Tasmania a separate diocese from Sydney and proclaiming St David's Church (the one prior to the

one now standing) as a Cathedral and took up residence at well-known Runnymede, New Town. There is a plaque to Nixon in the later St David's Cathedral, Hobart.



Runnymede. Reg Watson photo

The Bishop, however, was what is termed “High Anglican” meaning very traditional in church thought and service. This brought him in conflict with not only the more liberal evangelical churchmen of the colony, but with other denominations. Yet he was sincere and was dedicated to building churches and Anglican education which saw the commencement of the Launceston Church Grammar School (1846) and the same year, Hutchins School in Hobart.



Bishop Nixon's desk, Runnymede. Reg Watson photo

He clashed with the Governor Sir John Eardley-Wilmot. The Bishop believed he had all power over all the clergymen while the Governor, who paid their wages, believed his administration also had jurisdiction. The conflict went all the way to the Archbishop of Canterbury where a compromise was made. The Governor would submit appointments and removals for the Bishop's consideration.

Conflict dogged his time in the colony; for instance he openly came out in opposition to the appointment of a Catholic Bishop for the colony. This was a heated topic at the time.

Nixon's pastoral care included the Bass Strait Island and an extensive tour of the Furneaux Group where he sympathised with the Tasmanian aborigines and then to King Island. In 1854 he wrote "The Cruise of the Beacon" self-illustrated regarding his tours.

Twenty years of touring, stress, controversy and pastoral care took a toll on his health and in 1862 he left our shores to return to England and then to retire at Lake Maggiore in Italy where he died 7th April 1879.

Nixon who married three times, firstly to Francis Maria Streatfield (died 1834), with whom he had three children, secondly to Anna Maria Woodstock (died

1868) with whom he had eight children and finally to Flora Elizabeth Muller with whom he had two sons. He is well remembered for being the Anglican first Bishop in Tasmania, but he was much more. A colourful, forceful character who believed he was “right”.