

An Irishman's Diary about Fr. John Crowley, 'Padre of the Desert'

By Joe Breen 01/18/2016

Priest who left his mark on California

As we drove into California's barren but bewitching Death Valley along route 136, the road rose imperceptibly. Before long we turned into a big horseshoe-shaped lay-by where a colourful assembly of cars, trucks, motorcycles and motorhomes had gathered to take in the panoramic views of the Panamint Springs area of the scorched valley. A plaque on a stone monument stated that this was

"Padre Crowley Point

"In Memory of the Padre of the Desert 1891-1940

"Father John J. Crowley

"From the snowy heights of the Sierras beyond the deep shadows of Death Valley. Beloved and trusted by peoples of all faiths. He led them towards life's wider horizons. He passed this way."

And he did indeed pass this way, many times, especially on Sundays, whizzing by in his battered Model T Ford speeding to say Mass in the remote outposts of his huge parish. Driving was to be his undoing, but not before he would become a key figure in the fallout from the Californian water wars later made famous in the celebrated 1974 Roman Polanski movie *Chinatown* starring Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway and John Huston.



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- Race memory – An Irishman's Diary about the 'Running Footmen'

According to Prof William Webster on owensvalleyhistory.com, John Crowley was born in the Killarney Lakes area of Co Kerry on December 8th, 1891. He was in his teens when his family emigrated to Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1903. He was educated in the local Holy Cross College and after graduation entered a seminary. He was not alone in his vocation – judging by a family portrait, of his seven siblings, three were nuns and two were priests. Shortly after he was ordained in 1918 he left for the west coast and in 1919 volunteered to serve in a Californian parish located in the desert region of four different counties – Mono, Inyo, Kern and San Bernadino

"His initial parish," writes Prof Webster, "covered 30,000 square miles, an area equal in size to all of Ireland. His northernmost church was in Bishop, 200 miles from its southern counterpart in Barstow. And in those years, this remote area had few paved roads. Driving between his scattered parish meant bouncing over gravel and sand. The parish contained both the lowest spot in the United States, Death Valley, and the highest, Mount Whitney. In his first 16 months, Fr. Crowley put over 50,000 miles on his Model T Ford."

It also included the Owens Valley, then still a relatively verdant spread of farmland watered by the Owens River which flowed down from the snow-capped High Sierras.

Parched land

Belfast-born William Mulholland, who was educated in O'Connell's CBS in Dublin, was a key figure behind a plan to divert the Owens River through an 223-mile aqueduct to a nascent and arid Los Angeles. Armed with persuasive wealth, power and muscle, the Los Angeles authorities bought up key parcels of land in Owens Valley all the time, promising that the valley would be left with enough water to sustain its farming life. They lied.

After the aqueduct was finished in 1913, the flow of water into Owens Valley was gradually cut. As the flow dried up, angry local farmers and ranchers turned to violence and in 1924 attempted to blow up the aqueduct, but the agitation eventually fizzled out.

Fast-forward to 1934 and Fr. Crowley lies seriously ill in hospital after a career building up the Catholic Church in the Golden State. He asks his bishop can he return to his first parish. His wish is granted but he returns to a community now divided and devastated by the loss of the water that gave life to Owens Valley.

This is where writer Irving Stone (1903-1989), a Californian once famous for biographical novels such as 1961's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (about Michelangelo), takes up the story in "Desert Padre", a celebrated 1944 piece for a once mighty magazine, the *Saturday Evening Post*. Stone is clearly smitten by Crowley and tells his story with the same gusto that coloured his later books.

He chronicles Crowley's relentless campaign to restore water to Owens Valley; how the priest worked to unite all the people of the valley, Catholics, Protestants, Mexican-Americans, Native Americans, into a force for change. The Los Angeles authorities eventually gave way to a limited extent, allowing a dam and a vast reservoir to be built at the top of the valley, which is called Crowley Lake in honour of the Desert Padre. Crowley also championed a number of other developments including tourism and movie-making – many famous westerns were shot there.

But Crowley would eventually run out of time. While returning from a publicity event in San Francisco in September 1940, accompanied by his small pet dog, Tray, and no doubt travelling at speed, his car struck a deer and veered into the path of a truck. He was killed instantly.

The other Irishman who had made such an impact on Owens Valley, William Mulholland, predeceased him. He had died in 1934 aged 79, his reputation as one of California's great water engineers and visionaries sullied by the St Francis Dam disaster of 1928 when hundreds lost their lives after the dam collapsed; 12 hours earlier Mulholland had pronounced it safe.

He accepted full responsibility, telling the inquest into the deaths that, "If there was an error in human judgment, I was the human, I won't try to fasten it on anyone else." And yet his name lives on in Los Angeles. Mulholland Drive, Mulholland Highway and, most pointedly, Mulholland Dam are all named after him.