

The Little Church at Van Reenen

by Neil Bloy

This year marks the centenary of the events that led to the building of the Little Church at Van Reenen. The Llandaff Oratory, its official title, was built by Maynard Mathew, a retired magistrate, in memory of his son Llandaff, who died as a result of injuries received in a mining accident at Burnside Colliery in northern Natal. One hundred years has been enough time for myth and legend to develop around related events, and an attempt is made to dispel some of these.

The Mathew family

Legend has it that the family descends from the earls of Llandaff but, like so much in the popular story of the Little Church, this is not supported by the facts. There were only two earls of Llandaff. The Mathew family was an ancient and distinguished Welsh family from Llandaff, and there is a monument in Llandaff Cathedral in Cardiff to Sir David (Dafydd) Mathew (1400–1484), knight and standard bearer to King Edward IV. The Welsh estates devolved on an Irish branch of the family due to the lack of a male heir at one stage in the Welsh family; and in 1738, Francis Mathew was born in Thomastown, Ireland. Francis Mathew was the MP for Tipperary, high sheriff of Tipperary and in 1783 was elevated to the peerage as Baron Llandaff of Thomastown. In 1793, he became Viscount Llandaff and in 1797 Earl Llandaff. The Mathew family had been Catholics, but Francis had converted to the Protestant faith in 1762. His son, Francis James Mathew (1768–1833), became the second earl in 1806, but he died in 1833 without having children. Both his younger brothers predeceased him childless, so the title became extinct. Since 1833, however, there have been several pretenders to the title,¹ including a member of a Mathew family in Cape Town and Maynard Matthews/Mathew, as shall be seen. None has satisfied the authorities that their claim is genuine.

Maynard Matthews' great-grandfather was Arnold



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Nesbitt Matthews (1765–1820), who was born in Down Ampney, Gloucestershire² and went to India, apparently to farm indigo from which one gets the dye. However, he may have gone there with the army and stayed on to farm. This family's claim to the earldom is based on his being the first-born son of the first earl with the second earl being the second son of the first earl, but this has been disproved. It should be noted that Maynard was not the first in the family to have claimed the earldom, but none of the claimants had ever been able to prove his claim. In the case of Arnold Nesbitt Matthews, his father was actually Richard (possibly Hunt) Matthews and his mother Anne (née Jack) of Gloucestershire. Arnold's son, and Maynard's grandfather, was Albert Matthews (1802–1872) who married Caroline Adriana Vos. Their one son was Richard Hunt Gregory Matthews; another was Horatio Nelson Matthews. R.H.G. Matthews (1831–1912) was born in Calcutta in 1831 and in 1860 he married Zelia Caroline Cockerell, also in Calcutta. They had four children, of whom Maynard was the third.³

Maynard Reginald Nelson Matthews was born in Bengal on 1 March 1865. He came to Natal either before or in 1878 when his father, an Indian linguist,

came to Natal as a high court interpreter to assist in cases involving Natal's growing population of Indian descent. Maynard may have schooled in England (he claimed to have done so at Dulwich College) and he joined the Natal civil service in 1878 at 13 as a messenger in the telegraph department and eventually became a magistrate. In 1889, when he married Sarah Jane Goodwin in St John's Church, Sydenham, Durban on 8 January, he was a clerk based in Ladysmith. Sarah, known as Sadie, was the daughter of Reverend Thomas Goodwin and his wife, Eliza Honoria. Both Eliza and Sadie were born on the island of St Helena, where the Goodwins were married in 1862. Maynard and Sadie were married by her father, who was then the incumbent of St John's, Sydenham.



Maynard and Sadie Matthews

Maynard Matthews' civil service career seems mainly to have been in northern Natal, with short periods in Verulam and Durban. In 1891 he was a civil service clerk in Ladysmith, as he had been at the time of his marriage in 1889; in 1894 he was acting resident magistrate in Ladysmith; in 1895 the resident magistrate in Weenen; in 1901 the assistant magistrate in Newcastle for a short period before becoming the resident magistrate in Dundee, where he remained until 1910. That year he was acting chief magistrate in Durban and then he returned to Ladysmith, where he appears to have retired.⁴ While in Ladysmith, in 1919 he purchased a piece of land and built a house at Van Reenen, which

he called Llandaff's Lodge. This was presumably a retirement home, but on retiring he went back to Dundee, where he became the local correspondent for the *Natal Witness*.

Maynard and Sadie's children were: Dorothy Gladys Sadie (7 November 1889, Durban–3 June 1966, Pietermaritzburg), who married Ernest Frederick Brown Hindson (1888–1950) and had two sons; Sylvia Louise Ruby (18 April 1891, Ladysmith–post 1963), who married first Godfrey Felix Owen (1882–1918), second Harold Carlyon Tatham (1886–1939) and third Vivian Nelson Vos Matthews (1891–1963, her cousin) and had no children; Cecil Maynard Goodwin (9 April 1894, Ladysmith–6 September 1971, Renishaw) and married first Dorothy Gertrude Carpenter (1894–1994) with whom he had a son and a daughter, then divorced, and married Madeline Rose Goble (1906–1960); Leonard Llewellyn Llandaff (14 October 1895, Weenen–19 March 1925, Burnside) who never married; and Tracy Richard Arnold (6 January 1903–22 January 1903, Dundee).

Maynard Matthews was baptised in the Anglican church, married in the Anglican church, and had all his children baptised in the Anglican church. During his stint in Dundee as resident magistrate, he was a pillar of St James church; between 1903 and 1909 serving as churchwarden, sidesman and lay representative to synod.⁵ By 1915, when his daughter Sylvia married Godfrey Owen, she was 'Mathew' and was married in the Roman Catholic church.⁶ So, somewhere between 1909 and 1915, Maynard Matthews, an Anglican, became Maynard Mathew, a Roman Catholic.

The family story is that he decided he would claim the title of Earl of Llandaff at this time. The earl's surname was Mathew, so it is assumed that was his reason for adopting it. Maynard's father had died in 1912 and he appears to have changed his name the following year: his son Llandaff entered Hilton College in January 1913 as 'Matthews' and left in December that year as 'Mathew' as Hilton College have it.⁷ Although the Mathew family in Ireland had originally been Catholics, the first earl had converted to Protestantism before being raised to the peerage. But perhaps Maynard was unaware of this and saw it as a help in his quest to become the earl? In any event, his elder brother, Richard Albert John Matthews, objected to his younger brother trying to claim the title and they fell out badly over it. Maynard was unsuccessful in his quest to become the earl, but was henceforth a Catholic. Perhaps his conversion to Catholicism was not related to his desire to be

the earl, but genuine religious conviction. By March 1925, Maynard had retired from the civil service (he would appear to have taken early retirement) and was living in Dundee, where he had a position as Dundee correspondent for the *Natal Witness*.

Daff Matthews

Leonard Llewellyn Llandaff (Daff) Matthews was born on 14 October 1895 in Weenen, where his father was the resident magistrate. Not much is known about his early life: he went to Maritzburg College and St Charles College and, in 1913, when St Charles was closed for renovations, he went to Hilton College for his final year of schooling.⁸ While at Hilton, he played cricket for his house (Churchill's) and the school second eleven. Although apparently an above-average scholar, he did not get a good enough pass in Dutch (no Afrikaans yet in 1913) and was thus not able to attend university to study law as he desired, although he later apparently often expressed his desire to one day quit the mine, which he frequently stated would claim his life if he did not get out of it, go back to his law studies and be called to the bar.⁹ His career immediately after leaving Hilton is unknown, but in 1914 World War I broke out and Llandaff enlisted at the beginning of 1916 in the 11th South African Infantry (SAI). This was part of the East African Expeditionary Force and Llandaff went to Tanganyika, where he would appear to have spent most of his time suffering from malaria. He was eventually, towards the end of 1916, repatriated to Durban to recuperate and in March 1917 declared temporarily medically unfit. However, in June 1917 he joined the South African Services Corps, Mechanical Transport Division as a driver. He was sent back to Tanganyika, where he again seems to have suffered greatly from malaria and was again in and out of hospital. But he saw out the war and was demobbed in Durban on 6 February 1919.¹⁰

After the war, he would appear to have started work at Burnside Colliery near Glencoe and, by 1925, had risen to be shift boss at no. 2 pit. While working on the mine, he invented an ingenious platform for swinging coal tubs onto different crossings without the use of points. This system was patented worldwide in 1924 and he was negotiating with a large American engineering firm for its manufacture in the USA at the time of his death in 1925.¹¹ He had recently passed the mine captain's examination and his appointment as mine captain at Burnside was imminent.¹²

At Burnside he was a popular member of the recre-

ation club, played cricket, tennis and rugby, used his fine baritone voice at every concert or other occasion; and was known as a kind and cheerful person always willing to help others and put his motor car at the disposal of anyone in need of it. He was also well-liked at work, where he was known for showing the same courtesy to his inferiors as to his superiors.¹³ Llandaff was engaged to be married to Dulcie Mason, the daughter of Louis Mason, the mine secretary. Mason's first wife had died and in 1924 he remarried in the Dundee Methodist Church: his daughter Dulcie and Llandaff Mathew were the witnesses.¹⁴

What happened on that fateful Tuesday, 17 March 1925, St Patrick's Day? The popular story has it that a rockfall trapped some miners underground. There was no mine rescue service in those days and Llandaff Mathew led a team down the mine to rescue those trapped. A number of miners were brought safely to the surface and when he returned underground there was another rockfall. He was buried and his body never recovered. Eight miners' lives had been saved.

Contemporary reports, however, do not support any of the above. Reports in the *Natal Witness*, *Natal Mercury*, *Natal Advertiser* (forerunner to the *Daily News*) and the official mine inquest into the incident differ slightly, but are similar. All reports agree that he was accompanied by a young learner miner or apprentice, William Sokehill Wilson, the nephew of the mine manager, Ben Sokehill, although not all reports name him.¹⁵

The official Department of Mines inquiry said that a haul road underground had been blocked by a rockfall too large to move and it had to be blasted to be removed. It had been drilled, and Llandaff charged and blasted the rock to demonstrate this process to Wilson. The blast appeared to have loosened some rock and when Llandaff returned afterwards to inspect his work, a large piece of loose rock slid down and pinned him to the ground, severely injuring him, and he died two days later. The official finding of the inquest was 'misadventure' with no mention of anyone else down the mine or of saving William Wilson's life.¹⁶

The newspaper reports are slightly different but are not contradictory: the two of them were down no. 2 pit at the mine, examining the workings, when Llandaff noticed a dangerous portion of the roof where a crack was developing. Llandaff immediately recognised the danger and called all the miners working beyond that point to come out to safety. Just as the last one had passed the danger point, the fissure suddenly widened further. Realising that the roof could fall any second,

Llandaff pushed Wilson through the narrow entrance way, which was only one person wide. Before he could follow, the rock had fallen and pinned him to the ground.¹⁷

He was rescued and taken to the surface, but his injuries (confined to his lower body) were extremely severe. The graphic description of his injuries would probably not be printed in a newspaper today, but they were in 1925. His pelvis was crushed, his left hip bone protruded, and he suffered severe internal injuries. He was taken to the house of Louis Mason, the father of his fiancée. It was realised that he could not survive his injuries and the loss of blood. On 18 March, he made a will and in the early hours of 19 March he died surrounded by his family and Dulcie Mason. His death certificate says the cause of death was a compound comminuted fracture of the pelvis, internal injuries and general peritonitis.¹⁸

In his will (witnessed by Louis Mason and Dr Cresswell, the doctor from Dundee who was attending him), he left his motor car (a Dodge) to his fiancée and the balance of his estate to his parents. Unfortunately, there was a major omission in his will as he failed to appoint an executor, but the Master of the Supreme Court appointed his father, a retired magistrate. All newspaper reports commented on his chivalry and how he could have saved his own life, but he did not, sacrificing his own life to save his apprentice's. There were comparisons with the situation on board a ship where the captain goes down with his vessel after the crew has been saved, and all used the same expression: that he 'had played the game'.

His funeral took place in Dundee that same afternoon at 4.30 pm at the chapel of the Roman Catholic Holy Rosary Convent, there being no other Catholic church in Dundee in those days.¹⁹ The papers stated that the funeral was exceptionally well attended and carried a long list of mourners: not only ordinary townsfolk and fellow workers but also dignitaries like the mayor and mayoress, ministers of other denominations (including the Anglican minister), doctors, the inspector of mines and others. The floral tributes (the givers of which were all named) were so many that the chapel, from the porch to the altar, was described as a 'garden' and were more than the hearse could carry when the cortege made its way to the Dundee town cemetery. The pallbearers (also named) were described as 'old school pals', plus two of his colleagues from the mine.²⁰

The *Natal Witness* reports that on a scroll on the oak coffin were the words: 'Llandaff Mathew, died 19th

March, 1925, aged 28. RIP'.²¹ Interestingly, his death notice completed by his father also says he was 28 years old as did the newspaper reports and the memorial plaque in the church, but he was actually 29, having been born in October 1895.²² There is no tombstone on his grave in Dundee and the Little Church was obviously to be his monument.²³

Little Church

On his return home from the funeral, Maynard Mathew was visited by Llandaff's fellow workers from the colliery to (as reported) not only tender their sympathy but to congratulate the Mathews on having a son who had, in their opinion, proved himself a hero. The *Natal Witness* talks about him having given his life to save the men under him, white and black, and they could not speak too highly of him and of the love and respect in which he was held by them all, from the manager down to the black mineworkers.²⁴ The *Natal Advertiser*, on the other hand, talks of his having saved the life of 'another'.²⁵ Certainly, it was at his call that those working beyond the rockfall could reach safety easily, but it was William Wilson's life that he physically saved by sacrificing his own. It is not known how many miners were beyond the rockfall. The popular version of the story has it that he saved the lives of eight miners and this is the reason for the eight seats in the little church; but the eight seats in what was, after all, an oratory or place of private worship were for Maynard and Sadie Mathew, their three surviving children and their spouses.²⁶

The popular story then goes on to say that Maynard Mathew wished to erect a monument in a Roman Catholic church to his son (some stories say the Lady-smith Catholic church, which would have probably made sense as that was the nearest Catholic church to Van Reenen where he planned to retire one day; and Dundee where he lived at the time had only a Catholic convent chapel), but that he was denied permission by the church authorities and so decided to build his own church in his son's memory.

This may be true, but it could also be doing a grave injustice to the Catholic Church: Llandaff died on Thursday, 19 March 1925 and the following Monday, Maynard Mathew signed a deed of sale for lot 9 of the farm Scottston at Van Reenen (now lot 115 of Van Reenen Township), hardly leaving time for much negotiation with the church authorities. It would rather seem that Maynard Mathew immediately made the decision to build the church and that very weekend went to Van

Reenen and bought the piece of land from Bob Bloy, a local farmer who owned a portion of the farm; and the deed was signed on the Monday morning.²⁷

Maynard Mathew was living in Dundee when he decided to build the church and he obviously knew and admired the work of a local master builder. So, when he wanted to build the church he gave the contract to a local Dundee firm, Johnston & Keith, on condition that they used as builder Arthur Douglas of Dundee.²⁸ Douglas spent a few months in Van Reenen building the church with the assistance of two young apprentices: his son, Richard (Dick) and his nephew, also Arthur Douglas, known as Chips. All his material came by rail from Dundee, so the church is built of Dundee bricks made by the Dundee Brick & Tile Company (sadly no more) and were hauled from Van Reenen railway station to the site on an ox wagon.

The church was reputedly built to replicate a wing of Cardiff Cathedral, or so the story goes, but a plan of the cathedral shows no wing resembling the Little Church. The memorial plaque to Llandaff in the church is interesting in that it bears the crest of Sir Dafydd Mathew and the earls of Llandaff, plus the word 'Towton' above them. According to Maynard Mathew, this was a mark of great honour awarded to Sir Dafydd Mathew for saving the life of King Edward IV at the Battle of Towton fought in 1461 during the Wars of the Roses and reputedly the bloodiest battle fought on English soil.

The story then goes that Maynard Mathew was ordained a priest and served in his Little Church. Strictly speaking, it was not a church, but may be one today, as a church is a place of public worship and an oratory a place for private worship. Maynard Mathew was a married man, though some of the stories kill his wife off to make him single and eligible for ordination. In reality, she survived him by several years and so he could not be a Roman Catholic priest. He did, however, become a tertiary in the Dominican order. Tertiary or lay Dominicans are men and women, single or married, living a Christian life with a Dominican spirituality in the secular world. The life of a Dominican layperson incorporates passion for the word of God and the religious practices of the order, and Maynard Mathew served in his Little Church for the rest of his life. He called himself Brother Joseph, but there would not appear to be any basis in the Dominican order for this.

In 1932, 'out of natural love and affection', Maynard Mathew donated all his fixed properties (he owned the church and the Llandaff Lodge, the property where

he lived in Van Reenen, and a vacant building site in Kingsley) to his surviving son, Cecil Maynard Goodwin Mathew.²⁹ Cecil, in turn, donated at least the church to his children, Sonia Dorothy Durelle Stubbs (as she then was) and Cecil Maynard Barry Mathew, in 1943, and they almost immediately sold it to Louisa Tierney.³⁰ Louisa owned it until 1953 when it was sold to Cecil N. Osborne.³¹ He sold it to Teresa Willins West-Thomas in 1965 and on her death, it was transferred in 1974 to her husband, Charles Alfred West-Thomas.³² West-Thomas remarried the same year to Maria Sophia (Miems) Mapp, born Heymans, and gave the church to her as a wedding present.³³ On her death, it passed to her daughter, Geraldine Johnson, who still owns the church. Geraldine also runs the tea garden and shop in the building next door: the building that was once the Methodist church, built on land donated for a church by Bob Bloy.

There was a time when the Roman Catholic Church under Archbishop Denis Hurley wanted to purchase the church. When it became known that he intended to build on to it to be able to accommodate a bigger congregation, the sale fell through. The Little Church is still used for regular church services, including by the Catholics. It is also used by a congregation of Pentecostals.³⁴

Epilogue

Maynard Mathew became a tertiary in the Dominican order, retired to Llandaff Lodge and devoted the rest of his life to prayer and meditation in his Little Church. He died on 29 July 1937 in Grey's Hospital, Pietermaritzburg from an internal haemorrhage from a duodenal ulcer.³⁵ His wife, Sadie, died suddenly of a coronary thrombosis on 28 July 1948 at Blythedale Beach while on a visit there.³⁶ She lived then with her daughter, Dorothy Hindson, at Kearsney. Dulcie Mason came to Pietermaritzburg and nursed at Grey's Hospital. As so often happened with nurses, she married a doctor, Geoffrey Dix English, in Pietermaritzburg in 1930.³⁷ The Englishes had no children and they both died in 1973. William Sokehill Wilson continued his career in the mines; but the gold mines of the Transvaal rather than the collieries of Natal. He married Helen Birkett in 1932 in Durban and they had five children.³⁸ At the time of his marriage, William Wilson was a mine official in Germiston and on at least one of his children's baptism records was described as a 'senior mine official'.

'What God wills, will be.'³⁹

NOTES

- 1 One source describes the number of claimants to the title as legion.
- 2 Maynard Mathews' claim to the title was based (as had others before him) on Arnold Nesbitt Matthews being the eldest son of the second earl and having been born in Paris, but this has been proven untrue. Arnold Nesbitt was the son of Richard and Anne Matthews and was baptised on 20 October 1767 in Down Ampney (Cornish Ancestry Ltd Research Report, January 2019).
- 3 Genealogy from documentation on Family Search (<https://www.familysearch.org/>).
- 4 *Natal Almanac and Directory*, various years.
- 5 Records of the Parish of St James, Dundee.
- 6 Family Search.
- 7 Hilton College register.
- 8 Hilton College published a book to celebrate its 150th anniversary that took the form of the stories of 150 'incredible' Old Hiltonians, including Llandaff Mathew. Unfortunately, it was the error-riddled popular story that was published.
- 9 *Natal Witness*, 26 March 1925.
- 10 South Africa, Department of Defence, Military Archives, personnel record file.
- 11 US patent 1,514,669, November 1924: platform or skid plate for use with light railways, tramways and the like; granted to Leonard Llewellyn Llandaff Mathew, Glencoe Junction, Natal, South Africa, filed 19 April 1923, serial no. 633,194.
- 12 *Natal Witness*, 26 March 1925: 11.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 Family Search: Dundee marriage register (Wesleyan Methodist church, entry number 3 of 1924).
- 15 *Natal Witness*, 26 March 1925 did name him.
- 16 South Africa, Government Mining Engineer accident report, April 1925, IMNA 98/25 (Talana Museum).
- 17 *Natal Witness*, 21 March 1925: 10.
- 18 Death certificate, 23 March 1925.
- 19 Described by the *Natal Witness* as one of the largest ever seen in the town, 21 March 1925: 10.
- 20 The pallbearers were Hamish Smith, Marshall Dalzel-Turnbull, Lieutenant Durham, Fred Nash, Billy McConville and Leslie Souter (*Natal Witness*, 26 March 1925: 11). The school that the four pallbearers Smith, Dalzel-Turnbull, Durham and Nash had attended together was not named; there being a choice as Llandaff had attended Maritzburg, St Charles and Hilton colleges.
- 21 *Natal Witness*, 26 March 1925: 11.
- 22 Leonard Llewellyn Llandaff Matthews was baptised by the vicar of Estcourt on 5 November 1895 (entry number 766 in the Estcourt baptism register) with a declared date of birth of 14 October 1895.
- 23 Llandaff was buried next to his brother, Tracy, who had died in infancy in 1903, in the Anglican section of Dundee cemetery, despite his funeral being conducted from the Roman Catholic church. There are no markers on their graves.
- 24 *Natal Witness*, 26 March 1925.
- 25 *Natal Advertiser*, 26 March 1925.
- 26 Confirmed by family members.
- 27 The deed of transfer (DT 1409/1925) to M.R.N. Mathew was dated 16 April 1925.
- 28 Arthur Douglas was the writer's maternal grandfather.
- 29 Maynard Mathew insisted that this wording be included in the deed of transfer for the properties (DT 2680/1932).
- 30 DT 2076/1943; DT 2841/1943.
- 31 DT 4349/1953.
- 32 DT 11949/1965; DT 8196/1974, 27 May 1974.
- 33 DT, 31 October 1974.
- 34 The use of the church by Pentecostals would presumably not amuse Maynard Mathew. He did not even approve of Methodists and is reputed to have said on seeing a box full of eggs that 'This box is as full of eggs as hell is of Wesleyans.'
- 35 Pietermaritzburg death register, 1937: 59.
- 36 Death notice, Sara Jane Mathew (née Goodwin).
- 37 Marriage register, St Peter's Church, entry no. 22 of 1930.
- 38 Of the five children, four are still alive in 2025. When contacted, none of them was aware of the story of the saving of their father's life.
- 39 The motto of the earls of Llandaff: *A Fynno Duw a Fydd*.