

### Michael Francis Cavanagh

(*Twentieth Century Impressions of Western Australia*, 1901, p.394), (*The Architect*, Vol.1 Issue 9 1941, p.8)

**C**avanagh, Michael Francis (1860-1941) was born near Beechworth, Victoria in 1860. The son of a builder, Cavanagh received architectural training c.1882-1886 in the service of the South Australian government. Resigning the post at Adelaide, he moved to London in 1887 and obtained experience from short periods within the office-studios of John Slater, Frank Baggallay & Walter Millard. Undertaking further studies, Cavanagh passed examinations entitling him to associate-ship with the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1888. Having gained greater knowledge, he returned to his adopted State and re-entered the SA Government Architect's Department, eventually rising to Chief Draughtsman. Cavanagh entered into private practice in 1891, and came to the gold boom State of Western Australia in 1895. By May of 1895 he was calling tenders for the construction of his design for 'Eagle Chambers' in Hay Street, Perth – noting that his other office was in the Eagle Chambers in Adelaide. Michael had the intention to set up a 'branch' practice in Perth for his younger brother James. Finding there was so great an extent of work available, Cavanagh closed the SA office and settled permanently in WA.

With other prominent architects of the period, Cavanagh was instrumental at a meeting of May 1896 that formalised the West Australian Institute of Architects (WAIA):

*A general meeting of practising architects was held yesterday afternoon at the Criterion Hotel for the purpose of forming an Institute of Architects in Western Australia. Mr G.T. Poole was voted in the chair, and Mr M.F. Cavanagh proposed the first resolution viz: "That an Institute of architects be formed in Western Australia". Mr G.R. Johnstone [Johnson] seconded, and the resolution was carried unanimously. The election of officers was then proceeded with, with the following results: Mr G.T. Poole was elected president, Mr M.F. Cavanagh vice-president, Mr J. Talbot Hobbs treasurer, Mr Clarence Wilkinson hon. secretary; and the following gentlemen were elected members of the council: Messrs W.A. Drake, H.S. Trigg, G.R. Johnstone [Johnson], E.H.D. Smith, A.R.L. Wright and J.W. Wright. ...*

Michael Cavanagh married Dorothy Trench in 1897, they had a daughter, Dorothea Maria (1898), and two sons John 'Jack' (1900), and Brendan (1904). From early on, Michael was joined in partnership by his brother James, with a break when James undertook further studies in London, similar to those of his elder mentor. Prodigious development was undertaken in WA during the late 1890s, and in May 1898 the Cavanaghs announced that Herbert Sedgfield had been taken into partnership, with tender notices for works in the Fremantle area soon put out by Cavanagh Cavanagh & Sedgfield, although the union was short-lived. *Wises* directory of 1898 includes an entry for the Cavanaghs with E.J. Keogh, indicating that during this busy time a number of partnerships had been considered.

George Poole was inaugural president of WAIA and served from 1896 until 1903, even though he spent a period of time overseas in 1897-98. Poole was succeeded by Michael Cavanagh in 1903. Poole 'took the reins' again from Cavanagh in 1905-1907, followed by Percy Harrison who was voted president at the annual meetings of March 1907 and 1908, by Talbot Hobbs in the period 1909-1911, Harrison 1911-1913, Poole 1913-1915, and Cavanagh again in 1915-1917. Along with these three other respected men, Cavanagh provided stable and impressive leadership of the Institute in the early Twentieth Century. Representing WAIA, Michael Cavanagh travelled with fellow Perth architect Harry Trigg and Kalgoorlie's Hedley Sprigg to NSW for the Conference of Australian Architects, meeting in Sydney in December 1900 - January 1901, where he acted as a vice-chairman. Amongst other resolutions, the conference proposed the formation of a national institute, and Cavanagh duly took the concepts back to his colleagues in WA. In September 1901, a large meeting of Western Australian architects was held in Trigg's Chambers at Barrack Street, Perth. The principal objects of the meeting were (1) to consider the incorporation of WAIA; (2) to arrange for affiliation with the Federal Institute of Australasian Architects; (3) to consider resolutions in connection with the carrying out of public buildings, passed by the recent conference held in Sydney; and (4) to arrange for the election and enrolment of all practising architects throughout Western Australia.

With respect to the first issue, WAIA was duly incorporated in 1902. Less successfully, with rivalry between Victoria and NSW the proposal for a federal institute collapsed, not to be resolved for almost three decades. Although largely ineffectual, the architects' protests were particularly vehement in respect to the contemporary competition for WA's Parliament House; but on the final issue, Cavanagh's and others ongoing efforts toward the registration of architects in WA were finally rewarded with legislation passed in 1921.

Cavanagh was extremely successful in obtaining a majority of Catholic Church and affiliated orders' work in WA in the period 1895-1915. Other architects who did work for the Catholic Church included Edgar Henderson and Richard Dennehy, but it was the Cavanaghs who took the 'lion's share' of major Catholic projects of the period. Herbert Parry joined the Cavanaghs in partnership through 1908-1911, and in 1915, previous pupil C. Gordon Clifton was taken in to broaden the practice's scope. A sample of Cavanagh's many Catholic buildings in WA includes the Christian Brothers College, St George's Terrace, Perth; the Roman Catholic Archbishop's Palace, Perth; Redemptorist Monastery, Vincent Street, North Perth; St John of God Sisters' Hospital and Convent at Subiaco; Oblate Fathers' Industrial School for Boys, Glendalough; St Joseph's Orphanage, Wembley; St Patrick's Basilica, Adelaide Street, Fremantle; St Mary's Cathedral, Perth; St Brigid's Church, Fitzgerald Street, Northbridge; St Mary's Church, Kalgoorlie (with Hawkins and Sprigg); St Brigid's Convent, John Street, Northbridge; portions of the Sisters of Mercy's Mercedes College, Victoria Square, Perth; Convent of Mercy, Bunbury; the central building at St Joseph's Orphanage (Clontarf); St Bernard's Church, Kojonup; Star of the Sea Church, Stirling Highway, Cottesloe; and the first building at Aquinas College.

Secular works include the Central Fire Station, Murray Street, Perth; Fremantle Fire Station; Great Western (Brass Monkey) Hotel, Perth; the Esplanade Hotel, Perth; Orient Hotel, Fremantle; P & O Hotel, Fremantle; Melville Park (Majestic) Hotel, Applecross; Tambellup Hotel; many important residences including Lexbourne House, West Perth; offices including Mannings Chambers, Fremantle; bank premises and many shops including the extensive Foy & Gibson's department store, Perth (later David Jones).

Michael Cavanagh died on 29 May 1941 at Subiaco, and was buried at Karrakatta Cemetery. His last pupil, W.A. (Bill) Durack, wrote in June 1941: 'By some, perhaps, he was not greatly loved, his quick criticism and Irish temperament being occasionally taken to heart by some of his associates. But on the whole he was regarded by all who knew him as being one of the soundest and ablest men in his calling and I will always remember him as the man who was tireless in his efforts to stamp out those abuses and unprofessional acts which had been allowed to creep into the profession.'

#### References:

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'Notice of Partnership', *The West Australian*, 20 May 1898, p.1 (Cavanagh, Cavanagh and Sedgfield).

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Contributing author: John Taylor

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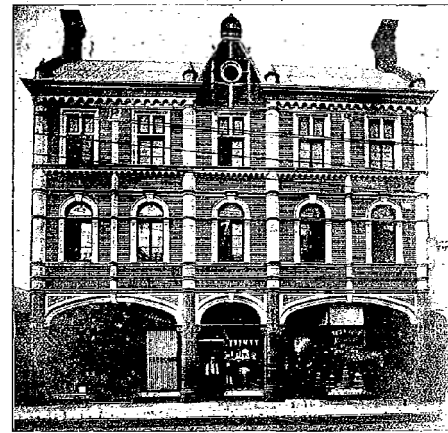
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Lexbourne House, Colin Street, West Perth  
(*The Salon*, July 1915, p.210)



Eagle Chambers, Hay Street, Perth  
(*The Western Mail*, Christmas 1897, p.67)



Great Western Hotel, William Street, Perth  
(John Taylor 2008)



St Brigid's Convent, John Street, Northbridge  
(John Taylor 2000)