

# Father William M O'Brien

1901 – 1971

By Buddy Hide Jr ©



Born 13<sup>th</sup> October 1901 in Chicago, William M O'Brien attended the local junior school.

He attended local public and parochial schools with one year at Loyola University before coming to Maryknoll in 1921.

**Left:** Father William M O'Brien

Loyola was one of the first medical schools to administer its own entrance exam to prospective students ensuring that the applicants were fully qualified and had been accredited by the Council on Medical Education and Hospitals of the American Medical Association in 1920.

After studying for one year William experienced a strong calling to mission and in 1921 joined the *Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America* known as the *Maryknoll Society*.

After completing his education and training William was ordained into the Fatherhood on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1927 and assigned to Guiyang in Guizhou Province, southern China where the MaryKnollers trained young Chinese as lay priests.

The Christmas Day escape party from Hong Kong proceeded from Waichow to Longchuen by boat up the mighty East River. Captain Hewitt who escaped from Hong Kong a month later described the town: *"Longchuen turned out to be a small, well-kept town, with wide tree-lined streets, lotus ponds, tea shops and restaurants."* After spending the night there the main party proceeded by truck, with a car for Admiral Chan Chak and David MacDougall, both suffering with bullet wounds. A/B Lenny Rann noted *"Trucks provided by the China National Relief Committee arrived to take us on to KuKong"* The convoy proceeded out over the river, destination, Kukong, now Shaoguan, the war time capital of Kwantung Province, which was a two day drive through the mountains infested with bandits. It was slow progress, with hairpin bends and sheer drops without barriers, mud slides, break downs, punctures, and constantly running out of fuel. Major Goring noted: *"A full day's journey over such roads as those was 'carriage exercise' indeed."*

Father O'Brien had been based in the market town of Lianping, situated at the junction of four main roads, for several years. The escape convoy stopped for a break after four hours at a village in a valley, which was about half way to Lianping, the Log Book of MTB 07 records: *"Stopped at about 10 am at Junsing, where we had good meal. Then rounded up by Father O'Brien, of the MaryKnoll Mission, who produced coffee, & biscuits."* Major Goring expressed his thanks *"The midday halt was brightened by the kindness of Father O'Brien, an American Roman Catholic priest, who insisted on regaling us with American cigarettes, coffee, and biscuits. As these came out of his meagre year's supply, and there was no prospect of his receiving any more for an indefinite period, this was hospitality indeed."*

Father O'Brien hosted many escapees from Hong Kong during the years of Japanese occupation. With the Communists winning the civil war in China and persecuting western missionaries Father O'Brien returned to the USA in 1949.



Chiang Kai-shek and the remnants of his Nationalist forces fled to Formosa, now Taiwan. Father O'Brien set sail again in 1952 for Formosa, to work with the Hakka-speaking inhabitants and open up new missions. He returned to the USA in 1969 for the last time, after which he returned to Formosa where he *"continued to climb mountains until the end. There is probably no man as well loved by his people and fellow missionaries. What more could you ask?"*

**Left:** Fr William M O'Brien 1939

Anthony Hewitt said of Father O'Brien *"He had for many years shared with the Chinese people the immense hardships of their existence, the disease, the epidemics of Cholera, natural disasters, the rule of warlords, civil war. He had provided a refuge for the people, open to all the people, not merely Christians. His experiences were worth hearing. He spoke frequently of historic events, mentioned that we were close to the Province of Kiansi, where the 'long march' began. He was dedicated to his calling, a truly good man"*

Father O'Brien died in Formosa on 24th September 1971 aged 69.

#### References

MaryKnoll Archives

Log Book of MTB 07 1942

A/B Lenny Rann 1942 Memoirs.

My Escape from Hong Kong by Lt-Colonel Arthur Goring 1949

To Freedom through China by Anthony Hewitt 2004.