

Archbishop Kelly and the Quarantine Station Incident of 1918

Jeff Kildea*

Michael Kelly, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney from 1911 to 1940, is renowned for his piety. When it comes to his reputation with regard to politics, however, it is difficult to find anyone, whether they be a contemporary or a modern historian, who has a good word to say about him. W.A. Holman, Premier of New South Wales from 1913 to 1920, in his memoirs compared Kelly unfavourably with his politically astute predecessor, Cardinal Moran:

[Moran's] successor, Archbishop Kelly, whose saintly life was passed in unworldly simplicity, was a churchman of an entirely different stamp. He made no attempt to control the political movements of his flock, and a perplexed party leader who called in upon him was much more likely to get wholesome counsel as to the state of his soul and the necessity for a careful searching of his conscience than helpful suggestions as to the best way out of a purely mundane difficulty.¹

In the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Professor Patrick O'Farrell has written that in the sectarian engagements which occurred during the period 1916 to 1925 'Kelly was a strident, uncompromising, but often inept and unnecessarily narrow Catholic leader.'² It is not intended in this paper either to challenge or to support these judgments; the absence of a full biography of Archbishop Kelly makes it difficult to draw general conclusions. However, a political incident involving the Archbishop which occurred in December 1918

* Jeff Kildea BA LLM (Syd) MA (UNSW) is a practising barrister and part-time student undertaking doctoral research in the School of History at the University of New South Wales. His research topic is the Catholic Federation of NSW 1912-1925.

1. W.A. Holman, *My Political Life* (Serialized in the *Bulletin* between 21 November 1934 and 1 May 1935), 16 January 1935, page 42.
2. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 9, page 557.

deserves to be recalled if only to give some balance to the generally bad press which Kelly has received.

Background: Chronic Sectarianism

The period referred to by O'Farrell was a particularly trying one for Catholics. Australian social life since 1788 had always known religious sectarianism. Mostly it existed in the background. But from time to time the social equilibrium which had come to accommodate this chronic problem was disturbed by acute episodes of sectarian conflict. The potential for such conflict increased from the 1870s with the introduction of 'free, compulsory and secular' education provided by the State. Motivated by a mixture of conscientious belief and a desire on the part of the Irish clergy to sustain Irish Catholic identity, the Catholic community operated its own separate education system thereby reinforcing a sense and a perception of difference. This tendency assumed organised political form with the founding of the Catholic Federation in four States in the early 1910s.

With the outbreak of the Great War sectarian tension noticeably declined as Catholics and Protestants shared in the blood sacrifice of the trenches. But this irenic interlude dissipated with the Dublin uprising of Easter 1916 and the divisive debates of the conscription plebiscites of October 1916 and December 1917. Over the next few years, Australian Catholics would be subjected to vitriolic abuse and a series of humiliations as bad as any they had experienced in the previous 120 years. During and after the conscription campaigns Prime Minister W.M. Hughes engaged in a public feud with the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, in which the leader of the nation made many intemperate remarks seemingly lumping all Catholics together as 'Sinn Feiners, pro-German, IWWers and shirkers'. In this atmosphere bigoted pamphleteers, such as Critchley Parker and Rev. T.E. Ruth, commanded a large audience eager to read their vile propaganda with its unrelenting attacks on Catholics and their religion. Commonwealth authorities who used war time regulations to silence Catholic anti-conscriptionists such as the editor of the *Advocate*, Melbourne's Catholic paper, and the Catholic Premier of Queensland, T.J. Ryan, claimed in correspondence with the Catholic Federation that they had no legal basis to stop the dissemination of anti-Catholic literature.³ It is no wonder, then, that in these bitter times many Catholics were hypersensitive to threats to their religious liberty-particularly at the hands of the Commonwealth government.

The Death of Annie Egan

It was against this background that a 27 year old Catholic nurse from Gunnedah came to assume national prominence. Annie Egan, who had trained at St Vincent's Hospital and who in 1918 had volunteered for service at the Sydney Quarantine Station, was one of the first victims of the outbreak in

3. National Archives of Australia: CRS MP 367/1, Item 512/3/806.

Australia of so-called 'Spanish influenza'. The disease, which had already ravaged much of the world's population, arrived here in about October 1918 with the soldiers returning from the Western Front. For three months strict quarantine procedures succeeded in containing the disease. However, once it found its way into the general community, the disease rapidly spread. By the time the epidemic had run its course at the end of 1919, twelve thousand Australians had died.⁴

In the months prior to the breach of the quarantine barrier, a number of Catholic priests arriving by ship had been detained, in accordance with the quarantine regulations, at the Sydney Quarantine Station. While there, they were able to minister to the religious needs of Catholic inmates. When the last of the priests was discharged, Archbishop Kelly applied to the Commonwealth authorities for permission for Father Ruggero, an Italian priest, to enter the station. (An Italian priest was nominated because at the time a large number of detainees at the station were Italian Reservists.) However, Dr John Elkington, the medical officer in charge of the Quarantine Station, after having interviewed Father Ruggero rejected him 'as not adapted in temperament'.⁵ Archbishop Kelly wrote to the Defence Minister, Senator Pearce, requesting that he overrule Dr Elkington's decision.⁶ Kelly also approached the Minister for Trade and Customs, Walter Massy-Greene, whose portfolio included the quarantine service.⁷

In the meantime Nurse Egan had become seriously ill, and she asked that she be permitted to see a priest. News of Nurse Egan's request and her deteriorating condition was brought to the attention of the Archbishop. Father O'Gorman, the Administrator of St Mary's Cathedral, and Father Hayden, President of St Patrick's College, Manly, made numerous telephone requests to Quarantine Station staff to allow a priest to visit the nurse. Dr Elkington refused these requests, initially stating that the priest would have to be a military chaplain. When the name of a military chaplain was put forward, the authorities said that there was a lack of accommodation at the Quarantine Station.

On 3 December 1918 Nurse Egan died. On the same day, Archbishop Kelly's request for the appointment of a chaplain was formally refused by

4. For an account of the outbreak in Australia see Humphrey McQueen, 'The 'Spanish' Influenza Pandemic in Australia 1918-1919', in Jill Roe (ed.), *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901-1975*, Cassell, Stanmore, 1976, pages 131-147. See also Jean Duncan Foley, *In Quarantine*, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, 1995, pages 110-115.
5. Letter 29 November 1918 from Archbishop Cattaneo (the Apostolic Delegate) to Archbishop Kelly and note endorsed thereon (Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, Kelly Correspondence, Box T1628 File No. 8). Unless otherwise stated all correspondence referred to in this paper is located at the same place.
6. Letter 30 November 1918 from Archbishop Kelly to George Foster Pearce. Pearce did not reply to this letter until 16 December 1918 by which time the matter had finally resolved. See letter 16 December 1918 from George Foster Pearce to Archbishop Kelly.
7. The son of John Greene and Julia Eamer n   Sandeman, Mr Massy-Greene was initially known as Mr Greene until he incorporated the family name, 'Massy' into a hyphenated surname. He was appointed KCMG in 1933 (C.J. Lloyd, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 10, page 437).

Massy-Greene.⁸ Kelly reacted decisively. That night he convened a meeting of concerned Catholics at the Chapter Hall of the Cathedral. The meeting resolved to send a strong protest to the government and to make representations to leading members of the House of Representatives to raise the matter in Parliament. Kelly also cabled the Defence Minister proclaiming that Sydney Catholics were indignant at the exclusion of a priest from the Quarantine Station.⁹

The Catholic newspapers joined the fray. The *Freeman's Journal* headlined its report 'An Outrage that Has Shocked Australia' and compared the circumstances of her death to those of Edith Cavell, a British nurse who had been executed by the Germans in 1915.¹⁰ The *Catholic Press* put it down to 'Wooden-Headed Militarism' and published a letter by Father O'Gorman accusing Dr Elkington of being 'a hater of priests and parsons generally'.¹¹ The issue united Catholics of all persuasions. Justice Charles Heydon, a pariah to many of his fellow Catholics because of his attacks on Archbishop Mannix during the conscription debates, became a leader of the protests.¹² Kelly contacted his fellow bishops around Australia and they in turn expressed their outrage to the government.

Kelly Steps up the Pressure

On 6 December 1918 Archbishop Kelly presided at a solemn Requiem Mass for the deceased nurse at the Cathedral which was attended by her parents and 'a large gathering of leading citizens of the city'.¹³ The Mass was celebrated in the absence of Nurse Egan's body as she had already been buried, as required by health regulations, at the Quarantine Station; prayers over her grave having been said by a fellow nurse. In his sermon the Archbishop castigated the authorities for their callousness in refusing Nurse Egan's requests for a priest. He said:

Let it be remembered that Nurse Egan has won the martyr's crown. They have given her military honours at her funeral. As if she had no soul. As if that were enough. They might lay a Victoria Cross or any other decoration upon her tomb, but they nevertheless denied her dying wish to have her God in the Holy Viaticum.¹⁴

The next day Kelly wrote to Dr Elkington renewing his request for the admission of a priest to the Quarantine Station. In his letter Kelly wrote that

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8. Telegram 3 December 1918 from W. Massy-Greene to Archbishop Kelly.
 9. Copy telegram 3 December 1918 from Archbishop Kelly to Minister of Defence. FJ 5 December 1918, page 27; CP 5 December 1918, page 27; SMH 4 December 1918, page 11; DT 4 December 1918, page 10.
 10. FJ 5 December 1918, page 27.
 11. CP 5 December 1918, page 27. John Simeon Cole Elkington was an experienced and respected public health administrator (Michael Roe, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 8, page 425).
 12. DT 4 December 1918, page 10; 5 December 1918, page 5; FJ 5 December 1918, page 27.
 13. FJ 12 December 1918, page 18.

unless the request were granted without delay he would personally seek to enter to the station. He also cabled Acting Prime Minister Watt informing him of his intentions.¹⁵ The Apostolic Delegate also wrote to the Acting Prime Minister adding his protest to the many that were now coming into the government. Although at this time Australia and the Holy See did not have diplomatic relations, the protest of the Apostolic delegate carried the authority of his office as the Pope's representative in Australia.¹⁶

By Monday, 9 December 1918, Watt had not replied to Kelly. The Archbishop, therefore, accompanied by a number of priests, presented himself at the entrance to the Quarantine Station and requested entry. Members of the press were also in attendance, including a photographer from the Sun whose pictures were to illustrate newspaper reports of the event. The guard at the gate of the Quarantine Station politely informed the Archbishop that he would not allow him to pass and that if he forced entry he would be arrested. Kelly said that he would not provoke an incident and withdrew. But he had already made his point. His willingness to expose himself to the dreaded disease was seen by some as heroic. Elizabeth Mullarkey of Kogarah wrote to him, 'Your noble example of self sacrifice has touched the heart of every true Christian'.¹⁷ More significantly, public opinion was now overwhelmingly on his side.

Indignation meetings were being held in cities, suburbs and towns across New South Wales. Letters expressing outrage were appearing in metropolitan and regional newspapers throughout the State. Many of the letters were from bishops in Australia and New Zealand as well as from members of Parliament at both State and Federal level.¹⁸ The Catholic Federation of New South Wales had mobilised its members and letters of protest were received from over 200 branches.¹⁹ But it was not only Catholics who expressed their disapproval of the government's actions. Even the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which was generally antagonistic to Catholics, had joined in the criticism of the government over the issue.²⁰ In the NSW Legislative Council a former Liberal

14. *FJ* 12 December 1918, page 18; *CP* 12 December 1918, page 20; *SMH* 7 December 1918, page 13. Nurse Egan had been buried in the Quarantine Station's Third Burial Ground on the afternoon of 5 December 1918 with the service being conducted by another nurse, Nurse Williams, at the request of Nurse Egan's family (*SMH* 6 December 1918, page 7; *DT* 6 December 1918, page 4; Foley, *In Quarantine*, pages 113).

15. *FJ* 12 December 1918, page 22. As Senior Chaplain of 2nd Military District Kelly had the necessary qualifications to be appointed as a chaplain to the station.

16. Copy letter 7 December 1918 from Apostolic Delegate to Acting Prime Minister.

17. Letter 11 December 1918 in Sydney Archdiocesan Archives, Kelly Correspondence, Box T1521.

18. See, for example, reports in *FJ* 12 December 1918, pages 22-23, 28, 30; *CP* 12 December 1918, pages 21, 23 and *SMH* 9 December 1918, pages 7-8; 10 December 1918, page 7; *DT* 5 December 1918, page 5; 9 December 1918, page 5.

19. *CP* 19 December 1918, page 11. Cleary wrote, '[W]e are proud to note the effects of organisation in the method by which and through which branches were able to gain the attention of the public.'

20. *SMH* 5 December 1918, page 6; 10 December 1918, page 6.

Premier, Sir Joseph Carruthers (a Protestant) moved a motion expressing regret at the actions of the Federal authorities.²¹ In the Commonwealth Parliament the issue was also debated.²²

The government was shaken by the strength of feeling in the community and it needed a way out of the impasse. The decision to refuse the request to admit a chaplain had been taken by the government on the advice of the Commonwealth's medical experts and those experts were not prepared to change their opinion. Ironically, it was Archbishop Mannix, the Prime Minister's nemesis, who was to broker the settlement that let the government off the hook. After negotiations over a number of days, Massy-Greene telephoned Mannix on 10 December and said that the government was prepared to accept the compromise which had been worked out. For his part Mannix undertook to recommend to Kelly the acceptance of the proposed solution as the best the circumstances would allow. That afternoon Massy-Greene made a statement to the House of Representatives and the next day the government issued regulations allowing chaplains to be admitted to the station.²³

Orange Plot or Bureaucratic Blind Spot?

But for the particular circumstances of the times, Annie Egan would have died in the same relative obscurity as she had lived. But these were not ordinary times and, as a result, what was essentially a public health issue was transformed into a controversy over religious liberty and the rights of the Catholic minority. Although many Protestant clergy and laity were outraged by the government's action and had expressed support for the stand which Archbishop Kelly had taken, Catholic newspapers detected a sectarian dimension in the affair. The *Catholic Press* reckoned that the 'the Orange Ascendancy Party in the Federal Ministry' was to blame, while the *Freeman's Journal* accused the Anglican Primate, Dr Wright, of allowing Archbishop Kelly to do the fighting on the issue, emerging only after the government had backed down in order to claim that he had been a supporter of the cause all

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21. *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Council, 10 December 1918, pages 3603-3613. The issue had previously been the subject of a special adjournment debate. See *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Council, 7 December 1918, pages 3592-3603.
 22. The issue was raised in questions and in adjournment debates. See *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 4 December 1918, page 8709; 5 December 1918, pages 8886-8887; 6 December 1918, page 8904; 10 December 1918, pages 8952-8953; 8958-8966.
 23. Letter 10 December 1918 from Archbishop Mannix to Archbishop Kelly. Mr Massy-Greene's statement is in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 10 December 1918, page 8952-8953. See also FJ 12 December 1918, page 22; CP 12 December 1918, page 20; SMH 10 December 1918, page 7; 11 December 1918, page 11; DT 10 December 1918, page 4. Although the regulations which emerged from the compromise talks were restrictive, Kelly was prepared to abide by them, though under protest (SMH 13 December 1918, page 7).

along.²⁴ These judgments reflect the opinion of many Catholics who by 1918 had grown impatient with a political and social order which, in their perception, treated Catholics as second class citizens.

Looking back from the present, a different judgment seems appropriate. Dr Elkington's refusal to permit a priest to visit the quarantine station to minister to Nurse Egan can at one level be justified on medical grounds, given the doctor's concerns as to the catastrophic consequences for public health which could flow from a breach of quarantine – consequences which with hindsight can be seen not to have been exaggerated. Nevertheless, given the willingness of the priests to remain in the Quarantine Station, it is difficult to see how quarantine could have been breached. Medical considerations, therefore, do not provide a complete explanation.

Issues of public health require careful consideration to be given to competing interests within the community. In this case, one such interest was the religious sensibilities of Catholics who saw it as an imperative that a priest be available to administer the last rites to Catholic inmates of the Quarantine Station who might be dying of the disease. A leading Catholic member of the State parliament, John Lane Mullins MLC, explained to the Legislative Council, '... when a Catholic is confronted by death the presence of a priest is of infinitely more importance to him than that of all the doctors in the world.' It is doubtful whether the medical authorities saw things quite in those terms. Their initial response to requests to allow a priest into the station was a series of unconvincing justifications, implying that the requests themselves did not warrant serious consideration. Even when the controversy erupted, the medical authorities refused to alter their advice to the government. The approach of the medical authorities suggests a secular mindset which, at least in the context of the epidemic, heavily discounted the claim of religion as a relevant factor in the formulation of public health policy. This view is consistent with Edmund Campion's description of Dr Elkington as a secularist and friend of Norman Lindsay who shared Lindsay's distaste for religion.²⁶

The initial refusal of the responsible Ministers to reverse Dr Elkington's decision can be explained without the need to invoke the existence of an Orange plot. The politicians knew that they would bear ultimate responsibility

24. CP 12 December 1918, page 21; FJ 19 December 1918, page 21. A mildly worded letter from Archbishop Wright to Acting Prime Minister Watt dated 5 December 1918 is reproduced in SMH 12 December 1918, page 7. Prominent non-Catholics, such as the Chief Justice of New South Wales, Sir William Cullen, and Mr Justice Street, publicly added their voices in protest (FJ 12 December 1918, page 23; CP 12 December 1918, page 21; SMH 9 December 1918, page 6). Mary Gilmore even penned a poem which was published in CP 12 December 1918, page 23. Rev. R.G. MacIntyre, former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, in a letter given wide publicity, refuted any suggestion that the issue was confined to the exclusion from the Quarantine Station of a priest wishing to minister to Catholics. 'The Protestant Churches are as keenly interested as they on behalf of the sacred rights of their people to the ministrations and comfort of our common Christian faith.' (FJ 12 December 1918, page 23; CP 12 December 1918, page 21; SMH 9 December 1918, page 6).

25. *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Council, 7 December 1918, page 3599.

if they acted contrary to the advice of their medical experts and the disease spread. The potential of the epidemic to kill tens of thousands of Australians was well known. Until they received a clear indication of the attitude of the community, the politicians were not prepared to act contrary to that advice. But once Kelly, by careful manipulation of public opinion, had demonstrated that, unlike the medical authorities, the community appreciated the religious necessity of having a priest attend the dying patients, the government, against the recommendation of its chief medical adviser, quickly relented.²⁷

Conclusion

The Quarantine Station affair disappeared as abruptly as it arose. The embers of sectarianism, however, continued to smoulder, flaring up every now and again until they eventually expired from exhaustion in 1925 following the battle over the *Ne Temere* legislation. In the context of the political and social issues of the day, the affair itself did not amount to much. However, it is a valuable reminder that religion, and religious sectarianism in particular, have been potent forces in this country's political and social history.

Postscript:

During the years following the Quarantine Station affair, Archbishop Kelly continued to be forthright in the defence of his people. However, his handling of the affair was arguably his most successful foray into politics, an arena in which, according to his critics, he was inept. Once he had achieved his aim of having a chaplain appointed to the Quarantine Station, Kelly was content to let the matter rest. He declined a request by Justice Heydon to hold a public meeting in his honour to mark the victory.²⁸

In the early 1920s a public subscription was launched to raise money for the erection of a headstone over Annie Egan's grave. Dr John Nash MLC who had been an outspoken critic of the Federal government in the debates in the Legislative Council was a major promoter of the fund.²⁹ Today, visitors to the Quarantine Station, which is now a museum administered by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, are treated to an audio-visual presentation of the history of the station in which the story of Annie Egan is recounted.

27. The decision to admit clergy was approved by the Cabinet despite the views of the Director of Quarantine, Dr J.H.L. Cumpston. In a minute to the Minister, Cumpston wrote that 'he would be obliged, if the matter were left to him, to decide solely on his own judgment against taking the responsibility of admitting the clergymen.' He then set out a series of measures which he recommended should be taken to minimise the risk of infection should the government decide otherwise (SMH 11 December 1918, page 11).

28. Letter 15 December 1918 from C.G. Heydon to Archbishop Kelly.

29. Correspondence concerning the erection of the monument is in the National Archives of Australia: CRS SP399/1.

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