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Where Crows Gather

The Sister Liguori Affair 1920-21

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The story of Sr Liguori is a remarkable tale which, if written as a novel, would be considered too far divorced from reality to be acceptable as a serious work of fiction. Yet it is a true story, full of tragedy and farce, in which a young Irish nun flees her convent at Wagga Wagga, fearful she is about to be murdered by her Mother Superior, and places herself under the protection of the Orange Order. Arrested as a lunatic at the request of her bishop, she is declared sane by the Lunacy Court, which orders her release. There are fisticuffs in parliament over the affair and she sues her bishop for false imprisonment. If that is not enough she is also kidnapped off the streets of Kogarah by her brother.¹

The title of this paper, 'Where Crows Gather', derives from the meaning of Wagga Wagga in the local Wiradjuri language. But it also conveys a sense of the perilous predicament in which Sr Liguori found herself when she made that fateful decision to leave the convent and became caught up in the most bitter sectarian conflict in Australia's history.

The story is set in early twentieth-century Australia, when Catholics were mostly Irish by birth or descent, the Irish were mostly Catholics, and Irish Catholics were mostly on the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder. This three-fold identification of religion, ethnicity and class had been a feature of Australian society since the nineteenth century,² and from the earliest days of European colonisation Irish Catholics had perceived themselves as a persecuted minority. Whether or not Catholics were ever subject to persecution in Australia is debatable.³ Nevertheless, whatever may have been the reality, perception shaped the attitude that Catholics held as to their place in the wider community, and in early twentieth-century Australia, persecuted Catholicism was the orthodox Catholic historical interpretation.⁴

If ever there was a particular time in the history of Australian Catholics when this interpretation seemed justified it was during the early 1920s, a period in which

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a series of sectarian controversies, piled one upon the other in quick succession, threatened to tear the fabric of Australian society. In the words of NSW Attorney General, Edward McTiernan, there was at this time 'a veritable hurricane of sectarianism'.⁵ And at the eye of the storm was Sr Liguori.

Born in 1890 at Newbridge, Co. Kildare, Bridget Partridge was the daughter of an English soldier and his Irish wife. She had three sisters and a brother, Joseph. In 1908 Bridget joined the Presentation order at St Bridget's Convent in Kildare town. Within three months she was on her way to Australia where in 1911 she was professed at Mt Erin Convent, Wagga Wagga, taking the name Sr Liguori.

At first she worked as a teacher. However, after an adverse report in 1918, she was relegated to domestic duties. Resentful of her demotion and suffering poor health, she came to the view that she no longer had a vocation, but, preferring to avoid the moral pressure which she feared would be brought to bear on her should she apply to be released from her vows, Sr Liguori brooded, allowing her resentment to grow.

Eventually, a paranoid fear that she was about to be murdered by her Mother Superior triggered the nun's sudden departure from the convent. When the Mother Superior realised that Sr Liguori was missing, she alerted the police who organised a search. However, the search was in vain as Bridget had taken refuge in the nearby home of

a Protestant family and within 24 hours she had been spirited out of town and was on her way to Sydney in the company of Mr R. E. Barton, the Grand Master of the Loyal Orange Institution.



Bishop Joseph Dwyer

After a few days, the Bishop of Wagga Wagga, Joseph Wilfrid Dwyer, who was responsible for the nun's welfare, realised that Sr Liguori was no longer in the district. Acting on the advice of her doctor that she was 'mentally unhinged', the bishop instituted proceedings under the *Lunacy Act* for her arrest. Within a short time the police ascertained where she was staying and just before midnight on Saturday, August 1920, they called at the Kogarah home of Congregationalist Minister Rev. William Touchell and took Bridget into custody, lodging her at the Darlinghurst Reception House.

On the following Monday Bridget appeared at the Reception Court where T. J. Ryan KC (the former Queensland Premier and, at that time, a member of the House of Representatives) announced to the magistrate that he appeared for Miss Partridge. Ryan had been retained by the prominent Catholic layman, P. J. Minahan MLA, who claimed to be a friend of Miss Partridge. However, Mr F. B. Boyce of counsel, who had been briefed by solicitors retained by the Orange Order, also claimed to appear for Miss Partridge. When Boyce challenged Ryan's right to appear for the nun, the magistrate remanded her in custody pending receipt of a psychiatric report.

On the following Friday the Chief Medical Officer reported to the Court that in his opinion Bridget was sane and the magistrate thereupon ordered her release, allowing her to leave the court in the company of Rev. Touchell and his wife. Outside the courtroom a large crowd had assembled, and when news of the magistrate's decision was conveyed to them it was greeted by cheers and boos from different sections of the gathering, with much heckling and pushing and shoving. This was only the beginning of what would build up to be a major public controversy, lapped up by an enthusiastic press eager to inform a scandalised public of the salacious details.

That month the Address in Reply debate gave parliamentarians an opportunity to air their views on the Sr Liguori affair, with Protestant members speaking in support of Bridget's right to liberty, railing against Catholic institutions and demanding government inspection of convents to prevent young women being held against their will. Catholic members, in an equally strident manner, refuted the allegations made against the convents.⁶ In September, Thomas Henley MLA called on the Government to appoint a Royal Commission to inquire regarding women in convents,⁷ and in November he sought leave to introduce a private member's bill 'to provide security against detention of persons against their will, in any institutions, or by any persons'. Catholic members responded with derision to Henley's thinly disguised attack on the convent system and, at times the debates became very heated, with P. J. Minahan declaring, 'If you in any way interfere with these Catholic institutions there will be a "mess-up" here worse than that which occurred on the

plains of Flanders.' At the close of one of the debates, members had to intervene to prevent physical violence between Henley and C. C. Lazzarini.⁸

While the politicians made what they could out of the affair, Bridget's private life was in turmoil. Bridget's younger brother Joseph lived in Hong Kong. In response to a cable sent to him by the Mount Erin convent, Joseph arrived in Sydney on 7 September 1920. His arrival in Australia was accompanied by the sort of intrigue that might be expected in a John Le Carré novel. To avoid his falling into the hands of the Orange Order, Joseph was taken off the ship at Townsville and transported by train to Brisbane, where Charles Lawlor, secretary of the Catholic Federation, met him and accompanied him to Sydney. All the while, Archbishop Duhig kept Bishop Dwyer informed of Joseph's movements, using coded telegrams.⁹



Joe Partridge in Sydney

The Catholic Federation, which was acting in the affair on behalf of Bishop Dwyer, took charge of Joseph, and made use of him to gain publicity in its campaign against Barton and Touchell, whom it accused of detaining Bridget against her will. The Federation also launched a public appeal for funds to assist Joseph to recover his sister.¹⁰ Joseph, who was an accomplished musician, performed at many of these functions. There were some in the Federation who opposed these tactics, believing that because Joseph had come to Australia to return his sister to Ireland, he should not be paraded like a 'show puppy' at publicity stunts. It was also being suggested that the Federation had in fact prevented Joseph from taking his sister home.¹¹

Although by the close of 1920 publicity surrounding the affair had died down, it was re-ignited, in the following year when, on 30 June 1921, Justice David Ferguson of the Supreme Court commenced hearing an action for damages brought by Bridget against Bishop Dwyer in which the former nun alleged that the bishop had procured her arrest and imprisonment without just cause. On the opening day of the hearing, a long line of men and women stood in the rain in King Street outside No. 5 Jury Court waiting for the gates of the court house to open. When they did there was a rush for seats and the gallery quickly filled, and those who could not get into the court waited outside, hopeful of being admitted at some stage during the day.

The parties were represented by the leading King's Counsel of the day and, over ten sitting days, each side called a string of witnesses, including Bridget and the bishop, to narrate the sorry saga. During that time verbatim accounts in the daily papers maintained the public's fascination with the case. At the end of the evidence, and after addresses by counsel and the summing up by the judge, the jurors were sent out to consider their verdict. After seven hours deliberating on three questions put to them by the judge, they returned, finding on the first two questions that the bishop had not taken reasonable care to inform himself as to the true facts of the case, and that he had not honestly believed the case which he had laid before the magistrate. The outcome seemed inevitable. Surely Bridget had won. But notwithstanding the first two answers, the jury found, in answer to the third question, that the bishop had not been actuated by malice. This finding was critical to the outcome of the case, as malice was a necessary legal element of Bridget's claim, so that, despite the jury's findings on the other two questions, the judge was bound to enter judgment for the bishop. The *Sydney Morning Herald* described the reaction to the verdict of the huge crowd that had gathered outside the court: 'Volley after volley of cheers were given for the Bishop, whose sympathisers could be estimated at about ten to one in the sea of faces out in front of the court.'¹²

On the following Monday night, Sydney's Catholics, numbering upwards of 10,000, filled the Town Hall for a meeting to celebrate the victory.¹³ Organised by the Catholic Federation and presided over by Archbishop Kelly, the meeting opened with the singing of 'Faith of Our Fathers'. When Bishop Dwyer appeared on the platform he was greeted by an outbreak of applause that lasted for several minutes, after which P. S. Cleary, president of the Catholic Federation, moved, 'That this meeting of citizens records its appreciation of his Lordship, Dr Dwyer, Bishop of Wagga, and of the manner in which he has vindicated the dignity and responsibility of his position'. The motion was enthusiastically carried. Father Maurice O'Reilly, Sydney's answer to the demagoguery of Archbishop Mannix and never one to pass up an opportunity for hyperbole, hailed the result as a victory for the Catholic Church of Australia. Clearly the crowd lapped up the rhetoric, subscribing more than £1,500 to defray the bishop's legal costs.¹⁴

Apart from the occasional verbal forays by one side or the other, the affair appeared to subside once again.¹⁵ But Joseph Partridge was determined to remove his sister from the company of Barton and the Touchells and return her to Ireland. On 26 October 1921, while Bridget was walking along Chapel Street, Kogarah in the company of the Touchells, after having attended a Home Mission Festival, she was snatched from the street, bundled into a motor car and driven away.¹⁶ In the car was her brother. They were driven to the house of Dan O'Callaghan at Ashfield where

Joseph spent the night trying to persuade Bridget to leave her Protestant friends and return with him to Ireland.

The next morning, an alert policeman spotted Bridget in the city in the company of O'Callaghan. They were taken to police headquarters where a meeting was arranged among various interested parties. At that meeting Bridget made clear her desire to remain in the company of her new friends.¹⁷ This seemed to satisfy Joseph, who shortly thereafter departed Australia, leaving in his wake a further controversy which rekindled sectarian passions. Parliament once again became the scene of bitter exchanges across the denominational divide, with Sir George Fuller, the Leader of the Opposition, moving a censure motion alleging that the Government had acted improperly in not having the kidnappers charged.¹⁸

Wagga Wagga was deeply divided over the affair. In July 1921 division turned to violence when Rev. Touchell visited the area to establish branches of the Protestant Federation, a counterweight to the Catholic Federation. At meetings held at Marrar and Coolamon Touchell was assaulted and had to be rescued by police. A number of men were later convicted of riotous behaviour and assault.¹⁹

It is difficult today to understand how such passions could have been aroused. But at the time Australian society comprised two communities: one was British in origin and Protestant in faith, the other Irish and Catholic. At a functional level the two communities generally co-existed and co-operated peacefully and effectively, but viscerally they were quite distinct and often in a state of tension.

Competition between religions reflected not only theological differences but also complex ethnic rivalries, particularly those between Irish Catholics, on the one hand, and English Anglicans and Scots-Irish Presbyterians on the other, stretching back centuries.²⁰ These chronic rivalries became acute in 1912 due to two factors. Firstly, with the introduction of the third Home Rule Bill in the Westminster parliament the monumental political and constitutional struggle going on half a world away captured the enthusiastic interest of Australians of all religions. The 'Irish Question' had been played out in Australia in one form or another for over a century, so it was not difficult to arouse passionate debate on the issue.

Yet, at the same time, Australian Catholics had gone on the offensive over the state aid issue, establishing Catholic federations to pressure governments in four states. The two issues soon became intertwined, intensifying interdenominational tensions. However, before the situation had escalated out of control, events in Europe in the summer of 1914 overshadowed the local conflict and the outbreak of the war saw Australians across the religious divide unite for the sake of the war effort. For

Australian Catholics, the war offered hope that as a result of the shared blood sacrifice they would gain acceptance.

For the first 20 months of the war this hope held, symbolised on the first anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli by the enthusiasm with which Catholics and Protestants together embraced the idea of Anzac Day as a symbol of national unity.²¹ But on that very day news was spreading throughout the land of a rising in Dublin the day before – Easter Monday. At first Catholics joined with Protestants in condemning the rebels.²² But when the British government responded to the rising by executing the leaders, Catholic criticism of the rebels turned to outrage directed at the British government resulting in a Protestant backlash.²³

If the Easter rising inserted the wedge between Catholics and Protestants in Australia during the war, it was the debates over conscription in 1916 and 1917 that drove it home. Research has shown that it was considerations of class rather than religion or ethnicity that led Catholics to oppose conscription.²⁴ Nevertheless, Prime Minister Hughes and many of his supporters chose to blame Irish Catholics in general and Archbishop Mannix in particular for the defeat of the two plebiscites. Increasingly, Protestant leaders called into question Catholic loyalty, especially after Pope Benedict XV issued a peace note in August 1917 and Archbishop Kelly in May 1918 appeared to link continued Catholic support for the war with the provision of state aid.²⁵

With the war's end interdenominational tensions once more subsided, only to increase again in 1920, especially in Sydney, with the decision of the Catholic Federation to stand candidates at the State elections. Protestants who already believed Catholics had taken over the Labor Party, saw the decision to run candidates as additional evidence that the threat of Rome rule was real. Adding to the tension was a series of overlapping events which unleashed a round of sectarian bitterness prompting McTiernan's meteorological metaphor. These events included: the deportation of Father Charles Jerger in July following months of agitation around Australia which had been led by Catholics and which included a monster meeting at Moore Park in Sydney on 30 May that attracted a crowd of 150,000 people;²⁶ the British navy's arrest in August of Archbishop Mannix on the high seas while he was on his way to Ireland;²⁷ and the expulsion of Hugh Mahon from the Federal Parliament in November for speaking out against England's policies in Ireland.²⁸ Earlier in the year the British government had deployed the Black and Tans in Ireland, and their campaign of terror and reprisals against the Irish population to counter the IRA's campaign of terror against forces of the Crown reignited the local debate on British rule in Ireland. In addition, the years following the Great War were a time of industrial turmoil with disputing factions contesting for control of the political and indus-

trial wings of the working class movement. The very fabric of Australian society was under threat. It was against this background that the Sr Liguori affair was played out and must be understood.

By the end of 1920 organised Catholicism and organised Protestantism were lining up for a showdown, with some Protestants predicting a violent conflict: 'Australia will be embroiled in a war such as that now being waged in Russia; in other words Australia will have a bloody time with Bolshevism and Sinn Feinism arrayed on one side and constitutionalism and Protestantism on the other,' opined one correspondent to a Protestant newspaper.²⁹ The *Australian Christian World* published an account of an organised plot to have Roman Catholics take over Australia by having priests form federations in the parishes so as to train Catholics and to infiltrate trade unions and the Labor Party. It alleged that twenty priests were sent out from Ireland for this purpose.³⁰ Mr W. Copeland Trimble, a prominent newspaper owner of Enniskillen and a member of the Ulster Unionist Council, told a Protestant Federation luncheon that the Irish rebels were being financed by Bolshevik and German money and that large numbers of priests were coming to Australia to organise the disintegration of the Empire.³¹ At a Protestant Federation rally at Bondi on 9 November 1921 Rev. James Green warned:

There is a determined effort afoot to establish a Romish Government in Australia. Those behind the movement are establishing themselves in strategic positions with much skill and forethought. Every hill in and around Sydney is in their hands. They are all within easy signalling distance of each other. Every country town and railway station between Sydney and Melbourne and Brisbane had the surrounding hill dominated by the Roman Catholic Church.³²



Bridget Partridge

Soon the once notorious Sr Liguori affair faded from public sight and eventually from social memory. By the mid-1920s the flames of sectarianism had died down sufficiently so that only the embers remained, occasionally flaring up from time to time over the ensuing decades but never again reaching the intensity of the early 1920s. For the most part the two communities have since worked together to build the Australia we know today, where sectarianism (between Christians at least) has

little if any influence over public discourse, and the labels 'Irish Catholic' and 'British Protestant' no longer functionally define sections of the Australian people.

As for Bridget Partridge, she remained a member of the Touchell household for another 40 years before being admitted to Rydalmere Psychiatric Hospital, where she died on 4 December 1966.³³ She is buried in an unmarked grave at Rookwood Cemetery.

- 1 The events described here are derived largely from contemporary reports appearing in Catholic, Protestant and secular newspapers and from the papers of Bishop Joseph Dwyer in the Wagga Wagga Diocesan Archives. An account of the Sr Liguori affair is in Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric: Sectarianism in Australia 1910-1925*, Citadel Books, Sydney, 2002, pp. 218-226. *Tearing the Fabric*, p. 218 fn 97 cites other secondary sources which describe the affair.
- 2 Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1987, pp. 28-29. The last generalisation, though conventionally accepted, may need to be revised in the light of Judith Brett's 'Class, Religion and the Foundation of the Australian Party System: A Revisionist Interpretation', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 37, 2002, pp. 39-56.
- 3 See James Waldersee, *Catholic Society in New South Wales 1788-1860*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1974; Mark Lyons, *Aspects of Sectarianism in New South Wales circa 1865 to 1880*, PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1972; C.J. Duffy, 'The Origins of Anti-Catholicism in Australia', *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, Vol 1 Part 2, 1960, pp. 1-12; Mansfield, Joan and Bruce, 'Australian Religious History: 21-23 August 1975', *Journal of Religious History*, Vol 8, 1975, pp. 412-420.
- 4 Waldersee, *Catholic Society in NSW*, pp. 1-41.
- 5 This was the term used by E. A. McTiernan, at a prize giving at the Marist Brothers' High School (at Darlinghurst) at the end of 1920, when describing recent events to Archbishop Kelly who had returned from overseas (*Australian Christian World* (ACW) 4 February 1921, p. 11).
- 6 See, for example, *NSW Parliamentary Debates* (NSWPD) Vol 79, pp. 420-425; 452-455 (25 August 1920); 534-541 (31 August 1920). Father J. M. Cusack wrote a lengthy article for the *Freeman's Journal* (FJ) in which he defended the convents against such attacks (FJ 19 August 1920, pp. 16-17).
- 7 *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) 2 September 1920, p. 6; 4 September 1920, p. 13.
- 8 NSWPD Vol 81, pp. 2902-2913 (30 November 1920); Vol 82, pp. 3215-3222 (7 December 1920); 3971-3974 (21 December 1920); *Daily Telegraph* (DT) 1 December 1920, p. 9; 8 December 1920, p. 10; 22 December 1920, p. 8; SMH 8 December 1920, p. 14.
- 9 For example, a telegram dated 6 September 1920 to Bishop Dwyer states, 'Bringing Perdriau tyre train arriving Sydney Tuesday splendid condition' (Wagga Wagga Diocesan Archives).
- 10 *Catholic Press* (CP) 16 September 1920, pp. 11 and 20.
- 11 Letter 2 December 1920 from Charles Lawlor to Bishop Dwyer (Wagga Wagga Diocesan Archives). The Diocesan Archives contain a number of letters from Lawlor reporting to the bishop on the latest developments.
- 12 SMH 14 July 1921, p. 9. The Catholic papers carried triumphant editorials: FJ 21 July 1921, p. 20; 28 July 1921, p. 20; CP 28 July 1921, pp. 24-25.

- 13 FJ 21 July 1921, p. 14.
- 14 SMH 19 July 1921, p. 7; FJ 21 July 1921, pp. 14-15.
- 15 For example, SMH 12 August 1921, p. 9; 13 August 1921, p. 13.
- 16 SMH 27 October 1921, p. 7.
- 17 SMH 28 October 1921, p. 9. A detailed account of these events is in ACW 4 November 1921, p. 10.
- 18 SMH 3 November 1921, p. 7; 8 November 1921, p. 9; 16 November 1921, p. 14; 17 November 1921, p. 9. NSWPD Vol 84, pp. 1179 (27 October 1921), p. 1268 (1 November 1921), p. 1328 (2 November 1921), p. 1479 (8 November 1921), pp. 1724-1742 (17 November 1921); Vol 85, p. 2422 (6 December 1921).
- 19 *Wagga Wagga Daily Express* 14 July 1921, pp. 2-3; 29 July 1921, pp. 1, 2; ACW 5 August 1921, p. 9. James Logan, 'Sectarianism in Ganmain: A local study, 1912-21', *Rural Society*, Vol 10, 2000, pp. 121-138.
- 20 For a discussion of the meaning of 'sectarianism' in the Australian context see Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, p. ii, Hogan, *Sectarian Strand*, pp. 4-8; Lyons, *Aspects of Sectarianism*, pp. viii-xxi.
- 21 FJ 27 April 1916, p. 22.
- 22 FJ 4 May 1916, p. 25; CP 11 May 1916, p. 21. Peter Overlack, "'Easter 1916" in Dublin and the Australian Press: Background and Response', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 54/55, 1997, pp. 188-193; R.P. Davis, 'Tasmania and the Irish Revolution, 1916-22', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings*, Vol 21 No. 2, 1974, pp. 69-88. Even Archbishop Mannix initially described the rising as deplorable and its leaders as misguided (*Advocate* 6 May 1916, p.25).
- 23 Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, pp. 134-136.
- 24 This is certainly the case with the vote in October 1916. The situation is more complex in 1917. See Jeff Kildea, 'Australian Catholics and conscription in the Great War', *Journal of Religious History*, vol 26, no 3, October 2002, pp. 298-313. See also Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, chs 8-9.
- 25 Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, pp. 164-165, 187-189.
- 26 Gerard Henderson, 'The Deportation of Charles Jerger', *Labour History*, No 31, 1976, pp. 61-78.
- 27 B.A. Santamaria, *Daniel Mannix: The Quality of Leadership*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1984, pp. 103-123.
- 28 L.F. Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger 1914-1952*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1979, pp. 452-456.
- 29 Letter from 'A Justice' published in ACW 12 November 1920, p. 10.
- 30 ACW 12 November 1920, p. 10.
- 31 ACW 24 June 1921, p. 11.
- 32 ACW 18 November 1921, p. 16.
- 33 Sheila Tearle, 'I Remember Sister Ligouri', *Footprints*, April, 1977, pp. 9-10.