

The other inclusions in this important document are a tribute to Peter Phelan by a seminary friend Joe Broderick; a poem by Bruce Dawe, who was a family friend, called *At Mass for Peter Phelan*; a record of his time as de facto editor of *The Advocate* by Michael Costigan during this turbulent period; and a reprint of the paper given to the Australian Catholic Historical Society in July 2018 by Des Cahill, Emeritus professor of International Studies, RMIT University. Lastly there are some of the comments and statements made during the forum which concluded the day.

This publication is important as a public record of the turmoil in the church which came to a head in 1968 and which is ongoing.

BOOK REVIEW

The Extraordinary Case of Sister Liguori

Author: Maureen McKeown

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Reviewed by Jeff Kildea*

‘What goes around comes around’, so the saying goes. And it aptly describes my being asked to write this review of Maureen McKeown’s *The Extraordinary Case of Sister Liguori*. In 2005, at the Australian Catholic Historical Society’s conference ‘The Catholic Impact on Australia’, I presented a paper entitled ‘Where Crows Gather: The Sister Liguori Affair 1920–21’. The following year, the society published my paper in this journal. Then, in 2010, a woman in Ireland researching her family history came across the article and wrote to me, saying she was almost certain that Sr Liguori (Brigid Partridge) was her great aunt. That was my first contact with Maureen McKeown. I had always intended to write something more substantial on the Sr Liguori affair as it is a story worth telling, but other projects kept pushing it back. So, I was delighted when a couple of years

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later Maureen informed me she had decided to write a book about her great aunt's extraordinary life. Thereafter, we met in Sydney and I was impressed by her determination to uncover the facts. And here I am now, having read the book she eventually wrote, writing this review. But, why should I be surprised at this latest twist in the Liguori saga. After all, as I noted in my 2005 paper,¹ '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'. Perhaps that is why Ms McKeown decided to write her book not strictly as history and not strictly as fiction, but as 'narrative non-fiction' a genre that uses the tools of dramatization but does not fictionalise.

Set in early twentieth-century Australia riven by sectarianism, it is the tale of a young Irish nun who in July 1920 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, Sr Liguori is declared sane by the Lunacy Court, which orders her release, whereupon Brigid Partridge, as she now prefers to be called, goes to live with a Congregational minister William Touchell and his wife. There are fisticuffs in parliament over the affair and Bridget sues her bishop for false imprisonment. If that is not enough she is also kidnapped off the streets of Kogarah by her brother who has been smuggled into Sydney by the Catholic Federation to persuade her to leave her Protestant gaolers or guardians, depending on your point of view. When a jury rejects Brigid's claim against the bishop the Catholics declare victory and the controversy dies down. Thereafter Brigid remains with the Touchells but ends her days in Rydalmere Psychiatric Hospital in 1966, ever-fearful that the Catholics are still trying to kidnap her.

McKeown's method using Brigid's first-person point of view enables her to lay bare personal emotions, capturing well the dread and utter helplessness that Brigid surely felt after she realised that convent life was not for her. Yet, when the book goes beyond speculating on individual emotions to narrating events it sometimes fails to grasp their wider historical import. This is not an uncommon problem for a non-historian writing narrative non-fiction. In the case of the Liguori affair, verbatim newspaper reports of the court case

1 Jeff Kildea, 'Where crows gather: the Sister Liguori affair 1920–21', *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 27 (2006), 31–40.

provide copious material for both courtroom dialogue and as a source of facts relating to various events. But the reports do not provide the all-important background of those events, which the author must discover elsewhere. An example is McKeown's treatment of the role played by members of the Orange Order, who give Brigid refuge and support her in her determination not to return to the convent. Framed as an act of pure humanitarian kindness it neglects to show the full context in which that support was offered. And in doing so it misjudges the true nature of Brigid's predicament, one we have seen in other cases, e.g. in 2005 with Terri Schiavo over her 'right to die' and in 2000 with Elián González over his repatriation to Cuba. It is a situation in which activists on both sides of an ideological divide pull at the hapless victim like children fighting over a rag doll, each side proclaiming its motivation as purely the individual's best interests. It is no wonder Brigid started to come apart at the seams, for 1920 was arguably the worst year in Australia's history of sectarian conflict and she had unwittingly found herself in the middle of what the then Attorney-General Edward McTiernan described as a 'veritable hurricane of sectarian strife'.

While *The Extraordinary Case of Sister Liguori* tells very well the poignant story of a young woman wronged by her church who had the courage to do something about it, the Sr Liguori affair was much more than that. Those seeking to delve deeper into the controversy, to try to understand how and why Brigid Partridge came to be the centre of public attention for months on end in the press, the parliament and at public meetings, may find it less satisfying.