
BOOK REVIEWS

STEPHEN UTICK, *Captain Charles, Engineer of Charity: The Remarkable Life of Charles Gordon O'Neill*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2008; ISBN 978 1 74175 387 3; xii + 276 pages.

The St Vincent de Paul Society is arguably the best known Catholic organisation in Australia, yet Charles O'Neill, the man who brought it to New South Wales is hardly known at all. An architect and engineer of some note in his native Scotland, 35-year old O'Neill emigrated to the Antipodes in 1863. Sailing to New Zealand in search of gold (not as a digger but as an engineer), he rose from obscurity to celebrity status after being elected to parliament as the representative of the Otago goldfields. During almost ten years in parliament he supported many progressive measures and was largely responsible for the introduction of town planning legislation. He was also an early and active supporter of the Society after its establishment in New Zealand in 1867.

Yearning for a broader stage and to further his charitable work, O'Neill crossed the Tasman in 1880. On 24 July 1881 he presided at the inaugural meeting of the Society at St Patrick's Church Hill, in Sydney's Rocks district. Three days later he received from Archbishop Vaughan approval for the establishment of the Society in the Archdiocese of Sydney and his Grace's blessing on 'this holy work'. Thereafter, conferences sprang up across Sydney and further afield, many with O'Neill's direct assistance.

In those days The Rocks was a neighbourhood of poverty and vice, comparable to the Glasgow slums O'Neill had left behind. It was here that he concentrated his charitable work, which took precedence over his engineering career. Even so, he continued to be a progressive thinker, being one of the first to propose tunnels under Sydney Harbour. He also advised governments on infrastructure projects.

An attempt to enter parliament in 1889 for the seat of Sturt, centred on Broken Hill, was unsuccessful, heralding the start of a decline in his life's fortunes. In this he was not alone. Crippling strikes followed by economic depression in the early 1890s saw many lives ruined. In O'Neill's case, naivety and poor business judgment accelerated his downfall.

For reasons that Stephen Utick admits remain a mystery, O'Neill became involved with some shady characters associated with the Northumberland Banking Company. The bank collapsed and many of its customers were ruined. In February 1892 O'Neill joined his fellow board members in the dock when the directors were prosecuted for conspiracy to cheat and defraud. Ultimately, he was acquitted, but his reputation was destroyed.

Before his arraignment O'Neill stepped down from all offices he held in the Society to save it from embarrassment. Nevertheless, so highly was he regarded

that a meeting at St Patrick's Church Hill passed a resolution expressing confidence in his innocence. In Utick's opinion, 'O'Neill had been drawn into a trap by a swindler who treacherously tried to implicate Charles in a web of malpractice', but despite the acquittal, his 'business ineptitude had been exposed'.

Fortunately for the Society, O'Neill had established it on a firm foundation, so that his enforced retirement was only a temporary setback, with other prominent men continuing his work. Charles carried on charitable work through the St Patrick's conference, acting as a mentor to its members. He died in November 1900 in St Vincent's Hospital.

In this very readable book, Utick elevates O'Neill from being 'a footnote in someone else's saga', to the place of prominence he deserves. In doing so, he sets the life-story of Charles O'Neill against the background of the communities in which he lived, giving the reader not only an insight into the life of a fascinating but flawed philanthropist, but also an understanding of the political, social and economic milieu in which he operated.

Jeff Kildea

PHILIP AYRES, *Prince of the Church, Patrick Francis Moran, 1830-1911*, The Miegunyah Press, Carlton, Victoria, 2007. ISBN 9780522853735; 367 pages

As a Prince of the Church, Patrick Francis Moran's biography has long been anticipated. Philip Ayres, from Melbourne, set himself the task of breathing life into the story of a motherless boy (at 14 months), who became a Roman trained priest, Bishop and Australia's first Cardinal. Such an undertaking was never meant for the fainthearted. Ayres approaches his subject with enthusiasm.

Moran's life and church career were extensive and distinguished. Born in 1830 and dying at the respectable age of 81, the Cardinal reached what can only be described as the pinnacle of success for an aspiring middle class Irish male of the nineteenth century. Orphaned at a young age, Moran's comfortable extended family ensured he did not suffer the ravages of the Irish Famine (1845-50). Transported to Rome, his education was the best and under the guidance of his step uncle, Cardinal Paul Cullen, the young Moran's rise through the ranks of the church was inevitable. Ayres details his career from Rome, back to Ireland (Bishop of Ossory) and then on to Sydney.

The sheer length and breadth of Moran's long career is what makes the task of such a biography so daunting. The writer must become immersed in the history of Ireland, the role of the Catholic Church there, Rome's diplomatic relationships with Ireland, the British Empire, and Irish Catholic migration to Australia. Most importantly the reader must be helped connect the colliding world views of these migrants from the 'old countries' as they struggled to assert their vision on the newly emerging church in Australia. Moran's personality and stamp on the