

The Sister Liguori Story - A Manichean Morality Play*

Introduction

The Sister Liguori story took place more than a hundred years ago. Yet, it refuses to go away. Every now and again, it resurfaces in both scholarly journals and in the mass media.¹ In the latter category are the following examples:

- in 1954 *People* magazine ran a six-page piece on the affair;
- in 1980 the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Good Weekend magazine published a feature article by the *Herald's* religious affairs reporter Alan Gill;
- in 2017 a 'narrative non-fiction' book, *The Extraordinary Case Of Sister Liguori*, was published in Ireland by Maureen McKeown, a great-niece of the nun;
- in 2019 the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried a story on Maureen McKeown's book;
- in 2021 artist Amanda Bromfield marked the centenary of the affair with an exhibition at the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery incorporating ceramics, found objects, and a video performance.²

Its most recent manifestation was in April this year when the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a news item written by journalist Tim Barlass, who claimed to have uncovered the secret behind the story.³

In this paper I will explore the reasons why the Sister Liguori story continues to captivate the public imagination. But first, for those unfamiliar with it, here is a condensed version.

Overview

The story begins in July 1920 when Irish-born Sister Liguori (aka Bridget Partridge) of the Presentation order flees Mount Erin convent, Wagga Wagga in her nightdress, fearful she is about to be murdered by her mother superior. Her flight takes her to the house of Mr and Mrs Thompson, a Protestant couple with links to the Loyal Orange Institution. Evading police and convent search parties, who are fearful she might have drowned in a waterhole or suffered exposure on that cold winter night, she is smuggled out of Wagga Wagga and eventually taken to Sydney by Grand Master Robert Barton.

There the police arrest her as a lunatic on a warrant issued at the request of her bishop, Joseph Dwyer. She is detained at the Darlinghurst Reception House but the Lunacy Court

¹ In the former category are: Nancy Blacklow and Elizabeth West, 'Sectarianism and Sisterhood: Research in Progress', *Rural Society*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2000, pp. 243-248; Jeff Kildea, 'Where Crows Gather: The Sister Liguori Affair 1920-21', *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, Vol. 27, 2006, pp. 31-40; Andrew Lee, 'The Nun in the Nightgown: The Public Airing of Private Prejudice and the Sister Liguori Scandal, 1920-21', *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 52, 1997, pp. 34-42; James Logan, 'Sectarianism in Ganmain: A Local Study, 1912-21', *Rural Society*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2000, pp. 121-138.

² Anonymous, *People* 11 August 1954, pp. 5-10; Alan Gill, 'The Fate of Sister Liguori', *Sydney Morning Herald* 19 July 1980, Good Weekend section, p. 14; Maureen McKeown, *The Extraordinary Case of Sister Liguori*, Leo Press, Downpatrick, Nth Ire., 2017; Tim Barlass, 'The "escaped nun" on the run who fled in the night', *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 April 2019, p. 9; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-22/nun-in-the-nightgown-scandal-that-put-wagga-on-the-map/100311566>.

³ Barlass, Tim, 'Pregnant to a priest, nun on run defied church over child', *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 April 2023, pp. 14-15

* A paper given by Dr Jeff Kildea, Honorary Professor in Irish Studies, University of New South Wales, at the 26th ISAANZ Conference, at the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, 12-14 December 2023.

declares her sane and orders her release. There are wild scenes outside the court as Protestants and Catholics jostle and debate the merits of the case. Thereafter, Bridget goes to live with a Congregational minister William Touchell and his wife Laura.

Around the country, the Orange order organises meetings to protest against women being held in Catholic convents. Catholic bishops and newspapers respond, defending the convents. Each side accuses the other of mistreating Sister Liguori. To Protestants she is an 'escaped' nun whom they have rescued; to Catholics she is a 'captured' nun whom the Protestants are holding against her will.

The controversy plays out in newspapers not only in Australia but also in New Zealand, reaching as far as England, Ireland, Canada, and America. There are threatened fistcuffs in the NSW parliament as Catholic and Protestant MPs debate calls for a royal commission into convents. The Orange order claims that armed Catholic gunmen followed Bridget Partridge to Berry on the New South Wales south coast and that Protestant ex-servicemen intended to storm the Mount Erin convent. The police and the RSL deny these claims.

In an attempt to persuade Bridget to leave her Protestant friends, the Catholic Federation fetches her brother Joseph from Hong Kong, where he is working. They bring him to Sydney in secret to prevent the Orange lodge from intercepting him. It is to no avail as Bridget refuses to go with him.

The Orange lodge funds an action by Bridget in the New South Wales Supreme Court claiming damages from Bishop Dwyer for falsely and maliciously procuring her arrest and imprisonment. The case plays out in a packed court room, with newspapers across the country providing daily verbatim accounts of the evidence. While the case is being heard in Sydney, there is violence in the Riverina with Rev. Touchell being assaulted at Coolamon and Marrar at meetings to establish branches of the Protestant Federation there.

After ten days of hearing the jury rejects Bridget's claim. The Catholics declare victory with a monster meeting in the Sydney Town Hall and the fuss dies down. It reignites three months later when Joseph and a gang of Catholic men kidnap his sister off the streets of Kogarah as she is returning from a church service with the Touchells.

The police intervene and arrange a meeting at which Bridget convinces her brother she wishes to remain with the Touchells. Joseph withdraws and returns to Ireland. As he leaves, the episode erupts again in parliament with the opposition leader moving a vote of censure against the Labor government for allowing Joseph to escape justice. The motion is lost with some opposition members supporting the government.

For the next 40 years, Bridget remains in the Touchell household, ever fearful the Catholics will kidnap her again. In 1939 her fragile mental health leads the Touchells to have her psychiatrically examined at the Darlinghurst Reception House, where she had been incarcerated 19 years before. In 1962 Bridget is admitted to Rydalmere Psychiatric Hospital where she dies in December 1966. A few days later, the woman who had once been a household name in Australia, is buried in obscurity at Rookwood cemetery. Only one mourner is present – a former student she had known at Mount Erin convent.

The Story Lives On

I first came across the Sister Liguori story in the late 1990s when researching religious sectarianism in Australia for my PhD thesis. At the time I was told by a local historian in Wagga Wagga that the town was still divided over the affair, a claim I found incredible. How could an event that occurred nearly eighty years before still generate controversy? Yet, twenty-five years after that conversation, the Sister Liguori affair continues to do just that, as evidenced by the sensational news story about the affair that appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in April.

The article begins:

Twenty-year-old Sister Liguori climbed out of the window of her Wagga Wagga convent one foggy winter night in 1920 wearing just her nightdress.

The truth is she was three months short of her 30th birthday and she walked out the front door of the convent. But why let the facts ruin a good story.

The next paragraph states:

It seems every newspaper in Australia was fascinated with the story of Brigid (aka Bridget) Mary Partridge, originally from Ireland. But the motive for her disappearance as “the nun on the run” remained a mystery – until now.

While the first sentence is true, the second is nonsense, as the author of the article would have known if he had read newspaper reports of the court case in 1921 when Bridget sued her bishop.

There is no mystery at all. Bridget told the court in great detail the reasons why she fled the convent and disappeared. Not once did she mention a lascivious priest, let alone being made pregnant by one or having had a child by him. Nor, in the bitter public controversy that raged for more than 15 months, did the Orange order ever hint at such a claim. Had it been true it would have been the perfect brickbat with which to belt the church and its convents, which were the main target of the Orange order’s attacks.

Barlass’s informant was an 86-year-old Protestant, Gordon Sanson, who was born more than a decade after Sister Liguori fled the convent. Clearly then, he could have had no personal knowledge of the matter. Sanson told Barlass he had grown up with the Sister Liguori story. So, the solution to the mystery that never was turns out to be based on no more than family gossip.

I mention this case not so much to challenge the article’s accuracy, though that is lacking in many respects, as to provide an illustration of how the Sister Liguori story continues to captivate the public imagination one hundred years on, albeit sometimes with the interpolation of alternative facts.⁴

⁴ For a critique of the article see Jeff Kildea, ‘Blast from our sectarian past’, *Pearls and Irritations*, 16 April 2023 (<https://johnmenadue.com/blast-from-our-sectarian-past/>)

Manichean morality play

I would argue that this is because the Sister Liguori story is essentially a Manichean morality play with Bridget Partridge as Everyman caught up in the struggle between good and evil.

At its most basic level it is the story of a young woman who discovers she is no longer suited to the life she has chosen but feels trapped, unable to face the humiliating process of applying for a dispensation from her vows. After months of brooding in which her health, physical and mental, deteriorates, she snaps and in a moment of frustration she flees the convent under a paranoid delusion. In nine out of ten times, such a crisis would have passed. Sister Liguori's flight would have been seen as a cry for help, prompting her religious community to adopt a pastoral approach to her problems, helping her to reconcile herself with religious life or assisting her to return to her family in Ireland. But in this case, Bridget fatefully took refuge in the house of a Protestant family with links to the Orange order, who deceived the police and the convent as to her whereabouts. They then handed her over to the order, which paraded her as an example of the evils inherent in the convent system. As Justice David Ferguson said at the hearing of Bridget's action against Bishop Dwyer, 'I cannot help thinking that it is a very unfortunate thing for the plaintiff that at that time she did not meet somebody who would have shown a little common horse-sense.'⁵

Bridget's story is one of a genre of 'escaped nun' stories that had excited sectarian divisions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in England and America. As noted by historians Nancy Blacklow and Elizabeth West:

Whether through the penny press of the early nineteenth-century scandal sheets or the enormously popular 'Awful Disclosures', alleged and real ex-nuns of the likes of Maria Monk (1836), Rebecca Reed (1835), Edith O'Gorman (1886), and Josephine Bunkley (1855), and the 'plight' of women incarcerated in convents, were appropriated by the Protestant crusade.⁶

Australia received a taste of this phenomenon when Irish American ex-nun Edith O'Gorman toured the country in 1886, giving lectures on 'How I escaped the convent'. The Orange order in Sydney sponsored O'Gorman's visit as part of its campaign against Catholic convents. The campaign featured reports of the iniquities of religious life for women and demands for government inspection of religious institutions. With Sister Liguori, Australia now had its own homegrown 'escaped' nun story. For militant Protestants, it was an opportunity too good to pass up in their crusade against the Catholic convent system.⁷

The Manichean nature of the Sister Liguori story is reflected in the apocalyptic language used by advocates on both sides. On the day after Bridget was arrested in Sydney, Grand Master Barton addressed a meeting of Loyal Orange lodges at Balmain Town Hall. After telling his audience of his part in bringing Bridget to Sydney, he said:

⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald* 14 July 1921, p. 10.

⁶ Blacklow and West, 'Sectarianism and Sisterhood', p. 243.

⁷ For an account of the O'Gorman visit see Dianne Hall, 'Defending the Faith: Orangeism and Ulster Protestant Identities in Colonial New South Wales', *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2014, pp. 207-223, p. 220.

I am sure and satisfied that the Protestant people of New South Wales are going to assist and fight to the end. We are going to gain the young lady her liberty. ... Rome is not going to have her way today. I am determined to fight. It is Rome versus the Orange Institution in this matter. ... It is time that the convents were inspected to see what is behind the walls. We are not going to tolerate this thing in a free country like Australia.⁸

Following the Lunacy Court's decision to release Bridget Partridge, Alderman John Ness, a leading militant Protestant, told the *Daily Telegraph*:

Miss Partridge needs sanctuary temporarily, and we are going to provide it. ... But this business is not finished with. We are going to fight for Miss Partridge, if needs be, and for any other unfortunate, irrespective of creed, who may be submitted to such cruel persecution as has Miss Partridge. We are out to protect her freedom and the freedom of all others similarly situated.

We have come to a time when a proper and complete investigation should be made of a system which threatens the individual liberty of any person. We are going to get that investigation. We must take up a firm and aggressive stand – and now.⁹

Initial Catholic response to the campaign was muted. The *Freeman's Journal* aimed its criticism at the daily papers, accusing them of giving 'Orange ranters publicity and print[ing] every anti-Catholic libel' and for adopting the 'escaped' nun narrative.¹⁰ But Catholic rhetoric soon heated up. In a letter to the press Justice Charles Heydon, a Catholic, wrote:

Many people will become thoroughly convinced that [Rev. Touchell] is keeping the girl practically a prisoner, and using influences to turn her from her faith, or to make her go on to the platform as an 'escaped nun' – an example of the horrors of which (I am sure he believes) Rome encourages within Convent walls.¹¹

Patrick Minahan, a Catholic MP, told the legislative assembly that if the Protestant MPs calling for a royal commission into convents 'were in any way to interfere with these Catholic institutions ... there will be a "mess-up" here worse than that which occurred on the plains of Flanders'.¹² At the meeting in the Sydney Town Hall to celebrate Bishop Dwyer's victory in the court case, the president of the Catholic Federation, Pat Cleary, spoke of 'the dark influences' behind the affair: 'It was not the liberty or the welfare of the girl concerned that was in the mind of these megalomaniacs but anxiety to besmirch Catholics and the Catholic Church. ... How absurdly serious do they take their buzz against the Church which has withstood the pests of twenty centuries!'¹³

Conclusion

Bridget Partridge was no longer a young woman with personal issues to be resolved in a quiet and caring manner. She was now an object in the centuries-old apocalyptic struggle between

⁸ *Daily Telegraph* 9 August 1920, p. 5.

⁹ *Daily Telegraph* 14 August 1920, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Freeman's Journal* 12 August 1920, p. 22; 19 August 1920, p. 26; 2 September 1920, p. 23.

¹¹ *Daily Telegraph* 20 August 1920, p. 9.

¹² NSWPD 7 December 1920, p. 3218; *Sydney Morning Herald* 8 December 1920, p. 14.

¹³ *Freeman's Journal* 21 July 1921, pp. 14-15..

Protestantism and Catholicism, a trophy to be fought over in a conflict which Barton described as a fight to the end and which Minahan likened to the grizzly battlefields of the western front.

In this regard the Sister Liguori story is not unique. It is an ancient tale, dating back at least to the Mycenaean age with the story of Helen of Troy, popularised by Homer. We have seen it played out in our own times, most spectacularly in 2005 with the severely brain-damaged Terri Schiavo over her 'right to die' and in 2000 with Elián González, a five-year-old Cuban refugee, over his repatriation to Cuba.¹⁴ It is a tale in which powerful adversaries pull at a hapless victim like children fighting over a rag doll, in a struggle they frame in Manichean terms, while at the same time proclaiming their motivation is the individual's best interests.

To me, this is the reason why the Sister Liguori story continues to captivate the public imagination. It is a story with a universal theme that resonates down the ages.

¹⁴ Terri Schiavo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terri_Schiavo_case; Elián González: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elián_González.