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Campion's *Australian Catholics*

EDMUND CAMPION's book, *Rockchoppers*, published in 1982, was a major publishing success, for a book about religion. There was more to this than the novelty of a priest writing something that people want to read. It was a very personal, readable and direct account of the author's reaction to the changes in the Church in his lifetime. Since his reaction was that virtually all the changes were good, Campion came in for a good deal of fire from conservatives; a particularly severe review in *Quadrant* (November 1982) was entitled, 'The disintegration of intellectual Catholicism.' But the critics found little of what the *Catholic Weekly* film reviews used to call 'objectionable scenes and other reservations' – no

Review of *Australian Catholics*, by Edmund Campion (Viking).
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heresies, no really nasty political commitments, no scurrilous attacks on saintly elders. Many readers, both members and non-members of the Church, found the book a valuable account of one man's faith.

The natural question about any author's second book is, is it as good as his first? Or even, is it different from his first? *Australian Catholics* is a much less personal book than *Rockchoppers*, much more an objective social history. Campion has certainly taken to heart the criticism that *Rockchoppers* was too much about the author and his *coterie*. There is even an element of overkill in his determination to include every Catholic group, of every persuasion. *Everything is in it* – frontier nuns, the Holy Name Society, Catholic homosexuals, seminaries, relief agencies, the Assumption Society for Invalids. That account is throughout clear, well-written and fast-moving. The impression left is of an Australian Catholic culture of immense size. 'The apron bar had sold 250 aprons by early afternoon', said the report of the 1967 Moonee Ponds parish fête; how many times does that item have to be multiplied to give an idea of the size of the Catholic enterprise? The impression is often of huge energy, too, especially in the early years. Like the universe, Australian Church history seems to have been a slow working out of massive clashes of elemental forces in its early minutes.

The famous conflict between Mary McKillop and the Bishop of Adelaide, which resulted in her (temporary) excommunication, was apparently only one of such clashes of titans. Vows of poverty and celibacy left these people with a large surplus of energy to expend. Joined to a vow of obedience, and confined, such energy could produce a St Thérèse of Lisieux; the Australian Church represents the opposite extreme,

where there was a continent to expand in. In fact, Australia did not even get a random sample of those who took vows as priests and nuns. Our presbyteries and convents were largely built by Irish who had not only taken vows, but also volunteered to go to the other end of the world for life. Such a sample has an over-representation of the power-mad, naturally, leading to the spectacular struggles between bishops and mothers superior at one level, and at another the impact on young minds that has produced the 'Catholic childhood' of literature.

Generations of seven-year-olds believing they will be eternally burnt if they miss Mass on Sunday is a part of Australian Catholic history that celebratory volumes like *Campion's* omit, but that has to be included in a fair evaluation. Balancing that is an opinion of a pupil of the nuns, quoted by *Campion*:

Convent girls are inducted into life by a rare and eccentric breed of women who reject the servility of marriage with all the paraphernalia of middle-class acquisitiveness. If it hadn't been for the nuns, I might well have gone to a secretarial college, had streaks put in my hair and married a stockbroker.

This is from an *Australian Women's Weekly* article by Germaine Greer.

As *Campion's* story approaches the present, more of it is taken up with Left-Right battles. Of course, this in-fighting is only pursued by a minority, and the majority reasonably enough takes no notice and continues with the serious work of the Church, like its spiritual life and the St Vincent de Paul Society. On the other hand, the matter looms large in public perceptions

– during the papal visit of 1986, the newspapers wrote about little else. The outcome of these struggles also affects the future, by influencing what is taught in the schools.

The ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ in the Church are not to be simply identified with the Left and Right generally; to begin with, both sides regard politics as of secondary importance. This complicates the picture, so here is a very quick guide to the two camps.

The Left can generally be recognised by the use of the Greek words like ‘charism’ and ‘kerygma’. They are in favour of contraception (but not usually abortion), home Masses, and married and women priests, and find the terms ‘dialogue’ and ‘social justice’ inspiring. Their vocabulary is further explained by their belief that the language of serious theology is German. They see the Right as a clique of grim-faced clerics and poorly-educated fathers of ten, unable to open their minds to the modern world. They believe that the Right will die off in due course, but in the meantime has too much influence with the bishops.

The Right may be recognised by saying, ‘Vatican II was only a pastoral Council.’ They are in favour of the Pope and St Thomas Aquinas, and find the terms ‘magisterium’ and ‘the family’ inspiring. They see the Left as a small band of café intellectuals and pregnant social workers, who adhere to various heresies already condemned by many Councils. They believe the Left will gradually disappear, as trendy priests marry and leave the Church, but that in the meantime the Left has too much influence with the bishops.

Though Campion is by now the chief spokesman of the Catholic Left in Australia, *Australian Catholics* represents a certain attempt to be even-handed. Give or

take a few patronising remarks, he succeeds, up to about 1960. Unfortunately the account of the last thirty years is both perfunctory and one-sided. There is even a slight suggestion that he tried to be fair earlier *in order* to be partisan later. Campion thinks that the loss of numbers and confidence in the 1960s and 1970s is giving way to a revival, led by dynamic people on the Left like himself. Certainly there is a revival. Catholics are now the largest religious denomination in Australia; their numbers showed an increase in the last census, and in the one before, while all other major denominations declined. Catholics schools are bulging, and the vigour of groups at the parish level is obvious. But there is nothing especially Left-leaning about any of this. Opus Dei is as vigorous as any other Catholic organisation.

There is another gap in Campion's story. Australian Catholics are numerous, and a picturesque lot, but what are they *for*? Perhaps it is too much to ask a historian to answer that question, but since the only readable books about Australian Catholicism are by historians – notably Campion, Patrick O'Farrell and Tim Suttor – it is not too much to expect them to give *some* idea of what Catholics have to offer.

Australians' problems are not primarily about wealth. The concern for most is not how to acquire material things, but what to do with them, and themselves. Australia is much afflicted by materialism, in both the philosophical and the jacuzzi-owning senses. Neither kind has anything to say about what is worth doing; everyone knows this. But some things are worth doing, others are not, others are wrong; everybody knows this too. So the supply of moral indignation is siphoned off by the political Left, or by the political

Right's reaction to the idiocies of the Left. Surely this is getting us nowhere. In *Rockchoppers*, Campion tells of going to one of James McAuley's last major speeches, and being shocked that the main subject matter was the importance of parliamentary democracy. This is not very fair to McAuley, but the instinct is sound. Defending liberalism and the literary classics does not constitute much of an aim in life. Catholics have something different to say: the moral and spiritual parts of a person can go together with thinking of the highest standard, resulting in the best possible understanding of the world and the clearest view of what should be done.

Thinking, regrettably, has not been one of the strong points of the Australian Church. Campion treats well one of the best-known facts about Australian Catholic history; so much effort was put into building a complete education system that there wasn't much left over for other things. Thought, for example. Individuals have emerged who could think constructively: B. A. Santamaria and Ronald Conway have produced intelligent comment over many years, and Francis Xavier Costigan and Tony Fitzgerald have given us intelligence-led action. But in encouraging Santamaria and his colleagues in the 1930s, Mannix was as out of step with other Church leaders as he was in other ways. The organised Church had done little to encourage a serious Catholic intellectual life, and one has not emerged. This is especially true in Sydney, where St John's College of Sydney University stands as a symbol. The uneducated Catholics of Sydney gave generously to build it, and got a nice building full of beer and football.

Poor performance on the intellectual front must be the fundamental cause of the recent shambles over the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. Of course

the bishops had to support justice, and that meant being associated with efforts to keep the problem of Third World poverty on the national agenda. But there was just no-one intelligent to do the work. Consequently, the level of argument in the CCJP's statements and its associated journal, *National Outlook*, was so low that it had to be put a stop to.

If Australian Catholics are going to make the impact they should, something must be done. Campion and others have done well with Catholic history. Now the Church has to find, encourage and pay for Catholic philosophers, novelists, psychiatrists and theologians who can tell Australians what they need to hear.