

## ARCHDEACON JOHN MCENCROE: AN ARCHITECT OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHURCH

**Edmund Campion\***

*All the oppressed, those in distress, all those in debt, anyone who had a grievance, gathered round him and he became their leader.*

(Sam. 22.2)

Fellow students of history,

I want to start with a reading from my friend Tony Doherty's recent book *The Attachment*, a collection of emails between Tony and the actor Ailsa Piper. He tells of his visit to the village of Derryveagh in Co. Donegal (Ireland), where his paternal grandparents had been evicted by their landlord in the Famine years, and he praises the man who helped them survive. Tony writes:

... 'His name was John McEncroe, an Irish priest regarded as a hero by Sydney's Catholic community. He set up the Donegal Relief Fund, enabling James and Mary [Tony's grandparents] to escape the Letterkenny workhouse (where they would surely have died), and travel to Australia.

More than a century later, I was appointed Dean of Sydney's St Mary's Cathedral, only to discover that McEncroe's grave lies in its crypt.'

John McEncroe came to Sydney in 1832, aged 37. Who was he? He was a son of Tipperary land holders whose father died when he was two. His mother married again, one of his half-sisters later becoming a Sister of Charity in Sydney. John was ordained from Maynooth College and then spent seven years in the diocese of Charleston, South Carolina (USA) returning to Ireland for health reasons. There, he was recruited by John Hubert Plunkett to go with him to New South Wales as government chaplain. Plunkett was a member of Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Association that had won Catholic Emancipation in 1829, and so as a Catholic he was now able to be appointed Solicitor-General of New South Wales and then Attorney-General.

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\* Edmund Campion is a Sydney priest, and emeritus professor of history at the Catholic Institute of Sydney. This is the text of his address to the Australian Catholic Historical Society on 18 Feb 2018.

His prosecution of the murderers of Aborigines at Myall Creek would be his finest hour. For his part, McEncroe had been close to the Bishop of Charleston, John England, and could speak of the bishop's ideas about what we would call inculturation, such as his democratic diocesan constitution that gave the laity a say in church decision-making.

So when he came to Sydney, McEncroe was already a seasoned pastoral priest with experience of what was needed in a fluid missionary church. He took stock of the situation and a few weeks later wrote a letter to the Archbishop of Dublin: 'The Holy See should provide this place with a bishop.'



*Archdeacon John McEncroe*

Which is what happened three years later, with the arrival of Bishop John Bede Polding, an English Benedictine, then aged 40. Polding had a dream of an all-Benedictine church – the whole continent being missionised by monks travelling the land with sacramental necessities in a pack on their backs, as in Dark Ages Europe.

In those years, a black cloud of convictism hung over Sydney—as chaplain, McEncroe attended in his first three years 75 hangings. No wonder he drank! When the thirst came on him, you couldn't stop him; he would climb out the window and go in search of a drink. Polding, who lived with him at St Mary's Cathedral, could see shipwreck ahead. Years later, McEncroe acknowledged that it was the bishop who had shown him how to master his addiction. Thereafter, he refused all stimulating drinks: alcohol, coffee, tea... Water only. He became a temperance advocate and a friend to any priest similarly addicted.

The recovered alcoholic volunteered to care for recidivist convicts on Norfolk Island. McEncroe was there for four years, finding his friends among the convicts and gaining a close knowledge of the convict system, which enabled him to write about changes to the system.

On Norfolk Island he also wrote a work of apologetics, *The Wanderings*

of the Human Mind in 'Searching the Scriptures'... (short title). One after the other he examined the lives, rather than the theology of some forty men whom some call reformers but the Catholic Church calls heretics. These are unflattering portraits, *ad hominem* attacks, as he quotes reformers against each other. A footnote to the chapter on Martin Luther gives the tone:

I regret the necessity of being obliged to copy the coarse, vituperative and unchristian language which these reformers used towards each other.

Read today – there are copies in the Veech Library at Strathfield but not in the State Library – the book feels like a collection of newspaper columns by a writer who saw little that was good in his subjects.

Well, John McEncroe was a newspaper man. Bishop England in Charleston (USA) had seen, at the beginning of the age of public opinion, that a Catholic newspaper was needed if the Catholic voice were to be heard in the national conversation; and he founded *The United States Miscellany*, the first Catholic paper in the United States. When McEncroe joined him, he made the young Irishman the editor of his paper. McEncroe learned to write by writing.

So in Sydney, when some laymen spoke of the need for a Catholic paper, he joined them, putting his money into their venture and, for a time, his skills as an editor. Thus he was led to begin, in 1850, *The Freeman's Journal*, a paper that would last until 1942 and which will come back into this story. Starting it, McEncroe said,

My sole object as a priest and as an Irishman is to establish a paper which will be soundly Catholic and at the same time liberal in its general views and Irish in its sympathies.

It was widely read all over Australia. Here's an example: Growing up in Warrnambool on the southern Victorian coast, a young man with a Catholic background used to read it at the local presbytery. He was J F Archibald, founder of *The Bulletin* (which for over a century was a central part of our weekly journalism) and benefactor of the Archibald Prize for portraits and the Archibald Fountain in Hyde Park, Sydney. In his memoirs, written at the end of his life, he recalled his visits to the Warrnambool presbytery and his discovery of McEncroe's *Freeman's Journal* there. Archibald called *The Freeman's* 'that cradle of Australian literature'. It is no surprise that when *The Bulletin* started it was printed at *The Freeman's Journal*.

In *The Freeman's Journal* McEncroe was happy to address public questions. As well, like his mentor Bishop John England, he would speak at public meetings, where audiences liked his Irish wit, swashbuckling style and passion for social justice. When transportation of convicts to New South Wales ceased, in 1840, the squattocracy continued to argue for the re-introduction of this cheap labour. McEncroe became a main speaker against this. He knew what being a convict meant.

These were busy days for McEncroe for, apart from his pastoral duties, he was director of education in the archdiocese, which meant meetings, interviews and correspondence. He continued to seek Irish pastors for the largely Irish flock and in 1851 - by now Archdeacon - wrote to the Pope saying that English bishops could not attract Irish priests. Irish people in Australia wanted Irish priests and Irish bishops, as McEncroe kept saying in his letters.

As time went by, an increasing number of talented laymen arrived in Sydney, loving the church and hoping for a say in its direction. *The Freeman's Journal* became the organ of their discontent but Polding and his brother bishops in Melbourne and Hobart disliked its cheeky tone. They issued a warning, a *Monitum Pastorale*: such men they wrote, were 'following in the footsteps of Luther and other authors of heresy ... they hold Bishops in honour and condemn Episcopal rule'. There were gatherings of the clergy and gatherings of the laity. They said they wanted a fair go for the Irish secular clergy and religious orders for the schools .

Their discontent fastened on Henry Gregory OSB, a brash, some would say bumptious, young man whom Polding had brought out with him from England and whom he soon made his Vicar-General. Gregory enforced Polding's pastoral plan with enthusiasm, careless of the consequences. People loved Archbishop Polding, they recognised his holiness and named their sons Bede after him; but Gregory paid the price for the holes in his pastoral plan. Polding and Gregory were overseas in the mid-fifties, leaving an auxiliary bishop in charge. Alas, within weeks, he died. What to do? The clergy elected McEncroe to run the diocese, which he did for 18 months. But when Gregory returned, he reversed many of McEncroe's decisions. This became known.

One example will suffice of growing hostility to Benedictine rule. At the new University of Sydney, founded in 1850, the government offered

the Church land to build a Catholic college, called St John's. Subscribers to the college building fund would elect the college fellows. Polding let it be known that he would choose the fellows; but in that democratic age subscribers refused to be told who to vote for. Five hundred of them met and elected a council of fellows, clerical and lay with McEncroe heading the clergy list. The Archbishop would be named 'Visitor' but the direction of St John's College would remain in the hands of the elected lay fellows, as it remained until just the other day.

The fellows of St John's sent McEncroe overseas to find a rector for their new college. He would be away for some sixteen months and his absence meant that the dissident laity went ahead without his steadying hand. As with John Henry Newman in England when Acton and Simpson were under episcopal attack for *The Rambler* at this time, McEncroe deplored the bad manners of *The Freeman's Journal* set but he refused to abandon them because he thought that at heart their Catholicism was sound. His absence overseas meant that, in John Hosie's phrase, the year 1859 would be a 'Year of Crisis' in Sydney. (John Hosie's paper on this offended senior members of the Australian Catholic Historical Society who organized a day of rebuttal against it. His book *Challenge: The Marists in Colonial Australia* is a fine work of history, worthy to stand alongside Mary Shanahan's *Life of Gregory*, and Frances O'Donoghue's *Life of Polding*. In 1954–56 the *Australasian Catholic Record* published ten chapters of a biography of Archdeacon McEncroe by Father Roger Wynne which is valuable as a record of an oral tradition of Australia's Irish clergy.

The year 1859 had opened with Vicar-General Gregory's appointment of Dr Bassett, a Protestant, to the board of the Catholic orphan school in place of Attorney-General Plunkett, who was retiring. What! trumpeted *The Freeman's*, was no Catholic man found to fill this place? Had Gregory lost his senses? Was he really sane? This was treason to the Catholic community, it headlined. Three days later, a rowdy meeting at the Victoria Theatre passed a vote of no-confidence in the Benedictine administration, asking for a committee of 'dignitaries of the Church' to advise the government on Catholic affairs. (Daniel Deniehy's fiery speech at this meeting, targeting Gregory by name, can be read in the first volume of Patrick O'Farrell's documents.)

Gregory's response was sudden: he had Polding threaten the instigators

of the protest with excommunication; whereupon, with the exception of Deniehy, they withdrew. They went ahead, however, with an appeal to Rome, to which Cardinal Barnabò of Propaganda Fide in Rome replied with his customary suavity, saying that as yet their remonstrance could not be considered because it was lacking the correct canonical form but, to show his sympathy, he sent them three papal documents for their better instruction. Have no doubt about it, Barnabò's eye was now on Sydney. Soon he would have McEncroe in Rome, to answer any questions; although Bishop Goold of Melbourne, an Augustinian, would be there too, to counter him. Meanwhile, Polding began to write a letter to Cardinal Barnabò and his pen ran away with him. Polding's draft letter, which is in the Sydney Catholic archives, can be read in Delia Birchley's *Life of McEncroe*. The word 'schism' appears three times in his draft to describe the mentality of *The Freeman's* set and he badmouths the editor, J K Heydon, as 'a man of some talent, but illiterate, of low origin and social position'. Elsewhere, he would call Heydon 'a Catholic in name only ... an infidel ... a disciple of Voltaire'. Polding requested Barnabò to take action against McEncroe. But the archdeacon had already sold his shares in *Freeman's* on instructions from Rome. Happily, by the time the archbishop sent his letter to Rome, his draft, while still very angry, had been sanitised. The unsanitised version, however, shows how the affair had destabilised him.

While the Archbishop was writing his letter to Rome, another storm blew up to threaten his equanimity. One day an Irish priest, visiting the new St Vincent's Hospital, noticed some Protestant books in the ward. Judging them out of place in a Catholic hospital, he removed them. Another row. It led to Sister de Lacy, rectress of the hospital and the last of the original band of Sisters of Charity, going back to Ireland, where she was listened to. In Sydney, the Sisters of Charity and their hospital were treasured by Irish Catholics, so this was another cause of complaint against the English Benedictines, especially Gregory.

By this time people, even bishops, were murmuring that Gregory had to go. Power, we have been told by Lord Acton, tends to corrupt; and a Vicar-General is a powerful man. Being Vicar-General seemed to go to Gregory's head—corrupted him, if you like. He pushed people around, so that they blamed him for the defects in Polding's Benedictines-first pastoral policy. In this circumstance, Rome turned to William Bernard Ullathorne, Bishop

of Birmingham, formerly Polding's first Vicar-General. Would he go back to Sydney on a canonical visitation Rome asked? No, but he would write a report, which Bill Wright, now the Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle, discussed in Neil Brown's collection *Faith and Culture*, no 13. Ullathorne's remedy for the mess in Sydney was simple: sack Gregory; and if that did not work, sack Polding. So it was done. Gregory left Sydney early in 1861. Polding blamed the Irish; he blamed the French Marist Fathers at Hunters Hill; he blamed McEncroe. Although he had his suspicions, he never knew that his fellow Benedictine and former novice, Ullathorne, had fashioned the stiletto that cut his heart out. Ahead of him lay a lonely old age and he seemed at times to be close to a nervous breakdown.

Let us return to McEncroe.

In his long year away from Sydney, McEncroe would be busy talking up his pastoral plan of missionising Australia with Irish secular priests and bishops. When Father Hand had started All Hallows seminary, in 1842, both McEncroe and Father Therry had each pledged to pay the annual pension of six Irish students for the Australian mission. English Benedictines were unwilling to go to Australia, but Irish secular priests were eager to go there. By the end of the century, All Hallows had sent some 450 priests to Australia. In Dublin, McEncroe spent many evenings telling the students what lay ahead of them in the antipodes. He also told priests they should bring their landless people south – one of these was Father Lanigan, of Clonmel in Tipperary, who did this. He became the second bishop of Goulburn. Of course McEncroe made contact with Cardinal Cullen of Dublin, overlord of the farflung Irish ecclesiastical empire and a master of church politics. In Rome, McEncroe recruited Cullen's nephew, Patrick Francis Moran of the Irish College, to alert curial officials to the true state of the Australian Church.

Half a century later, in his gargantuan history, Moran, now Cardinal Archbishop of Sydney, would write a cruel sentence about the first Archbishop of Sydney and his pastoral plans.

His seminary failed, his college failed, his religious community failed, his Monastic Cathedral failed, his long cherished scheme of setting the seal of the Benedictine Order on the whole Australian Church melted away like an ideal dream.

This is a dazzling sentence, brutal in its Irish triumphalism, a summing up

of the case for the prosecution. Dom Birt of Downside would reply for the defence in his *Benedictine Pioneers in Australia*.

Now, when bishops were selected for new dioceses – James Quinn, Brisbane (1859), Bonaventure Geoghegan OFM, Goulburn (1864), Matthew Quinn, Bathurst (1865), James Murray, Maitland (1865), the Quinn brothers and Murray being proteges of Cardinal Cullen – Rome did not bother to consult the Archbishop of Sydney, he was yesterday's man.

In his year away, McEncroe did other things. He contacted the Sisters of Mercy to invite them to Sydney and when, some years later, they arrived, he looked after them. (He would look after them too in his will, and the Sisters of Charity, and St John's College. Not the Benedictines.) In Dublin too he brought out a second edition of his *Wanderings* book, dedicating it to the seminarians of Maynooth and All Hallows – perhaps that was meant to keep the needs of the Australian Church before their eyes.

When McEncroe returned home from overseas, he found the atmosphere at St Mary's somewhat chilly; so he moved out to St Patrick's Church Hill. This was still part of the cathedral parish and he was not the Parish Priest, as the Archbishop told him. At St Pat's, however, he was living among his own people who recognised him as the leader of their tribe, the 'Chief Druid' as impertinent Australian priests used to call senior Irishmen. I've mentioned the Donegal Relief Fund, as an instance of his charitable nature. He was a soft touch, whether you were in need of a few bob or were a wayward priest. One example of his ready generosity from his early days will suffice.

Angelo Confalonieri was a young North Italian priest whom the madcap Bishop of Perth, John Brady, had recruited. The bishop sent him via Sydney to open a mission in the far north of the Perth diocese, giving him what he said was a cheque to buy agricultural tools – it was no more than a scrap of paper which no bank in Sydney would recognise. So the missionary went to see McEncroe, who staked him to one hundred pounds. (The agricultural tools and Father Angelo's missionary companions were lost in a shipwreck in the Torres Strait; but that is another story.)

As an old man, McEncroe liked to reminisce about the day, in 1838, he was saying Mass in the cathedral when a coterie of Irish secular priests walked in from their ship in the harbour – the men of '38, as historians call them, fathers of the future Australian church. If Benedictines would not come here, to realise Polding's dream, then secular priests and bishops after



them must be sought in Ireland or the faith would be lost. John McEncroe was an architect of this future church.

So we come to the archdeacon's death – 22 August 1868. Many of the bishops were in town, planning a synod. They joined Polding at McEncroe's deathbed. Mother McQuoin of the Mercy Sisters was there too, and Scholastica Gibbons of the Sisters of Charity. Behind them were rows and rows of his people, Catholic and non-Catholic, who had been coming there all week to farewell their *soggarth aroon*, their own dear priest. Before he went, he had one last request of Archbishop Polding – would the archbishop place at St Patrick's Church Hill the Marist Fathers? The archbishop said yes. It was the final touch to McEncroe's plans for the Australian church.

And so we salute this architect of that church, in this his sesquicentennial year.