

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Australia's Catholic University: the first twenty-five years*

Author: John Hirst

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Reviewed by Michael Costigan\*

Two of a number of events during 2015, marking the 25th anniversary of the founding of Australian Catholic University, were a Solemn Mass of celebration led by Archbishop Denis Hart, President of the University Council, in St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, and the publishing of this history of those action-packed twenty-five years.

I have had some associations with ACU almost since it came into being at the beginning of 1991. At that time, I was employed by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in the areas of social justice, human rights and overseas development. In some of its major undertakings, the Bishops Committee of which I was the executive secretary was to receive considerable help from members of the new university's staff. Those projects included national consultations on the distribution of wealth in Australia, the situation and future of young people in this country and the role of women in the Catholic Church here.

An early professional assessment of the bishops' consultation methodology by ACU's Dr Muredach Dynan was of considerable value to these projects. Advice from university academics with expertise on the

(This review draws in part on an address by Michael Costigan, substituting for an ailing Professor Craven as guest speaker, at the annual Christmas lunch of the Australian Catholic Historical Society on 29th November 2015.)

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economy had been helpful during the wealth inquiry. Later I was invited to address one of ACU's early graduation ceremonies on the bishops' hopes for the young. And the hierarchy's remarkably successful consultation on women in the Church was the occasion for years of close collaboration between my office and representatives of ACU and of Religious leaders. The contribution to that project by ACU people and associates like Professor Peter Carpenter, Dr Marie Macdonald, Sisters Margaret Malone sgs and Sonia Wagner sgs, Ms Sandie Cornish and Professors Gabrielle McMullen, Bob Dixon and Bernard Daffey cannot be over-estimated.

I sense that cooperation between ACU and the Bishops Conference, together with its agencies, as well as Religious Orders and Congregations in such other areas as concern for the environment in the wake of the encyclical *Laudato Si* has continued and indeed intensified since my retirement from the formal service of the bishops.

That departure occurred just over ten years ago, in 2005. Soon afterwards, still in that year, to my surprise and delight I was offered an adjunct professorship at the University. My link has been with the Theology and Philosophy Faculty, with my base on the Strathfield campus for several years and now in North Sydney.

During eight of those ten years, Professor Greg Craven has been the University's Vice-Chancellor. With a legal background he brought to the role his extensive administrative and teaching experience in other universities, including Notre Dame in WA, as well as a national reputation as an articulate expert on government, the Australian Constitution and public as well as religious affairs. My association with Greg Craven since his arrival at ACU has given me some chance to witness or become aware of just some of his achievements there, added to those of his predecessors, Peter Drake and Peter Sheehan, which I already knew.

Some of the evidence for this, in the form of buildings, could be seen in a five-minute walk from where St Mary MacKillop lies buried. There is the Vice-Chancellery itself at 40 Edward Street, occupying what for years was the Apostolic Delegation, where Pope Paul VI rested his weary head in 1970 during the first ever papal visit to Australia. Looking from the street towards that imposing edifice, one can now see to its left the exquisite small chapel and baptistery dedicated to Our Lady Seat of Wisdom. This was a Craven initiative, as is the reconstructed plaza in front of the Vice-Chancellery, with its beautiful statue of St Mary MacKillop, patron of the North Sydney campus. Behind and a little to the right of the vice-chancellery is the four-storey Carroll Building, opened in 1988 by Prime Minister Bob Hawke and named after Archbishop James Carroll, who played a key role

in winning government support for religious education institutions from primary to tertiary level.

Several other buildings in streets close to the central campus, mainly Berry and Napier Streets, have been bought or are being leased for University purposes. Valuable acquisitions include the recently baptized Caroline Chisholm House at 33 Berry Street and, at 8-30 Napier Street, the 22-storey office block now named Tenison Woods House.

One could list many other similar developments, some of them architecturally outstanding, on the University's other campuses in Strathfield (NSW), Fitzroy (Melbourne), Banyo (Brisbane), Ballarat (Victoria), Thebarton (Adelaide), Dickson (Canberra) and, last but not least, on the Janiculum Hill in Rome, where only this year Professor Craven, in collaboration with the Catholic University of America, oversaw the opening of a Centre designed to enhance the cultural, educational and research capabilities of students and personnel from both universities.

Statistics too reveal much about what has to be judged the extraordinary success of the ACU project, for which some prophets of doom twenty-five years ago predicted almost certain failure. What began as the difficult and painful amalgamation of relatively small training institutions for future teachers and nurses in three States and the Australian Capital Territory is today a thriving multi-campus national university with some 33,000 students from Australia and overseas and a staff of 2,100 academics and other professionals. It has been an astonishing transformation.

Another indication of the project's success and of ACU's now unchallenged authenticity came to my attention recently with the announcement of the list of awards to universities for Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA). Many of ACU's disciplines received Field of Research scores that were at or above (in the case of Psychology well above) world standards. In the words of the Vice-Chancellor, "these excellent results demonstrate that ACU is positioning itself to become a leading research university and highlight our commitment to supporting and developing excellence in research".

Lest my reflections give the impression that I am simply doing a PR job for ACU, I would refer history-lovers to the account of those twenty-five years and what preceded them by the skilled writer and historian John Hirst.

This book, written with the flair one would expect from John Hirst and adorned by many fascinating photographs, gives a frank account of the many problems and controversies that confronted the university before and

during its life-time, even to the present day. One of these relates to varying approaches among interested parties to the University's Catholicity. Others have been concerned with bruised feelings over appointments or the naming of campuses, with inter-city rivalries or with the obvious "tyranny of distance" difficulties facing managers and overseers of national enterprises in Australia.

Some contentious issues have involved one of the most famous and at times controversial figures in the Church in Australia, Cardinal George Pell, who is rightly credited as one of ACU's principal founders, together with the likes of Brother Ambrose Payne, Sir Bernard Callinan, Cardinal Clancy (the University's first Chancellor) and a sometimes sceptical government minister and architect of university reform, John Dawkins. A passage on page 111 introducing the fascinating Chapter 8 ("Crisis") about the funding of Notre Dame University and the taxing of ACU is only one of several in the book where the author places George Pell at centre stage, both favourably and less so. I can only applaud this kind of open approach, not always found in commissioned institutional histories.

Leaving all of that to one side, I make no excuses for my enthusiasm for Australian Catholic University and its exciting growth and development. In these times the Church in Australia can do with a good news story like this. John Hirst's handsome volume, which could have benefitted from an index, is a highly recommended source of optimism-inspiring information.