

## BOOK REVIEW

*Byways: Memories from a Catholic Seminary 1923-2018*

Compiler: Michael Stanislaus Parer and 37 other contributing authors

Publisher: Alella Books, Churchill, Vic. 2018.

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Hardback or Paperback: i-x/412 pages

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Reviewed by Michael Costigan\*

Tony Abbott, John Fahey and Thomas Keneally have one thing in common. The former Australian PM and the ex-Premier of NSW, together with our country's best known living writer of fiction and non-fiction, all spent time as seminarians before quitting that role.

Although it does not deal with their stories, this book could invite speculation on how seminary training, even if it ended after a few years, might have made a telling contribution to the success of such careers as theirs. About half of the 38 writers of 44 essays in *Byways* are ex-seminarians.

A leader of a particular group among them is the author of the Foreword, Michael Gibson. He claims that, in general, many of the students like himself who gave up seminary life or were compelled to give it up without being ordained as priests ended up well as academics, lawyers, teachers, accountants, public servants, publicans, taxi drivers, authors, psychologists, counsellors, journalists or funeral directors, not to mention as politicians and/or fathers of happy families. The accounts by a good number of them of their days as trainee priests leave little doubt that, in spite of criticisms they may have of their seminary experience, it helped to equip them for what lay ahead.

Most of the *Byways* contributors belong to the group that Gibson and a few of his ex-seminarian friends formed in December 1987, which at first was given various names, with ironic allusions to failure. Its subsequent history is traced by himself and his associates from way back, Bob Hayes and Bob

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Munro. In time the group's membership and the involvement in its annual First-Friday-in-December dinners and in other more frequent convivial gatherings and activities expanded to include anyone at all who had attended the Victorian and Tasmanian provincial seminary, Corpus Christ College, Werribee (1923-72) and/or CCC's other campuses in Glen Waverley (1962-72), Clayton (1973-99) and Carlton (2000 to the present). This included those who had been ordained, whether or not they stayed in the clergy.

Reminiscences by representatives of all three categories (called for convenience ex-seminarians, ex-priests and active priests) are in *Byways*. Some of them are resurrected or revised from past publications, mostly first produced by now deceased authors and covering periods in the 1930s, 40s and in one or two instances the 50s. But the majority of the essays, ranging from the 50s to now, have come from living members of what is called CCC Guys, a title originating with the creation in 2007 of a closed Yahoo email message group which on a recent count number 177 members and which is the vehicle for animated and sometimes humorous discussions of both weighty and more trivial matters.

In my opinion, a big share of the credit for this book project belongs to ex-seminarians. One of them, Professor Lawrie Moloney, generously volunteered to act as Editor and also wrote three engaging and beautifully written essays. Among others in the same category in helping to bring the project to fruition were three of its "photo consultants" - John Shaw, Mick O'Brien and Terry O'Neill. The three were associated with others in that role, including the very competent "book compiler", Alan Ryan, an ex-priest who did not write for the book he did so much to compile.

The enterprising publisher and owner of Alella Books, Michael Parer, was the first laicised Australian Catholic priest to be publicly married in the Church (in July 1969). He chose the book's title, inspired by St Luke's Gospel (14:23, not, as quoted in *Byways*, 10:25), adopting what Jesus quoted, in one of his stories, from the instruction given to one of his servants by the provider of a great supper, to go into the highways and "byways" (more precisely "hedges and lanes") to bring in the uninvited to the feast. Parer also introduces the book with a brief "Publisher's Note" and offers two long and relevant articles, the second adapted in part from his 1971 memoir *Dreamer by Day: A Priest Returns to Life* (Angus and Robertson).

The *Byways* project was the brainwave of the CCC Group's most senior

member, Emeritus Professor John N. Molony, a married Ballarat Diocese ex-priest and the successor in ANU's Australian History chair to his mentor, the legendary historian Manning Clark. Following John Molony's death in Canberra on 16th September 2018, it was decided to dedicate *Byways* to him. Molony and I, as veterans in the group and as the respective editors of two previous CCC magazines published in the 1960s, had been named Consulting Editors of the new publication, a mainly honorific role. We each had writings about our different seminary years in Werribee and Rome in the book. John's was drawn from his memoir *Luther's Pine*. My two were about seminary attitudes to women, published 40 years ago, and about other memories of my two seminaries. As a reviewer here of *Byways*, I will leave it to others to say anything more about my efforts.

The book successfully and very importantly combines descriptions of and reflections on life in a major Australian seminary in an era that has come to an end. It is mostly about CCC at Werribee, with quite an amount about Rome, comparatively little about Glen Waverley, less on Clayton and really nothing regarding the campus existing now and since the dawn of the 21st Century, in Carlton near downtown Melbourne City. The reflecting and even the memories vary and at times are in conflict, notably about some of the seminary staff, the quality of the courses on offer, the value and relevance of the spiritual formation imparted, the food, the comfort of the accommodation, the air the students had to breathe and the policies and actions of some members of the hierarchy with overall responsibility for the seminary.

Although the book was not produced in any sense as a response to what the recent Royal Commission said on clerical sexual abuse, a number of its offerings contain horrified references to that scandalous and hard to believe phenomenon, which has so damaged the Church and many people. The book not only has considerable sociological value but it provides some of the kind of data needed if a better understanding is to emerge about how it came about that the intellectual and spiritual preparation of some seminary graduates at a certain time did not prevent them from appalling and repeated lapses, often not long after their graduation. Meanwhile, the CCC Group's involvement in creating the "For the Innocents" (FTI) initiative "to assist people adversely affected by clerical sexual abuse", which receives good attention from Michael Parer and Bob Munro in what they write and worthwhile mentions by others, deserves high praise.

In conclusion, I believe nobody will consider it invidious if I single out one contribution to *Byways* for a farewell accolade. It is the interview conducted by the Editor with the ex-seminarian and incomparable teacher and founder of a great Catholic high school in Leongatha, the ex-seminarian Ed Carmody, who died from cancer while the book was coming out. He was much loved and had a huge funeral. In reply to Lawrie Moloney's question about his time at Werribee, he said what encapsulates for me the real value of this book, which is essentially about friendship for life and what it produces. He said: "It was a great life if you didn't take everything too seriously. Study was not easy, but I knew I was learning. I was beginning to make lifelong friends; and they were guys with great ideals. I'm not sure I would have had these opportunities anywhere else."

### **BOOK REVIEW**

#### *The Mannix Era: Melbourne Catholic Leadership 1920-1970*

Author: Patrick Morgan

Publisher: Connor Court Publishing, 2018

ISBN: 9281925826166

Paperback: i-xv/304 pages

Price: \$29.95

Reviewed by Michael Costigan\*

Published six years after Patrick Morgan's *Melbourne Before Mannix: Catholics in Public Life 1880-1820* (Connor Court, 2012), this sequel completes this historian's wide-ranging picture of life in the Melbourne Archdiocese from 1880 to 1970.

The author identifies four "heroes" in his story: Archbishop Daniel Mannix, his Archdiocese, its weekly newspaper *The Advocate* and "the well organised Catholic community". Topics arising under these headings are so numerous that, in the pages of one book, the author could make only fleeting references to some of them. In a comprehensive bibliography he points to a

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