

# ‘Like Waterloo Survivors’: Ex-Priests and the Nineteenth-Century Australian Press

Colin Fowler\*

In an April 1892 edition of the *Freeman's Journal* the editor wearily commented: ‘The lecturing “ex-priests” are in Australia like Waterloo survivors. A fresh one turns up almost every month’. He was comparing the appearance in Sydney of yet another wandering and lecturing ex-priest to the seemingly endless parade of Waterloo veterans turning up since the 1815 battle. As for Waterloo veterans, in 1892 they were well beyond turning up—in February of that year, reporting from the Dublin *Freeman's Journal*, the Sydney *Freeman's* had announced that the last of the veterans had died, and then in May that the ‘very last’ had expired.<sup>1</sup> In the April item the editor may have been hoping that the latest ex-priest would be the last, or better still, the very last. That latest, Michael McKernan, was the first local priest to hit the lecture circuit.<sup>2</sup>

McKernan was not, of course, the first priest on the Australian mission to abandon holy orders. In February 1864, *Bells' Life in Sydney and Sporting Chronicle* carried the headline, ‘Clerical Escapade’:

A very painful rumour has prevailed throughout the city during the week to the effect that a reverend gentleman of that persuasion which

---

\* Colin Fowler is a member of the Australian Province of the Dominican Order. His doctoral thesis was published as *Descartes on the Human Soul: Philosophy and the Demands of Christian Doctrine* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999). In 2017 he published the history of a Sydney parish in which he had ministered for nine years: *150 Years on Pymont Peninsula: The Catholic Community of Saint Bede* (Adelaide: ATF). He has published articles on nineteenth-century Australian church history in the *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* and the *Australasian Catholic Record*. He is the editor of the forthcoming publication, *At Sea with Bishop John Bede Polding: The Journals of Lewis Harding, 1835 and 1846* (Adelaide: ATF).

1. ‘The Last Waterloo Survivor’, *Freeman's Journal*, 13 February 1892, 6; ‘The Very Last Waterloo Survivor’, *Freeman's Journal*, 21 May 1892, 5.
2. My interest in this topic arose from research into the history of the Pymont parish, where McKernan's name appears in the Baptismal Register for February 1884.

necessitates a vow of celibacy, had disappeared in company with a fair widow, with whom he had been carrying on an intrigue. Enquiry led to the discovery of the pair having sailed for Melbourne ... A telegram was received yesterday from our Melbourne correspondent, intimating that full particulars would be forwarded by the next mail, pending arrival of which we withhold the names of the guilty parties.<sup>3</sup>

There was no further information published because of the intervention of Archbishop Polding, who managed to secure the editor's silence: 'Bell's Life was bought into Silence for £20'.<sup>4</sup> The escapee was John Henry Curtis (Father Anselm, OSB), President of Lyndhurst College, whom the distressed Polding described as 'one of the most hopeful of our young Clergy'.<sup>5</sup> However, Curtis did not go on to deliver anti-Catholic lectures on behalf of the Orange Lodge. On the contrary, in later life, J.H.B[enedict] Curtis, husband and father and grandfather, submitted charming reminiscences about Benedictine life in Sydney to the *Freeman's Journal* and the Melbourne Catholic magazine, *Austral Light*.<sup>6</sup>

The Australian colonial press had shown sectarian interest in ex-priests, ex-monks and ex-friars from the earliest years of publication.<sup>7</sup> Reports from foreign newspapers—Spanish, Italian, German and English—carried reports of the scandalous activities of former Catholic clergy. There was in 1829, however, a reference to an ex-priest not for sectarian and anti-Catholic purposes, but in the context of a debate about convict transportation. Jose Maria Blanco y Crespo was a Spanish priest descended from Irish Catholic refugees. After fathering a child and fighting against the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula, he fled to England in 1810, where he became an Anglican. His ordination was validated by the Bishop of London in 1812. He chose to be known as Joseph Blanco White, reverting to the surname of his Irish ancestors. An accomplished writer in both Spanish and English, he lent his talents to supporting liberal causes in England and South America and to producing anti-Catholic material based on his personal experiences as a priest. In 1822 he published an essay, 'A Few Facts Connected with the Formation of the Intellectual and Moral Character of a Spanish Clergyman', a bitter denunciation of Catholic priesthood, and in 1825 a book, *Practical and Internal Evidence Against Catholicism*, later abbreviated as *The Poor Man's Preservative Against Popery*.<sup>8</sup> But it was neither of these publications that was the focus of Hobart newspapers in 1829. One of

- 
3. *Bell's Life in Sydney and Sporting Chronicle*, 13 February 1864, 2.
  4. Polding to H. G. Gregory, 21 June 1864. M. Xavier Compton et al., eds, *The Letters of John Bede Polding OSB*, 3 vols (Sydney: Sisters of the Good Samaritan, 1994), 3:157.
  5. Polding to Bishop Brown, 22 April 1864. Compton, *Letters of Polding*, 3:153.
  6. See Kevin Livingston, 'Anselm Curtis', *Tjurunga* 8 (1974): 195–216.
  7. Australia's earliest newspaper was the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, first published in 1803.
  8. G. Martin Murphy, 'White, Joseph Blanco (formerly Jose Maria Blanco y Crespo) 1775–1841', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.sl.nsw.gov.au/10.1093/ref:odnb/29260>, accessed 13 May 2018.

the liberal causes espoused by Blanco White was the abolition of transportation, because of its failure as a deterrence, and its replacement by imprisonment in Britain. The Hobart *Colonial Times*, committed to the continuance of transportation and assigned convict labour, was dismissive of the 'Reverend Gentleman', who, like 'many other ignoramuses in London, affects to write on a subject which he knows nothing about'; it ridiculed his personal experience of transportation, limited to his move from Spain to England and the 'pleasurable change from a Romish Priest to a Protestant Clergyman'.<sup>9</sup> Many years later, in 1869, twenty-eight years after Blanco White's death, Sydney's *Protestant Standard* would rediscover his anti-Catholic polemic and, over the next twenty-five years, make regular use of his texts in the Orange Lodge campaign against priestcraft.<sup>10</sup> The *Freeman's Journal* sought to puncture the recruitment of Blanco White to the Protestant cause by pointing out that he had abandoned Anglicanism for Socinianism and finally turned to atheism.<sup>11</sup>

\*

It was the *Sentinel* that, in 1848, first informed Sydney of the existence of Giacinto Achilli. This short-lived Sydney weekly (1845–48) presented itself as seeking to unite all Protestants against the 'abominations of the Vatican, and the more subtle, but scarcely less dangerous, heresies of Oxford', which are 'propagated among us openly and shamelessly'.<sup>12</sup> The newspaper published a letter sent by the Anglican Bishop of Gibraltar commending Achilli to the parliamentarian Lord Ashley, later the reforming Lord Shaftesbury. The friar, who had been suspended by the Roman Inquisition from exercising his priesthood because of the rape of a servant girl, was presented as a 'person of great promise', whose ambition was to establish a 'national Italian Church, in contra-distinction to the Roman or Latin Church'. The bishop's recommendation secured a welcome for Achilli in England. There followed the text of a lecture given by him in London. The roving lecturer set a pattern for all future lectures by ex-priests—he recounted a personal story of liberation from the chains of the Church of Rome; he mocked and renounced indulgences, worship of saints and statues, transubstantiation, the confessional and religious vows.<sup>13</sup>

Despite continuing accusations of fornication against him, Achilli gained a strong following for his anti-Catholic polemic. After being apprehended by the

9. *Colonial Times*, 6 November 1829, 3.

10. *Protestant Standard*, 5 June 1869, 14; 2 December 1893, 3.

11. *Freeman's Journal*, 24 September 1887, 13. Blanco White became a Unitarian in 1835, but it is nowhere else asserted that he became an atheist.

12. *Sentinel*, 8 January 1845, 2. The editor of *Bell's Life in Sydney and Sporting Reviewer* wrote of this newcomer to Sydney newsprint: 'the production is about as impertinent and silly a concoction of an insane mind, as the archives of New South Wales could exhibit' (*Bell's Life*, 11 January 1845, 1). W.A. Duncan commented dismissively in his personal newspaper: 'This warrior of the church militant decapitates bishops and archbishops as children conquer soldiers in gingerbread'. *Weekly Register of Politics, Facts and General Literature*, 11 January 1845, 15.

13. *Sentinel*, 23 March 1848, 2.

Roman Inquisition in 1849, not for fornication but for participating in the 1848 overthrow of papal rule, he returned to London and resumed his public lecturing. Meanwhile in Australia, the colonial newspapers excitedly reported various versions of Achilli's escape from the Inquisition. The *Freeman's Journal* attempted to counter the growing hero status of the ex-friar. In November 1850 it published a letter from 'Laicus', which contrasted a long list of converts to Catholicism, starting with the 'great name of Newman', with the likes of Achilli: 'On our side we have these; on the other side they have—Dr Achilli.' The letter posed the question, 'Who is this Dr Achilli?' The answer was a detailing of the sexual misconduct of the ex-Dominican. This was the man whom 'evangelical lords and scriptural ladies, Bible ministers and spiritual congregations are showing off ... from one end of England to the other'.<sup>14</sup> The *Freeman's* frequently reprinted copy from the London *Tablet* in countering the local enthusiasm for Achilli. The *Tablet* had turned to a catchy phrase attributed to Dean Swift, which described 'perverts from Catholicism to Protestantism' as 'weeds thrown over the Pope's garden-wall'.<sup>15</sup>

Early in 1852, news reached Australia that Achilli had initiated criminal proceedings for defamatory libel against John Henry Newman, a convert to Catholicism in 1845. During 1850 Newman delivered and had published a lecture, at the end of which he detailed alleged incidents of Achilli's sexual immorality. The trial began on 21 June 1852. Newman had sent a deputation abroad to gather evidence and they returned with some of Achilli's victims from Italy and Malta willing to give evidence of his crimes. However, the presiding judge refused to allow the foreign witnesses to testify. Newman's supporters claimed that the judge's decision reinforced the all-Protestant jury's prejudice against the defendant. Newman was convicted of libel on 25 June and fined £100.

When the news of the conviction reached Sydney in September, the *Freeman's* published an extensive analysis of the trial and verdict, with the heading: 'The Power of Prejudice in Warping the Judgment of a Jury: The Case of Dr Newman'. The article concluded: 'Let us ask, would the most worthless Protestant in England be convicted by the Judge and Jury who tried Dr Newman's case, under similar circumstances, if Dr Newman happened to be the plaintiff? We do not hesitate to say he would not, and simply because prejudice would have completely warped the judgment of such a jury'.<sup>16</sup>

Giacinto Achilli left England in 1854 and took up residence in the United States. The *Freeman's* reported in March 1860 that he had been arrested and

14. *Freeman's Journal*, 14 November 1850, 11. 'Laicus' is possibly one of the several pseudonyms of W.A. Duncan.

15. *Freeman's Journal*, 26 September 1850, 2 (from *Tablet*, 16 March 1850). The catchy phrase was also attributed to Rev. Sydney Smith (1771–1845), canon of St Paul's, London, and avid supporter of Catholic emancipation (see Rev. W. B. Hannan, 'Another Weed from the Pope's Garden', *Freeman's Journal*, 25 February 1932, 29). Canon Smith was often compared to his fellow wit, Dean Swift of Christ Church, Dublin.

16. *Freeman's Journal*, 7 October 1852, 8.

imprisoned in New York for 'gross immorality'.<sup>17</sup> He disappeared during 1860 and nothing more was ever heard of him. Vindicated, John Henry Newman went on to become a cardinal in 1879.

\*

The first mention of Fr Arthur Chiniquy in the Sydney press was a reference to him as the 'Canadian leader of the temperance cause' in the *Freeman's Journal* in August 1850.<sup>18</sup> The next mention was in 1859, in a series of articles published in the Church of England newspaper, *The Christian Pleader*, as advertised in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.<sup>19</sup> 'Read the Christian Pleader ... More about Father Chiniquy.' *The Pleader's* interest in Chiniquy was not as a leader of the temperance cause, but as an ex-priest on the lecture circuit in the United States. In 1856 Chiniquy had been suspended by the Bishop of Chicago, to where he had transferred in 1851. The *Freeman's Journal* caught up with Chiniquy's changed circumstances in 1860 via its North American correspondent, who reported on 'the miserable, degraded Priest Chiniquy' and his apostate francophone congregation in Illinois. He concluded by commenting wryly: 'No doubt the Protestants of Sydney have been subscribing to supply soup, &c, for these poor creatures, forsooth, whose object and purpose are to live in idleness on Protestant credulity and Protestant hatred to Catholicity'.<sup>20</sup> At the time of the publishing of the *Freeman's* article, Chiniquy had already taken his message onto the international stage—in September 1860 he delivered two addresses in the First Presbyterian Church in Londonderry. The lecture followed the familiar pattern, including the final appeal for funds:

Oh, my dear friends, if we could only get a college in which to instruct them! I gathered them together; there I have been teaching them the truth as it is in the Bible. They must be instructed; but I am alone to instruct and to feed them. I hope God in his mercy, however, will send means to teach them. I want a college for them, and means to teach them, so that they will be able to meet and confute the priests of Rome everywhere ... I hope that my God will give me the means of carrying on this work and that you will lend me your assistance.<sup>21</sup>

The *Freeman's Journal* maintained its criticism of Chiniquy throughout 1861, but then his name ceased to be mentioned in Sydney newspapers until the emergence in 1869 of the *Protestant Standard*, the organ of the Loyal Orange Lodge.<sup>22</sup> Beginning on 18 September, they published over three weeks 'The

17. *Freeman's Journal*, 17 March 1860, 3.

18. *Freeman's Journal*, 1 August 1850, 2.

19. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1859, 1.

20. *Freeman's Journal*, 25 August 1860, 2.

21. *Empire*, 31 January 1861, 21.

22. On Catholic-Orange conflict, see Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in*

Story of Father Chiniquy'.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the 1870s the *Standard* kept an admiring watch on Chiniquy's activities and publications. His name was barely mentioned in the *Freeman's* until September 1878, when the visit of the 'Protestant champion' to Australia was announced:

The Reverend Pastor Chiniquy, well known in Canada as an eloquent priest of the Roman Catholic Church for twenty years, and now for as long a period a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, arrived at Auckland on Tuesday, on his way to this city. Wherever Mr Chiniquy has gone he has drawn immense audiences. He is eloquent and pathetic in a high degree, but never abusive. His French politeness saves him from abusing those he has left, but whom he still regards with affections, though as he conceives in error, and ever treats with respect. He is regarded as the most distinguished and undaunted Protestant champion since the days of Luther and Calvin.<sup>24</sup>

However, the *Freeman's* found nothing but abusive 'frothings' in the visitor's lectures:

The *Herald* has reported from day to day the frothings of the new champion of Protestantism. Usually there are full reports, but it must have been a great disappointment to the prurient-minded, and a piece of great self-denial to the *Herald*, in its present excited state, that the 'lectures' on the Confessional (according to Chiniquy) were found unfit for publication in detail. After the usual devotional services, we hear every morning of the iniquities of Rome, of addresses on 'Auricular Confession', to gentlemen one evening and the next to 'chiefly ladies'. The other subjects dished up for delicate palates have been 'Nunneries and Convents' and ecclesiastical colleges.<sup>25</sup>

It was not only Sydney's Catholics who rejected Chiniquy's 'pathetic' eloquence. 'Laicus', a journalist of the *Australian Town and Country Journal*, had been contributing regular reports on church services in Sydney. On Sunday, 13 October, he attended Chalmers Presbyterian Church in Surry Hills, where Chiniquy was due to preach. He focused on the preacher's fundraising efforts:

Father Chiniquy promised to give a work on the confession to anyone who would subscribe a guinea, and he would enclose with it, a God of Rome, in other words a consecrated wafer ... 'You pay too much respect to the Catholic Church,' he said; 'it is not a Christian church, it is an

---

*Australian History* (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin, 1987).

23. *Protestant Standard*, 18 September 1869, 11; 25 September 1869, 12; 2 October 1869, 11.

24. *Evening News*, 26 September 1878, 2.

25. *Freeman's Journal*, 12 October 1878, 14.

idoltrous church, it is the most damnable form of idolatry; the worship of a white elephant is respectable compared to the worship of a wafer.'

'Laicus' concluded with a thoroughgoing condemnation of Chiniquy, which must have been a source of comfort for the Catholic community:

Now it must be apparent to everyone that these modes of raising money are most objectionable. The faith which has been embraced, after long consideration, by such men as Newman and Manning may be entirely wrong, but it is deserving of respect; and the solemn convictions of millions of our fellow Christians (for believers in Christ they are) in respect to the Eucharist, deserve something better than ridicule. Worst of all, this solemn subject is made the means of raising money. What the contents of the work on the confessional may be, I do not know accurately, but I understand that the book could not be sold openly. Under the pretence of giving it, the father plays upon the prurient imaginations of men in order to secure their guineas. This is really unworthy of the prominent part he is playing in the religious history of the day.<sup>26</sup>

It had become a well-established practice in the Catholic community that the clergy would remain aloof from open combat with the church's maligners; this was to be left to the laity. The lay editor and journalists of the *Freeman's Journal* took up that role enthusiastically. However, an unexpected champion entered the ring—a woman, Mrs Josephine Constable, known to Sydney's theatre-going public as Miss Joey Gougenheim. In her lecture to a large crowd at the Masonic Hall she explained her decision to speak publicly: 'She began by saying that in thus lecturing on such important matters it might be thought that she was going beyond her province; but they had to bear in mind that every Roman Catholic woman in the country had been grossly insulted by this firebrand (Pastor Chiniquy), and she as one of those insulted, would endeavour to prove that his statements and accusations were false'. Her parting advice to her audience was:

Catholic women should beg Catholic men to let this man alone. Stone-throwing was not a good argument, although a very imposing one ... Leave him safe in his own contempt, for he carried with him the seeds of his own punishment, which sooner or later would bear fruit. Leave him to himself, or rather to his own conscience, and to the thorns which in his bosom lodged to prick and sting him.<sup>27</sup>

26. *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 19 October 1878, 17. 'Laicus' was a not uncommon pseudonym for correspondents to colonial newspapers.

27. *Freeman's Journal*, 2 November 1878, 15.

Not all Catholic husbands were persuaded by their wives to leave Chiniquy alone. During his stay in Australia there were several ‘Chiniquy Riots’. The *Freeman’s Journal*, commenting on the most serious occurrence in Hobart, noted that Chiniquy’s Sydney lectures also ‘occasioned much riot and disorder’.<sup>28</sup> It drew attention to the comments of the *Australasian*, a Melbourne newspaper, expressing the wish that ‘there was a paper in this community courageous enough to speak out honestly, instead of industriously stirring up the embers of religious animosity’:

Nobody doubts that the Catholics are just as good, morally and socially, as men and as citizens, as any other denomination. Before Chiniquy came they all lived together in perfect peace and friendship. The only effect of his ministrations is to convert good neighbours into violent and disorderly foes. The conclusions, then, are plain, that it is an imperative duty of the State to insist on public order and freedom of speech. And for the rest, the Catholics may well be content to reply to the impertinent accusations of their traducer with silent contempt, a portion of which they may well spare for the reverend and other aiders and abettors of this perambulating firebrand of dissension.<sup>29</sup>

After a lecture tour of fifteen months, Chiniquy finally left Australia a few days before Christmas 1879. He was farewelled at Sydney’s Protestant Hall with a fulsome parting address:

Venerable Pastor and dear Brother, by the Grace of God your labours in Australia have been brought to a successful termination. With remarkable energy, courage, and perseverance you have traversed these wide-spread colonies, from Rockhampton in the north, and from Sydney in the east to Adelaide in the west, everywhere exposing the corruptions, superstitions, and idolatries of Papal Rome, and arousing and stimulating Protestants to a sense of their privileges, dangers, and duties ... The full results of the Great day alone can declare, but the conversion of many Roman Catholics, and the arousing of thousands of Protestants, have everywhere attended your movements ... We are glad to know that pecuniarily also your mission has been successful.<sup>30</sup>

The *Freeman’s Journal* commented dryly and with a sigh of relief: ‘Most people will say that the Pastor has done more in the way of filling his pockets by making dupes of his friends and followers, than he has done in the way of making conversions among Catholics’.<sup>31</sup>

---

28. *Freeman’s Journal*, 12 July 1879, 14.

29. *Australasian*, 5 July 1879, 18.

30. *Protestant Standard*, 27 December 1879, 4.

31. *Freeman’s Journal*, 24 December 1879, 15.



\*

Early in April 1892 the *Protestant Standard* carried a triumphant headline: 'Father M McKernan leaves the Church of Rome'.<sup>32</sup> The name of Michael McKernan was not unknown in Sydney parishes. In 1884 he had spent some months doing 'supply' work in place of sick or holidaying parish priests. His signature appeared in the Pyrmont Baptism Register for the month of February, with 'locum tenens' against his name. He had moved into the presbytery in place of Pere Joseph Marie Garavel, who was holidaying in New Zealand, where he had been a missionary from 1850 to 1864. For the rest of the year McKernan ministered at St Francis', Surry Hills. A native of Derry and a graduate of All Hallows College, he was ordained for the Diocese of Brisbane in 1879 and arrived in Australia in November of that year. His first appointment was to accompany Fr Patrick Hennebery, an American priest of the Precious Blood Congregation, who was in Australia as part of his world tour lecturing in the cause of total abstinence.<sup>33</sup> It was recorded that Hennebery gave 129 missions in Australia, made 166 converts and administered the pledge to 102,730 persons.<sup>34</sup> Hennebery was also forthright in his condemnation of Charles Chiniquy, who was concluding his Australian lecture tour.

McKernan spent four years in the Roma district, and then in 1884 sailed to Sydney. From 1885 he was working in the Melbourne Archdiocese. In 1889 he headed back north to the newly established Rockhampton Diocese and ministered in several mission districts. In 1891 he applied for and received an 'exeat' from his bishop, John Cani. The document, which stated that the bearer was 'free of censure' and 'recommended to any bishop to whom he may apply', was dated 7 November.<sup>35</sup> Five days later at St John's Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane, the thirty-seven-year-old Michael McGuigan McKernan married the twenty-five-year-old Ellen Madden Foley. The celebrant was Canon Stone-Wigg and the witnesses were the cathedral curate and verger. On the marriage certificate McKernan's occupation was given as 'traveller'; his Cork-born bride's occupation was not indicated.<sup>36</sup>

Soon after the nuptials the couple headed south. In New South Wales McKernan tried to secure a steady income by offering himself as a public speaker ready to deliver 'a course of lectures exposing the errors of the Church of Rome'. The *Protestant Standard* described his changed financial situation and his need for a new source of income: 'His life in Church was an easy and well paid one. This he left, and but few know the hard struggle he has had since he left'.<sup>37</sup> His first platform was at the Masonic Hall in Newcastle:

---

32. *Protestant Standard*, 2 April 1892, 8.

33. *Warwick Examiner and Times*, 29 May 1880, 2.

34. *Catholic Herald* (Roman Catholic Diocese of Sacramento), 29 July 1976.

35. Bishop John Cani, Townsville, 7 November 1891, quoted in *Daily Telegraph*, 26 June 1892, 5.

36. Queensland marriage certificate, registration no. 1891/15301.

37. *Protestant Standard*, 2 April 1892, 8.

McKernan, an ex-priest of the Church of Rome, delivered a lecture in the new Masonic Hall last evening entitled 'Some of the reasons why I left the Church of Rome, after fourteen years' experience' ... The attendance of the public was limited, only a few score of persons putting in an appearance ... The lecturer, who is a very fair speaker, opened by explaining that it was his first appearance on the public platform as an opponent to the Church of Rome. From a very tender age he was brought up to be a Roman Catholic priest, and his last position in the church was that of parish priest at Ravenswood in the diocese of North Queensland. He resigned his position some six months ago, having been in holy orders in Victoria and Queensland for fourteen years. His reasons for severing his connection with the Roman Catholic Church were many, the chief one being that he could no longer believe and preach the fundamental doctrines of the church.<sup>38</sup>

Later in April he was advertised as speaking at the Protestant Hall in Castlereagh Street in Sydney, at the Victoria Theatre, Parramatta, and in May at St Matthias' Hall, Paddington. The Parramatta lecture, 'Fourteen Years a Priest, and My Reasons for Throwing Off the Yoke of Bondage', admission one shilling, was promoted as 'a thrilling lecture by a fluent speaker'.<sup>39</sup> A subsequent lecture at the Castlereagh Street venue was entitled 'Convents and Conventional Life'; 'some strange and startling disclosures' were promised.<sup>40</sup> The familiar pattern of ex-priests' subject matter was followed: the confessional, transubstantiation, scandals involving priests and nuns. The report of the lectures in the *Protestant Standard* said they were peppered with 'applause', 'cheers', 'hear, hear', 'loud applause', 'laughter'.<sup>41</sup> His lecture at Paddington was devoted exclusively to 'auricular confession':

The audience was a large one, and the chair was taken by Mr Thomas Lutton. In the course of his remarks the lecturer stated that the avowed necessity for auricular confession was not supported by Scripture, and that he could not accept confession and subsequent absolution as a divine institution ... The lecturer was only interrupted by applause. At the close of his address he was, on the motion of the Rev. E. D. Madgwick, accorded a hearty vote of thanks.<sup>42</sup>

Thomas Lutton was the Deputy Grand Master of the Loyal Orange Lodge, and the Rev. Madgwick its Grand Chaplain.

38. *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 2 April 1892, 8.

39. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 April 1892, 1.

40. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 1892, 2.

41. *Protestant Standard*, 9 April 1892, 41; 30 April 1892, 5; 7 May 1892, 6; 28 May 1892, 10.

42. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 May 1892, 4.

In June the *Daily Telegraph* carried the headline: 'An Ex-Priest in a New Light: Father McKernan's "Recantation"'. A statutory declaration signed by McKernan had been delivered to the editor by the Marist Father Pierre Francois Le Rennetel, parish priest of St Patrick's at the Rocks since 1883:

In connection with the unfortunate position which I occupied before the public of Sydney during the last few weeks I beg to submit the following statement. I know I have given grave scandal by my conduct. I am now about to make the only reparation in my power. I have had no communication whatever with Roman Catholics since I commenced to lecture. Therefore they made no overtures to me to give up lecturing. Drink brought all my trouble upon me. I came to Sydney about four months ago hoping to get a situation, and earn an honest living. But having no letters of recommendation which would be of any use, I failed in the attempt. From Sydney I went to Newcastle, but my luck was no better there. In a statement which was published in the Protestant Standard, I made it appear I had left the Church of Rome through conscientious motives. I must say here, that there was not one word of truth in it. I believe all the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church as firmly as any man in the world. As to the imprisonment of Nuns in Convents and immorality, I do not believe for a moment that such exists. Protestants, no doubt, will think hard things about me for abandoning the platform. I cannot help it. I have had no peace of mind, and could have none, so long as I continued lecturing. I received from Protestants a large amount of sympathy and support, and I thank them cordially for the same. They are very suspicious about the sincerity of those who go over from Rome, and they have good reason to be. It is my candid belief that no Roman Catholic ever gave up his Church except from a desire to better his position in a temporal point of view. I thought to make as much as could take me out of Australia, but though the prospects were fairly good I decline to act the hypocrite any longer. I never was a Protestant, so I have not to give up that Church. I attended Protestant service once on invitation; but I neither saw nor heard anything to convert me. I am a sincerely penitent Roman Catholic. I am sorry to the heart for what I have done, and I will use my best endeavours to make amends. (Signed) Michael McKernan. Witness to the signature, Daniel Spillane. Sydney, 14th June 1892.<sup>43</sup>

The story was taken up with great gusto by metropolitan and regional newspapers throughout Australia. Protestants did indeed think and write hard things about him. Thomas Lutton of the Loyal Orange Lodge, whom McKernan

43. *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 1892, 5. Daniel Spillane was a lawyer and member of the congregation of St Patrick's.

had first approached for help, described his initial caution towards the ‘ex-priest’, and cited Bishop Cani’s approving ‘exeat’ as his reason for trusting McKernan. He invited the public to draw their own conclusions about how this priest, who ‘was greatly in debt, could all of a sudden pay a large number of his debts, make a recantation and then vanish’.<sup>44</sup> The *Methodist* was scathing:

Father McKernan has recanted his recantation. After making solemn declaration that he had renounced the Papacy, he is said to have made an equally solemn declaration that his renunciation of Romanism was a piece of base deception. He has been lecturing on the errors of Romanism, has received the hospitality and help of the Protestant public, and now he is said to have re-embraced Romanism, and has suddenly disappeared ... Father McKernan is again, what he says he always was, ‘a good Catholic’. But what of an organisation which can harmonise such deception with the principles of religion, and which can receive back into its communion a man who deliberately asserts that he has been acting like a hypocrite.<sup>45</sup>

An American Baptist minister, the Rev. J.B. Daly, allegedly a former Catholic priest, who had begun his Australian lecture tour in Queensland in October 1891, was in rural NSW when Michael McKernan terminated his involvement with the Orange Lodge. One journalist suggested a connection between McKernan’s much publicised recantation and the sudden demise of J.B. Daly:

The ‘Rev’ J. B. Daly, alleged ex-priest, is still in Orange and threatens to deliver more lectures. Whether it was that the recantation of McKernan raised doubts in the mind of the public I can’t say, but somehow or other Daly was a petrified frost here. People did not enthuse over his lectures to any extent, and the entertainment was very flat. Another thing that hampered Daly was the fact that both local papers completely ignored him. This was certainly a crusher. I think it is likely Daly will abandon his present occupation and will settle into some useful business.<sup>46</sup>

Within a fortnight Daly’s mission had come to a crashing halt:

Fined for Drunkenness. Cootamundra. Friday:

A man styling himself the Rev. J. B. Daly, Baptist minister, was brought before the bench this morning for the third time, charged with

44. *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 1892, 5.

45. *Methodist*, 2 July 1892, 7.

46. *National Advocate* (Bathurst), 29 June 1892, 3.

drunkenness. Daly states that he was a priest of the Church of Rome for 14 years. Daly was fined £1, or seven days' imprisonment in the local gaol.

The name of Michael McKernan soon disappeared from colonial newspapers. In a manuscript list of Australia's pioneer priests, Fr McKernan of the Ballarat Diocese is attributed a unique combination of designators accompanying his entry: 'LM' (Left Ministry), 'Returned', 'Diamond Jubilarian'. It is noted that he died in 1935 at the age of ninety-one.<sup>47</sup> It is not known what became of Mrs Ellen (Foley) McKernan.

Michael McKernan was not the last, nor indeed, the very last itinerant ex-priest to step onto a Loyal Orange Lodge podium in Australia.

---

---

47. T.J. Linane, 'Index of Priests A-Z to 1900' (manuscript, Sydney Catholic Archdiocesan Archives, c. 1970).