

BOOK REVIEW

The Divided Heart of Catherine Mackerras: Faith, family & self-understanding in a different Australia

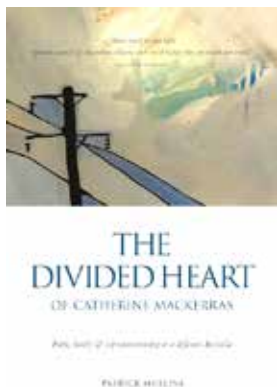
Patrick Mullins

Published by: Connor Court, 2024

ISBN: 9781923224247

Paperback: 100 pages \$24.95

Reviewed by Macolm Mackerras*



Catherine Mackerras (14 October 1899 to 7 February 1977) was descended from highly successful medical doctors they having been her grandfather Sir Normand MacLaurin (1835–1914) and father Dr Charles MacLaurin (1872–1925). They were of Presbyterian stock, although her father was a strident atheist, or “rationalist” as was the term used in those days. Catherine was my mother, me being the seventh child in her family of seven children. In my attempt to appear modest I used to describe myself as “last and least” of her seven successful children. She was an only child.

Our family was the subject of a 330-page book *Scholars and Gentlemen* by the late Joan Priest, published in hardback in 1986 – which publication made us appear to be a famous family. However, it was Catherine who deserved that fame and is still more-or-less famous in Australian Catholic circles. Her conversion to the Catholic church in 1932 shocked her husband and shook their marriage, though they never separated. Their very different personalities attracted them to each other in the 1920s but eventually every feature of such attraction became a feature of hostility between the two, papered over by the reality that both were very conservative and believed in putting up with things one does not like.

Having raised her family Catherine was a writer in the last two decades

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of her life. She wrote for the Catholic Weekly on a range of subjects which covered literature, history, theology, music and art. She also did some reviews for the music journal Canon. More importantly, however, she decided to write a book explaining her conversion to being Catholic. She felt it was much needed because such conversion went entirely against family tradition and the thinking of virtually all her friends and neighbours. The book was published posthumously in 1992 under the title *Divided Heart*.

In more recent times Damien Freeman, the General Editor of the *Kapunda Press* (the imprint of Australian Catholic University's PM Glynn Institute in association with Connor Court Publishing) decided that *Divided Heart* was meritorious enough to be celebrated. He suggested to the eminent biographer Patrick Mullins that he write a book of commemoration which is the subject of this review. The book is published by *Kapunda Press* and is titled *The Divided Heart of Catherine Mackerras* with the sub-title "Faith, family and self-understanding in a different Australia".

The combination of these three books, the Priest biography, *Divided Heart* and the Mullins update adds interest to Australia and to public knowledge about the family in which I was brought up. So far as Australia is concerned it proves the truth of the famous aphorism in L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-between* that "the past is a foreign country. They do things differently there". Australia was a very, very British country when Catherine was a child. It was also very, very Christian. Today, it is not really British nor Christian, and Mullins gives much detail about those changes. Perhaps I could say Australia today is semi-British in that its Sovereign is an Englishman, and Australia is semi-Christian.

However, it is in discussing the relationship between my mother and father that Mullins adds most insight – for this subject is not mentioned by Catherine in the autobiography she wrote. What we do know is that they found each other very interesting company in 1921, 1922, and 1923 – and they married in April 1924. Yet my memory of them in 1954 is that they would barely speak to each other, so different were their personalities, interests and opinions. I have often wondered whether Catherine's conversion to the Catholic church wrecked the marriage or whether it was effectively love-less before that decision she made. Should that have been so then her conversion may have been her way of reconciling herself to reality.

I do know this about myself and my living sister Elizabeth and living twin brother Colin. Though none of us is still Catholic I deny myself the right to be anti-Catholic for the simple reason that (obviously) all three living family members owes her/his existence to mother's conversion. Think of it

this way. When a child my Protestant friends were either an only child or came from a family of two children or three. There were rare Protestant families with four children, but all larger families were Catholic. Since we are the fifth (Elizabeth), sixth (Colin) and seventh (yours truly) it is obvious that we owe our existence to mother's conversion.

The seven children were divided in our opinions on the relative merits of parents. Joan was the one most critical of dad and most admiring of mum. I am the reverse. My memory of mum is that she never had a good word to say about dad. Matrimonial devotion did not seem to suit her notion. However, instead of influencing me against dad such anti-dad lectures influenced me against mum to the point that I can think of only one argument between them in which my sympathy lay with her. I now describe it.

In *The Divided Heart of Catherine Mackerras* Mullins notes on page 43 that Catherine presented her conversion to her husband Alan as a *fait accompli*. Was that an insult to him? I say not. She had no duty to consult him in the matter of her religious belief. Who, then, was the first to do the insulting? All I can do is tell mum's version since that was the one and only case where my sympathy lies with her.

Mum told me that when she converted, she said this to her husband: "Since I have joined the Catholic Church, I think you should know something about it. I give you this book by Ronald Knox titled *The Belief of Catholics* published in 1927." His reaction was to look that gift horse in the mouth, decline to take the offer and say he was not interested. That seems to me to be incredibly insulting to her.

Not everyone to whom I have told this story agrees with me. Some say that presenting such a decision as a *fait accompli* was the first insult. We must agree to disagree about that. In the meantime, I note that *The Belief of Catholics* is an excellent book by Ronald Knox (1888–1957), a very distinguished Catholic convert from the Church of England who is best-known for his single-handed translation of the Bible.