

BOOK REVIEW

Maria Monk has not died, but merely moved to a ritzier address, where she maintains a blatant ménage à trois with Dan Brown and Christopher Hitchens.

THE KNIGHTS' TALE

Reviewed by R. J. STOVE



CLIFF BAXTER has long adorned, by his high-quality journalism, such periodicals as *Annals* and Sydney's *Catholic Weekly*. He is a convert: like so many major lay Anglophone Catholic writers of the last century (two obvious exceptions being Hilaire Belloc and Australia's James Franklin). With *Reach For the Stars*, he has produced a consistently fascinating guide to the Knights of the Southern Cross (KSCs). The Knights comprise a Catholic organisation which, through its faith and good works, deserves to be far more celebrated than it is at present. Commissioned for the

Cliff Baxter, *Reach For The Stars 1919-2009: NSW Knights of the Southern Cross*
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300 pages / Paperback / \$29.95

group's 90th birthday, *Reach For the Stars* has been written with fine-fingeredness that never becomes light-headedness; with thorough archival diligence; and with a narrative force that, amid the accumulation of all the details, never lets the reader down.

As much cannot be said for ancillary factors. The book comes devoid of footnotes, endnotes, bibliographical references, or even an index. Apparently the decision to exclude these necessities

came not from the author, nor from the publisher, but from certain of the Knights themselves. A more short-sighted policy cannot be readily conceived. This is the case on two counts. First, the absence of such features makes it more difficult for the reader to find individual instances of the KSCs' community services. Second, numerous legitimate intellectuals (particularly those outside the Church who would most benefit from studying the book) will feel justified in their false but widespread belief that Catholics are fundamentally too backward, crankish, and lazy to attempt proper scholarship.

Although the KSCs officially started in 1919, Mr Baxter scrupulously gives us what movie critics would call 'the back-story' behind their founding. Above all, he indicates the traumatic impact which Irish history, ancient and modern, had on the group's origins. He should feel utterly unapologetic about doing this. Catholics – and indeed non-Catholics – aged 40 or more might be conversant with the outlines of this history, which includes the campaigns of Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet (both, incidentally, Protestants). But the average Catholic schoolchild in 2010 remains unaware of any church history whatsoever before John Paul II, and will therefore find that Mr Baxter's account possesses a truly shocking sense of innovation.

It is not a pleasant history. It is frequently a horrible one. The bulk of it can be summed up in Elizabeth I's belated regret: 'I find that I sent wolves, not shepherds, to govern Ireland, for they have left me nothing but ashes and carcasses to reign over.' Not much had changed by 1919. The Great Hunger proved that the joys of politically enforced starvation (Ireland kept *exporting* food, as Mr Baxter reminds us, during the Famine) did not require a Stalin or a Mao to be invented. In 1914 Christian Europe embarked

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on its first exercise in auto-genocide, which guaranteed a dysgenic triumph and demographic collapse from which our civilisation has scarcely begun to recover. Benedict XV, Blessed Karl of Austria, and the Anglican ex-Cabinet Minister Lord Lansdowne, not to mention Archbishop Daniel Mannix in Melbourne, predicted this very outcome. If any other leaders did, they maintained a discreet silence.

When to war-fever the British Government added the folly of turning the Easter Rising's largely incompetent rebels into martyrs, it not only ensured that infuriated Americans would be funding Sinn Fein terrorism for the next 80 years; it destroyed in Mannix any hopes of a compromise peace on the local conscription issue. That issue festered long after the Armistice. Mr Baxter's prose suggests (as did Paul Keating's championship of republicanism during and after his Prime Ministry) that among certain Irish-Australians it has not stopped festering even these days.

The central question, as the KSC founders appreciated, was this: would Australian Catholics remain a helot caste? A simple Yes or No might surely have sufficed for an answer. But that answer was precisely what the Ascendancy's chief spokesmen twisted themselves almost into permanent paraplegia rather than give, although the post-1918 efflorescence of 'No Catholics need apply' employment notices allowed Australians, whatever their creed, to make an intelligent guess.

As well as describing in great depth the KSCs' founders, their achievements and their personalities, Mr Baxter supplies hard data about what they were up against. Rightly, he acknowledges the importance of Professor Franklin's recent researches into Australian Freemasonry's heritage. Mutual Catholic-Masonic antagonism sometimes took strange forms. No reader will fail to relish, for example, Mr Baxter's dramatic tale of *The Runaway Nun In The Nightgown*. This 1920 scandal (the usual tabloid stuff, really) inspired NSW parliamentary debates, demands for a Royal Commission into convents, and, of course, front-page newspaper reporting. Prominent among the Ascendancy's legislative mouthpieces was State Justice Minister T.J. ('Lemonade') Ley, who 'stood on a prohibition platform, with a

local brewer of beer backing him,' and who overcame political and amatory rivals by the simple expedient of killing them. Eventually sentenced to the gallows, Ley died of natural causes in a British madhouse. Clearly a great role model.

Mr Baxter's story is not all high, or even low, politics. Light relief comes when the KSCs' charitable impulse, always a redoubtable quantity, took the form of General Secretary Bill Ross arranging for a consignment of egg-laying hens to be sent to Pius XII. Given the mania among chic 'historians' (D. J. Goldhagen, John Cornwell, Andrew Roberts, Gerard Noel) for defaming Pius as 'Hitler's Pope,' it will soon, no doubt, be fashionable to defame Ross as a 'Nazi'. Indeed, who shall definitively say that Nazism will not be imputed to the hens themselves?

By the early 1950s religious ill-feeling had grown rather somnolent. As Mr Baxter says, 'The anti-Mason function which had once been the *raison d'être* of the Order was becoming an anachronism.' Instead of the British Empire on which the sun never set, Australia had (in Malcolm Muggeridge's famous words) the British Commonwealth on which the sun never rose. What inflamed passions all over again – not least among KSCs themselves – was the ALP Split, beginning in 1954. No description of antipodean Catholicism during the Split can ignore (and Mr Baxter does not try to ignore) the role of B. A. Santamaria.

This reviewer knew Santamaria somewhat, liked him, respected his intelligence, and saluted his early valour in crusading against atheistic Communism's trade-union *apparatus*.

Nonetheless, more than five decades on from the struggle between the Santamaria Movement on the one hand, versus Cardinal Sir Norman Gilroy and Bishop James Carroll on the other, we are fortunate that the Cardinal's loyalists prevailed. Notably and unhesitatingly, both of Australia's chief active priest-theologians, Dr Leslie Rumble [MSC] and Dr Patrick Ryan [MSC], brought their shared expertise onto the Sydney Archdiocese's side.

Not only that. Any Santamaria victory in Sydney would have effected the *de facto* subordination of Australia's entire – and thoroughly orthodox – episcopate to the policy whims of one layman, who (as editor J.D. Pringle complained at the time) either would not or, more likely, could not keep his own ranks disciplined.

Whither the KSCs now? Mr Baxter has denied writing the Order's obituary, but his result, for all its ebullience, cannot help sometimes reading like one. A nasty financial crisis in 1991 brought disagreeable headlines, as well as more concrete damage, to the organisation. More threatening than any monetary shortfall is post-Christian culture itself. Current theological progressivism – including abortion and contraception – is accepted as willingly by many Australian Catholics, or at least many Australians who call themselves Catholics, as by their openly pagan neighbours. Opinion polls indicate that typical Australian Catholics disbelieve in the Real Presence (as could, in any event, be inferred from their Sunday Mass attire). Clearly the KSCs cannot flourish in such a social climate. Just surviving becomes a full-time task.

Maybe more harmful to the KSCs' status than even Australia's sexual revolution has been its economic revolution: in particular, the contemporary equation of a university degree with a basic human right. While the KSCs always had their share of professionals and formally educated businessmen, much about their ambiance has been solidly working-class and lower-middle-class. Can it continue to be so, when the working and lower middle classes are now as tiny as the modern underclass is huge? And what doth it profit a Knight to vie with Masons for permanent jobs, when the whole concept of a permanent job has almost disappeared, save perhaps among the

Uncomfortable Truths

Truth does not become more true by virtue of the fact that the entire world agrees with it, nor less so even if the whole world disagrees with it.

– Moses Maimonides,
Guide for the Perplexed

