Biographies of those who are not major players in historical events but are there and involved in lesser capacities are always fascinating. They can cast light on the major events but, more importantly, they examine the way in which lesser figures act and react in history. They can give a feel for the times in which they lived and raise questions which do not readily spring to mind. Such is the biography of William Hackett SJ (1878-1954) by Brenda Niall, aptly entitled a ‘riddle’ though it would seem the plural, ‘riddles’, is far more appropriate.

Hackett was born and raised in Kilkenny, one of nine children born to a doctor and his wife. This was the Ireland in which Michael Davitt founded the Land League in 1879 and the Land War started in 1880. Parnell was President of the Land League in 1879 and till his death in 1891 agitated for Home Rule for Ireland. Hackett’s father was a vociferous supporter of Parnell. This did not make him a favourite son of the Catholic hierarchy. Niall gives a good account of Hackett’s life in those years. The first riddle for the reader is to ask oneself what permanent effect these early years might have had on young William.

Hackett was then sent to a Jesuit boarding school, Clongowes Wood College, in 1890. Clongowes was a closed male community and, apart from school holidays, Hackett remained there for five years before leaving to train as a Jesuit. We have here a boy who grew up in a household that rebelled against English rule now deliberately subjecting himself to the far stricter rule of a religious order. By 1900, aged 22, Hackett is in France studying in the Jesuit house at Vals. The next riddle is what became of his early upbringing in these years. Niall gives a clue when she quotes a letter Hackett wrote to his brother, Dom, in 1898 in which he writes of ‘those horrid Parnellites … when they assail the priests’ (35). Is early upbringing so easily cast aside?

Hackett then served as a parish priest and teacher in Limerick and in 1915 returned to his roots by organising students in a cadet corps with the avowed aim of being ready to defend a free Ireland. It was also at this time that he met radicals and revolutionaries like MacDonagh and Pearse. Then came the Easter Rising and Niall quotes a Hackett letter: ‘It was thrilling to be quite suddenly plunged from profound peace into the actualities of war’ (59). At this time Hackett was 38 years old and the riddle is to find a consistency in his character and beliefs.

For the next six years Hackett was involved in minor ways with the Irish struggle for independence. He knew and met the major players on the Irish side. The high point of Hackett’s involvement came with the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations in 1921. He admitted to causing much harm: ‘Peacemakers – like myself – did much harm in getting Republicans to make concession after concession to peace, but the English did not want peace’ (123). The following year he was sent by his order to Australia, never to return. Why? This is the riddle which Niall explores but does not solve. Niall and Gerard Henderson have been involved in lengthy email exchanges about the riddle and the full text of these exchanges appear in Gerard Henderson’s Media Watchdog Issue 61, 9 July 2010. In this correspondence Niall takes the view that ‘the riddle was not so much why Fr. H was sent away from Ireland, but why he wasn’t sent earlier’. Henderson disagrees with Niall and offers reasons for Hackett’s exile.
Hackett’s life in Melbourne revolved, at various times, around parish work, Xavier College and the Catholic library which he founded. He was an intimate of Archbishop Mannix and well known to those who frequented the library, Bob Santamaria, Vincent Buckley and the rest. Through the library he became connected to Catholic Action and the fight to drive the communists out of the trade unions. Clearly a man who got involved wherever he was. Is that a function of being gregarious, which he was, an idealist, or a chameleon?

It may well be that we all change our views over a lifetime, and some of these changes might be radical and seemingly inexplicable to others. Other changes may be more moderate and seemingly explicable. In order to comprehend any change it is necessary to see the world from the point of view of the actor. He or she is the final authority. In order to understand actions of a person we rely upon conventions to a great extent. When these conventions are not seen to apply we ask questions such as ‘what did he think he was doing?’ For the biographer the problem, if one is not just to give a bald account of the facts, is to endeavour to see things from the subject’s point of view and to include that in one’s account and explanation of what happened; a difficult task when the subject is dead. Niall has gathered a great deal of material which, while not conclusive (who would expect it so?) leaves it to the reader to come to an understanding of a Kilkenny boy from the nineteenth century who became a traffic fatality in mid twentieth century Melbourne.

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