Troublesome Cleric

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Michael Gilchrist

DANIEL MANNIX: WIT AND WISDOM
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WHAT MAJOR FIGURE in Australian history, apart from Ned Kelly, has had more biographies than Archbishop Daniel Mannix? Certainly, Mannix looms large in serious Australian historiography. There are personal studies by Captain Bryan (1919), E.J. Brady (1934), Frank Murphy (1948 and 1972), Niall Brennan (1964), and Walter Ebsworth (1977), and B.A. Santamaria’s short, weighty lecture of 1977. As well, the Mannix shelf is crowded with books like Michael McKernan’s Australian Churches at War, Gerard Henderson’s Mr Santamaria and the Bishops, Patrick O’Farrell’s The Catholic Church and Community in Australia, and B.A. Santamaria’s Against the Tide — in all of which Mannix is a dominating force. There is no lack of information about the archbishop.

What we need is interpretation. What was the meaning of Mannix? Why did he loom so large? Why all those books? Years ago, when Macmillans were starting their series In Search Of ...., I suggested they ask Vincent Buckley to write In Search of Daniel Mannix. Nothing, however, came of this, and we are poorer for it. Then I heard that Mr Santamaria was turning his hand to a full-length work. In the hope that this book might be conjured forth by academic necromancy, I put it on a reading list for students. To date, alas, there has been no sign of it.

Now comes Daniel Mannix: Priest and Patriot by Michael Gilchrist. It is a light, chatty book of anecdotes rather than analysis. Its tone is set by the profusion of illustrations of Mannix — sixty-seven photographs or cartoons of him. Such abundance suggests a fan club production or the mindless reverence of one of those Mickey Mouse cults.

Yet if the archbishop is a hero to his latest biographer, he is nevertheless not portrayed as an unblemished human type. Mannix was one of the most idolised public speakers Australia has known. Throughout his life he could draw thousands upon thousands of people to hear his wit and wisdom. It is an everyday fact that successful public speakers are frequently coarsened by their own success. Gilchrist makes it clear that this happened to Mannix. The flattering laughter of obsequious audiences led him on and on, until he heard himself saying things he later regretted. Vulgarity was the price the Maynooth scholar paid for being a leader of the people.

Having established that, Gilchrist moves on to other things. Yet it is precisely here that Mannix challenges our understanding. The history of Australian Catholicism — and hence the history of Australia — will never be understood until one gets down to the reasons why Mannix was necessary to the Irish Australians. He was not one of the popular leaders, like O’Connell, who create new ways for the people to act. Rather, he was a leader who seized on and spoke out the people’s half-understood longings. He was the public face and insistent voice of a people who, until then, had been submerged and disregarded.

Perhaps I am being unjust to Gilchrist in criticising him for writing his book in his own way. To be fair, he isolates and identifies the principal challenge which Mannix confronted. It is contained in a speech by Herbert Robinson Brookes, the financier who set up an anti-Catholic secret army in 1918:

The public must teach that man of foreign extraction, that man who hated the very name of England, that the patience and long-suffering of this community had been tried too long. Retribution must follow him and his supporters and their name must pass out of Australia.

In 1923 the Minister for Defence, Mr Bowden, was even more pointed: ‘This was a Protestant country and it was their pride that they had absolute liberty of conscience under the Union Jack. If any man thought that the flag was not good enough for him, let him get out.’

What people like Brookes and Bowden were saying, and what Catholics were denying, was that Australia was essentially a British community, a part of the British empire without a destiny of its own apart from England. Any move to develop an Australian national sentiment or to put Australia before the empire was resisted as treasonable. Such Britishness was given religious sanctions by its close association with Protestantism, the religion of the British crown.

The reality of this made suggestions for shared religious services questions of political commitment. Mannix was rigid in his opposition. In part, this came from his refusal to condone the hegemonial view of papers like the Argus and people like Brookes, that the way to be a loyal Australian was to be a British Protestant.

That is not the whole story, of course. Mannix was typically episcopal in wanting to keep tight control over his people by isolating them from alien styles of thought. He encouraged initiative but he could also be quite authoritarian. Gilchrist tells the story of the crushing of Father Mangan. Mangan was an independent priest who questioned the archbishop’s financial dealings. In reply, Mannix addresses the priests of the diocese for eighty-five minutes, raking Mangan bishop’s financial dealings. In reply, Mannix addresses the people by isolating them from alien styles of thought. He makes it clear that this happened to Mannix. The flattering laughter of obsequious audiences led him on and on, until he heard himself saying things he later regretted. Vulgarity was the price the Maynooth scholar paid for being a leader of the people.

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