Somewhat to my relief, Anne Henderson’s book *The Killing of Sister McCormack* focuses more on the life of its subject than her death, making this a less sensational book than the cover blurb, and indeed the title, implies.

Irene McCormack was a Josephite nun working in a mountain village of Peru when she was executed, along with 4 local men, by Shining Path terrorists in May 1991. A decade after the event, Henderson became interested in her when it appeared she was being passed over for Pope John Paul’s list of martyrs of the twentieth century. She decided to try and find out why. Her quest took her to friends, relations and colleagues of Sister McCormack all over Australia, and to Peru, the scene of the crime. Ultimately, though, there is no clear answer to two of the large questions the book raises, that is, why McCormack was not initially put forward by the Australian Catholic church as a martyr when the papacy asked for nominees, and exactly why she was singled out as a victim of the terrorists.

Sensibly, Henderson has not spent too much time and energy trying to find answers to these questions, since any conclusions would be a matter of contentious speculation. What she has tried to do is to gather as much material as possible and sketch a portrait of the woman behind the headlines. She has been careful not to idealise her: she is determined, she says, ‘not to write a hagiography’: Irene McCormack emerges as a rather ordinary human being, dedicated but not saintly, enthusiastic but not always wise, and with her share of
joys and troubles in life. The changes wrought on the lives of religious communities as a result of the Second Vatican Council and the resulting increases in freedom and community involvement brought with them both opportunities for education and personal fulfillment, and additional stresses as a deeply conservative institution struggled with modern trends. Sister Irene was, it seems, never the most conventional of nuns, and had a zest for life which sometimes conflicted, if not with her vows, at least with the traditions of the church. One of her colleagues commented that she was in a way ‘the automatic choice’ for a martyr from the community, ‘because she loved life so much. For her to sacrifice life was a far greater sacrifice than for someone who didn’t.’ The details are hazy: however, Henderson does more or less scotch the suggestion that Irene was a lesbian, and she discovers that there was a man in her life for a short time in Bolivia, without establishing how far the relationship went.

Henderson is a Catholic herself, and writes as an insider. Although she avoids religious rhetoric and cautiously distances herself from statements which imply a strong belief in divine agency, she, perhaps unconsciously, assumes a knowledge of the Catholic church in her readers. She is careful, on the other hand, to explain Australian matters: it seems she may have an international readership in mind. She rather laboriously sets out the McCormack family background in country Western Australia, talking not only to family members but neighbours about the pioneering days of the district. This is the least successful part of the book, and its relevance seems out of proportion to the space devoted to it. The best parts of the book are the conversations with family and friends, and especially those where there is a sense of something held back ‘Even in my very first interview,’ she says, ‘I am surprised to see my
interviewee hesitate over some of her assessments of Irene. This is someone with no axe to grind and with a close personal understanding of her sister colleague. Yet it seems as if she wants to tell me something but finds it impossible to articulate it in a way that will not be misconstrued.’ This is most marked in her interview in Lima with Father Donnelly, the priest in the village at the time of Irene’s death – his lack of responsiveness in itself communicating volumes.

Overall this is an odd book. It is interesting in parts, but its structure is disjointed and obscure. There is an attempt to introduce some suspense by delaying certain revelations, foreshadowed earlier. However, minor family scandals and mid-life crises cannot compete with the climax of her death – by far the most sensational thing about her. This Henderson chooses to relate in the first chapter, and thereafter the dramatic tension can’t help but fall away. She finishes effectively enough with her trip to the Peruvian village where Irene met her end, and where she is now remembered with reverence, but ultimately I felt that there was not enough of interest in this rather unremarkable life to carry the weight of a 300 page book.