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Martin Griver: Unearthed

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McCarthy, A. (2016). Martin Griver: Unearthed. *Pastoral Liturgy*, 46(1), 32-33.

O'Brien, Odhran. *Martin Griver: Unearthed*. Strathfield NSW: St Pauls, 2014.

Book review by Dr Angela McCarthy

Ecclesial biography is not my usual genre for reading pleasure but this book certainly was very pleasurable to read.

O'Brien was awarded the Historical Commission Research Scholarship from the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth which provided him with the funds to write this book. Further scholarship funding from the Western Australian History Foundation and personal and professional support from others enabled him to travel within Australia and over to Spain to delve into original sources. The study of Church history is indeed important and for this biography original sources of information have been sufficient to build a valuable historical view of the period in which Martin Griver worked in the new settlement of Perth as well as a view of the man himself. O'Brien carefully outlines the sources that he used in his first chapter with special emphasis on the value of the archives in the New Norcia Monastery, two hours' drive north of Perth.

The period in which Martin Griver worked in the new colony of Western Australia was formational from several perspectives. The preceding two bishops, Brady and Serra, had ecclesiastical battles that left the small Catholic community scarred and financially depleted. Griver actually arrived on 29 December 1849 into the port town of Fremantle with Serra who was newly made a bishop and a Spanish knight and who brought with him new recruits from Spain for the fledgling colony.¹ Bishop Salvado, the one who principally established the community at New Norcia, was also with them and their Benedictine recruits from Spain. Bishop Serra was to be the new auxiliary bishop for Bishop Brady and even though they were greeted fervently by the small Catholic community both Brady and Serra had different ideas about how the missionaries were to be dispersed. Bishop Serra intended to send them to New Norcia where the Benedictine monks had begun a community as a mission to the aboriginal population but Bishop Brady had very different ideas. What ensued was what has been described as 'The Great Schism of Perth'.² O'Brien's account is detailed and well supported and shows how the cultural differences between the Spanish and the English speakers became a serious cultural problem for the small community struggling to establish themselves in Western Australia.

A further struggle was the extreme delays in communicating with Rome, particularly Propaganda Fide, who were charged with administering missionary activities by the Curia. In our contemporary communication systems we are capable of speaking to people on the other side of the world with no difficulty at all. In the latter 19th Century it could take four months for a letter to reach Rome and if they asked for more details the letter exchange with a possible decision could take up to twelve months.³ It is hard for us to comprehend the difference that would make to responsible decision making activities. Both Serra and Brady took advantage of it and eventually Bishop Polding had to go to Perth from Sydney to untangle the debacle. Brady was sent back to Europe and Serra left in charge but the difficulty between the Spanish vision and the needs of Perth, Fremantle and the wider country areas was left to Griver, as the administrator, to sort out and restore to some kind of harmonious social balance.

¹ Odhran O'Brien, *Martin Griver: Unearthed* (Strathfield NSW: St Pauls, 2014), 77.

² *Ibid.*, 61.

³ *Ibid.*, 60.

O'Brien's account of this unfolding history is detailed and full of interesting details that have a legacy in Western Australia to this day.

One of the unique qualities of Griver was a result of the Spanish Government's attempt to reduce the clergy and their power. Griver was not allowed to take Holy Orders as the Spanish Government limited ordinations to try and restrict the numbers of clergy and therefore their wealth and power.⁴ When this happened to Griver he went to University and qualified as a doctor. This was a gift to the Western Australian community and particularly to the community at New Norcia and to outlying Catholic communities with few resources. He also had experience in viticulture and horticulture from his upbringing in a farming family in Granollers.⁵ He was determined that the colony would be self-sufficient in altar wine!

While battles ensued between the Spanish and English speaking fraternities, Griver established himself as a very good administrator, humble, honest and diligent. He put in place very good structures and processes that enabled the young diocese to start to function in a more orderly manner. Western Australia did not begin as a penal colony and the lack of labour made it very difficult for the colony to flourish. However, once convicts had been brought to WA the majority of them were Irish Catholics and so the needs for pastoral care were greatly increased for Griver's administration but few resources were available.⁶ O'Brien makes it clear throughout the biography that the poor, the convicts, the marginalised and others struggling to survive were Griver's main concern. His own apostolate to those in the notorious Fremantle prison was profound.

This biography presents Griver as a holy man. Even though he made initial vows as a Benedictine before leaving Spain, he did not finalise them as the needs of the colony and then his elevation to Bishop of the Perth diocese took his entire vocational resources. He was responsible for the building of St Mary's cathedral which he saw as the necessary spiritual and cultural focus for the Catholic community of Western Australia. His body was exhumed from under the old cathedral and reinterred in the new crypt following the beautiful renovations completed in 2009.

Problems that we have today with cultural differences between clergy and parish communities,⁷ as well as badly behaved priests and the resultant damage, were a reality for Griver as well. He was greatly challenged by the needs of the convicts, especially those to be executed.⁸ Even more so, the preparation of the aboriginal prisoners who were facing execution. In these instances Griver worked well with Salvado who was building the New Norcia community. He asked him to send an indigenous person who was capable of communicating with the aboriginal prisoners and to bring them comfort.

Griver was an ascetic person who was very frugal and he insisted that those around him live similarly. It was only after his death that it was discovered that he wore crosses with nails strapped to his body, one on his back and one on his chest.⁹ This was not uncommon among the mystics of Spain and Europe who

⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁶ Ibid., 77.

⁷ Ibid., 156.

⁸ Ibid., 149.

⁹ Ibid., xxx.

influenced his development but was still a surprise to those who had worked closely with him before his death, particularly his assistant, Fr Gibney.

Interesting details within this biography that are fascinating include the episode where Fr Gibney, while travelling to the Eastern colonies his train stopped at Glenrowan and he witnessed the shootout between Ned Kelly and the police. Having heard that Kelly was injured and Catholic, Gibney left the train and administered the last rites and Kelly survived to fight another day.¹⁰ A further incident of great interest was the rogue Irish priest that came to the colony, Fr Patrick McCabe. He developed a strong friendship with the Fenian prisoner, John Boyle O'Reilly and ensured that mail got in and out of Fremantle prison with the eventual result of O'Reilly and others escaping on the *Catalapa*, a whaler sent out from the USA. Hard to imagine what it took in terms of patience, endurance and meticulous planning, as well as a lot of luck, for such events to happen.¹¹

This is a meticulously drawn biography giving profound insight into the life and times of Bishop Griver. This history could well be the thorough and scholarly work that precedes consideration for canonization.¹² Bishop Griver's legacy endures to the present day through the careful decisions that he made to establish a Catholic community that was carefully aligned with the culture of the wider community and with the churches and schools necessary to build into the future.

¹⁰ Ibid., 217.

¹¹ Ibid., 203.

¹² Ibid., xxxv.