The return of Bishop Brady: The exhumation of Perth's first bishop

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The Return of Bishop Brady

the Exhumation of Perth’s First Bishop

In 1844–45, Perth’s first bishop, John Brady, recruited in Europe a number of missionaries to return with him to Western Australia to establish churches, schools and missions. Among those he recruited were three Benedictine monks who founded what would later be known as the New Norcia mission. In the first article in this journal, from the letters of one of those Benedictine monks, we learnt of Brady’s first journey as a bishop, in which he brought these missionaries back to his new diocese. In this article by Odhran O’Brien, we learn of Bishop Brady’s final journey, as it were, 165 years later – the exhumation of his remains in France and their return to rest in his Diocese of Perth.

About the Author

ODHRAN O’BRIEN was born in Ballinasloe, County Galway, Ireland, but raised and educated in WA. After initial studies in philosophy and psychology, he completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in literature and history at the University of Notre Dame Australia. In 2007 he was awarded the Archdiocesan Historical Research Scholarship by the Archdiocese of Perth to undertake master’s-level research into the life and administration of Perth’s second Catholic bishop, Martin Griver. He is currently completing his Master of Arts by Research at Notre Dame University. He hopes to pursue his interest in biographical research further by pursuing a PhD on another colonial Australian bishop.

On 15 March 2011, a small team of Western Australians representing the Archdiocese of Perth congregated around a tombstone in a small graveyard in the French spa town of Amélie-les-Bains, on the French-Spanish border in the region of Catalonia. Inscribed on the tombstone was ‘Jean Brady the Bishop of New Ireland’. Bishop Brady’s tomb is one of several within the graveyard where other notables, including a Japanese spy from World War II and an acclaimed English writer and Nobel laureate, are buried. Amélie-les-Bains has long attracted distinguished visitors, most commonly aristocrats, intellectuals and priests throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who would travel to the town to use the naturally occurring thermal spas in an attempt to alleviate ailments such as respiratory disorders.1 Adjacent to St Quentin’s Catholic Church, the graveyard also contains many mausoleums – the resting place for generations of local families and residents.

However, it was ‘Jean Brady’, or more accurately John Brady, the first Bishop of Perth (or ‘New Ireland’ as the French described him) that most interested the Western Australians visiting the graveyard that day. The team was commissioned by the current Archbishop of Perth, Barry Hickey, to exhume the remains of Bishop John Brady and return them to Perth for burial in the new crypt of St Mary’s Cathedral in Perth. The team included Dr Michael Shanahan, retired general surgeon;
Fr Robert Cross, archaeologist and assistant to the Archbishop of Perth; Jade O’Brien, archaeologist; Fr Jean-Noel Marie, St Mary’s Cathedral priest and native French speaker; and Odhran O’Brien, master’s-degree student in history at the University of Notre Dame Australia. In the first section of this article, I will briefly describe the restoration of St Mary’s Cathedral, which led to the decision to exhume Bishop Brady from France. I will follow this with an abridged historical overview of Brady’s missionary career, which will lead into a discussion by Jade O’Brien on the archaeological exhumation itself.

**St Mary’s Cathedral and the New Crypt**

Bishop Brady’s exhumation in France was part of a much bigger project to restore and complete St Mary’s Cathedral in Perth, which included the relocation of the sanctuary and construction of a new crypt underneath the cathedral. Bishop Martin Griver (second Bishop of Perth, 1870–1886) was responsible for the construction of the first cathedral on the ‘commanding’ Victoria Square site in 1865. However, Griver was restricted in what he could build at the time as the diocese was still struggling to support itself financially. When Griver started construction in 1862, his intention was to provide a building of adequate size for the growing Perth congregation, many of whom had been forced to stand outside during Mass when attending the original St John’s Cathedral on Lord Street (now Victoria Avenue). Griver believed that a simple Romanesque-style cathedral could be adapted in the future to meet the changing needs of the diocese. On 4 May 1930, Archbishop Patrick Clune (Bishop of Perth, 1911–1913; Archbishop of Perth, 1913–1935) opened a major addition to the east side of St Mary’s Cathedral which extended out from behind the old 1862 sanctuary. Unfortunately Clune, like Griver, was restricted by the archdiocese’s finances and, coupled with the onset of the Great Depression, this led him to postpone further enlargement and completion of the cathedral. In 2006, Archbishop Hickey, with the assistance of a large group of architects, builders and project managers, undertook the task of completing St Mary’s Cathedral. After a series of heritage reviews on the building, it was decided that in order to preserve its historic fabric, a large portion of the 1865 structure and the 1930 addition would remain unchanged. The importance of both Griver’s 1865 structure and Clune’s later addition lay not only in their age, but also in the way each reflected a significant historical milestone in the growth of Western Australia’s Catholic community. However, in order to make the building more suitable for current liturgical practices, the middle section of the building was extended, the sanctuary was relocated into the centre, and a new crypt was installed. The crypt was designed to provide space for all the deceased bishops and archbishops of Perth to be placed in vaults, with provision for successive bishops for years to come.

**Bringing the Bishops Home**

Prior to the decision to repatriate Bishop Brady’s remains from France, Fr Robert Cross undertook the exhumations of several other bishops in Western Australia, starting in September 2006. Before builders began the construction of the new sanctuary and crypt, Bishops Griver and Matthew Gibney (Bishop of Perth, 1887–1910) were exhumed by Dr Shane Burke, Fr Robert Cross and students from the University of Western Australia and the University of Notre Dame Australia. The two bishops had been buried in a brick-lined grave in the 1865 section of the cathedral building, near the position...
of the original sanctuary, prior to it being relocated during Clune’s alterations. In 2008, following Griver and Gibney’s exhumations, Redmond Prendiville (Archbishop of Perth, 1935–1968), Launcelot Goody (Archbishop 1968–1983) and William Foley (Archbishop 1983–1991) were exhumed from Karrakatta Cemetery, Perth, by Fr Robert, Vivian Lengkeek (archaeologist), and Michael Shanahan. Archbishop Clune, who was a member of the Redemptorist Order, was not exhumed as he had expressed a wish to be buried with the other members of his order in their allocated section of Karrakatta Cemetery (at that time there was no section for Roman Catholic bishops).

The Curious Case of Bishop Brady

I will separate this brief overview of Brady’s missionary career into two sections. The first section will describe some of the basic facts about John Brady’s life and missionary career. The second section will outline some of the anomalies surrounding his dismissal, and later life, including the mystery as to why he died in France.

John Brady (ca 1800–1871) was born in the town land of Corratubber in the parish of Castletara in County Cavan, Ireland. It is believed that he studied in Paris at the Seminaire des Missions Etrangères de Paris before he left France to become a missionary on the French Island of Bourbon (now Réunion), situated in the Indian Ocean east of Madagascar and southwest of Mauritius. He remained in Bourbon for ten years from 1 June 1826 to 1836. After his arrival in Perth, he began building the colony’s first Catholic church, which later became its first cathedral, St John the Evangelist. Once construction of the church was underway and after a brief survey of colonial life and the young settlements of Perth and Fremantle, Brady decided that he needed to go to Europe and recruit missionaries to assist him in establishing the Catholic Church in Western Australia. He left Fremantle for Rome on 11 February 1844. While in Rome, he petitioned Pope Gregory XVI to make Perth a diocese and appoint a resident bishop. This was granted on 6 May 1845 when the Pope officially erected the Diocese of Perth. Brady was then subsequently appointed Perth’s first bishop and was consecrated on 18 May 1845. The key to Brady’s success in Rome was the report that he submitted to the Vatican department for missions, commonly referred to as ‘Propaganda Fide’, for the Catholic and Aboriginal population in Western Australia. Brady suggested that there were 5000 Catholics and two million Aborigines in the colony. To date, it is not known how Brady gathered these figures. The first colonial census in Perth was not until 1848, after Brady’s return from Rome, and the census did not include the Aboriginal population. Given that there were no official government records of the colonial population prior to Brady’s trip to Rome and that he had very little time to explore the colony before leaving for Rome, it is likely that his figures were based mostly on personal estimation.

Before leaving Europe, Brady recruited twenty-seven missionaries for his new diocese in the hope that they would help him establish schools and churches
and work with the Aborigines. Brady arrived in Fremantle from his European visit on 7 January 1846. By March Brady had begun dispersing groups of the missionaries to three strategic points where he felt they could begin their work with the Aborigines. One group was sent to Port Essington (near modern Darwin), another to King George Sound (now Albany), and a third to the Victoria Plains district, where the New Norcia mission was founded. In Perth, Brady asked the Sisters of Mercy, whom he had brought from Ireland, to establish a school.

It was the size of the group that Brady had recruited, together with a rapid and relatively unplanned dispersal, that caused his administration of the new diocese to quickly disintegrate. It soon became apparent to Brady and the missionaries that Western Australia’s Catholic population was small and poor. This meant that the Church had little financial support from its followers. The colonial government, which was struggling with its own problems as the colony was in the midst of an ongoing economic recession, was also unable to offer the group any significant financial assistance. Brady accumulated a debt estimated at £10,000. When news of Brady’s troubles reached Rome, the pope appointed Benedictine monk Dom José Maria Serra, whom Brady had sent to Rome to plead for help, Coadjutor Bishop of Perth with control of the diocese’s finances and assets. Brady’s hostile refusal to accept Serra’s promotion and his decision to ignore the Vatican’s subsequent reproaches culminated in his being asked to leave Perth and never return.

In addition to the mystery that surrounds his later life, there is much that has yet to be clarified about Brady’s administration of the Perth diocese. While a figure of £10,000 has been suggested, the exact amount of debt that Brady accumulated has never been properly verified and remains a conundrum. Neither has Brady’s alleged debt been compared with the financial gains that he made through land purchases and the crown land grants that he received. There is much more that can be discovered about Brady’s administration which will have a marked impact on the way we can evaluate his success as a missionary bishop.

**Anomalies**

From the time that Brady left Perth, the rest of his life is largely unknown. Short newspaper articles indicate that he returned to the Diocese of Kilmore in Ireland, where he was born, and assisted the local bishop by undertaking official duties such as confirmations. He also sporadically corresponded with Perth, via the Cardinal of Ireland, with minor queries such as the payment of his pension from Perth. There are numerous questions to be answered about his life in Ireland such as where he lived, how often he assisted the Bishop of Kilmore, and whether he had an official title in the Kilmore diocese or was merely acting in an unofficial capacity.

Then we come to the final part of Brady’s life which led to his exhumation in March this year.
— his death in France. This in itself leads to more questions. In particular, why was Brady in France? It has been suggested that he ended his life as a hermit. However, further research by John Hoyle, a local parishioner of Amélie-les-Bains, suggests that in 1864 Brady attended the consecration of the new basilica in Marseilles. In a newspaper article published in *The West Australian* on 12 October 1935, the author, using the *nom de plume* ‘Sandgroper’, describes a basilica crowned with the famous statue of the Virgin Mary. According to the anonymous author, Monsignor Brady is inscribed on the foundation stone. The only basilica crowned with a famous statue of Mary is *Notre-Dame de la Garde* which was completed in 1864. Fr Jean-Noel Marie noticed, while taking part in the exhumation, a sign incorrectly placed on a grave close to Brady’s, which said that he was a prominent man of the region who had assisted the Bishop of Perpignan (the local diocese) in consecrating the Church of St Quentin’s — the church which is situated next to the graveyard where he is buried. Previous to these discoveries, it had been believed that Brady was in Amélie-les-Bains purely to use the naturally occurring spas to recover from bad health. Hopefully some of these questions can be answered by John Hoyle who is currently undertaking research into Bishop Brady’s life by trawling through archives in France. The continued analysis of the archaeology associated with the exhumation may also give further insight into Brady’s last days in France. A description of the archaeological exhumation and the initial findings will be discussed in the following section.

**Archaeological Excavation in Amélie-les-Bains**

The excavation began with a survey of the cemetery on a very cold and wet March morning in 2011. Using a GPS (Global Positioning System), Fr Robert Cross and Jade O’Brien took a GPS location of the grave and the boundary of the cemetery. A meeting the previous day with Mr Pouzens, the funeral director, had confirmed that a small excavator would be available the next day to lift the heavy stone gravestone and to excavate the first metre of backfill. Although the excavation had a slow start, we would soon be under pressure to complete the excavation in time.

When we arrived early the next morning, a group was already assembled. This included Mr Pouzens, the three people in his team, two local police officers and the Hoyles. As it was not raining, and we finally had the opportunity to draw a site plan, it was time to lift off the gravestone and begin! Anticipation began to build as the excavator slowly removed large stones, clay and gravel that comprised the first metre of the fill.

The fill was saturated from the heavy rains that had occurred over the winter and this had a number of advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage was that clay is much easier to excavate when it is wet, but on the flipside of this, the ground was so saturated that water was filling the grave as the fill was removed. Approximately one metre below the surface of the grave, a hinge was discovered and this meant that it was time for Fr Robert to climb in and commence digging, because at the time we were unsure whether the hinge was part of the coffin or just within the fill. The diggers commented that they had never seen a grave filled with rock and gravel.

During the mechanical excavation, soil pH had been tested and it was discovered that the soil was very neutral, suggesting that there should be some form of preservation. Fr Robert chose to focus on what was expected to be the foot end of the coffin based on the orientation of the gravestone, and towards the end of the first day, a dark line appeared in the soil that suggested there was or had been a piece of wood. As Fr Robert excavated around it,
and while madly baling out the water that filled the grave, he determined it was indeed a piece of wood, and its survival suggested strongly that we would encounter skeletal material. As we had established that the water was not from a spring but from the heavy rains, it was decided that we would leave it for the day and hope that the water level would lower overnight.

Day two began with the decision that the rest of the fill would be removed to uncover the coffin and determine its nature and shape. This meant a move away from trowels and on to shovelling out the fill as we had determined where the coffin was, and since the fill was a disturbed context, it would not contain anything pertinent to the bishop. As we approached the location of the coffin, work slowed down and sieving was recommenced to ensure that nothing was missed. Fr Robert was required to dig out around the coffin, but as it took up most of the area where the grave had originally been dug, this was very difficult.

As Fr Robert was slowly removing the fill from near the head of the coffin, he felt his trowel strike something that felt different from all the rocks and debris that had been in the grave. Brushing away the clay that had covered this mysterious object, it was determined to be teeth from a lower jaw. They had been pushed through the lid of the coffin from the weight of the rocks in the fill. This concluded day two of our excavation, and with a feeling of elation we left the cemetery brimming with the anticipation of what the final day would bring.

With the suspense having built overnight, we arrived at the site for the final day of the excavation. The initial plan had been to remove the soil around the coffin, but the waterlogged wood meant that this had to be adapted and it was decided that the lid would be removed to see what was inside. The coffin comprised two layers, one of wood and then one of metal that was most likely zinc. These were slowly removed to reveal a clothed human skeleton, dressed in what appeared to be a Roman soutane, wearing the metal-fringed gloves that would be expected of a bishop from that time. This will be further discussed below.

Once the lid had been removed, it was then decided that the clothes were so waterlogged that they would not travel well, and with the strict Australian quarantine laws, there was concern that they would not be allowed to enter Australia, so they were removed, recorded and left in the grave. This meant that we were within hours of completing our goal of removing the remains of Bishop John Brady to bring him home. With bated breath we began removing the skeleton, bone
by bone, from the grave. Each bone was placed in a labelled bag so there could be no confusion as to what the bones were and to allow a reconstruction and more detailed inspection once the bones had arrived back in Perth. This was a very slow process, but fortunately only a small number of bones from the toes were missing.

This excavation was one that filled all members of the team with great satisfaction. There had been much doubt as to whether there would be anything left, and a small number of people had expressed doubts over the necessity of this excavation. An archaeological dig is always an exercise filled with uncertainty because we are dealing with the unknown, but to return with such a rewarding result and completing exactly what we set out to achieve shows the success of our expedition.

**Preliminary Results**

**Coffin**

The coffin was a simple wooden coffin, 183 cm long and lined with zinc. The coffin was widest at the head (62 cm) and tapered at the feet (56 cm). There were no religious markings on the coffin, and based on estimates of the height of Bishop Brady, the coffin may have been slightly too small for a man of his height.

**Clothing**

Bishop Brady wore a stock, trousers, a skullcap, a Roman collar and a priest’s soutane. The soutane was buttoned with a three-sleeved cuffed arm. The soutane was too short for Bishop Brady and this, along with the fact that it was not a bishop’s soutane, suggests that it may not have been his own. No shoes could be identified, but given the lack of integrity at the foot end of the coffin it could not be determined as to whether he was wearing shoes when he was buried.

Brady was also wearing gloves with metal braiding that had been cut, most likely to dress the bishop post-mortem. What was most interesting was that these were the only items of clothing that identified him as a bishop. The lack of a pectoral cross, ring and appropriate clothing seems unusual for a man of his status.

**Remains**

The remains were in very good condition with some hair still being visible on his head. The fractures that appeared across the skeleton were inflicted post-mortem and were likely the result of the rock-filled overburden. There was some evidence of osteoarthritic changes to the spine, but this was considered to be inevitable for a man of Brady’s age.

**Conclusions**

Overall, there is more to say about what is missing than what was actually present. The coffin and the clothes suggest that either Brady died without any belongings or that almost everything he owned had been taken post-mortem, possibly as payment for the funeral. Even as he returns to Australia, until more information is found about the later years of Brady’s life and the events surrounding his death, it is almost impossible to know how and why he was buried in Amélie-les-Bains.

The crypt of St Mary’s Cathedral, Perth, with plaques on the wall commemorating the bishops, now including Bishop Brady, whose remains rest in the vaults above (The Record newspaper)

**Notes**

1. Professor Michel Roux (Department of History, University of Perpignan), interview with the author, University of Perpignan, Perpignan, France, 27 May 2011.
4. DF Bourke, *The History of the Catholic Church in Western*
6 Bernard Noel to the Archivist of Spiritan Archives, Mauritius, 10 October 1963, Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, Mauritius. (Rt Rev. Bernard Noel was the Provincial Archivist of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in Paris, and it appears that during his tenure he dispersed historical material from the provincial archives to Spiritan archives throughout the world where he thought it was more relative.)
9 Bourke, p. 9.
10 Bourke, p. 10.
13 Bourke, p. 9.
15 Bourke, p. 11.
20 Walderson, p. 178.
21 O’Donoghue, ‘Brady, John (1800–1871)’.
The death of Bishop John Brady recorded in the council register of Amélie-les-Bains, France; transcription and translation by Peter Gilet