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# In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword: a personal account

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### **Abstract**

This is a slightly revised version of a talk I gave at a seminar on Australian Literature held some time ago at Stirling University, Scotland. Several things prompted me to give such a talk. I had recently been home and whilst there had seen Ron Blair's play *The Christian Brothers*. I had on my return to London seen Mary McCarthy's play, *Once a Catholic* and the film *The Devil's Playground*. Then in Aarhus I had been teaching *The Merry-go-round in the Sea*. I remembered the passage where Rob is discussing with his mother and aunt:

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## In Spite of Dungeon, Fire, and Sword: a Personal Account

This is a slightly revised version of a talk I gave at a seminar on Australian Literature held some time ago at Stirling University, Scotland. Several things prompted me to give such a talk. I had recently been home and whilst there had seen Ron Blair's play *The Christian Brothers*. I had on my return to London seen Mary McCarthy's play, *Once a Catholic* and the film *The Devil's Playground*. Then in Aarhus I had been teaching *The Merry-go-round in the Sea*. I remembered the passage where Rob is discussing with his mother and aunt:

Blood, the boy was thinking. Blood was mysterious.

'Have I got any nigger blood?' he asked.

'Of course not,' his grandmother said, shocked.

'Have I got any convict blood?'

'Certainly not,' said his grandmother.

'If I had convict blood and nigger blood,' the boy said, thinking it out, 'I'd be related to just about everyone in Australia.'

'No,' said Aunt Kay, gravely. 'You wouldn't be related to any Italian fishermen, or any Greek tomato-gardeners.'

'Or any Bog Irish Catholics,' said Mrs Maplestead.

'Uncle Paul's a Catholic.'

'That's quite different,' said Mrs Maplestead.

I asked Mick (Randolph Stow) why uncle Paul was different and he told me it was because he was a Maltese marquis. I can't lay claim to any Maltese marquis but I can to the bog Irish. So when Alastair Niven, who was organizing the seminar, asked me to speak I decided I would try to pay tribute to the bog Irish and the men and women who staffed their schools.

My first conscious memory of religion dates back to when I was visiting my relatives 'up the bush'. 'Up the bush' was, and still is, a very small village called Carroll, approximately 12 miles from Gunnedah. The Bradys, my relatives, had come from Ireland at the end of the 1840s, had worked first of all in the Murrurundi area and then in the early 1850s had crossed the Great Dividing Range by bullock dray to settle eventually in Carroll where they became small farmers — very small farmers. Some of them are still there.

When I first knew Carroll it had only three public buildings: the public school, the Church of England, and the Catholic church. The priest used to come from Gunnedah once a month to say Mass and the local Catholic population used to drive up in their buggies and sulkies.

On this particular visit it was announced that there was to be a mission. In answer to my query, 'What is a mission?' I was told that it meant that the priest would come for a whole week, that there would be Mass and a sermon every day during that week, that this was a great privilege and that I must be very good so that I could get the grace of the mission. I have no memory of what the priest said or indeed of anything else about that mission except for one thing. And that was that at the end of Mass each morning and the sermon in the evening everyone stood up and sang with great fervour, indeed with a gusto that would do justice to any non-conformist revivalist meeting this special hymn. It was always the same hymn, 'Faith of Our Fathers'.

Faith of our fathers, living still  
In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword:  
Oh, how our hearts beat high with joy  
Whene'er we hear that glorious word!

Faith of our fathers! Holy Faith!  
We will be true to thee till death.

Our fathers, chained in prisons dark,  
Were still in heart and conscience free:  
How sweet would be their children's fate,  
If they, like them, could die for thee!  
Faith of our fathers! Holy Faith!  
We will be true to thee till death.

As you can see, it is far more of a battle-cry than a hymn and I loved it. I imagined myself chained in some dark prison dying for the faith, a vision that was to change when I began school and the prison was replaced by the Roman Colosseum and I waited for the lions to eat me. For the first time I became conscious of 'them' and 'us': we were a persecuted group, and we must be ready to suffer, fight and if necessary die for 'the one, true faith'.



The village of Carroll, New South Wales.

As the pictures below indicate, the division existed not only in life but also in death.



Pictures of a cemetery from a town on the mid-North Coast of New South Wales. The one on the left is taken from the Church of England section looking across to the Catholic section. Each section is signposted so that there can be no danger of straying into the wrong region.

To understand this Catholic/Protestant conflict one must take certain social/historical events into account. The historians have pointed out that early Australian census returns do not record the national ancestry of citizens but they do record their religion. The figures for 1831 show that nearly  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the population was Catholic. And in early Australia one must realize that 'Catholic' implied 'convict or emancipast', but most of all it implied 'Irish'. This situation was not to change until after 1945. The body of professing Catholics in Australia was, until the large-scale immigration after World War II, probably approximately equal to, though not identical with, the body of people of Irish descent.

The social, political and economic conditions in Ireland which had helped to create the convicts also helped to swell the ranks of immigrants, and the figures show that over 50% of the assisted immigrants to Australia before 1851 were Irish. Almost without exception they were working class and in Australia became unskilled labourers. They brought with them a deep-rooted hatred of the English, a hatred which had been nourished over the centuries and which the conditions in Australia did nothing to alleviate. As Manning Clark has remarked, 'The wrongs of the Irish in New South Wales began to be added to their melancholy history in Ireland.' Perhaps I should add that the notion of the Irish in Australia being a persecuted group has been questioned, particularly by James Waldersee in his book *Catholic Society in New South Wales, 1798-1860*. He argues that the Irish Catholics were not nearly as badly done by as they believed or as their spokesmen have made out. The truth possibly lies somewhere between Manning Clark and Waldersee. But that is not really the point. What is important is that the militarism of Irish Catholicism was transferred to Australia and that until just recently Catholics in Australia were brought up with the belief that they were, and had been from the beginning, a persecuted group.

The other historical event of importance in this connection is the establishment of the Church schools. A.G.L. Shaw has outlined the situation. Schools in New South Wales were originally controlled by various religious denominations. In 1848 'national' schools were set up, mainly in sparsely populated areas where the religious schools were inadequate. The system of two boards allocating funds to two separate school systems proved unsatisfactory; a committee of enquiry in 1855 found that in both systems many schools were in need of repair, attendance was poor, discipline lax and teaching unsatisfactory. At this stage Henry Parkes entered the scene. One of Australia's most famous politicians, sometimes called the Father of Federation, he was revered by teachers and children in the

state schools as the man responsible for introducing an education system that was 'free, compulsory and secular'.

This, I might add, was not the image I grew up with. Here was the man responsible for our plight, for not only introducing a godless system, but a system that deprived us of our rights. We were taught by an old Irish nun and there were three subjects guaranteed to turn her attention from whatever she was teaching us: the potato famine, the Irish martyrs from the 1916 uprising in Dublin, and Sir Henry Parkes. The picture she gave of him was such that we weren't certain we hadn't strayed into the Christian doctrine class and were listening to a description of Satan himself.

The education issue was a bitter and violent one, which the secularists eventually won. In 1866 Parkes's government set up a separate council of education and refused government aid to new church schools which made the future expansion of church schools impossible. Rather than send their children to the godless state schools denounced by William Bede Vaughan, Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, as 'seedpots of immorality, infidelity and lawlessness' the Catholic hierarchy decided to establish their own schools whilst at the same time continuing their campaign for renewal of state aid (state justice was how we were taught to express it!), a campaign that was not successful until the 1960s. To build and equip these schools they raised money from the Catholic population; to staff them they recruited nuns and brothers from Ireland. What resulted was to have far-reaching and long-lasting effects. The result of the establishment of these schools was the creation of a dual education system — the State schools and the Catholic schools. There was actually a third group, the Protestant private school. Manning Clark sums up the situation:

The Protestant schools educated the sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie in the cities, of the merchants, bankers, traders, manufacturers, publicans, and professional men, the sons and daughters of the squatters and the wealthy farmers, together with a few talented children whom they bought with scholarships. Their schools were modelled on the English public schools and designed for the education of boys and girls to serve God in church, state, and the professions — to produce that upright man who feared God and eschewed evil and at the same time was dedicated to the service of the worldly aspiration of the British people.

By contrast the Catholics provided only a few schools for the children of the bourgeoisie, the squatters, and the professional classes because their numbers came from the petit bourgeoisie and the working classes.... In such schools priests, brothers, nuns, and laymen presented a view of man and the meaning of his life as well as a version of human history, quite different from what was taught in the Protestant schools. The state schools taught a syllabus prescribed by the Colonial Department of Education. The Protestant and the state-school boy grew up to believe in the

contribution of the British to the freedom of men and the progress of the world; the Catholic boy grew up nursing in his mind the melancholy history of the Irish people and a conviction that the British by great barbarity and cruelty had contributed to the oppression and degradation of the ancestors of his people in Ireland.

Such schools made sure that the fear, suspicion and prejudice that had already divided the Catholic from the Protestant would be perpetuated for many years to come, in fact right up to the time when Ron Blair's play is set in the mid-1950s.

The suspicion, fear and hostility each felt for one another was to enter deep into the fabric of our society and imaginations. At the lowest level it was reflected in the slogans of abuse we hurled at one another on our way to and from school.

Proddie dogs will always yell  
When they feel the fires of hell.

Catholic, Catholic, ya, ya, ya,  
Ought to be, ought to be, dipped.

At a slightly more sophisticated level it was reflected in the advice Ron Blair's brother gives to his pupils preparing for public examinations:

While I'm talking about exams, there's something else I should mention. Next year is of course an external exam, probably the most important you'll ever sit. One tip. Don't put A.M.D.G. or J.M.J. at the top of your page -- anything that will give you away as a Catholic. And if you do a history question and you have to mention the pope, don't on any account refer to him as the holy father. That's a dead give-away. I heard of one boy who did a lot of damage when he did the question on the unification of Italy. He said that Napoleon III was a heretic who was no doubt this minute burning in hell.

*(Pause.)*

Now that may very well be true. But a public examination with Protestant and Mason examiners is no place to say it. You're more use to God with your Leaving Certificate than back here for another year. Boys, some of those examiners are terribly bigoted people and they'd like nothing better than to make the going tough for a Catholic lad. Nothing frightens them more than to see the professions filling with Catholics. Boys and girls pouring out of the colleges and convents, and taking positions of responsibility in the professions and the Public Service ... positions their kids aren't bright enough to win. If you have to refer to the pope -- although my advice is to skip the question altogether: it's my guess it's a question put in to trap the unwary -- call him: the pope. And refer to Catholics as Roman Catholics and occasionally: papists. Then they'll never guess!

In an introduction to Ron Blair's play *Edmund Campion* describes the schools and the sacrifices of the Catholic community:

The schools were rickety, unpainted, crowded buildings.... To build (them) and keep them open, the Catholic working class had to scrape every penny from its own resources. Every one of them believed that the community should help support their schools; and every one of them resented with a sullen, deep, unnoticed anger the refusal of the community to help. They did not enjoy the alienation of being second-class citizens.

This is a perfect description of the situation I grew up in. I came from Mayfield (it was many years before the irony of the name struck me), a working-class suburb in Newcastle, which in itself is an aggressively working-class city. Mayfield is surrounded by four hills; in my childhood the Catholic hospital stood on one, the Catholic orphanage on the second, the Redemptorist monastery on the third, and the Catholic church and convent on the fourth. At the foot of these hills lay The Commonwealth Steel Company, Lysaghts, Stewart and Lloyds and the Broken Hill Propriety Company. Between them they represented the four largest heavy industries in Australia. I mention this to show that even in the 1940s and '50s Manning Clark's correlation between Catholic and working class still existed. With one exception the father of every child in my class worked as a labourer in one of the surrounding industries.

The first school I attended was a two-room weatherboard shed which was officially known as the Hanbury Street annex of St Columbanus's parish school but which was known to all and sundry as Snake Gully. Even given Catholic school conditions of the time it was bad. There were fairly large holes in the wooden floor which were ignored until Father McNamara tripped in one as he was saying Mass. The solution to the problem was the usual one. A raffle was organized and with the proceeds from this a piece of carpet was bought and placed in front of the altar. During school time the carpet was carefully rolled up and the altar was hidden by a large, dark red and very old velvet curtain.

We paid school money. 6d a week, increased to a shilling and then two shillings as we moved into secondary school and reduced in the case of large families. But even the sixpences and shillings dried up in times of strikes and they were frequent in those years. I can remember all the industries closing down when the miners on the northern coalfields went on strike because the pit ponies had bad breath.

Some tried to outwit the opposition and get something out of 'them'. The most ingenious instance I can remember occurred when I was in

fifth class. It was first day of the year and the nun was calling the roll. She came eventually to the name of a boy who was one of a family of seven and whose parents were staunch Catholics. She called his name and there was no reply. Another pupil then volunteered the information that all seven children had gone to the 'publics'. He might as well have announced that Archbishop Mannix had joined the Royal Empire Society. A second child then informed the teacher that the mum of the defectors had told his mum that they'd all be back when 'they'd got what they could'. In a week's time they returned armed with the exercise books, pens, pencils, rulers etc. that were supplied free to the children in the state schools but which the Catholic school parents had to buy.

But cases like this were rare. Generally it was up to us to find ways of raising money. We'd hold sugar days when each child was expected to bring a cup of sugar. This was then handed on to one or two children whose mothers had volunteered to make toffees which would in turn be sold for a penny and the proceeds used to buy some small item, perhaps a reference book for the library or a new bladder for the basketball. The children, as well as the parents, pulled their weight. We'd hold backyard concerts at the weekends. Our mothers would bake cakes and make toffees for us to sell and we'd charge 3d admission. It didn't matter that members of the audience were also usually performers. The star item in my day was a song and tap dance routine in which a boy and girl dressed in Dutch outfit sang and danced 'I'm a little Dutch girl'.

But the chief source of income was gambling. Raffles were as much a part of our life as prayers. A box of chocolates that one of the nuns received from a visitor was promptly turned into first prize in a penny raffle. Added to the week's rituals of confession, benediction, Mass, was one more — housie. We could all of us recite the litany of housie (bingo) legs eleven — one one; the devil's own — thirteen; clickety-click — sixty-six, with as much ease as we could the Litany of the Saints.

A major money raiser was the school fête. Whether we would have a record player or a new set of text books the following year depended on the success of the fête, and the success of the fête depended on the weather. Prayers were offered up each morning for a fine day and usually they were answered. I can however remember a couple of occasions when it threatened to rain. The procedure was always the same. First of all Sister Chanel saw to it that the statue of St Joseph was taken outside and placed on the lawn in front of the convent with an umbrella over him — just in case. Then, if things continued to look grim, we would be marched off to the convent chapel to offer up prayers to St Jude, the hope of the hopeless.

The division between 'them' and 'us' was also reflected in our school rituals. In the state school the ritual took place on Monday morning where in front of the assembled school the flag was raised, the children chanted

I honour my God  
I serve my King  
I salute my flag.

and then sang God Save the King.

For us the ritual took place on Fridays when we were all marched off, class after class to confession which was followed at noon by Benediction at which we sang *O Salutaris* and *Tantum Ergo*.

Devotion to your religion meant devotion to Ireland. The two were synonymous. The more Irish you could appear the more likely were you to find grace in the eyes of God and the nuns. I went through a terrible period of feeling embarrassed about my name. In the midst of all the Connollys, Bradys, Ryans and O'Dwyers there was I stuck with Rutherford. Not only was it not Irish, but I was constantly being reminded by my school companions that one of the same name had founded the Jehovah's Witnesses. If only my parents could have baptized me Colleen or Therese to show that their heart was in the right place even if their name wasn't. But no, they couldn't even make that concession. And what's more, they didn't even make it Anne which name I could find amongst the list of saints. Oh no. They had to settle upon a slightly foreign version and I had to convince myself that it was a slight variant of the real thing. My situation was eased somewhat when another girl joined the class and she was called Jeanette McMurtrie. Anna Rutherford was bad enough, but Jeanette McMurtrie was quite beyond the pale. And that wasn't all. The poor girl had even more to live down. My father had 'changed' ('turned' was how the 'others' put it), but her father remained a Protestant.

All of this meant that Empire Day played no part in our lives. For us the one day of the year was St Patrick's day. For weeks before we not only practised for the St Patrick Night's concert but we also spent much of our time making shamrocks and harps to present to our favourite teachers on the day itself. These ranged from simple shamrocks cut out of green cardboard — an added sophistication was to spray them with silver tinsel — to very sophisticated Irish harps with gold thread for the strings and sequins where the thread was attached to the harp. On St Patrick's day you'd think that whole fields of shamrocks had become animated as you

saw the most popular nuns moving about bedecked in 20 to 30 shamrocks and harps. The culmination of the day was the concert in the Town Hall. This was attended by the Bishop of Maitland himself. He was an imposing figure and as he entered the hall the whole audience stood up and sang 'Hail Glorious St Patrick'.



A convent school girl.

All of this not only divided our society, it also bred in the Catholic minority a deep resentment. But over and above the resentment it created a determination not only to survive but to win. One way of proving superiority was on the playing field — no matches were more fiercely contested than those between Protestant and Catholic. There was another event that occurred each year and that gave us a further

opportunity to show 'them'. This was the Health Week March in which the pupils of both Catholic and State schools marched down Hunter Street, the main street of Newcastle. For weeks and weeks before the event we marched in fours around the paddock adjacent to the school to the accompaniment of orders shouted by Sister Helena who beat an old tin drum to keep us in step. When we were deemed respectable enough to be seen by outsiders Gladys King's father was called in. He was a sergeant in the air force and it was his task to bring us to perfection. Along with Sergeant King came a boy and a real drum, both on loan from the Marist Brothers. For the next two weeks we marched each day around the block on which the church, convent and school stood. And as we swung from Church Street into Crebert Street we could see the nuns standing on the edge of the convent grounds eyes trained on us (they were an enclosed order and not able to accompany us outside the convent grounds). As we reached the point where they were standing Sergeant King bellowed out 'Eyes Right'. Let me assure you that no group of Field Marshalls could have been more exacting than those Dominican nuns as they took the salute, and no group of King's guards could have been more anxious to please.

When I think back on it I believe that our yearly efforts for Health Week were more than a gesture of defiance. They were also a gesture of reassurance to let 'them' know that even if we didn't raise the flag each Monday morning, even though we celebrated St Patrick's Day and not Empire Day, and even though our fathers refused to attend the protestant Dawn Service on Anzac Day, we could still be relied upon, if necessary, to cling just as desperately to the hills of Gallipoli as our fathers and grandfathers had done before us.

On the other hand there could be no traitors to our cause. Catholic parents were compelled to send their children to Catholic schools. Failure to do so meant they were refused the sacraments. In my parish there was one couple who defied the church and sent their two children to the State school. The parents and children attended mass each Sunday but the former were unable to receive Communion. Needless to say the whole parish followed the progress of the two children closely and there was not only a sigh of relief but an added feeling of triumph when they failed to do better than those at the Catholic school. There was an even greater feeling of triumph when the boy became a drop-out at university. God's hand at work no doubt!

Much has changed since those days but old habits and prejudices die hard. I was reminded of this when a friend of mine showed me a letter

her mother wrote to her during the Queen's Jubilee year. Her mother had watched the celebrations on television in Sydney and had written:

On Tuesday night last they showed us the Queen and her tour of the river and at night 2 hours of pageantry and fine works and the Royal Family on the balcony and the huge huge crowd singing Rule Britannia – Land of Hope and Glory – and God Save the Queen, the smiling beautiful girl in bright yellow, what a sight, fantastic in its real sense – I sang with them, had tears in my eyes and anger in my heart that anyone would dare mention a republic only the Catholics, because they'd like the Pope.

Last time I was home my mother was lamenting the changes in the church. 'Singing hymns just like the Protestants' was one complaint. (She always told my father that his liking for hymn singing was a 'throw back' to his Protestant youth.) The nuns also came in for comment. 'Can't tell them from your next door neighbour these days.' 'Skirts up round their necks' sniffed my 90 year old aunt. I went to Mass in Gunnedah and when I saw the nuns tripping around, gossiping to all and sundry, in skirts that weren't far off mini, I began to have doubts myself. It was as if the good Lord heard me for at that moment the priest finished Mass, turned to the congregation and announced the final hymn. For one terrible moment I feared it might be 'Rock of Ages'. But no. In loud tones, with all the vigour of former days the organ peeled forth. 'Faith of Our Fathers.' And I must admit, I smiled.

# A Vision or a Waking Dream?: Ron Blair's *The Christian Brothers*

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk  
(John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale')

Since Vatican Council II there has been a spate of works dealing with Catholicism in general and Irish Catholicism in particular. This isn't confined to Australia. In England these range from Antonia White's brilliant *Frost in May*, to a rather slick and cheap treatment of the subject in the London production of Mary McCarthy's play *Once a Catholic*. In Australia titles which spring readily to mind include Peter Kenna's *A Hard God*, Thomas Keneally's *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*, *The Devil's Playground*, and Ron Blair's *The Christian Brothers*. Without exception they stress the narrowness, rigidity and superstition of Irish Catholicism and place special emphasis on its prudery in connection with sex, a prudery designed to keep people in ignorance and to create guilt-ridden complexes. Perhaps I could give an example from my own upbringing. Physiology was one of the subjects taught at school. We were constantly asking the nun about diseases but to every question of this nature she would reply, 'Girls I will have you know that we are studying the perfect human body'. We may have been studying the perfect human body, but we were certainly not studying the complete one, for the chapters on reproduction had been very carefully removed from our textbooks.

I had a friend who attended another Catholic school where the nuns were a little more advanced in so far that they acknowledged the fact that when the girls left school boys might take them out and on their return home might even make 'improper suggestions'. In such circumstances the

girls were advised to make an aspiration and then, like *Bartleby*, say 'I would prefer not to'.

What is significant is that the works mentioned above have all been written post Vatican Council II, but are concerned with the period prior to the Council when Catholicism was a religion of law and with that a religion of certainty.

Vatican II was to make sweeping changes in a Church which for centuries had remained static and had conscripted truth. Many of the old myths were destroyed; no longer was it a mortal sin to eat meat on Friday — saints disappeared: St George, St Christopher; the latter, stripped of his title, must have bankrupted quite a few firms. The result of the relaxation of the regulations was a wholesale exodus of religious from the church. The reason for the exodus was obvious. What was to hold them? One remembered the old sermons and the talk about the two ways of life, the religious and the married. One could of course lead a good Christian life in the latter category but the former was infinitely more desirable and reserved for the chosen few. No longer was there this strict division between clergy and laity, and if the division no longer existed, why sacrifice for it.

The post-Vatican writers can look back and see the tragedy of those people who destroyed their lives for the 'truths' which the Church now so confidently rejected.

In the previous article I discussed the extraordinary sacrifice demanded of the Catholic parents to keep the parochial schools open. The same sacrifice was demanded of the men and women who taught in them. To quote *Campion* once more: 'They were staffed by over-worked and under-prepared men and women ... who made up for their lack of polish by rare self-sacrifice and love of their pupils'.<sup>1</sup> Most of these religious teachers would have entered the novitiate directly after leaving school. Little more than teenagers themselves — 'I wasn't much older than them then'<sup>2</sup> —, untrained, completely ignorant of life, insecure in everything except a blind belief in the one true faith and the need to sacrifice one's life to it. What made them do it? Parental pressure, the mother who every evening after the Family Rosary prays that her son will be a priest; Church pressure, the sermon that points out that there are two stations in life, the married and the religious, and whilst one can contribute to the glory of God in the former the latter is definitely to be preferred. The ultimate is to be either a Bride of Christ or Bridegroom of Mary, a relationship symbolized by the marriage ring worn by the religious after their period in the novitiate (engagement) is over. In *The*

*Christian Brothers* the central character, a Christian brother, tells the boys he teaches about the vision that led him to become a brother:

I've actually seen the Blessed Virgin Mary.

(Pause.)

Now I don't want to see any smirks or sniggers. The first sign of a simper and that boy can leave the room.

(Pause.)

Of course when I told people about the vision, just after it happened, they said it was a dream. The only thing was I spoke to men of three different nationalities simultaneously, in their own languages. For about five minutes, I had the gift of tongues! I was about a year older than you, in my last year at school. I had been praying hard to the Blessed Virgin about my vocation. I wasn't sure, you see. Then one night, I'd just got into bed — the light was out — when there in the darkness at the end of my bed, she appeared. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. All around her body was this light, emanating out of her in a slow, steady stream, giving off a sort of hum, like high tension cables. She was wearing a mantle of blue light and she smiled at me and nodded. I sat there for about a quarter of an hour after she'd gone and then got out of bed and went into the lounge room where my parents were entertaining an Armenian and a Chinaman. 'I have just seen the Blessed Virgin Mary', I said, and both my parents, the Armenian and the Chinaman each understood me in their own language. The next day I applied for entry to the novitiate. Now that gives you some idea, boys, of the personal interest the Blessed Virgin Mary has in each and every one of us. If you think you have a vocation, then you couldn't do better than pray to her for guidance.

We laugh at the ridiculousness of the vision — 'too far-fetched' some cry, a flaw in the play. But to suggest this is, I believe, to miss the very point that Ron Blair is making — namely that emotional rape created by family, church and teachers can lead to a religious hysteria which will in turn create such a vision in the mind of the teenage victim.

The setting for Ron Blair's play is a Christian Brothers' school in Sydney in the mid 1950s, the action is a class in session. There is one actor only, Peter Carroll, who plays the Christian Brother and who through an acting *tour de force* is able to evoke a whole classroom of boys. There are five props in all, a crucifix, a picture of the Virgin Mary, a blackboard, a desk, and a single chair. It is the last mentioned that holds our attention. It stands alone in the centre of the stage and is occupied by an imaginary, difficult pupil who bears the brunt of the Christian brother's anger. It is a tribute to Peter Carroll's acting that we

shrink back when he approaches the chair, feel pain when he twists the corners of the chair (the boy's ears), and wait tense and anxious for some movement when the upturned chair lies motionless on the floor.

As a social document it is a comic exposé (some would argue a savage attack) on a narrow sectarian education system as it existed at the time. There can be no doubt that the success of the play was partly due to the joy of recognition on the part of the audience (both Protestant and Catholic). But it is far more than that. It is a tragic portrayal of a lonely man who has sacrificed his life to an ideal that he has now come to question. The vision that led him to join the brothers has failed him. He now senses that life has passed him by, he craves for a human love and understanding which he knows and we know he will never have, he fears the loneliness and oblivion that the future holds for him.

There is a constant see-saw movement throughout the play between laughter and pity and fear. It opens with the boys reciting by heart Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Our laughter at the lesson suddenly turns to awareness and compassion when we realize the symbolic import of Keats' poem to the brother's own condition. Throughout the play you have similar references where a topic which fits quite naturally into the classroom situation assumes a symbolic implication. The history lesson is on the French Revolution. Rejecting several answers to his question about its prime cause, 'No not the tennis court oath', the brother suggests hunger.

It's not surprising that the lesson in French on the verb to undress leads to some schoolboy vulgarity which in turn rouses the brother's wrath and leads him onto his favourite topic -- sex. What characterizes the brother is his inordinate fear and horror of sex, for which he compensates with an equally inordinate devotion to the Virgin Mary. He produces what is described as 'a tame cheesecake picture from *Pix*' which he has confiscated from a pupil who has been expelled for possessing it. As he burns it he warns the boys:

Boys, the human body is a temple of the Holy Ghost and believe me, for those who abuse that temple by either posing near naked or leering on that pose are trafficking with the devil himself. And as for those who publish such photographs — in this case (*consulting the print at the bottom of the page*) Sungravure — there is a pit in hell awaiting them this very minute and in that pit is a fire (*indicating the lighter*) a world wider than this, which will rage and burn them body and soul. (p. 14)

He is willing to admit that the brothers 'feel these temptations of the flesh' but, he tells the boys, 'Chastity's relatively easy if you're busy ...

That's why we play handball! You look in after school one day. You'll see a few Brothers whipping the handball. Outpacing the devil, I call it'. But our Brother has an even better antidote — the Virgin Mary. 'I personally think the best way to avoid temptation is to pray to the Blessed Virgin Mary' (p. 15). Just prior to these remarks the brother had made what I believe to be a significant and important observation, the implications of which he was unaware. As he holds up the picture of the girl in the swim suit, he remarks, 'But first, boys, I want you to understand that the misguided young woman who posed for this photo has the same physical characteristics as the Blessed Virgin Mary. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with her' (p. 14). What the brother is touching on here is the whore-madonna dichotomy.

I would suggest that in connection with this point he has conscripted truth so that light has become a destructive element. If I could elaborate a little. Light is traditionally connected with truth, therefore a quest for truth would also be a quest for light, but with each conscription of 'truth' in the name of 'homogeneity' light becomes an implacable tool to subdue, perhaps exterminate. This means that in order not to conscript truth/light one is forced to move back to darkness and to start one's journey all over again, to return to the 'womb of space' like the crew in *Palace of the Peacock*. The whole truth comprises both light and darkness and in isolation either becomes a perversion of the truth. To illustrate this point one could mention Mother Earth. She is all-inclusive and thus contains within her both light and darkness. The Virgin Mary is one of her aspects who represents a particular group's concept of light and truth in the shape of sexual innocence and the immaculate conception. Her dark side would be the opposite of the virgin, i.e. the whore, but this aspect is certainly not part of the image of the virgin figure, even though it is implicit to Mother Earth. The Virgin Mary may idealize a circulation of light which deprives itself of the rich light/darkness circulation from which it is sprung and excludes from itself a descent into resources of revision and renewal. This, I would suggest, is what has happened with the Brother. It goes without saying that for him there is no place for sex outside of matrimony, and even then there is no suggestion that it might be enjoyed. Ask any Catholic brought up at that time the question 'What is the prime purpose of matrimony?' and you can be pretty certain that the answer will come back that 'the prime purpose of matrimony is the pro-creation of children'. 'I never ask an old boy', says the Christian Brother, 'if he's kept the faith. That's none of my business. I just ask how many children he's got. That's usually the give-away. If

he's got five or six, you can be pretty certain' (p. 11).

What characterizes the brother's method of education is his use of violence — 'the chair is beaten, kicked, knocked to the ground'. His justification for the use of violence is one so often used by those who preach objective truth — the end justifies the means, all is permitted in the indoctrination of the one true faith. We can see it for what it is, an outward manifestation of the frustration and sense of loss which he feels subconsciously but which his conscious mind refuses to acknowledge. To illustrate my point: He has just beaten a boy to within an inch of his life for his inability to answer a question about the soul.

The great issue is whether or not you (*thumping out the words on his desk*) save your immortal soul! Hey! What are you doing? By God, sonny, you're a sly hound. I'm talking about your immortal soul. Do you know what that is?

*(He charges to the chair.)*

Your soul is in peril, sonny, in peril of eternal judgment.

*(He drags the chair up to the blackboard and, still holding it, writes the word 'soul' on the board with his free hand.)*

What's that word? Right! Soul. Do you have a soul, sonny? Sometimes I very much doubt it, you're such an animal. How do you know you have a soul?

*(Pause.)*

What? It's got nothing to do with the ten commandments! Fool of a boy! What does the catechism say? Eh? 'I know I have a soul...' Well, repeat it after me! 'I know I have a soul ... because I am alive ... and because I can think ... reason and choose freely.'

'I can think ... reason and choose freely.' His tragedy lies in the fact that this is exactly what he can no longer do and he knows it.

Towards the end of the play he once more describes the personal vision of the Virgin Mary which led him to enter the noviciate. This time, however, he ascribes it to another brother who acts in the capacity of his alter ego.

I ask him if what he saw all those years ago has helped him through the years. He says ... he doesn't really know. At the time, they dismissed his vision. He now wonders whether or not it was some self-induced miasma or adolescent mirage. He says he often wonders what it might be like with a wife and a mortgage. 'Then leave', I tell him. 'You're not too old to begin! Nobody wants you to stay here if

you're not happy.' He says it's only the devil tempting him with doubts and that he must pray; for, he says, there's nothing more comic than an old man who is both broke and looking for a wife.

It should be remembered that the play is set during the time when most of the teachers in the religious schools had no university or state-recognized teaching certificates. 'We didn't worry about getting degrees much in those days' (p. 17), the brother tells his class. This was of no consequence as long as they remained within the system — outside they became pathetic figures. Trained to do one thing only — teach — they were no longer able to do so because their lack of qualifications made them unacceptable as teachers in the state schools. But it was more than practical implications that held the brother and thousands of others like him back. Inculcated into him was the belief that the fallen priest was the worst pariah of all with a terrible fate awaiting him. 'You know, boys, don't you, that the worst punishments in hell are reserved for fallen religious' (p. 15). Added to the fear was the guilt. His leaving would not only be a desertion of the Church but also of his Bride in Christ, the Virgin Mary. This would haunt him for the rest of his life and make any normal, sexual relationship almost completely impossible. As he remarks - 'The Church is a bad enemy to have, boys' (p. 34). Prior to this section of self-analysis, questioning and doubt he had removed his soutane. Now, realizing that he is no longer free to choose, that he must 'wait for the grave' for the answer to his questions, he symbolically once more dons his soutane, praying that he will 'keep the faith with the same devotion and courage as did Bishop Plunkett in the face of English torture three hundred years ago' (p. 37). Like all the other references in the play, the one to Oliver Plunkett is also apt; the brother like him is a martyr to the cause. The play ends with him reciting the litany of the Virgin Mary with the class. As he does so, he takes a pot of paint and commences to paint the chair blue. There have been numerous discussions about the significance of this. I would argue that it symbolizes the renewal of vows, an act of allegiance to his Bride in Christ. Whilst stating this, I do not in any way wish to imply that he has reached the state of re-affirmation and confidence that one finds in the concluding lines of Herbert's poem, 'The Collar'. On the contrary. Trapped as he is, there is nothing else to do than to cling desperately to the vision that has in many ways destroyed his life.

What one finds in Ron Blair's play is a great deal of love and very little hate. What is absent from it is the cheap mockery found in *The Devil's*

*Playground* (I'm thinking in particular of the scene where Keneally plays the role of the retreat priest) or the slick humour of *Once a Catholic*. There are two works in particular with which I associate *The Christian Brothers*: First Herbert's 'The Collar', which I have already mentioned, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* — Marlowe has been discussing imperialism and then remarks:

What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...<sup>3</sup>

Amongst other things, *Heart of Darkness* presents us with the perversion of the idea, and finally Kurtz reaches 'that supreme moment of complete knowledge'. As he did, so

He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision — he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath —  
'The horror! The horror!'<sup>4</sup>

It seems to me, albeit on a less grand scale, this is what *The Christian Brothers* is about. The brother, like Kurtz, began with 'an unselfish belief in the idea — something (he could) set up and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to'. The play, like *Heart of Darkness*, shows us the perverse and destructive effects of this idea, and the Brother, like Kurtz, comes to a realization that he has possibly sacrificed his life for a vain and unworthy thing. The dilemma of Ron Blair's brother is that of any man who has dedicated his life to a vision and lived to question it. The tragedy lies in his consciousness that his life has been wasted but that he has no other alternative than to play it out as he has always done to the bitter end.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep?  
(John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale')

#### NOTES

1. Edmund Campion, 'Intimations of Immortality', in Ron Blair, *The Christian Brothers* (Sydney: Currency Methuen Drama Pty Ltd, 1976), p. 39.
2. Ron Blair, *The Christian Brothers* (Sydney: Currency Methuen Drama Pty Ltd,

- 1976), p. 17. Subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the text.
- 3 . . . Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* edition? (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 10.
  - 4 . . . Ibid, p. 100.