

# A SPANISH BISHOP IN COLONIAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA

**Odhran O'Brien, *Martin Griver Unearthed: The Life of a Spanish missionary priest who became a bishop in colonial Western Australia, 1814-1886*, Strathfield: St Paul's, 2014. 284pp. \$35.95pb. \$39.95hb.**

Reflections by Robert M. Andrews

Whether the head of a 'sectarian snake' or the insignificant contributor to the rise and development of an unspiritual 'sunburnt country', the positive aspects and significant contributions of religion on Australian history remain misunderstood and neglected within mainstream Australian historiography. Despite the work of historians such as Stuart Piggin and, more recently, Michael Gladwin, it remains a continual battle for the sacred elements of Australian colonial history to become more a part of the largely secular narratives associated with the rise of Australian nationhood. Indeed, there still exist remarkable—but mostly unknown—tales of the way faith played a dominant role in nineteenth-century Australian society.

In regards to Catholicism, the sectarian elements of Irish Catholic life understandably dominate narratives. It is, however, easy to forget that other nationalities and cultures have played important roles in Australian Catholic history. The religious history of Australia's Western colony, Western Australia, is an example of this surprising diversity. There—an outgrowth of a worldwide missionary movement among Catholics in the nineteenth-century—a Spanish, Benedictine style of Catholicism planted an unusual continental element into West Australian Catholicism. More successful than the English Benedictine mission in Sydney led by Joseph Bede Polding, the monastery of New Norcia—established in 1847 became a domineering force in nineteenth-century West Australian Catholicism and, by default, a major influence on colonial West Australian society.

Remarkably, there is yet to be a definitive history of New Norcia, Australia's only monastic town, but other areas of Western Australia's unique Catholic history, dominated as it was by Spanish Catholicism, have begun to be uncovered. Such is the case with Odhran O'Brien's new study of the life and times of the Spanish missionary bishop, Martin Griver, a prelate who governed the Perth diocese from 1862 until his death in 1886 and who, until recently, had been largely forgotten to historical memory.

Intentionally obvious, 'unearthed' is an apt verb for O'Brien's study of Griver's life, for in 2007 Griver's remains (along with those of his successor, Bishop Matthew Gibney) were rediscovered during a major archaeological dig prior to major renovations to St Mary's Cathedral, eventually to be placed in a new cathedral crypt where Perth's Catholic archbishops now lie. As the author documents his own role in these excavations, the discovery of Griver's remains are a remarkable—and tangible—insight into the life of this most interesting and important colonial figure. There is even evidence that points to one of those all too rare examples in Church history: namely, of an ecclesiastical administrator who combined diocesan governance with genuine sanctity.

Born in Granollers, Catalonia, on 11 November 1814, Martin Griver came from a modest family who earned their living in agricultural work associated with the local winemaking industry. Excelling as a seminarian in Barcelona during the 1830s, Griver nonetheless struggled to find an ordaining bishop amid a politically volatile anti-clerical

Spanish climate, where it was government policy to restrict the number of ordinations. Waiting in uncertainty, Griver furthered his education by obtaining degrees in philosophy and medicine—the latter proving invaluable for his future missionary vocation. Finally ordained on 18 December 1847, Griver—influenced by the witness of two travelling Spanish Benedictine prelates from the new and fledgling West Australian colony, José María Benito Serra and Rosendo Salvado, who were in Spain to recruit missionaries—decided in 1849 to dedicate his priesthood to the ecclesial needs of the colony of Western Australia, rather than his homeland. Feeling he had been called by God to leave his native Catalonia, Griver sailed for Western Australia with a group of thirty-nine missionaries recruited by Serra and Salvado. They arrived in Fremantle on 29 December 1849.

Obrien's book demonstrates that religious history is frequently about more than simply the history of a denomination. Thus his narrative is scattered with detailed references to the multiple political and social contexts affecting Catholics both in Spain, Europe and, by default, the British colonies in Australia. Thus Griver emerged from a Spain divided by traditionalists and anti-clerical radicals to a colony, though technically a product of a post-reform Britain that in theory gave preference to no single Church, remained imbued with a social structure that at times gave unofficial partiality to the Church of England over Roman Catholicism. Moreover, when Griver arrived in Western Australia, he found himself immersed in a complicated dispute between the Bishop of Perth, John Brady, and Serra over issues related to personality, pecuniary concerns and administrative differences. Griver, supportive of Serra—who was, in turn, supported by Rome in the dispute with Brady—became known for his competence and loyalty amid the chaos—both as a priest, doctor, and as a reliable diocesan administrator; skills that made him ideally suited to missionary work and as a possible future bishop. Supportive of the

welfare of Aborigines (whom he referred to as 'Australians' [p.74]), Griver, along with Serra and Salvado, planted a distinctly Spanish-Benedictine style of Catholic piety in the West. Among a small and mostly Irish-Catholic milieu, it was an odd combinations of traditions. But Griver, despite being Spanish, seems to have shown a cultural perspicuity that was well suited to the native and planted cultures he moved within; indeed, was more suited than his own diocesan superior, Serra, whose preoccupation with planting a Spanish-Benedictine vision in Western Australia at times neglected the pressing pastoral needs of his community. Griver's development as a pastorally dedicated priest, in addition to being a reliable and careful diocesan administrator (maintaining diocesan records and acting as diocesan treasurer) was rewarded in the 1850s by increasing levels of trust and authority being delegated to him. By late 1859, following a breakdown in diocesan administration by Serra, whose authoritarian nature had alienated both the Irish Sisters of Mercy and Salvado (who had successfully petitioned Rome to separate New Norcia from Perth's jurisdiction), Griver had become not only Vicar-General, but acting administrator of the diocese following Serra's departure to Rome to contest the separation of New Norcia. He would, however, never return, leaving Griver initially as interim administrator, by 1862 apostolic administrator and finally, eight years later, as bishop.

Though as a bishop Griver would govern Perth for sixteen years, his tenure was, in effect, of more than two decades duration. Though not initially Rome's choice for the see of Perth, he was eventually consecrated in Rome on 12 June 1870, holding back—if only for a time—the rising Irish dominance of the wider Australian episcopate. Nonetheless, despite the interim nature of his ministry, for the first eight years of his leadership Griver proved himself to be a competent and stable leader of Perth's Catholics—the ultimate reason for Rome's choice of him as Perth's bishop. A savvy yet realistic individual when it came to

relationships with spiritual and secular authorities, especially those with difficult personalities, O'Brien's biography consistently notes the qualities Griver brought to the office that had been lacking in his predecessors. A prominent one was a pragmatism that placed the needs of Perth's Catholics first, despite being frequently constrained by a lack of funds. For example, he quickly realised that the somewhat utopian vision of a Benedictine hegemony in Western Australia was unsuited to the needs of a secular diocese, as it had been for Polding in New South Wales. Moreover, the reality of Benedictine life, which was frequently contemplative, conflicted with the need for secular clergy who did not have to balance the life of the cloister with that of the outside world. Thus the monastery in Subiaco quickly became unworkable, even if priests from New Norcia continued to successfully serve the diocese in various capacities from their rural monastery. Another pragmatic outcome was the construction and design of St Mary's Cathedral, opened on 29 January 1865. Its design, a relatively simple Gothic structure, was nonetheless impressive as it overlooked the city of Perth from its modestly elevated setting; even commanding a seeming-albeit symbolic-ecclesiastical superiority, as its doors looked down upon St George's Anglican Cathedral.

Griver oversaw the revival and renewal of Western Australia's colonial Catholic community, assisted as he was by Salvado's New Norcia. By the end of his reign, the diocese Griver governed could claim not only stability, but also growth and integration into West Australian society. Overcoming some government discriminations against his denomination (such as state funding for Catholic schools or the ability for the diocese to mortgage against government donated land), Griver helped the broader West Australian community to see that Catholics could not only integrate, but support society in ways that placated Protestant fears of aggressive Catholic evangelisation or nascent

Irish Fenianism. Always the head of a missionary diocese, Griver had to continually seek out additional priests and religious to serve the vast territory of his diocese, in addition to find the funds to construct new churches, orphanages and schools. For almost a year and a half during 1882 to 1883, Griver spent time in Rome and Europe, especially his native Spain, where he spent several months. Returning to Perth in 1883, Griver, an elderly man, suffered a serious fall at his episcopal palace on 19 April 1885. Weakened by serious injuries, he nonetheless attended the Plenary Council of Australasian bishops later in the year. Indeed, old age and declining health never deterred Griver from undertaking as many episcopal duties as he could until his dying days. Though assisted by Fr Matthew Gibney, who in 1886 had been appointed coadjutor bishop with right of succession, Griver succumbed to his declining health on 1 November 1886 following a stroke. On his body a penitential cross was found imbedded in his chest, a demonstration, in O'Brien's words, of 'the depth with which he practised and sustained his faith in God' (p.232). Taking Griver's Marian episcopal motto (*Sub tuum praesidium*), Griver's successor, Gibney, articulated the widespread view that Griver's episcopate had not only been a success in terms of ecclesiastical administration, it had been a life of dedicated Christian ministry that had affected Perth's Catholics deeply.

A revised version of a Masters thesis completed at the University of Notre Dame, Fremantle (and which was funded by the Archdiocese of Perth), O'Brien's book is by no means uncritical or in any way unscholarly; nonetheless, the extensive preliminary material gives the impression that one is about to read an archdiocesan case for Griver's possible canonisation (indeed, as the author himself states, the biography was funded by the archdiocese to provide further knowledge about Griver's life so that 'if consideration for canonisation was to commence at a future date, the necessary

scholarly work would have already been prepared' [p.xxxv]). Still, though it is a fine balancing act for the professional historian, there is no objective reason why hagiography cannot be based on history and, as O'Brien documents, there is evidence that Griver was not only a good bishop and worthy contributor to West Australian colonial society, but a man of holy life. Time will tell if the Church investigates Griver's sanctity in further detail. Perhaps more work needs to be done by a historical theologian on Griver's spirituality and holiness (his interior life), so as to bring more light to his own sanctity and its possible implications. In this regard O'Brien is restrained and limited in his assessments. Personally I would have liked to see more discussion of Griver's theological beliefs and spirituality throughout the book—their characteristics, how they changed and developed in relation to his life as a colonial missionary and bishop. But O'Brien's restraint in this area is probably a virtue as it avoids the charge of the work being merely a hagiographical case for canonisation.

Like all histories that recall a bygone age and that, by default, cause one to reflect on the present, there is much in O'Brien's narrative to ponder given developments in Australian history since the nineteenth century. For example, one notices the dominance of Christianity in colonial Australian society, and how this influence has all but disappeared in the contemporary Australia. That instinctual reverence and respect for the Christian heritage—for tradition, custom and convention, which Griver and the West Australian Spanish hierarchy embodied, perhaps more so than their Irish counterparts, may not have been as successful as hoped—certainly not in its desire of establishing a Benedictine hegemony in Western Australia, but it was nonetheless a noble effort and produced fruits that make it one of the more successful Christian missions in Australian history. Griver represented a

significant element of that—indeed, a more successful one given his pragmatic ability to place the pastoral needs of Catholic first, rather than obsessing (as Serra was wont to do) with the implementation of a Spanish-monastic vision, which O'Brien shows to have been unrealistic, especially within the metropolitan area of Perth, which did not lend itself to the more contemplative elements of the Benedictine horarium.

But there may be one area, however, where we might praise Serra's vision over than of Griver's more humble outcomes: namely, the design and construction of Perth's Cathedral. O'Brien thus notes that when the original cathedral was being planned, Griver turned down a design from none other than the noted English architect of the nineteenth-century Gothic Revival, Augustus Pugin. Perhaps overly grand, it is true a Pugin design may not have fitted well in the current location at the time; nonetheless, it is a pity that Perth's Catholics missed out on such a possibility (as an aside, it is unfortunate to note that Archbishop Patrick Joseph Clune, who reigned during the early twentieth century, also turned down a design from the 'hermit of Cat Island', Monsignor John Hawes—whose noted architectural skill would have easily rivalled anything Pugin designed). Nonetheless, this is a minor criticism. As O'Brien has reminded us in this excellent narrative of Griver's life, bishops have numerous challenges and Griver, reviving the fortunes of the Perth diocese after decades of controversy, had limited resources to work with. What mattered—and always will matter—was the pastoral needs of Perth's Catholics. In this regard Griver was a fine example of a bishop who placed the needs of his flock first. It is no wonder that Perth's Catholics are considering the spiritual outcomes of the life and ministry of this colonial bishop who left the vineyards of his native Catalonia for arid climate of Western Australia.

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