

A scholarly look at the Christian Brothers

FAITH AND FATHERLAND: The Christian Brothers and the Development of Irish Nationalism 1838-1921. Barry Coldrey. Gill and Macmillan, 328 pp. RRP \$29.95.

THE amalgamation of the old Dublin publishing house of Michael Gill with the international firm of Macmillan, has meant a greatly facilitated flow of books about Catholicism and Ireland through the Australian branch of Macmillan.

This book by Br Coldrey is an example of the type of book for which we should be grateful. Before the amalgamation a few years ago, Gill might not have been able to place it on the Australian market.

The Christian Brothers have played a significant part in the history of Australian education. It is too early to assess what part this is.

But certainly for the past century they have been in the forefront of the education of the poor and it would be a fascinating exercise to compile lists of those Australians who are now leaders in their professions whose education began at the hands of the brothers.

Their role in contemporary society may be smaller than it was because of the waning numbers of the very poor as a substratum of society. When Br Coldrey examines their role in the emergence of Irish nationalism, he challenges someone to examine their role and influence in Australian politics.

Although devoted to the education of the poor, and therefore politically leaning to the Labor left, the brothers in Australia have shown surprising tendencies towards conservatism.

Br Coldrey's study covers only the period from 1838-1921, virtually the period of the existence of the brothers in Ireland and

itself a period which is a landmark in the Catholic history of Ireland, covering as it does the time from Catholic emancipation to the foundation of the independent Free State, outside of which education of almost any sort for the Catholic Irish was non-existent.

The brothers brought with them to Australia a century ago a very strong sense of Irish nationalism, embodied in the Celtic Cross which was to become their universal trade mark.

The other great educational force for boys, the Jesuits, always proposed a more universal, and European view of the world tempered by their apparent affection for boys from families economically better off.

This is essentially a book for a serious student but possibly for the student of modern Irish history rather than Australian history but for such a student, it would be a very rewarding experience.

No reviewer in his right mind would dare pronounce it good or bad as such, because of the wealth of research and thoughtful analysis that has been put into it.

My only worry with this book — and it is not a criticism which should deter any serious student from benefitting from it — is that a book about the Christian Brothers written by one of the brothers lays itself open to the charge of special pleading.

This may detract from the author's confessed admiration for some of their achievements. What is needed is a dispassionate study of their whole contribution by an outsider. But such an outsider may be either an admirer of the society or an embittered ex-brother seething with hostility; so such a book may be impossible.

We are left with what we have, which is an excellent and scholarly book in its own right.

— NIALL BRENNAN