

The Scheme: The Christian Brothers and Childcare in Western Australia

By Barry M. Coldrey. Pp. 464. Western Australia (O'Connor), Christian Brothers, 1993, Argyle Pacific Publishing. (No price listed).

The Scheme: The Christian Brothers and Childcare in Western Australia by Br Barry Coldrey tells a complex and significant story. Between 1897 and 1983 the Congregation of Christian Brothers ran four distinct institutions in Western Australia for the full time care of boys from 'just out of kindergarten' at 7 or 8 years to 14 or sometimes 18 years. Clontarf Orphanage, Castledare Junior Orphanage, St Mary's Farm School at Tardun and St Joseph's Farm School and Trade School at Bindoon catered in their time for 4,000 boys, including 800 child migrants, and were staffed by 175 different men of the order, together with religious sisters and lay workers. In 1987 allegations of physical and sexual abuse at the institutions focused media attention and community discussion. In this context the Provincial Council of the Christian Brothers in WA/SA commissioned a researcher to bring the skills of a trained historian to the records of the orphanages. Brother Coldrey is a Christian Brother from the separate province in Victoria with a doctorate in history who has published previously on both the Christian Brothers and childcare issues. Commissioning Br Coldrey to report and evaluate the work of the orphanages points to a re-shaping of the weighty tradition that 'silence is part of good government' in the church. The publication of *The Scheme* is a courageous invitation from the Christian Brothers to examine the complexities of the past in WA, to confront the vision and hopes of the institutions as well as the lack of resources and faults of authorities in which hope was mired.

The Scheme in 464 pages does not dodge the controversial issues, and frankly acknowledges specific instances in which trust was abused. But neither does the book accept the controversy as the limits of the discussion. While it has been prompted by particular questions in the present, Coldrey's work points beyond the immediate contention to a wide network of other historical themes. *The Scheme* will be an important tool for researchers who wish to explore further such areas as the social history of childcare and philanthropy, the nature of spirituality in Australia, the construction of masculinity, and questions of land settlement as well as making a solid contribution to the understanding of administrative and political issues surrounding 'childhood' in WA.

The story of these four diverse foundations is underwritten by a concern to set the institutions in the context of West Australian and Australian history, within the traditions of the Christian Brothers and within the broader histories of childcare, migration and charitable work. The orphanages were part of a wider world: government decisions introduced child migration, sectarianism demanded separate institutions for Catholics and Protestants, depressions, droughts and war determined shortages of resources, canon law required a

monastic regime that left 24 hour child care unquested. Against a grim background Coldrey shows the Brothers refusing to accept the structures of society that prevented access to secondary education, skilled work or access to land. The religious framework of the vision was taken for granted. There were strong elements of paternalism in the undercurrents of the schemes but the Brothers' orphanages were not about acquiescing to the prevailing social order, they were about hard work to become part of it, and perhaps to change it.

Brother Coldrey has drawn on valuable material in the archives of the order, government departments and private associations such as the Knights of the Southern Cross. Like many books that turn over a body of material for the first time, this is a 'fact packed' account. Coldrey's sources are overwhelmingly administrative, and his book reflects the sources, as all history books must. In chapters that deal with each institution chronologically there are precise details of costs of projects, the to-ing and fro-ing of correspondence and negotiations on particular issues and the comments on file that reveal perceptions and pre-occupations at the time. Occasionally the book also draws on the oral history of former students and staff. Access to these valuable records has provided a sound basis to move towards an overall picture of the places and personalities. Brother Coldrey cannot have direct access to the lived experience of the students and staff, but *The Scheme* employs the checks and balances of scholarly argument across a wide range of sources to come to a reasoned approximation of the past. In the interpretation of previously unexplored material it makes an invaluable contribution to discussion.

The format of the book seems to assume that readers will be looking for the story of a particular institution in particular years, and that might generally so be. The table of contents gives a good guide to the time and place of each chapter. But given that it is a dedicated reader who will approach this book from cover to cover a well-organised index would have been a helpful thing. Frequently too the text refers to related discussion in other places in the book; but without cross-references readers can only guess which parts the author has in mind. There are general chapters on the Brothers' early history and involvement with child care, on child migration, on the controversial issues, and these are especially important for setting the institutions in context and pulling together the underlying themes of the book. They also point, lightly, to other work on related issues. It is a strength of the format that readers come to these chapters well acquainted with the specific histories of the particular orphanages. Certainly to read the 4 general sections in isolation from the body of detail in 9 other chapters would be an injustice to the weight of research. Somehow it seems fitting too, that the broad themes of the orphanages emerge most clearly from careful considerations of the day to day.

The Scheme is not a triumphal history, but one that opens out crucial questions, and points to the need for further work. In launching the book representatives of the Christian Brothers and former students of the order expressed the hope that this would be a well-read book, and it certainly deserves to be. A mature church, a mature community, with hall marks of compassion is well-served by research such as the Christian Brothers have sponsored and made available here.

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