

The Hard Way

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John Hanrahan

From Eternity to Here:

Memoirs of an Angry Priest

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FOR THOSE WHO remember John Hanrahan as an incisive literary critic for *The Age*, former editor of *ABR*, and literary commentator on the *ABC*, this biographical account, published posthumously, will have great poignancy. Hanrahan was a writer who did it the hard way, because of the struggle involved in being a Catholic priest. In kicking against the pricks, he found his voice.

In his memoir, Hanrahan writes about the Catholic Church as an institution and what it did to him. Hanrahan died in 1997, just before the first wave of paedophilia accusations were levelled at the Church. Yet Hanrahan hinted at what was to come. To this end, his book, completed but unedited before his death, is unusually timely. The sensitivity that Laurie Clancy and John McLaren have displayed in tidying up Hanrahan's prose is a reflection of the esteem in which he was held. It is also a reflection of Hanrahan's ability as a writer. In a sense, that is what the book is about. It is an insight into the journey of a writer who finds that he has something to say and says it in an inimitable way. The impression soon gleaned from the struggles of someone who became a troublesome and angry priest is that the Church was a stultifying institution for a creative spirit.

Hanrahan was not your knockabout writer. He had a memorable turn of phrase, and learnt his trade as a freelancer. He was scholarly, empathetic and sincere. He completed a Masters thesis on James Joyce's *Ulysses* and achieved first-class honours. His supervisor was his friend and mentor, Vincent Buckley.

As much as this book is a flinty account of Hanrahan's not altogether joyous experiences in the Church, it is not without understated humour. He writes with simple irony: 'I did manage to become a priest, and it didn't take me long to become a disgraced priest.' Although he writes humorously about his liberation from the Church (his disgrace was to marry in 1971), there is refined distaste not so much for what the Church represented but for what it did to individuals. As recent revelations about abuse and paedophilia have shown, this has long-term consequences for the victims. Hanrahan was sufficiently iconoclastic and rebellious to

comment about his time in a minor seminary during the 1950s: 'I was being enmeshed in the sacred and the solemn, without realising it.' In this simple, almost diffident, observation, there is real terror. It resonates through the book. Hanrahan fears that his essential self is being subsumed by institutional life. This was a church where, when Hanrahan became a novice of the Society of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in 1957, he was to undergo the 'process of dehumanising boys in our unwomanned friendless world'.

The turning point and source of his 'disgrace' was Hanrahan's marriage to Helen Roddis. Hanrahan makes no secret of his struggle to remain celibate as a priest. His description of losing his virginity to a Sydney prostitute is profoundly sad. Saint Paul said it was 'better to marry than to burn', but Hanrahan's fulfilment in marriage is only briefly discussed in the book. This is understandable. He was an intensely private man, and his memoir became a kind of catharsis in coming to terms with the impact of the Church on his life.

Hanrahan had a formidable intellect. If something can be winnowed from his time in the Church, it is that he used it with charity. He was also capable of great love towards his friends and family, clearly demonstrated in the ongoing struggles he had with his daughter's severe epilepsy. He writes about this with courage and frankness. He also mentions the Church's reaction. After he left the Church and married, he was not free from its interest in him:

But they kept tabs on me. I received half a dozen letters, all of them with the same message. I quote one. 'I keep you in my prayers, now that you are being punished for your betrayal of your priesthood. Your daughter is your punishment for your treachery.'

It is clear that Hanrahan could not have survived in a system that held such views. When he writes about his association with poets and writers, such as Bob Brissenden, Gwen Harwood, James McAuley and Vincent Buckley, there is palpable excitement. His spirit, so nearly crushed by the intransigence of the Catholic Church, was revived in the fellowship of fellow travellers.

This book, written in the gloaming of a life regained from the Church, is not without its astringent criticisms. Hanrahan is pungent on the belittlement of Church dealings with individual priests. He says at the conclusion of the book: 'Priests fail because they are not men enough to admit that they and the world are also female.'

As much as this is a book about an individual attaining peace outside the Catholic Church, it is also a book about making the most of the changes and chances of this fleeting world. In that, Hanrahan touches us all.