

BOOK REVIEW

"INNINGS OF GRACE - A LIFE OF BISHOP W G HILLIARD"

Janet West, Standard Publishing House, 1987

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by the Honourable Justice Michael Kirby CMG

Innings of Grace - A Life of Bishop W G Hilliard by Janet West,
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Bishop Hilliard confirmed me - and thousands of others - into the Anglican communion. I well remember his austere face, with the shock of white hair, rimless glasses and delicate hands. That face looks out at the reader from the vivid portrait by William Pidgeon which is the cover of this book of his life. The biography is written by Janet West, wife of the present Headmaster of Trinity Grammar School in Sydney. Ron West was a cousin of Bishop Hilliard. Like the bishop, he taught at Fort Street High School in Sydney before, also like him, taking up the headship of Trinity Grammar. The title signifies the bishop's interest in sports, particularly cricket.

In his foreword, Sir Marcus Loane describes Hilliard as versatile, his life being most memorable for his "wonderful loyalty". At his funeral in March 1960, still in harness as a Co-adjutor of Sydney, Archbishop Gough took as the text the tribute to Barabas:-

"He was a good man and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith".

Gough was to learn of Hilliard's loyalty and of his greatest skill which was communication. He was a natural orator, with gifts of debate and persuasion. Had he not felt a calling to the Church there is little doubt that he would have spent his life as a teacher. Indeed, that is where he started.

He was born in Redfern, near Sydney, in 1887, the product of a working class family which could trace its descendents on one side to the early convicts. His family brought him up in the tradition of the Anglican Church in Sydney. The strong evangelical tradition of the Diocese is well outlined in the descriptions of the Church in which Hilliard grew up and served.

He did what many boys of humble origins did in those days before Commonwealth scholarships and free universities. He taught during the day and continued his higher education at night. His secondary education was at Sydney Boys' High School, then in Ultimo. But he began teaching at Fort Street in 1910 where he forged a close friendship with the doyen of Headmasters, Alexander Kilgour. He was a gifted teacher of modern languages. Kilgour was keen to have him on the staff, instructing the intellectual cream of the working class of the western suburbs of Sydney. Later, Kilgour was to join Hilliard on the staff of the Trinity Grammar School.

Feeling the call to service in the Church, Hilliard was ordained in December 1912. He became involved in the moves that led to the establishment of Trinity Grammar School which opened its doors in February 1913 to 29 pupils. Necessarily, the standards of the pupils were more variable than at the selective public schools which he had previously known. But Hilliard was determined to secure high standards in a school which was modelled on English and Victorian Anglican colleges. On the chance departure of the first headmaster, he was

appointed the school head. He remained in that position until 1916 when he left for his first parish assignment at St John's, Ashfield, near Sydney. Already, his gifts as an orator were attracting notice. The period at St John's was not without difficulties. In 1918 he lost his first wife. He suffered more than the usual share of personal misfortunes. Three of his four children predeceased him, two in infancy. Sadly there is hardly a word about the wives. They are unrecorded companions whose part in his life is not disclosed.

Hilliard was an ambitious man. So in 1926 he took the more challenging assignment of a parish in Marrickville. He was recorded as sometimes aloof, speaking to parishioners more as a head master than as a priest. He did not make himself popular by preaching stalwartly against gambling. He began to busy his hours in freemasonry and in numerous school councils and church committees where his gifts of persuasion and oral communication were to shine.

He returned to St Trinity Grammar School in 1929 for a second period as head master. The school was not as prosperous as other Anglican schools, such as Barker College and Cranbrook. The latter drew on a more prosperous catchment area. But it was fitting that this child of poor parents should strive to make a success of an Anglican school in less prosperous parts of the Sydney metropolis. By skilful fund raising and the imaginative purchase of another ailing college, he was to lay a firm foundation for a fine institutional tradition which continues today.

Hilliard's energetic personality and talent in speaking took his reputation across the Tasman to New Zealand. In 1934 he was offered the See of Nelson. After prayerful consideration, he accepted. Perhaps reluctant second thoughts were shown by his delay in departing and by the unusual invitation to Archbishop Mowll of Sydney to participate in his consecration. It seems that the period in Nelson was rather lonely for Hilliard. A photograph shows him, surrounded by earnest women in long dresses in the New Zealand sunshine, smiling a little too self consciously into the lens. When in 1940 Archbishop Mowll invited Hilliard to return to Sydney as Co-adjutor, Hilliard did not tarry long. He became the loyal lieutenant of the large Archbishop with his ringing voice and firmly evangelical ways.

As is often the case with talented communicators, Hilliard was no great shakes as an administrator. He was given to procrastination and would even cause the saintly Mowll to voice irritation from time to time. But he was particularly useful to the Church in his use of radio and later television where his talents in speaking shone through. One of Hilliard's reasons for leaving Nelson appears to have been his conclusion that no Bishop of Nelson would ever be primate of New Zealand. There is little doubt that he hoped to succeed Mowll as Archbishop of Sydney. In due course, he offered himself to that service. But by the time the chance arose, he was too old and it was clear that the church needed a younger man and a better administrator. Archbishop Gough was chosen. Hilliard attracted only a small vote. As Janet West says, he could

scarcely hide his disappointment. He hoped, at the least, to be rewarded for years of loyal service by the crown of interim leadership. It was not to be. But he was brought up in the old tradition. He was proud of the Englishness of the Anglican Church and keen to keep this feature of Australian society. He was truly one of the Queen's men in Australia. With these traditions went the loyalty which he offered Gough once the new man arrived. He refused to join the chorus of criticism that followed the new Archbishop's admission that he enjoyed a glass of wine. He died less than two years after this disappointment in advance of a planned retirement which he never enjoyed.

Janet West's book is a sound historical document, well footnoted and indexed. It contains the factual record of Bishop Hilliard's life, much of it gleaned from contemporary newspapers. But there are tantalising omissions. For example, reference is made to his working class origins and the connection of his family and early environment with the founders of the Australia Labor Party in the 1890's. Because of his humble origins, Hilliard had an affinity with Labor governments which other Anglican leaders of the time largely surrendered to their Roman Catholic brothers. This point is mentioned but not developed.

So too are the features of Hilliard which were rather modern. For example, when appointed to Nelson he insisted on due respect for the Maori tradition in services in his Diocese. He also appointed a woman to a leading function - something which doubtless seemed revolutionary at the time.

The role of women in the church continues to agitate both Anglican clerics and laity, nowhere more than in Sydney.

Perhaps with the advantage of contemporary oral history it might have been possible to develop more of Hilliard's thoughts, for example on the modern relevance of the Christian ministry. It is one thing to be a fine orator. But the value of oratory depends, ultimately, on what is said. If the message is unremarkable, gifts of oratory may be ephemeral in the extreme.

Sermons, like most judgments and book reviews, tend to be ephemeral. It is a pity that there could not have been, scattered through the record of Bishop Hilliard's life a larger catalogue of his intellectual contribution as a modern churchman. Perhaps this asks too much of the historian and even of the subject. Such glimpses as occur at his views on Christian life are sometimes troubling. For example, his support of the ban on the book "Ulysses" in 1941 and his refusal to attend a civic reception for the Cardinal Archbishop of New York. Perhaps he simply reflected the values of the time. They were stern, reformation values - and some of them linger on.

Busy on so many committees, continuing to the end his interest in his school, rising to the challenge of an evangelical sermon, the good Bishop may not have had the time for deep and long reflection on the moral problems of the day. Those problems have, if anything, become more acute. The challenge to church administrators with the decline in church attendance and specifically the decline in the proportion of

Anglicans in Australia, presents the modern day Anglican leader with very large problems to be solved.

Bishop Hilliard emerges from this biography as a man of earlier, simpler times - loyal to his religion, his church and the sovereign, ambitious to advance within the service. But not so ambitious as to overlook the necessity to make a daily contribution to the two activities to which he dedicated his life: education and the Christian ministry. The retrospect contains some hard hitting criticisms of Hilliard the administrator. But perhaps the most serious, for a church leader, is the recorded suspicion "that his magnificent voice and charisma covered a spiritual vacuum."

In the past, Australians were generally content to read the biographies of overseas notables. Now, an increasing number of local biographies are appearing - and judges and bishops are figuring amongst them. It will be important that these biographies should not be panegyrics and should contain critical analysis of the subject who, being mortal, are always subject to criticism. But it will be no bad thing if the Bicentenary stimulates more writers like Janet West to take up a subject and to record the events of his or her life. The record will be more lasting and have greater instruction if it goes beyond a chronology and offers a critical insight into the mind of the hero. That is the way those who follow will derive most benefit.

Events are but the shell of life. Within lies the core of a human spirit. That spirit comes most to life when the shell is penetrated and the core is revealed. Janet West has written a useful history. It is brought to life with evocative photographs which bring back to me many memories of an Anglican upbringing. It is an honourable and pious tradition that is recorded here. That the book leaves nagging questions about its adaptation in a wildly changing world is not to denigrate Bishop Hilliard or to disparage Janet West's record of his life of service.

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