



**Francis Ravel Harvey, *Traveller to Freedom: The Roger Pryke Story*. Sydney: Freshwater Press, 2011. pp 392, \$49.95. ISBN: 9780646536538 (hbk)**

*Reviewed by Sr Catherine Thom RSJ*

Two points need to be made at the outset of this review: my admiration for Roger whose presence and liturgies at Camperdown were the highlights in the life of this very young religious university student who spent most school holidays living in the convent on Missenden Road and working in Sydney University library. The second point is that with the book came a message to readers: 'As we go to press... one of the principal media for promoting [the book] to the general public, *The Catholic Weekly*, advised the publisher that "because of its subject" they would not allow it to be advertised in their newspaper.' Its subject was a highly intelligent, prayerful, thoughtful, challenging and dedicated priest of the Archdiocese of Sydney!

As [Edmund] Campion writes in the Foreword, Roger Pryke as Chaplain to Catholic students at the University of Sydney for a decade before Vat II changed thousands of people's lives. Pryke seems to have been the midwife of Vatican II, according to one of his contemporaries, for he promoted the major themes of this seismic event before it happened. Campion goes on to say 'that an historian wishing to trace the emergence of Vatican II themes in Australia might profitably start with Roger Pryke.'

Harvey's attraction to Roger Pryke was the example Roger gave of living a priestly life while remaining a man. However, opinions about Roger were divided. His friends, like Peter Williams could truthfully say, 'Rog, there are golden things you wrote in the Book of Life that will never be erased.' Others like Guilford Young with whom he studied in Rome and had a wonderful friendship for many years responded differently. Young had dinner with Roger after he left the priesthood and to Roger's question, 'It's not the same, is it Gil?' Young did not reply. Harvey comments, 'But there was a world of eloquence in his silence'. Some members of the hierarchy were ambivalent and later decidedly not comfortable with this Roman student turned university chaplain. There was not one 'cause' that Roger did not espouse with gusto and pursue with relentless enthusiasm: changing public worship (for the better), championing the peace movement and committing himself tirelessly to the education of religious sisters.

In the author's note at the beginning of the book, Harvey summarises the man Roger Pryke thus: a powerful man, who on his own admission was both gifted and flawed; he possessed an essential honesty and troubled conscience; he made powerful mistakes and errors of judgement which he rarely acknowledged. Finally Harvey says '[Roger] found it difficult to write about the people he had hurt or disaffected, and could not find words for the personal terrors he felt.' Given this pen portrait, it is amazing the influence he exerted for so many years on the lives of so many young and impressionable university students, religious women and laity. For he did. Even today when speaking to 'his' university students, they seem to light up at the mere mention of the name of Roger Pryke; so do many religious sisters who came under his theological and liturgical influence.

His time as secretary to the Apostolic Delegate brought him into contact with the Josephites at North Sydney; his time at the university developed a friendship with the Sacra Coeur Sisters at Sancta Sophia. These were lasting friendships which Roger cherished. What struck me when reading this work was that Roger's prayer life never flagged: he was faithful to the end in taking time out for personal reflection; assiduously preparing for homilies and liturgies; leading young university students in the same path of fidelity to prayer in their lives and living by the Gospels. Because of his own dedication to intellectual rigour he prepared courses and weekends for the students, particularly those at Sancta Sophia.

The depth of his friendship with lay persons is evident in his letters, often personal revelations of the state of his soul. Some of them are recorded in Harvey's book. One letter to Robert and Margaret Vermeesch from Rome in October 1960 is poignant: 'Now and then I feel pretty lonely and wasting, and feel regrets that I have pulled myself out of the apostolate [at Sydney University] for these two years [study in Rome] and think it was foolish. Then I think that this is a very valuable time to have a second ... novitiate, and to stand off from commitments and try to commit myself fully to God...' These are not the words of a man who is blithely going his own way with no reference to his fundamental commitment. In referring to Roger's conflict with authority figures in Sydney, Harvey employs a couple of interesting metaphors: 'But [ Roger] slowly began to realise that he carried a considerable amount of repressed anger, or "frozen rage" and in his case the "loving source" was the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.'

The brief few lines as record of Harvey's last conversation [1995] with Roger in his Author's note would have been better omitted. He says he asked Roger what he believed. Roger's response, seems to have devastated one of his university students who read the book. It seems that it was not merely the comments on what Roger believed that caused her pain. Maybe some more of his students do feel sad about the end of Roger's priesthood; some might feel sad about the loss of such a 'good' priest to the Church in Sydney. Some may grieve over the agony of soul that plagued the man they admired as a giant and tower of strength in their eyes. The student mentioned above was heard to exclaim that it is a very sad book. Sad indeed if one thinks that the memory loss which occupied Roger's last years might have begun before he made his response to Harvey in 1995. Further, identifying 'present day theologians' as agreeing with Roger's denial of the divinity of Jesus is to do a disservice to them. Even though he quotes Richard Rohr, Thomas Aquinas and Dun Scotus the seriousness of the theological issue deserves more than a few lines and would have been better not used.

Having made the foregoing comment I cannot leave this very brief review on a negative note. Many of the events recorded in this book would be known to informed Catholics of the era. Many more people would have fallen under the spell of this charismatic priest, enlightened preacher, powerful evangelist and even prophet. The agony and the ecstasy of the church emerging from the chrysalis into the beautiful freedom of the Vatican II days live in the memory of many an ageing Catholic who searches the horizon for another Roger and another John XXIII. Harvey's comment seems an appropriate way to conclude, '...Newman's description of St Paul also sits easily upon Roger Pryke: For him especially it was given to preach to the world, who *knew* the world; he subdued the heart, who *understood* the heart. It was his sympathy which was his means of influence; it was his affectionateness which was his title and instrument of *empire*.'

Vale Roger Pryke. 24 May, 2011

*Dr Catherine Thom rsj is a researcher, writer and presenter of days/material on Mary MacKillop. She is currently writing the History of the NSW Province of the Sisters of St Joseph and is a sessional lecturer at The Broken Bay Institute.*