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The Ascent of Tabor: Writing the Life of Archbishop Duhig

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Dr. Boland was born in Brisbane in 1929. He was educated at Mary Immaculate Convent, Ipswich Road, Annerley, conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph, and subsequently at St. Laurence's College, South Brisbane, and Nudgee College, both conducted by the Christian Brothers.

After studying for the priesthood at Pius XII Regional Seminary, Banyo, Brisbane, he was ordained priest in 1953. He continued his studies at the Gregorian University in Rome from 1956 until 1960 and in the latter year received the degree of Doctorate in Ecclesiastical History. His doctoral thesis dealt with the Queensland Immigration Society.

Dr. Boland has been on the lecturing staff at Pius XII Regional Seminary from 1960 and has lectured also at the University of Queensland (part-time) and the Yarra Theological Union (1977). He was Rector of Pius XII Regional Seminary in 1978.

Dr. Boland is the author of "Quiet Women" (1974), a history of The Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and a consideration of their founder, the unique Father Julian Tenison Woods. He delivered the first of the new series of Aquinas Memorial Lectures, "James Quinn: Monarch of All He Surveyed", in 1979. His latest book, the long-awaited biography of the Most Rev. Sir James Duhig, Archbishop of Brisbane 1917-1965, was published by the University of Queensland Press this year.



Archbishop Duhan
(1871-1965)

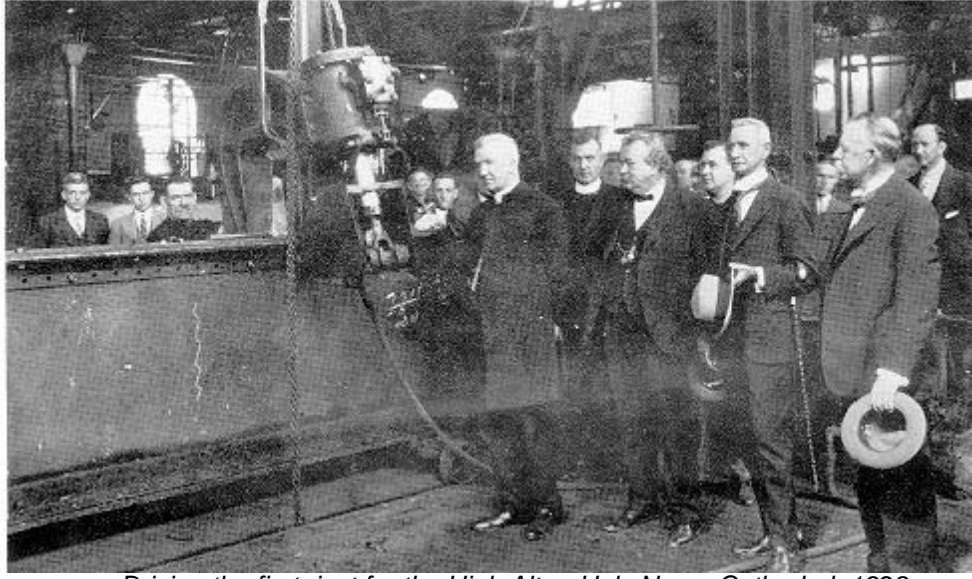
In an essay, "On Sacramental Things", Hilaire Belloc recalls sights and experiences that remained strongly in his memory. One dominated and interpreted the rest: the hills at dawn, when "The sun, in a single moment and with the immediate summons of a trumpet-call, strikes the spear-head of the high places, and at once the valley, though still in shadow, is transfigured, and with the daylight all manner of things have come back to the world. Hope is the word which gathers the origin of things together, and hope is the seed of what they mean, but that new light and new quality is more than hope ... Glory ... illumines and enlivens the seen world, and the living light makes of the true things now revealed something more than truth absolute; they appear as truth acting and creative."

As, ten years ago, I began plotting my way through the inchoate mass of papers, memories and events that made up the materials of a Life of Archbishop Duhig, it became evident that certain eminences rose from the *mare magnum*, like the mountains lifting from the chaos of the third day of Genesis. A glow gathered around them, illuminating the plains, highlighting the figure that crowned every hill. The figure, of course, was that of James Duhig, but, in each of his apotheoses, the sun that radiated from his experience illumined his people as well. His story is that of the Irish-Australian Church of Brisbane. He was one of them, he led them, he communicated to them the vision of the city, the nation and the Church that shaped the days to come, our days. In writing the Life of James Duhig I was writing the story of his people.

These images lead to certain problems concerning biography. A biography can be a mere memorial, even a panegyric, of a notable person. Lytton Strachey said that some Lives seemed to be written by the undertaker as part of the embalming process to tidy up the corpse for viewing and preservation. He thought that, whatever of valour, discretion was not the better part for biography.² When I speak of glory, you might think I am intensifying the brilliance of illumination to conceal the failures and the faults of my subject. Light reveals the shadows and no picture is worth seeing without them. Hagiography is usually poor biography, unreliable history and shaky

theology. Some hagiographies will never be written because the persons concerned will never be canonized. They will never be canonized, because the advocates of their causes try to conceal the failings of the candidates.

The fear of scandal does scant justice to the reputation of a great man or woman. The very effort to avert it creates others that never existed and cannot be rebutted because there is no solid ground on which to stand. Archbishop Mannix is responsible for the caricatures of himself that pass as history. He wanted no one to know his weaknesses; so he destroyed the evidence of his virtues, as of his failings. He has left no one the wherewithal to correct the distortions of his character that are currently accepted. It is better to deal with the real problems, especially as someone else will if the biographer does not. There was a problem that bedevilled my days for the first couple of years of my work with the Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives. More than once I was on the point of abandoning the project because of it. I was troubled, even scandalized, by the Archbishop's financial methods. I understood the hesitation Archbishop Dunne had in accepting him as Bishop of Rockhampton. The Archbishop believed that in 1905 Rockhampton needed a businessman and he feared that it was not going to get one. I was not undervaluing the colossal achievements of his episcopate. I was disturbed by the morality of his operations. He borrowed great sums of money and seemed unconcerned about paying them back. He himself once said jokingly that if he were not a bishop he would be in gaol. I hoped that he was only half joking. I was not going to publish a book about him which concealed that important fact, but I was not going to be the one who took away his great reputation. Abandoning the work seemed the only way out of my dilemma. Almost by chance I came across the key to the locked door. It did not make him into an MBA of the Harvard Business School, but it erased all suggestions of financial injustice. In the light of this discovery, certain of his letters took on a new meaning. Had he destroyed them as evidence of possible mismanagement, he would have condemned himself as guilty of something far worse, for which there would be no defence.



Driving the first rivet for the High Altar, Holy Name Cathedral, 1928.



Cardinal Cerretti, Papal Legate, and suite, "Wynberg", Brisbane, 1928.



Blessing the Archbishop Dughig Band, Broadford, Co. Limerick, Ireland, 1950.



Patron of Italian community, with the Vice-Consul and visiting officer, Brisbane

Having decided to paint a Cromwell picture, warts and all, the biographer has a human subject; and I discovered that mine was the most human of all. Here is another problem. The reviewer of a recent monograph on G. K. Chesterton wrote that "many biographers fall into one of two camps. They begin by loving their subject and grow increasingly exasperated as the Life (and their labours) goes on or, beginning with affection, they fall deeper and deeper in love."³ One critic speaks of "years of research bringing author and subject into a relationship of unparalleled intimacy ... what amounts to a marriage...".⁴ Although I was a priest in his diocese for twelve years, I did not know Archbishop Duhig well, and he did not know me. Yet over the last ten years I have lived inside his mind. I began with the acceptance of, and admiration for, his leadership that was normal for Catholics of my generation. My feelings about him were not deep or varied. Before I was far into research, I was feeling excited, amused, irritated, ashamed, defensive, amazed, furious, moved, bewildered. How could I claim that I was unbiased? Historians no longer pretend to any impossible absolute detachment. They try — at least, the only ones worth reading try — to write from within their subject. That is what I have tried to do.

It is not a biographer's task to set the record straight. That is the subject's own duty. If he cannot do it, the record is crooked. For a time I was surprised that, when I spoke to one person who claimed to know him well, I was told that he was a dyed in the wool Labor man; the next person told me he was a true blue Liberal. In fact, he was profoundly distrustful of all parties. I have trodden the conference circuit trying to convince historians that the Catholic Church is not a marketable political product, that there is no episcopal stereotype, that to know Daniel Mannix is not to know the Australian Catholic Church. One might as well tread the mill. I have found it impossible to confine James Duhig within the covers of a book. In T. S. Eliot's "The Confidential Clerk" Sir Claude Mulholland says:

There's always something one's ignorant of
About anyone, however well one knows them,
And that may be something of the greatest importance.
It is when you're sure you understand a person
That you're liable to make the worst mistake about him.

Yet, so far as I have been able to let him speak, I have turned him loose to confuse the cognoscenti, as he always did. He has shattered the stereotype.

This leads us to the next problem. It was my intention to write the history of the Queensland Church through his place in it. I planned to position James Duhig in every period of our history from 1871 to 1965, to relate Church to State and narrate his role in creating or transforming that relationship. I thought of what used to be the title of biographies, *The Life and Times of James Duhig*. As I commenced, Professor W. K. Hancock published a book in which he discussed his immense study of Field Marshal Smuts. He managed to get away with 1209 pages in two volumes. No publisher will accept such a work ten years later. The slide rule of page area and paper cost is the ultimate test of literary and historical value. Yet Hancock recognized that he could do what he wanted by writing the life of Smuts in his time.⁵ Barbara Tuchman faced the same problem in writing her biography of the World War II American leader, General Stilwell. She was not a soldier, though she studied the military history of the war. She hit upon the plan of treating her subject as the sign of her theme in writing. She saw that "the book is really two in one, like an egg with two yolks: Stilwell *and* the American experience in China, with the man chosen to represent the experience."⁶

Well, James Duhig suggested himself as the sign of my theme, the Queensland Church and community. In eighty years he created much of it. Yet Tuchman was lucky. She had a dual story; mine was multiple. There were so many contexts to which my subject was related, so many themes of which he was a sign — of contradiction often, of confusion always. One discovery in the archives amused me greatly. I found the account from E. J. Dwyer for James's

first copy of the Code of Canon Law, dated 1919. There were times when I felt like exclaiming: Why did you not read the thing and let that be your guide to what a bishop is? I could have produced a slim volume of biography in six months and been rid of this pervasive prelate. In fact, his refusal to conform to stereotype was his most significant ecclesiological contribution to the Australian Catholic Church. Yet, did he have to become so involved in politics, education — all education, not just Catholic — the arts, business, agriculture, oil, mining, urban development, racial prejudice, several wars, journalism, every subject under the sun — down to, and including, baby food? His Church was the Incarnation extended in every time, in every place, in every person. That is one way of putting it; another is that he was illimitably curious. He lived the dictum of Terence: *humani nihil a me alienum* (no human thing is foreign to me). My problem was: how do you relate him to all those fields? I could not qualify myself to write as an expert in all of them. I could only let him do his thing — and an eccentric, unbelievable thing it often was. Axel Clark, biographer of C. J. Brennan, described his work as a mongrel task, combining several subjects.⁷ I came to envy his relatively simple problems and those of Barbara Tuchman. She described the beginning of every new chapter as like Jacob's wrestling with the angel. Every half dozen pages I seemed to be mixing it with a demented octopus. Ultimately, I found that a great master had put it well almost two millennia ago. Livy in his Preface to his History *ab Urbe Condita* said: "I invite the reader's attention to the much more serious consideration of the kind of lives our ancestors lived, of who were the men, and what the means, both in politics and in war, by which Rome's power was first acquired and subsequently expanded .". He considered that in the broad sense there was a moral value for his contemporaries to discover. Sister Anne McLay has given us James Quinn. Father Neil Byrne will soon present us with Robert Dunne. I am content to bring you James Duhig in person, so far as I can. Closer to our time it is not an historian's business to enquire.

G. M. Trevelyan said that "history should not only remove prejudice, it should breed enthusiasm ... with the exception of a few creative minds men are too weak to fly by their own imagination beyond the circle of ideas that govern the world in which they are placed; and since

the ideas of no one epoch can in themselves be sufficient as an interpretation of life, it is fortunate that the student of the past can draw upon the purest springs of ancient thought and feeling." He suggests that Plutarch's Lives inspired the social, political and ethical renewal of more than one historical era. For this reason he writes with what he calls "intellectual passion" of the great figures of the past.⁸

This enthusiasm leads us to a word used by Thomas Carlyle, who is now returning to favour as a biographer after long years of neglect because of the witty cynicism of Lytton Strachey. Carlyle spoke frankly of the Hero in history.⁹ The term may suggest to us an uncritical attribution of perfection, but the word recalls the Homeric champions of the classic world. They were far from perfect, but they were grand. One Secretary of the Apostolic Delegation in Australia referred to Archbishop Duhig as "our Achilles". Achilles loomed large on the plains of windy Troy. At one critical time he sulked in his tent while his friends fell, but no one saw him as less than grand. Talk of Troy and heroes may seem to imply that a biography must be a tale of war, of conflict. One of the fallacies of historical writing — as of so much else in our time — is that it is essentially a struggle. It is presumed that the dialectic is the only mode of development. James Duhig was constantly in controversy, but he shunned conflict. We think we invented reconciliation. We use the term; it was his way of life. Lord Clark said in one of his television talks, "The Hero as Artist", that "Raphael is the supreme harmoniser, and for that reason he is out of favour today. You cannot write a novel of conflict about a harmoniser." For this reason Mannix may seem a more likely subject for a study than Duhig. Yet Michelangelo's stormy grandeur cannot negate the serene scale of Raphael's "School of Athens" or "The Discussion of the Sacrament". There we have it: it is a question of scale, heroic scale. James Duhig, I discovered, had lifted his eyes to the hills; he stood upon the everlasting hills; he told us what he saw there. He challenges us to follow him on the heights.

And so we come back to the hills. Peter Levi, in his enchanting autobiography, *The Flutes of Autumn*, speaks of the sense of place in history. He tells us that "gazing at places is never a

short cut to what happened in history; but a sense of place, of the small scale of the bright green ramparts, the dry, cracked tongues of the forest still stretching out, the flowering weeds, the lapwings in sunlight, the murmur of starlings, an accurate sense of place, is the fruit of a lifetime of patient scholarship...".¹⁰ I discovered what Levi found in researching the archaeology and ancient history of England. The earth itself is an archives that contains the secrets of the past. The piles of letters and the piles of stone tell the same story. There are not two stories; the one complements the other. They interpret each other. Too much of our academic history is as flat and dusty as a document; too much of our journalistic history is colour and line without substance. The marriage of research and exploration reveals the person, the place and the event. There is a place in biography, in history, for the re-creative imagination. It must be re-creative, seeking only what was, not what might have been. The imagination may operate only within the parameters laid down by the facts of person, place, event and, the far more elusive element, psychology.

In pursuit of James Duhig, I left the archives from time to time and travelled the broad world, which he loved to do. I believe that I discovered a sense of release in his mood when he travelled. It sometimes led him into indiscretions he would have avoided at home. I noticed that his special places had common elements: they were all hills and on these hills he appeared to undergo some transformation. An American, James McLendon, has presented to us *Biography as Theology*. In it he discusses the lives of a number of notable Christians, including Dag Hammarskjöld and Martin Luther King. He says that "the key to these biographies is the dominant or controlling images". For Hammarskjöld it was the servant, for King the Exodus. By these, he tells us "each understood himself, faced the critical situations in his life and chiselled out his own destiny. I take it that the convergence of such images in a particular person helps to form his characteristic vision or outlook". He then proposes "that in these men, indeed in all of us, as far as we are religious, such images are of the very substance of religion ... that images, while not the only constituent of religion, are of central importance to it."¹¹

We are all accustomed to Archbishop Duhig's predilection for churches on hills. He intended his Church in Brisbane to be visible and credit to the city; perhaps, to be dominant. You know Archbishop Mannix's story of the Pope's war map of Brisbane with flags marking the capture, hill by hill, by General Duhig. This was part of his imagery, part of his geography, but only part. One image I tried to block out, because it had become overblown in popular imagination and journalistic usage, was that of James the Builder. Professor Hancock found that the mythology of Smuts as "slim Jannie", in the peculiar South African sense of "slim", was "a most annoying impediment to my search for the real person ...".¹² He tackled the problem head on. I found a way of letting someone else do it for me. James Duhig was concerned with more than bricks and mortar on his hills. Some of the most significant came into his life before he had a chance to build. What role was he playing on the heights? The figure of Moses suggests itself, the leader of his people to Sinai and on the way, at least, to Sion. Was he David leading his flock, slaying Goliath, ruling his people? Among the cedars of Lebanon, maybe, was he Solomon seeking the timbers for his temple? Sometimes the high places of Israel were the scenes of the people's follies. The hill of Calvary casts its shadow over all. A variety of these elements suggested themselves, but there was one hill that rose in my mind above them all. It was Tabor, the Mount of the Transfiguration. We must not push the parallel too closely. We may find ourselves making strange comparisons. James Duhig sought God on his hills; he sought a place for his people; he sought glory for both.

If you asked the man himself which was his Tabor, he would undoubtedly tell you it was Duncan's Hill, the site he selected for the splendid crowning of all his achievements in Holy Name Cathedral. He scaled the first slopes, when the Papal Legate, Cardinal Cerretti, laid the foundation stone in 1928. National and international figures joined to sing his praises to a crowd the like of which Brisbane had rarely seen. For him it was more than a personal apotheosis. He came from a community that still shared the unease that Father Therry had sensed in Sydney a century before: a penal mentality surviving the penal laws which had not allowed Irish Catholics to build great churches in the main streets of their towns. He was leading his people out of that

wilderness to climb the heights of Sion. There he would lead them into such a temple as few of them would ever see again in their lives. And all the city should see it; he planned to make it visible from Moreton Bay. Father Martindale caught the atmosphere in his book about Australia of 1928. In Brisbane, he said, they no longer lived in the sign of the Rising Sun, but in the full blaze of noonday light of the Risen Sun. If dawn, noon and sunset came together all too quickly that day, reversing the feat of Joshua over Gibeon, and the glow died in the spring sky, never to kindle again over Duncan's Hill, there was another climb out of the depths to make; there were more spiritual temples to build.

Each of the hills along the way was a stepping stone to Tabor. Under the guidance of Father Tim Norris, I clambered down the banks below Killila Cottage to the tiny stream in which James Duhig paddled as a boy. As Peter Levi says, you must sense the scale and the substance of the past. In a child's eye that bank was an Everest. The boy returned as an archbishop after seeing the great basilicas and he viewed again the modest tree by the cottage door which he had thought then the size of a cathedral. We followed the lanes he walked to school, so confined to be the first rung on the ladder of fame. We saw the place of the Mass Rock of Monogea, from which, at the age of eighty, he looked out over the ancient kingdom of Thomond and saw all his history and that of his people in the Mass of the hunted years. The height, the climb, the luminous vision were always both physical and symbolic. They were his and they were his people's. He was a sign of their life.

In Rome I stood on the lower slopes of the Quirinal Hill, where the Irish College of Sant'Agata dei Goti had been; on the steep Belvedere of the Villa dei Greci in Tivoli, the Irish summer home, from which in 1891 the viewer could still see the dome of St Peter's on the Vatican Hill. Again and again in his letters the young James Duhig wrote of the view from those heights, of the light that filled the bowl of the Campagna and flooded the hills and valleys of the City, washing past, present and future with the colours of faith and history. He saw more than once the glory of the saints in the canonization ceremony. Even then he formed a plan to bring

the Brisbane Church to those hills. Sixty years later he led the Australian National Pilgrimage of 1950 to see and be seen there. It was another pinnacle for him and for them.

On Denmark Hill in Ipswich he did something he never did again. He looked down on the church. In the hills and valleys of Rosewood, Esk, Boonah he found the light of faith, the warm glow of Australian sun. He found the answers to the questions that plague us now: What is the Australian spirit? How does the faith express itself in an Australian way? Unfortunately, he never told us what those answers were, but he discovered that, on whatever rock he built his Church, he must build it among the community of Queensland people. I saw those towns and followed those valleys and remembered the letters from Catholics and Protestants that came to him from them for seventy years.

In Rockhampton one day he climbed Rosary Hill at Neerkol. He was on a picnic with the young ladies of the Range Convent. They looked to the sea and back to the western ridges; they ate their genteel sandwiches. The bishop composed some verses for the occasion. Some of them remembered those lines a lifetime later. He had found the secret of Catholic Action. He was never very clear as to what Pius XI meant by it — let alone Mr. Santamaria — but he had established lines of communication that led to every stretch of the Queensland bush to spread the light of faith and build the topless towers of a new Ilium, the City of God, the city seated on a thousand hills. Those girls, and the generations of them afterwards, wrote to him about every topic under the sun, problems the Preacher never dreamed of. I meet them still in every part of the world. Their world is as wide as his vision.

As I wrote most of the story I could look up to the opposite wall and see a desolate picture by Peter Lawson, a descendant of the Henry Lawson family. It was of a lonely hilltop, deserted, bare except for a crooked winch over an abandoned mine. In October, 1928, James Duhig stood on the hill of Mooga outside Roma and waited for Zeus to descend in the shower of gold. The sky seemed already full of it, but it never came. There were other bleak hills: in North Queensland,

along Lasseter's ridge in Central Australia, in the jungles of Bougainville, where now the fabulous wealth he dreamed of comes not from gold, but from the copper that plagued his assays. I followed an elderly prospector in Cania Gorge who had worked Archbishop Duhig's field. He showed me the secret place where it really was, the arcane knowledge the Archbishop pursued like a gnostic scripture all his life. I spotted an opening in the side of a steep gully in the silent bush near Mount Perry. Through the masking bushes I detected rusty iron protruding. It was another El Dorado of the Midas who never quite had the touch. I fell down the gully to the creek bed below, counting my blessings that I had not entered the shaft. I remembered the boxes of letters, some barely literate, of that strange breed of men who risked their lives on his enterprises on so many hills. I gazed on, but this time did not climb, the sheer cliff that hangs just below the peak of Bartle Frere and found it so symbolic that, on this highest point of the State, he built his Cathedral of the Hills. I could understand his great cry from the heart that he had poured all he had into the foundations and it had plummeted deeper than his departed dreams. In that picture I referred to the hill was bathed in light, but the thin, lonely, eerie light of a full moon, illuminating promises that never emerged into the gold of day.

Some weeks before his death the Archbishop went for a drive up One Tree Hill. For the last time he looked over his city and all the stories seemed true. Hill after hill passed before his eyes, crowned with convent, school and church. He had found the diocese in a Slough of Despond when he took it over fifty years before. This was the point of all his hills. He began, not from the plain, but from the valleys of oppression, of depression, of poverty, of neglect. Like Belloc he found the world in night, but he was always the first to see the gleam striking the peak. He saw his land in 1965 in gentle afternoon light, but he had experienced so many dawns, had stood in so many blazing suns of noonday. All his life, the life of his Church and his State were transformed in the Australian sun. Glory is represented by radiant light, but it is not a matter of praise, of panegyric; certainly not of adulation. Pope John Paul II is fond of quoting St Irenaeus that the glory of God is in man alive. This was a man alive with the hope that never died, the truth

that was acting and creative. This was a man who had seen the world from Tabor and found it very good.

NOTES

1. Hilaire Belloc, *On Something*, Methuen, [7th ed.], 1931, p.261.
2. Michael Holroyd, *Unreceived Opinions*, Penguin, 1965, p.35.
3. P. J. Kavanagh, reviewing Michael Ffinch's *G. K. Chesterton, A Biography*, *Guardian*, 6.7.86.
4. Alan Shelston, *Biography*, (The Critical Idiom Series), Methuen, 1977, p.8.
5. W. K. Hancock, *Professing History* Sydney University Press, 1976, pp. 52, 60.
6. Barbara Tuchman, *Practising History*, Macmillan Papermac, 1983, p.65.
7. Axel Clark, *Australian Studies Centre Journal*, 2:1981, p.3.
8. G. M. Trevelyan, *Recreations of an Historian*, Nelson, 1919, p.30.
9. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*, Lecture 1.
10. Peter Levi, *The Flutes of Autumn*, Arena, 1985, p.99.
11. James William McLendon, Jr, *Biography as Theology*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1974, pp. 89, 90.
12. Hancock, p.59.

