

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Nuns have transformed the lives of generations of Ballarat women through their tireless work in education and social justice, a new book has revealed. *The Challenge of Change* traces the contribution of the Sisters of Mercy and the Loreto Sisters in Ballarat from 1950 to 1980.

Launching the book on Friday, former premier Steve Bracks said the nuns had transformed lives by assisting young women to aspire to things they wouldn't have otherwise. He said the story of the sisters was one close to his heart. "My family, my ancestors, went to Sacred Heart and I taught there," Mr Bracks said. "The story in here is the story of my family and their education that helped shape me."

Author Heather O'Connor said the sisters had left behind infrastructure, educated generations of women in the community and were to this day still involved in issues of social justice. By 1980, they were arguably the most educated cohort of women in the city, emerging from Vatican II as professional women in new apostolic work. "They reinvented themselves," Ms O'Connor said. *The Challenge of Change* is available in bookstores now.



Article courtesy of the Ballarat Courier
Text by Rachel Afflick; photo by Adam Trafford

Foreword from the book:



Heather O'Connor, Steve Bracks and Sr Veronica Lawson

More than any other Australian provincial city, Ballarat inherited both class and sectarian characteristics from early European migration. This proved to be a heady mix in the 1850s when thousands flocked to Ballarat in search of gold. Indeed, the Secretary of the Ballarat Reform League, and leader of the Eureka rebellion, Peter Lalor, a devout Irish Catholic, was reportedly harboured and hidden by the Ballarat East Mercy Sisters who tended to his wounds at the end of the battle. Clearly the Mercy Sisters placed class and religion above the British Colonial rulers at the time. Would the Loreto Order up the road do the same? We will never know.

But what we now have in Heather O'Connor's book is a comprehensive account of these very issues, their historical context and their impact on generations of Australians, including me. Growing up in Ballarat in a devoutly Catholic family, attending and teaching at Catholic schools, having

my mother and four sisters all taught by the Ballarat East Mercy Nuns, and hearing my father talk about the sectarian issues he and others faced, I clearly couldn't escape my history. It shaped me. And as Heather's excellent book showed it shaped many others.

I am indebted to her for shining a light on these issues. It is a great revelation, a great read, and I hope others get the same stimulation that I got from this fascinating account.

Hon Steve Bracks AC

Sr Veronica Lawson was Master of Ceremonies at the launch, and her words can be read here:

It is my privilege to welcome you to the launch of Dr. Heather O'Connor's fine contribution to the history of Ballarat, *The Challenge of Change: Mercy and Loreto Sisters in Ballarat 1950 – 1980*. Some books we read. Others read us. For those who were educated by the Loretos or the Mercies in those decades, even those who lived in Ballarat at that time, I think you will find that this book reads you.

This is the first of four launches of the book. There will be one in Melbourne, one in Cobargo NSW, and another in Canberra. There are apologies from Professor John Moloney, from Srs. Margaret Scully, Bernadette Zeising and Mary Nutall, and from Dr Peter Morris. I now welcome to this gathering representatives of the Loreto and Mercy Sisters and their colleagues and partners in ministry. In particular, I welcome Sr Yvonne Lamarand who has been the local Community leader for the Loreto Sisters, Ms. Judith Potter, Principal of Loreto College, Sr Annette Schneider representing the Institute Team of the SOM, Sr Berenice Kerr, local Mercy Community Leader, Mr Matt Byrne, Principal of Damascus College, Fr Justin Driscoll newly appointed Vicar General of the Catholic Diocese of Ballarat, priests of the Ballarat area, staff of ACU, and the many other friends of Mercy and Loreto. Also I should make mention of Ms. Robin Scott, Provincial Archivist and Sr Lesley Dickinson, Archivists for the Ballarat Sisters of Mercy.

It is now my pleasant duty to welcome our speaker for the evening, the Hon. Steve Bracks AC, hometown lad and former premier of Victoria. Steve will no doubt share with you his impressive credentials for accepting the invitation to launch Heather's work. He has many connections with education in Ballarat, especially with Mercy education. Most people who know Steve are aware of his Lebanese ancestry. You may not know, however, that when his forebears came to Australia from the beautiful Be'qa Valley in Lebanon in the late 19th century, they changed their name from Barakat to Bracks. Now Barakat is the Arabic word for blessings. Steve, your whole family was a blessing for Ballarat and we consider ourselves blessed to have you with us this evening.

I also welcome guest of honour Dr Heather O'Connor, historian and author. I have been telling Heather for some time that she is a Loreto girl and a Mercy woman. Mary Ward, founder of the Loretos and Catherine McAuley, who founded the Mercies would be immensely proud of you.

**Heather O'Connor's Speech for the launch of her book held at the Claire Forbes Room, Australian Catholic University
Friday, 15th February 2013**

The first of many thanks goes to Steve Bracks for taking the time to come up to Ballarat for the launch. It is a measure of his great respect and his admiration for the Ballarat East Sisters of Mercy nuns with whom he went to school and with whom he taught. I am very aware of how busy he is, and his endorsement of this work is much appreciated.

I would like to thank the ACU for making this venue available. It is fitting that the launch should take place in the venue named after Sister Clare Forbes, one of the many great women who have led religious communities in Ballarat – and great to see Clare's two sisters, Anne and Helen, also Sisters of Mercy sisters, here today.

Thank you to Anthony Coppallo for believing in the value of this book to the history of Ballarat, and for making it possible. To my sister, Carmel and her family – when they invented the words "hospitality and support", they were thinking of the Moloneys! My son, Anthony, and my daughter, Anne, are here, being as supportive as ever.



Sr Anne Forbes, Sr Helen Forbes and Sr Veronica Quinn

The work began as a thesis which I did with the ACU. I acknowledge with great thanks the 3 best supervisors anyone could ask for – Presentation Sister Rosa MacGinley, Mercy Sister, Sophie McGrath, and Professor John Moloney from the ANU. None of it could have happened without the professional and personal help from the archivists at the two communities, Robin Scott and Sister Lesley Dickinson – to them I owe a deep debt of gratitude.

My greatest thanks goes to the Ballarat East Sisters of Mercy and the Loreto sisters who made me so welcome and did everything possible to ease the work. It can't be easy allowing an "outsider" into your family records, and having someone who has no experience of religious life, writing an aspect of your history. Their generosity and hospitality were well beyond what I could have expected, and as well as learning from their archives, I also gained an insight into how these women lived out the vocation to which many of them were called, in many cases, over fifty years ago.



Liam Davison, Sr Berenice Kerr and Matt Byrne

Many of us here grew up in Ballarat where the old saying was, "You send your daughters to Mary's Mount to learn how to get in and out of a car graciously, you send them to Sacred Heart so that they will earn the means to own the car themselves." What I hoped to do in this book is put to rest this stereotype.

One of the greatest challenges for me was to understand the implications of the differing canonical structures of the two congregations – an issue I knew absolutely nothing about when I started. I learnt that as one of seventeen independent, autonomous Mercy congregations in Australia, the Ballarat East Mercies worked almost entirely within the Ballarat diocese until after Vatican II,

The Loretos, on the other hand, were a national/centralized institute, which meant that their sisters were sent anywhere in Australia where they had schools. When writing the thesis, I was faced with the problem of giving due weight to Loreto sisters who may have spent minimal time teaching in Ballarat (or perhaps never taught here at all), and yet, they were women who had a profound effect on their community, by virtue of their leadership, their involvement in decision-making and the way they have "shaped" the Institute. For eg, Veronica

Brady taught at Mary's Mount for a very short time before being shifted to Melbourne, and later entering academia – but no history of the Loretos, local or nationally, could ignore her enormous influence as an outspoken critic of injustice or a passionate advocate of education. Deirdre Brown didn't teach here, but her contribution to music and liturgy within the Institute and the Australian Church has been priceless.

In the period before Vatican II, the Loretos were much more strictly enclosed than the Mercies, who could often be seen visiting homes, hospitals and the jail. As John Molony said, in the pre-Vatican II era, a Ballarat Catholic could go all their lives and never come in contact with a Loreto sister. On the other hand, as another long-serving priest commented to me, "The Mercies have always belonged to us in the Diocese." There were the largest of all the women's teaching orders, the Loretos were amongst the smallest in terms of numbers.

These were some of the differences between the two. But what I found were many more similarities than differences. I hope that I have shown that each community contributed in the light of their different canonical structures, in the light of the vision of their founders, and in response to what they perceived as the needs of the communities within which they worked, for the good of the Church and in pursuit of social justice.

Over the three years, I came to appreciate in both congregations:

- Their on-going contribution to education in the diocese, both of them covering everything from kindergarten to tertiary and adult education, in both parish and private schools.
- Their remarkable stewardship of the infrastructure they have bequeathed to a city which promotes its heritage value and its educational excellence.
- Their unrelenting work. I was struck by the example given of a small school in the Mallee: as a tribute to the nuns, the principal made the point that when the Mercies staffed the school, there were five nuns. In more recent times there were twenty-five staff for virtually the same number of children.
- Women in both communities worked long hours, in front of huge classrooms in some cases. They studied part-time, helped care for the older or sick sisters, cared for boarders 24/7, taught music to generations of Catholic and non-Catholic

students, outside school hours as a source of income in the case of the Mercies, adding immeasurably to the culture and life of the city.

- I came to appreciate the nature of leadership in a way that was completely new to me. Coming from a background in the women's movement where no woman would dare call herself a "chairperson", let alone a "leader", I saw the strength of having women elected to positions of authority as superiors, and congregational leaders. They were supported by women who were their councilors, and other unelected leaders who took great risks in stepping out from their traditional apostolic work to lead the way in new areas of social justice.

I marveled at the way they support each other. This is not to say everyone loves living in community with every woman she's ever met. But their concern and support for each other is palpable, based as it is in a shared commitment to their congregation and to living out religious life.

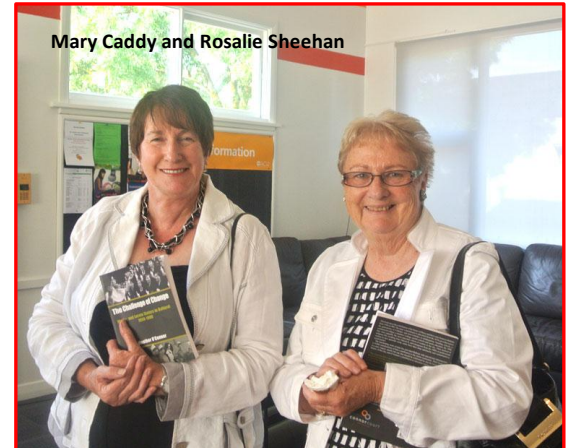
Most of all, I would like to express my undying admiration for a cohort of women who have undergone more change than perhaps any other sociological group in society. The extent and the nature of the changes since Vatican II have been unprecedented. As the most educated cohort of women in the city (some would argue, in the world), they have come through with enormous grace and integrity, with a commitment to social justice that they continue to live out through their work with the most marginalized people in our society.

I once asked a sister if she was distressed by the fact that within the next twenty years there may not be religious orders as we have known them. Totally unfazed, she said she was not in the least concerned – they did what they were asked to do – that is, they formed the backbone of a Catholic education system for over one hundred years. In my view, they have done much more than this.

I don't believe that we do any favours for women's history by idealizing or lionizing individual women. Equally, I do think it is important to challenge one-dimensional views of communities of women such as women religious.

Amongst the nuns who contributed to Ballarat were women who were teachers and scholars – we all acknowledge these roles. But there are also cooks, laundresses, cleaners and farm workers. There were published authors of national and international standing in art history, literary criticism, biographies, biblical studies, theology and liturgical studies, management studies, curriculum development, church history, and feminist studies. One has recently returned from the Vatican where she worked as a Canon lawyer; one is still at the UN where she represents women religious from across the world. There are amongst them poets, artists, musicians, educational administrators. They have worked in government agencies, non-government organizations, voluntary and charitable groups. Within the diocese, they have administered parishes, been pastoral assistants, counselors, social workers and volunteers. They are gardeners, weavers, knitters, doting aunts, fitness freaks, film buffs, footy fanatics and owners of dogs. They read everything from the latest theological works to the latest crime novels. There are fanatical footy followers, there's even a couple who are 'Midsummer Murder' tragics.

It is well time that we stopped patronizing them as the collective "good sisters" and see them as a group of women to whom we owe an enormous debt of gratitude and recognition. They are women of faith and women of justice, connected to generations of women who shaped this city. They have given us the gift of seeing how religious commitment can be lived in the most turbulent of times. It has been a great honor and privilege to have been given the opportunity to add this work to their history.



Mary Caddy and Rosalie Sheehan