CHAPTER FIVE

ECCLESIASTICAL CIVIL WAR IN THE SWAN RIVER
COLONY, 1843–1853

One of those who helped to cause Archbishop John Bede Polding’s reputation at the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide to falter in the later 1840s was the first Bishop of Perth, John Brady (see fig. 20). Polding’s difficulties faded almost into insignificance alongside the tortuous muddle into which Brady got himself in his own relationship with Roman authorities.

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In response to an urgent appeal from the small, priestless Catholic community in the Swan River Colony, founded in 1829, Polding sent Brady, one of his priests, as his Vicar General in the western part of Australia in 1843. Born around 1800 at Coratober, County Cavan, in Ireland, Brady studied for the priesthood in Paris on account of the penal laws. Ordination was followed by a twelve-year stint on the French-ruled island of Réunion. Brady’s linguistic and cultural background were thus basically francophone. He was recruited for the Australian mission in 1837 by Ullathorne who was impressed by his excellent missionary record.1

After only four months in Perth, Brady did something strange, the first of many strange actions. Instead of writing back to his bishop to report on what he had found and receive further instructions, he sailed

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for Europe without the permission or even the knowledge of Polding. His purpose was to persuade the Roman authorities immediately to establish the Perth mission as a diocese. On 22 February 1845 Brady presented to the Propaganda Fide Congregation a major report on the state of the Catholic Church in the Swan River Colony in which he reckoned that the Aboriginal population totalled 2,000,000 while there were 8,000 whites of whom 3,000 lived in Perth, half being Catholics. He recommended William Ullathorne for the diocese of Perth.

Brady’s description of the Western Australian situation was wildly exaggerated. The first census conducted in the colony, that of 1848, revealed that the white population was then a little over 4,500 of whom 337 were Catholics. In 1843, when Brady arrived, there would perhaps have been around 150. Another estimate puts the figure as low as 30. Although there was a general belief among the European settlers that the number of Aborigines living in the interior of the Swan River Colony was large, a belief which Polding repeated to the Propaganda Fide Congregation during his 1842 visit to Rome, Brady’s figure of 2,000,000 seems to have been nothing more than an extravagant guess.

There is not sufficient evidence to judge whether Brady’s misleading representations were inspired by innocent wishful thinking, self-delusion, dishonesty or mental imbalance. His subsequent behaviour indicates the probability of the last explanation. He also had a streak of ambition. He recommended Ullathorne for Perth but he also knew that Ullathorne had already refused two Australian dioceses and was unlikely to accept a third.

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2 Brady-Gregory XVI, 31 October 1844, APF, SC-Oceania, volume 2, folio 819r; See also Brady-Fransoni, 31 October 1844, APF, SC-Oceania, volume 2, folio 818r ff, and Brady’s memoria for Cardinal Fransoni, nd, APF, SC-Oceania, volume 2, folios 858r ff.

3 Relation de la Partie Occidentale de la Nouvelle Hollande, 22 February 1845, APF, SOCG, volume 967, folios 96r ff; See also Wiltgen, op. cit., 370–2.


5 Newbold, 12.

6 APF, Acta, volume 205 (1842), folios 25r ff; Polding-Cadolini, 7 February 1842, APF, Acta, volume 204, folios 32r ff; Polding-Fransoni, 8 May 1842, APF, SC-Oceania, volume 2, folios 140r ff. See also Newbold, 14, McCarthy, 9, and H. N. Birt, Benedictine Pioneers in Australia (London: Herbert and Daniel, 1911), volume II, 35.