CHAPTER SEVEN

THE EXILE OF ABBOT HENRY GREGORY GREGORY,
1859–1877

Cardinal Barnabò rejoiced that the storm in the Archdiocese of Sydney had passed, but soon found himself again grappling with more problems in that quarter. The personal nature of the criticisms gave a barbed edge to the anti-Benedictine agitation in Sydney in the late 1850s. The chief target of these attacks was Henry Gregory (see fig. 31), who, as Prior of St Mary’s monastery and Vicar General of the Archdiocese, was Polding’s right hand man, the one responsible for the day-to-day government of the Church and for implementing diocesan policy and the Archbishop’s decisions. A combination of factors made him a vulnerable figure.

I

Born in Cheltenham in 1813, into a family of landed gentry, converted to Catholicism at the age of 11 and educated by the Benedictines at Douai and Downside, Henry Gregory Gregory took the habit in 1833. Polding was his novice master and this was the beginning of a relationship which grew into an ardent friendship lasting the rest of their lives. Gregory was a member of Polding’s missionary party which voyaged to New South Wales in 1835. Polding became very fond of him, describing him from a vantage point much later in life as having been his ‘dimidium animae meae’, the second half of his soul. After ordination in 1837 Polding took him on missionary tours and entrusted him with a number of important assignments. On their return from Europe in 1843 Polding conferred the offices of Vicar General and monastic Prior on the thirty year-old Gregory. For his part Gregory repaid Polding with an intense and affectionate loyalty. Conscious of his ecclesiastical rank and social

1 Barnabò-Polding, 26 September 1860, SAA, Polding papers, Propaganda.
standing, inwardly he lacked confidence. Young and inexperienced, he had moved virtually straight from the novitiate at Downside to a raw colonial society, there to continue his religious formation and theological education in fragmentary fashion in the midst of early premature pastoral and administrative duties. He tried to compensate for his feelings of insecurity by adopting a manner of dealing with people that only succeeded in presenting itself as haughty and authoritarian. His pronounced gentry-class English speech and manners further handicapped him in a Catholic community overwhelmingly proletarian and Irish. He held the Irish character in low esteem and they saw him as arrogant. His relationship with Polding bore the impress of Polding’s dependent personality. Polding tended to lean on strong characters, first of all Ullathorne and then, after Ullathorne’s return to England, Gregory. Because of his own craving to be liked, Polding had a habit of distancing himself from awkward situations, leaving them to his immediate subordinates to cope with as best as they could. Because of his dignity as head of the Catholic Church in Sydney and his personal popularity, the critics of archdiocesan government in the 1850s were careful not to attack the Archbishop himself too strongly or directly. The Vicar General was an easier target.3

II

The Freeman’s Journal concentrated on Gregory from the beginning of its campaign but the criticism reached fever pitch after the Catholic

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