



The Sydney Morning Herald

# SPECTRUM

Saturday, July 22, 1995

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**Brother John Hallet**, a former headmaster in the Northern Territory, found guilty in May on two counts of abusing Aboriginal boys.



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**N**INE days before Christmas last year, Michael Evans drove his Daihatsu Charade into the isolated, scrubby salt-flats just inland from the Queensland coast near Rockhampton. For nearly 20 years Evans had worn the clerical cassock and white collar of the Christian Brothers, the Catholic religious order he joined in 1974, but on this blazingly hot day he was dressed in just shorts, a T-shirt and thongs. Michael Evans had severed his ties with the Christian Brothers nine months previously; today he was severing his ties with all else.

The previous day, Detective Adrian Beck had flown up from Wollongong with an arrest warrant which charged Evans with

# brotherly love

ures from both major parties. "They taught the sons of the poor and lived in poverty themselves," says Edmund Campion, the author of the book *Australian Catholics*. "No historian would deny them an honoured place in the story of Australian education."

But the stoic image disguised a life of isolation and self-abnegation that proved intolerable for some. One former brother says: "At the heart of the Christian Brothers there is a void because there is no essential Christian Brothers spirituality. The order only had a sense of hard work and what was alleged to be its mission; it did nothing to promote the wellbeing of its own members. They were expected to expend themselves in work and find purpose in that."

The shattering of the Christian Brothers' reputation began





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The previous day, Detective Adrian Beck had flown up from Wollongong with an arrest warrant which charged Evans with indecently assaulting a teenage student during his nine-year tenure as headmaster of Edmund Rice College, the Illawarra district's most exclusive Catholic boys' school. Detective Beck had arranged to meet Evans in Coffs Harbour but, instead, the curly haired and chubby former brother contacted Rockhampton police on the morning of Friday, December 16, leaving directions to the location of his body.

Police who located the car about 11.30 am found a hose running from the exhaust to the interior, where Evans sat in a semi-conscious state with a long note to his elderly mother. He died in the arms of a local constable several minutes later.

Right up to his death, Michael Evans denied all the allegations of sexual misconduct made against him. But, by then, the testimony of former students and colleagues overwhelmingly showed that Evans, who revelled in his role as a moral guardian to Wollongong's youth, was actually an incorrigible molester of young

boys. Indeed, the allegations against Michael Evans are so widespread and longstanding that they raise serious questions about why police and the Christian Brothers took no action until the 1990s — questions that may have already come to the attention of the Police Royal Commission.

Michael Evans is one of more than 100 Christian Brothers in Australia who have been accused of abuse in existing or threatened legal proceedings during the past eight years. Since 1992, four brothers have been found guilty and a further five charged in sexual misconduct cases brought before Australian courts. In the civil courts, 201 men who were once orphans under the care of the Christian Brothers in Western Australia want to file a massive compensation claim for physical and sexual abuse they allegedly suffered between 1938 and 1976; according to their lawyers, the men have accused 93 brothers, at least 20 of whom are alive.

These snowballing allegations have all but destroyed the reputation of a religious order

that educated some of the most prominent Australians of the past half-century. It has unfairly tainted the many decent brothers, past and present, who have worked in Australian schools. But the deeper question, one that has only recently surfaced, is how culpable were senior executives of the Christian Brothers in this calamity?

The Christian Brothers is not the only order plagued by allegations of sexual misconduct, of

course — religious of many denominations have been swept up in sex scandals. Last year alone, the former Vicar-General of Parramatta, Father Richard Cattell, was sentenced to two years' jail, the order of the Brothers of St Gerard Majella was dissolved after two former brothers were accused of abuse, and two Marist brothers — Brother David Christian of WA and Brother John Littler of NSW — were convicted.

But the allegations levelled against the Christian Brothers have assumed a magnitude far beyond a few errant brothers struggling with their vows of celibacy. If even some are proven, they suggest a deeply ingrained problem which not only went unchecked but was systematically covered up, its victims treated with a disregard that is totally at odds with the Church's beneficent image.

The allegations against the

Christian Brothers and the story of Brother Michael Evans trace the same course, from deception to hypocrisy to self-inflicted tragedy.

□ □ □

*My life as a Brother has crumbled . . . I accuse the major superiors of my Order of failing in their duty to protect us children from evil.*

An unnamed Christian Brother wrote those words to the

order's internal inquiry into child abuse last year, confessing that he himself had been abused by brothers who educated him in the 1950s. His despair must surely be shared by countless men who devoted themselves to the principles which helped the Christian Brothers become the largest male Catholic order in Australia.

The handful of penniless Irish brothers who first came to Australia in the mid-19th century laid the foundation of a remarkably influential teaching institution that still numbers more than 700 members throughout Australia and operates 10 schools in NSW. Stressing discipline over intellectual achievement, the brothers made private religious schooling affordable to the non-affluent and helped educate such notables as the novelists Tom Keneally and Morris West, the Chief Justice of the High Court, Sir Gerard Brennan, the actor Mel Gibson, the late Archbishop James Patrick Carroll, three NSW Attorneys-General and innumerable political fig-

ures from both major parties.

"They taught the sons of the poor and lived in poverty themselves," says Edmund Campion, the author of the book *Australian Catholics*. "No historian would deny them an honoured place in the story of Australian education."

But the stoic image disguised a life of isolation and self-abnegation that proved intolerable for some. One former brother says: "At the heart of the Christian Brothers there is a void because there is no essential Christian Brothers spirituality. The order only had a sense of hard work and what was alleged to be its mission; it did nothing to promote the wellbeing of its own members. They were expected to expend themselves in work and find purpose in that."

The shattering of the Christian Brothers' reputation began 16 years ago when the Canadian Government appointed a royal commission to investigate allegations of rampant sexual abuse at an orphanage run by the brothers in Newfoundland. The royal commission not only confirmed the abuses but revealed that in 1975 a deal was struck between the Justice Department and the head of the Christian Brothers in Canada, Brother Gabriel McHugh, which resulted in the quashing of a police investigation into the crimes. Three years after this deal was arranged, Brother McHugh became world head of the Christian Brothers in Rome.

The Canadian Church has since paid out nearly \$A18 million in damages and now faces a second scandal in Toronto involving 30 brothers charged with 240 offences. Yet the Canadian affairs are dwarfed by recent revelations about four Christian Brothers' orphanages in Western Australia — Clontarf, Bindoon, Tardun and Castledare. Since the late 1980s, scores of Australian

Continued Spectrum 4A

# brotherly love

The complaints have come from Sydney, Wollongong, Toowoomba, Perth and Darwin. In the past eight years, nearly 100 Christian Brothers have been accused of misconduct — typically the sexual abuse of schoolchildren. But why the Christian Brothers? And has there been a continuing cover-up?

BY RICHARD GUILLIATT



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From Spectrum 1A

men have claimed they suffered extreme physical and sexual abuse in these institutions, which until 1953 were under the control of the order's head office in Strathfield. In 1993 the Christian Brothers expressed "heartfelt regret for the failings of the past" and offered assistance to the victims.

Regrettably, this public posture of contrition is contradicted by the Church's behind-the-scenes tactics. For although the Church has provided counselling for former orphans and helped reunite many with relatives overseas, it has devoted a large measure of its financial might to protecting itself from further claims. Last year a book about the WA orphanages, *When Innocence Trembles*, was temporarily withdrawn from sale following a letter from the Christian Brothers' lawyers, and several victims' lawyers say the Church's manoeuvring against their clients has been ruthless and uncaring.

Hayden Stephens, a solicitor at Slater and Gordon who represents the 201 former orphans from WA, says it may take another two years for his clients' claims to be heard because of the legal obstacles the Church has used. He describes the Church's public statements of compassion as "insulting". The Catholic Church's law firm, Carroll and O'Dea, replies that its client is simply defending itself from a massive action which began without warning on the wrong side of the country and which has not yet been lodged as a statement of claim in the court. Carroll and O'Dea points out that the court has yet to determine whether the allegations — most of which go back several decades — fall outside the statute of limitations, and says many allegations are of excessive corporal punishment rather than sexual abuse.

Evidence that has emerged in the civil litigation shows the Christian Brothers have been less than candid about their history. In 1993, for instance, the Order published a 464-page book, *The Scheme*, which

the 1920s and named two brothers who had probably molested 50 boys each. Mr Peter Semmler QC, the barrister representing the former orphans, quoted many passages of correspondence between the order's leaders in Sydney and Dublin which he said showed a clear knowledge of the abuse and a complete failure to deal adequately with it.

In one pointed remark about the lax response of his superiors, Brother Coldrey allegedly wrote: "... I wonder if much has improved in recent years".

The Christian Brothers are now repudiating Brother Coldrey's findings, which are based partly on the order's internal records. The NSW Provincial of the order, Brother Julian McDonald, told the *Herald* that *Reaping the Whirlwind* was overstated, gratuitous, distorted and might have to be "relooked at".

The day after the secret report was tabled in court, Brother Patrick O'Doherty was called to the witness box. A former staff member and senior brother at three WA orphanages from 1948-71, Brother O'Doh-

erty — who is not the subject of any allegations before the court — was unable to recall sexual abuse there. He felt many of the men suing the order had been "talked into" making a statement. Brother O'Doherty was a teacher at St Patrick's College in Strathfield, says six Christian Brothers at the school were accused of improprieties by students or parents in the 1980s. McCormack says that in one case three students played him a tape recording of a brother asking a Year 9 boy if he was interested in some "good, hot, safe sex", yet when McCormack went to the school principal he was told the brother had been making an unorthodox attempt to expose a pornography ring at the school.

"A day later," says McCormack, "I got a telephone call from the head of the Christian Brothers, Brother Kevin McDonnell. He said the principal had been in touch with him and informed him of my fine work in bringing these allegations to his attention. He said they were convinced, of course, that the brother in question was completely innocent, that they had every confidence in his ability and that that is where the matter would end."

"I remember putting the telephone down and reaching behind me for the phone book to get the number for the Department of Youth and Community Services."

McCormack says that in the ensuing investigations, several brothers were removed from the school, but many simply went to other jobs where they were still in contact with children. Brother Desmond Neil Richards, a teacher at St Patrick's Junior School, was committed for trial on one count of indecent assault in 1988, but the case collapsed when the alleged victim decided not to proceed.

One brother who came to McCormack's attention at St Patrick's was Brother Michael Evans, who joined the Order in 1974 and came to the high school several years later. "All through the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were rumours about Michael Evans," recalls McCormack. "We were fairly naive, I guess, and gave him the benefit of the doubt. It wasn't until after he left the school at the end of 1981 that six or seven students were prepared to come to me and tell me their stories."



The NSW Provincial of the order, Brother Julian McDonald, said the Christian Brothers had changed its approach to sexual misconduct allegations and promised he would deal with complaints honestly and compassionately. "Regrettably, some few brothers have betrayed the sacred trust that was put in them."

Photograph by RICK STEVENS

and securing a radio show and a regular column in the *Illawarra Mercury*, through which he dispensed his populist wisdom about politics, rugby, Anzac Day and the problems faced by Australian youth.

"I think that, honestly, kids are becoming bored because they have too much too soon," he wrote in a June 1990 column, "and some of them grow up far too early and miss out on all of the fun and games of childhood..."

CONFIDENT to the point of being overbearing, Evans once told the editor of the *Illawarra Mercury*, Peter Cullen, about a local priest

Two of the youths were brothers who said Evans had sexually harassed them one night when he was drunk at their parents' house; the third accuser claimed he had been assaulted by Evans in the West Wollongong presbytery while in Year 12.

The three took their allegations to Wollongong police, who investigated but said there was insufficient evidence — even though the two brothers corroborated each others' statements. Unsatisfied, one of the alleged victims in 1990 contacted the Christian Brothers' head office, which sent a representative, accompanied by a youth counsellor from Eddy's Place, Brother Bill Hocking. The pair

became concerned about "rumours" of Evans's sexual misconduct, yet in 1992 he did nothing to stop Evans from securing a \$54,000-a-year government job building a new campus at the University of New England in Coffs Harbour.

Brother Evans became the project manager of the Coffs Harbour joint education campus in early 1992 after beating several other candidates vetted by a ministerial steering committee. Lionel Phelps, who was the deputy chancellor of the campus at that time, says he contacted the Christian Brothers' head office about Evans but was given no indication about anything untoward. Phelps said he did not feel misled because he believed any allegations at the time were unsubstantiated rumours, but he agreed that if the order had any substantial knowledge he should have been informed.

The result was that later that year Michael Evans applied for the job of executive director of the new campus. His career ambitions were extinguished in October 1993 when the *Illawarra Mercury* published a four-page investigative report which quoted six Wollongong men who made sexual abuse allegations against Evans and a parish priest, Father Peter Comensoli.

The allegations — three of them from the victims who were unable to get police action in 1990 — resulted in a police investigation which precipitated Evans's suicide in December last year. By then Father Comensoli had been sentenced to 18 months' jail after pleading guilty to indecently assaulting two boys aged 11 and 16. Many in Wollongong are now curious about the failure of the 1990 police investigation, which they hope the Police Royal Commission will investigate next year.

"I think the Church's influence in many places has prevented scandals from becoming known," says Peter Cullen.

In a recent interview at the Christian Brothers' residence in Balmain, Brother Julian McDonald said it was difficult to discuss details of the Evans case because of possible civil litigation. But Brother McDonald said he believed "rumours" of Evans's misconduct had been thoroughly investigated by the order and he defended his decision not to inform the University of New England about why Evans had left Edmund Rice College.

"At that time, no allegations had been made to me by actual victims or actual people claiming to be victims," Brother McDonald said. "... I cannot give out statements about rumours that surround anyone. That's professional integrity."

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Evidence that has emerged in the civil litigation shows the Christian Brothers have been less than candid about their history. In 1993, for instance, the Order published a 464-page book, *The Scheme*, which purported to be a frank and objective history of the WA orphanages written by Brother Barry M. Coldrey. But Slater and Gordon discovered last November that Brother Coldrey wrote a separate report, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Secret Report for Congregation Executives of the Christian Brothers*, that contained extremely damning material left out of the official history.

According to excerpts from this secret report, tabled in the NSW Supreme Court on December 5, abuses in the WA orphanages took the form of "sex rings" and a "sex underworld" in which brothers collaborated with one another and possibly shared the same boys. The report found a "serious, even pervasive" problem of sexual abuse since

the 1920s and named two brothers who had probably molested 50 boys each. Mr Peter Semmler QC, the barrister representing the former orphans, quoted many passages of correspondence between the order's leaders in Sydney and Dublin which he said showed a clear knowledge of the abuse and a complete failure to deal adequately with it.

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erty — who is not the subject of any allegations before the court — was unable to recall sexual abuse there. He felt many of the men suing the order had been "talked into" making allegations because "there is money at the end of the line". Eighteen months previously, the Christian Brothers had invited victims of abuse to call Brother O'Doherty and "share their concerns" with him.

□ □ □  
*If we do not take a determined stand with regard to this matter, we are bound to have various scandals in the near future.*

**Brother Patrick Conlon of the Christian Brothers executive, Sydney, in a 1935 letter to his superiors in Dublin.**

NSW has had its own spate of Christian Brothers scandals in recent years and the order's response here has followed a familiar, dismal pattern.

Merv McCormack, a former

teacher at St Patrick's College in Strathfield, says six Christian Brothers at the school were accused of improprieties by students or parents in the 1980s. McCormack says that in one case three students played him a tape recording of a brother asking a Year 9 boy if he was interested in some "good, hot, safe sex", yet when McCormack went to the school principal he was told the brother had been making an unorthodox attempt to expose a pornography ring at the school.

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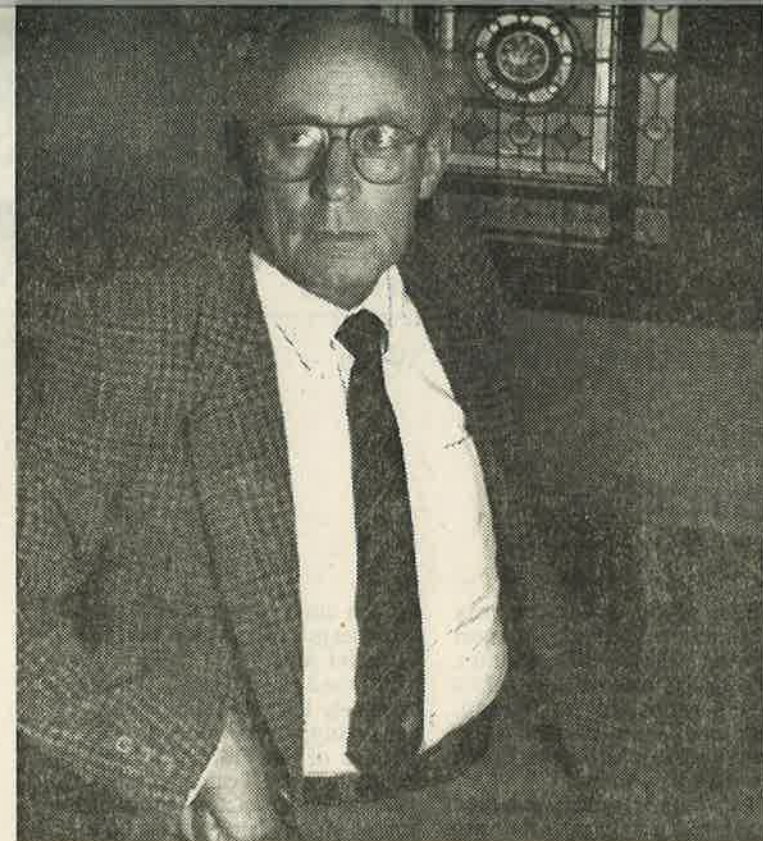
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The stories were of Brother Evans molesting or making sexual passes at students, and McCormack says at least one parent complained to a school chaplain. (His recollections were supported by a former student and former teacher.) Yet despite Brother Evans's recurring misconduct, in 1982 the Christian Brothers appointed him principal of Edmund Rice College near Wollongong, a boys' school named after the Irishman who founded the order in 1802.

The *Herald* has learnt that only two years after Evans arrived at Edmund Rice, one of his victims complained directly to the Bishop of Wollongong about a sexual assault. Yet Evans proceeded to become a star in the city's Catholic community, attracting major donations to the school, wooing local power-brokers



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**C**ONFIDENT to the point of being overbearing, Evans once told the editor of the *Illawarra Mercury*, Peter Cullen, about a local priest who was allegedly molesting children. In what must stand as his most brazen accomplishment, he even set up a "child mistreatment unit" called Eddy's Place in a suburban house in Mount Keira in 1988, a refuge which accommodated more than 100 troubled youths in its first three years.

Cullen says: "You believed him; you really had him on a pedestal. He was a classic case of a man in a position of power who could use that power to manipulate young people and at the same time have it well and truly covered up."

Evans's deceptions began unravelling the year after Eddy's Place opened when three former Edmund Rice students told a local priest, Father Morrie Crocker, that Evans had molested them in the early 1980s.

Two of the youths were brothers who said Evans had sexually harassed them one night when he was drunk at their parents' house; the third accuser claimed he had been assaulted by Evans in the West Wollongong presbytery while in Year 12.

The three took their allegations to Wollongong police, who investigated but said there was insufficient evidence — even though the two brothers corroborated each others' statements. Unsatisfied, one of the alleged victims in 1990 contacted the Christian Brothers' head office, which sent a representative, accompanied by a youth counsellor from Eddy's Place, Brother Bill Hocking. The pair allegedly acknowledged Brother Evans's problem and said he was in therapy, but urged the victim not to go to police (the Christian Brothers dispute this version of events).

Whether the police or senior Christian Brothers ever confronted Evans is unclear, but Brother Hocking certainly proved an inappropriate choice as counsellor — two years later he pleaded guilty to aggravated indecent assault of a boy under his care at Eddy's Place and was sentenced to 150 hours of community service.

At the end of 1991, the newly appointed Provincial of the Christian Brothers in NSW, Brother Julian McDonald, finally removed Brother Evans from Edmund Rice College. Brother McDonald was later quoted as saying he had

Evans out given no indication about anything untoward. Phelps said he did not feel misled because he believed any allegations at the time were unsubstantiated rumours, but he agreed that if the order had any substantial knowledge he should have been informed.

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"At that time, no allegations had been made to me by actual victims or actual people claiming to be victims," Brother McDonald said. "...I cannot give out statements about rumours that surround anyone. That's professional integrity."

Brother McDonald said that since the 1960s, the Order had changed its approach to sexual misconduct allegations and he would deal with complaints honestly and compassionately.

"Regrettably, some few brothers have betrayed the sacred trust that was put in them," he said. "That is regrettable and I will do all in my power to address the damage that has been done ... I believe that that should not outweigh the enormous good that has been done by 3,000 Christian Brothers in this country since we have been here. I believe there was no cover-up and no attempt to cover up anything around any brother that was a serious allegation."

"I have a serious obligation to preserve my integrity and to make sure that the response of the Christian Brothers will always be a response of integrity. Otherwise, I mean, it becomes self-defeating."

That, at least, is a statement no-one disputes.

# See the fall

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