An Interview with Professor Patrick O'Farrell by Mark Hutchinson, 26th July 1991. (Dr Mark Hutchinson is Dean, School of Graduate Studies, Southern Cross College.)

MH: Professor O'Farrell, you grew up in New Zealand. Perhaps you would like to tell us something about that: you have, in fact, published something quite recently about that in *Vanished Kingdoms*.

O'Farrell: Yes, indeed, although that's not so much about me as me writing about my mother and father, and family – cousins, uncles and aunts. I was observing the life, the religious beliefs, and life experiences that my parents went through. So really, that book finishes in the 1940s. It's not focussed on me at all – it's not an autobiography, at least I don't see it as such. It's a family history of a particular kind. But what do you want to know?

MH: We'd like to know how, in your case, background acts as a springboard for an entry into history.

O'Farrell: Well, all of this is highly accidental – or if you take the Providential view, is highly providential! But not being presumptuous, I would like to think it was 'luck', the way things work out. Although I'm going to leave room for the Providential, I just don't know. The situation was really quite improbable. I went to a very small Marist Brothers School in a very remote part of New Zealand. The Upper Classes were tiny. What we called 'Upper Six' in 1952 consisted of me! One person. I spent my time making radios and conducting dangerous chemical experiments, and reading of course. Nobody in living memory had been to university other than a doctor who was in his middle age, and came to the school on one occasion – he was the son of the local solicitor. There was no tradition of attendance at university. Some people had been there part time in relation to their teachers' college scholarship activities. My father was a man who believed that his

children should be given the opportunities that he did not have himself. He told me towards the end of my schooling that if I wanted to be a doctor, the money would be found (he was in no way wealthy and it would have had to have been borrowed), to send me to the New Zealand medical school. I had no wish to be a doctor at all, so I declined that offer. I had no idea, really, what I wanted to do except university seemed a good idea. I knew nothing about university. U had an older brother. I didn't know him well, because he was twelve years older than I was, and he left home when I was five, and lived in Wellington. He was a public servant. He attended part-time at Victoria University, but he also attended an accountancy college. The old accountancy college education was something one did in those days. 'Engtings'? I can't remember the name of it. They used to be famous, for people who would do these courses after work in the evenings. It was a pretty arduous scene. But he did attend, and he had friends at, Victoria University, but I had never met any of them. I knew of them through his correspondence, but he usually went mountaineering over Christmas and didn't come home. Or he'd come for a couple of days. So there was no contact at all really with university life, except there was a cultural base. In Greymouth the WEA used to supply records, for instance, classical records, bit boxes of Beethoven symphonies, and that sort of stuff. But generally speaking, it was a coal mining, timber milling town, population about 9,000. Still has a population of about 9,000, so it has not grown – or probably has shrunk a bit. So at that stage, there was the Catholic school. In the state school (we played football against them and all that sort of stuff) a similar situation prevailed. I knew nobody who went from there to university. There probably were, but I simply didn't know them. Anyhow, I applied for a teacher's college scholarship, was awarded it, and went to university where I thought I'd major in English. But in second year I found that I did better in history than in English, and history had very considerable attractions, in that John Saunders, who was a pupil of Christopher Dawson, was our lecturer in Medieval [History]. I thought his lectures in medieval history were marvellously good. And history generally was something that attracted me. So far as the religious aspect of it was, I was a good Catholic lad, and joined the Newman Society – got to be secretary, President, or whatever – met there a number of interesting people. David Moody is I think one of the best known authorities on T.S. Eliot. I see a book of his published last

year – lives in Oxford. He and I got to be friends. The Dronkes, a German family, became a world authority on Rilke. It was weird this, in New Zealand, these people. They knew the New Zealand literati – James K Baxter, Louis Johnson – and I became literary editor of the College newspaper. The actual editor, a chap called MacLeod, was (when I last heard of – I used to hear him on the ABC because he did 'Notes on the News' from Scotland) editor of the *Scotsman*. So there was a group of people who drank parsnip wine, of all things, a very cheap brew, and hung around the Students' Union and debated each other. Marxists – a guy by the name of Crosby Walsh. I remember debating with Crosby, I don't know what happened to old Cros. But anyhow, there were very good relations between the Communists and the Catholics in those days, in the sense that we used to argue like anything but got on extremely well personally.

There was a very small, intimate group of people who knew each other. It was a small university – 2000 people – but knitted into a wider intellectual community. The people that I got to know introduced me to books that I suppose I wouldn't have read otherwise. Although that's not quite true either, because my brother had bequeathed, in the sense of 'books around the house', his reading. He had started reading Maritain. So I started reading bits of Maritain, and then I read all of Maritain. I lived in Greymouth, and the scholarship was quite inadequate to get you through university. So I worked in the vacations and I got what amounted to a full time/part time job. It was a full time vacation job on the Greymouth Borough Council gardening staff, which consisted of three people. So I used to either hoe plants, or drive a tractor around. Indeed, I chopped gorse and did all of those sorts of things for three months of the year, every year, and also in the short vacations as well, when I would work for three weeks. They knew I needed the money and so forth, and they needed somebody to chop back the gorse, too. That worked out fairly well, but it meant that in fact, for three months of the year, I was sundered from this pretty lively intellectual society and removed to the wilderness again. In the evenings, and in the weekends, as I had no real friends back in Greymouth itself, (other than my parents who were elderly and indeed my father was in hospital for a good deal of this time), I used to read a vast amount of material Reading of a pretty serious nature: I read all of Dostoevsky, I read all Virginia Woolf, all the sorts of things people at University

were reading, or that grew out of texts prescribed in syllabuses, and from lecturer's suggestions, and so forth. With Maritain, *True Humanism* is one that comes immediately to mind, *Art and Creative Intuition*. The great virtue of Maritain was that he had this extraordinary clarity and organization, for which the French were, of course, famous. This was the Neo-scholastics' material. Martin D'arcy's book *The Mind and Heart of Love*, had a great impact on me as well as a way … Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. There was a chap whose name has just slipped me for a moment Graham [Berry] something or other – one of the sorts of people who used to 'hang around' universities in those days when it was possible to do so. There are a few people nowadays who appear to be permanent students, but there were a lot more of them in those days because there was no compulsion to pass. You could keep on failing forever. Graham Berry was his name. Graham was the man who sold me his library when he left, and I sstill possess his copy of the Complete W.B. Yeats, it's his copy of Martin D'arcy's Mind and Heart of Love (D'arcy's a Jesuit), and I think I own his Buber. These matters used to be discussed at some considerable length, between particularly Moody and a guy called Leeming, who was a French scholar, and assorted other Catholic people in the main. But not entirely Catholic, it was a fairly open group. All of them proved to be people of some ability, as was later proved I guess – they went on to be editors of the *Scotsman*, and to be Professors in Oxford, as Moody is, and to write poetry and all that sort of stuff. They were people of some repute. I don't know if that was accidental or not. Well, knowing New Zealand now, I wouldn't think that there was any real comparison.

MH: It does appear to have been an extraordinary time in New Zealand – people like people like Karl Popper were coming through …

O'Farrell: Indeed. We treated these people to parsnip wine at various occasions … Not the Newman Society – the Newman Society dealt with, when I think of it, fairly heavy stuff. But no, it was really in my capacity as literary editor of the Canta, which was the name of the publication. The *Canta* lot – we had a whole group of helpers, as *Tharunka* has, we would ask A.M. Pryor, the philosopher who was there at the time for a brief period, and of course, Popper was writing *The Open Society*. That was a book

which had an immense influence on me. I don't think any has influenced my political thought more than that. It was at university: I did Political Science at university, and I read this book with so much excitement. I never, I don't think, have been so intellectually excited by a book as that, and by this marvellous dissection of Hegel and Marx. And in the way that he unmasked Plato and Aristotle, which everybody praised as being good things, and sees within the germs of their thoughts all sorts of nasty aspects that the usual impression didn't give you. I thought this was the most exciting intellectual experience – it opened my mind to what I think books should be like, and I suppose thereafter, particularly now when I'm a bit older, I see myself writing my sorts of equivalents of *The Open Society*. And I hope that I could do half as well.

MH: So you would see yourself as being influenced by Popper to be critical, rather than descriptive …

O'Farrell: Yes, something that says, 'Here is some venerated icon, which everybody bows before, let's have a look at it and see what it is like …' And I'll ask some questions which turn it on its head, or on its backside, and inspect it rigorously, and that I've found it most exciting. That made an immense impact on me, probably more than all the religious stuff. And also, I suppose Dostoevsky. I forget who introduced me to Dostoevsky – it certainly wasn't on any syllabus. I suppose it had to be Moody. Moody read every depressing thing, generally full of gloom – he used to go out like a character out of the *Wasteland* – suffering agonies and all the rest of it. I think he took to me because I didn't see life so grimly. That group of people also went to concerts, and plays, and organized the procession through town – I was fairly heavily involved in student affairs for the middle couple of years. In the latter years I went back to work … I could go on forever about that – I enjoyed it immensely, too.

What happened after that was, that I applied for such scholarships as were offering to get overseas. My brother then in Australia. First of all, of course, I did a research M.A. on the local Greymouth region on working class politics. My father was president of the local labour party, and I had entrée to the local labour party scene. He was also a director

– it sounds grandiose , but it was nothing like that – of the local labour newspaper, there was one daily labour newspaper in New Zealand, and actually I used to work as a paper boy for it, delivering papers in the early hours of the morning. I was paid 'ten bob' a week, with which I used to purchase balsa-wood for making model aeroplanes. I worked through the *Grey River Argus*, as it was called, for traces of working class organization back to the gold fields times (the 1860s), and finished it with the election of the first labour member for the district in 1913. This was a guy called Paddy Webb, who was still around, and who we happened to know. He had since retired from politics. So it was very much a family sort of thing. That took me a full year – the M.A. took me two years. Then at the end of the M.A. I applied for a … Fulbright grant, I suppose it was … I applied for Rochester University in the U.S., and got it, and also applied to the ANU, and got it, decided in favour of the ANU because they did not make difficulties over the fact that I was engaged to be married at the time (to my wife), and America made difficulties about getting in. I'm glad I made the decision, needless to say, but that was what made that decision. My brother was in Melbourne, and not Canberra – that wasn't a particular factor, in fact as I say, I didn't know my brother at all well. I subsequently got to know my brother well, after we'd come to Australia, and in fact he married us. He was a priest, of course. He'd left the Public Service and gone to Rome, and studied for the Dominican priesthood. He used to send me stuff occasionally – presents and so forth. Some of it was pretty good. Again the clarity of the Neo-scholastic way of ordering things always appeared to me – I liked things intellectually well-structured, which was one of the reasons why Christopher Dawson and his pupil, J.J. Saunders, had a great appeal. I liked very much the generalities of the structures that Dawson could perceive in history. I thought that made sense of it in a way which the party-politics under Gladstone didn't make sense of anything. The great sweep of the Mongol hordes across Europe, or the growth of European culture in the Middle Ages, and all these sorts of things, I thought were superbly dealt with in Dawson and in his student.

MH: Were there other teachers who influenced you at undergraduate level?

O'Farrell: I can remember them all, of course. There was Neville Philips, who's still around. Neville was Professor of History, and a very difficult man indeed, a tyrant. He was a major in the New Zealand Army during the war, and he wrote the key volume of the history of the New Zealand Army in the Second World War. He eventually became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canterbury. That was after I left. But he was a man who was extremely harsh in his disciplinarian ways. Quite a good lecturer, and interested in intellectual matters, but extremely reserved, and extremely authoritarian in his relationship with his own staff. He made their lives hell. I was lectured by Trevor Wilson, who's now Professor of History at Adelaide. I was lectured by D.K. Fieldhouse. I got to know him later in Australia, actually. He used to come and have a meal with us when he was in these parts. Fieldhouse introduced us not to colonial history but to Clarendon, to the history of the seventeenth century. And in fact, again, I suppose the field which interested me most in history was Medieval, and also the great debates of the seventeenth century. We were a taught by an extremely British syllabus, and there was no New Zealand history taught – or a tiny bit of New Zealand history taught. Bill Oliver, who still professor at Waikato, I think, he taught us American history, on the basis of one chapter ahead in the book, using Morrison (he made no secret of this). Bill Gardener, taught the New Zealand history and supervised my thesis. A couple of younger guys, like John Owen. Fieldhouse and John Owen were Namierites. We were very lucky in New Zealand. Now we just get British rejects that can't make the grade. At that stage, a period in the colonies was thought to be a good thing for a rising English academic, if you couldn't get in … Of course this was before the explosion of the British universities. But what happened, of course, was these people came – Fieldhouse, Owen – first rate men, and as soon as there was an opportunity back home they left, but they left us legacies of their intellectual excellence. Owen taught eighteenth century. He was a pupil of Namier, he was a sort of second Namier, so we waded through the eighteenth century House of Commons, and ticked off all the names that voted this and that and the other. I didn't find this particularly enticing, but John Owen was a nice guy, and that worked out rather well. So that's five or six of them …

MH: If things had been more open in terms of research in New Zealand history, do you think you would have stayed?

O'Farrell: I don't think so, because there is one thing you must remember is that New Zealanders don't like Catholics, or didn't like them at that stage, and still don't like them much.

MH: So there is not much chance that you would have written, say, the history of the New Zealand Catholic church?

O'Farrell: I've often been asked to write the history of the New Zealand Catholic Church, by people who believe my history of the Church in Australia has been an immense service to this Catholic church – which is very kind of them to think that. I'm almost convinced myself by the comments I've had by New Zealanders on this matter. But they argue that the fact that one organized the history of the Catholic church in Australia, that it gave Catholicism here a structure and a mode of imaging itself that gave it security in a time when security was hard to find. And if you want to see the facts that that had, the best thing to do was to look at the country that didn't have that, and that was New Zealand. Undoubtedly, I have never seen such religious anarchy as now exists in the New Zealand Catholic Church – I don't know about the other churches, but the New Zealand Catholic church has sort of fallen to pieces. It seems to not know what it is, or what its function is, or anything at all. But at this stage, don't forget that I'm not in any involved with religious history. I didn't get into religious history until 1967. I was a man who was interested in labour history. I didn't read – I mean I did read in the Medieval sort of stuff – so I didn't see myself as a religious historian or see my future in that regard at all. I came to Australia to write the history of the I.W.W. – the Industrial Workers of the World. I put up a number of proposals – you have to do that in applying for a scholarship, a number of proposed topics. At that stage, the people at the ANU consisted of Laurie Fitzhardinge, Bob Gollan – I guess they were the two key people thee. Of course, Bob, a Labour historian, saw the chance of getting someone to write the history of the IWW. When I relinquished that task, which I did after about a year, of course, Ian

Turner took it over. He did a PhD thesis on the IWW, while a did a study of Harry Holland.

MH: Why the switch?

O'Farrell: The sort of work I was doing on the background to the IWW led me into contact – increasingly Harry Holland's name kept coming up, and I knew that name because he occupied the electorate next to ours in New Zealand. He represented Buller in New Zealand, and my father knew him slightly. He died the year I was born. But my father had a long association with the labour party going back to 1916. So he was part of the family lore, I suppose, and I wrote to the Holland family, and asked if they would be interested if I was to do such a thing. They were more than interested, they were highly enthusiastic and very co-operative. So I put it to Gollan, would it not be better to do this, and I was more interested in it, because Holland seemed to be such an interesting man. He proved to be not quite so interesting – I don't want to be misunderstood. He was interesting in that his integrity was frightening. He would go to gaol at the drop of a hat for a principle, and he did. He was gaoled several times, both in Australia and New Zealand, for sedition, and for denouncing the government in strike situations, gaoled in Broken Hill. He was a man of immense commitment and so on, but intellectually he wasn't all that interesting because he was a zealot. And he saw things in black and white, and indeed he was right to see them in black and white at that stage, too, I guess, because it was pretty black and white, the oppression of the capitalists on the working classes was fairly marked. So that was a subject which had advantages. I got to know Holland pretty well, but there were also disadvantages, in that, of course, you have to cover the whole of the man's life. This is why I often say to PhD students 'Don't do a biography, because you're committed to the whole span of the guy's life'. Whereas you might find enough information which would be enough for a PhD in half his life, but you can't say, well, now he's 38 forget him. You've got to carry on. So I stuck with Harry until he died when he was 63, or something, and he died. And that led to various problems, needless to say. But I completed that, and came down here to UNSW. I applied for three jobs, Sydney, which Marley Stephen got. Marley taught me, actually, at the ANU. Marx of all

things. Marley, O'Farrell and Marx – well, why not, he did a fair job on him. Well, Marx, of course, because I was working very much with a Marxian background. I get very impatient with Marxians who make the big presumption that I know nothing about Marx. I spent years studying Marx for my own purposes; studying the American labour movement, and studying all sorts of things that people presume, given my present Catholic and Irish inclinations, I know nothing about. But of course, that's totally false.

MH: What year did you go up to ANU?

O'Farrell: 1956. I went to the ANU in 1956, and came down here in 1959. By 1957, Hancock had taken over the directorship of the School of Social Sciences, and the Chairmanship of the History Department. That made a very big difference to the quality and morale – but you've been through all last week. But it did make a vast difference. I had occasion to look at some of those letters. I dug them out last week to look at some of them, to see what they said. I said something like 'Hancock has arrived; he's just the bloke that this dump needs.' I can remember the word 'dump' very clearly. He interviewed all the existing staff about what they were doing. Poor old Laurie Fitzhardinge got a hard time because he had gotten nowhere with W.M. Hughes, which he was supposed to be doing. So the rest of my time there was under Hancock's fatherly attention. He lent me a piece of Smuts, which he was writing at the time, showing how he had dealt with certain aspects of biography, and so forth. I grew to admire and like Hancock, and to see him as a person who, although not of my cultural background, he exemplified the best in the 'Anglo' tradition. The other thing about him, of course, as I was to find when I took up Irish Studies, when he knew of this (this was long after I had left the ANU), he very kindly gave me his copy of the Irish Parliamentary debates for the period in which he had written in the History of British Commonwealth Affairs the section on Ireland. Now I found out in Ireland, when I talked to people in Ireland (he gave me introductions to people in Ireland), and I went and talked to some of these people, among whom were top civil servants, some of them retired, that Hancock was seen as a person who had, for the first time, given the Irish a fair go in British imperial history. This Australian had seen them in a different light, and his way of dealing with

them, a colonial way of dealing with them, was very different from the way in which their imperial masters sneered and expressed contempt. They were immensely grateful, they respected Hancock for the type of attitude that he had taken, a very important book as it was then, a sort of path-finding book, and they saw him as a pioneer in the better understanding of Anglo-Irish relations. Not only historically, but politically, as well. So when I did eventually change to Irish history, Hancock was most supportive and extremely helpful in a very practical way, giving me names and letters of introduction to these people. And they were delighted to help anyone that Hancock had recommended. Of course I didn't know that at the time, but in terms of intellectual quality, he was so far in advance of anybody else down at the ANU it wasn't funny. They were all good blokes, etc., but this was a man who was a real intellectual, and a real scholar and a real historian, he had this 'span' (using his own word). I mean he had written on the Risorgiomento, he had written on Italian history, he'd written on Australia, he'd written on Africa. Here's a man of the world, and I thought this was the way historians ought to be. I didn't see any virtue in the parochial. And it was that that took me out of labour history. Well, the first move that I made I suppose was natural enough, was to try to move towards the source, to move into Russian history. So I spent seom years, six or seven years I suppose, reading myself into and teaching Russian history at the University of New South Wales. I was the first person to teach Russian history in Dublin. No one had ever taught Russian history in Dublin before. So I did. There were no books in the library – I couldn't find a single book on Russian history in the Library, it was weird. That was in 1966.

I wrote up Harry Holland – I re-wrote the thesis entirely, and it was published as a book in 1964. Even at that stage I was bored with labour history, and couldn't see that it had much that I wanted to do now. That led to complications, of course, that I have found recurring since. People who don't use their brains much, sort of branded me as a class traitor. You can't leave labour history, it's like the Catholic Church, you just never get out of it. It wasn't so much orthodoxy – it was seen as class betrayal, as a failure to stand fast with your, or affirm your class origins. I wasn't interested in denying my class origins, if people thought I was a member of the working classes, though I didn't think in these terms. I've never denied the need to earl a living by digging holes, I mean, I've dug

the Blaketown sewerage system, I've working in the bush, I've done all the sorts of things that workers do. I've worked with workers on the roads and bridges and all that sort of stuff as an employee of the Greymouth Borough Council, but I didn't regard this as some great loyalty. I don't know quite how I saw it. I didn't necessarily see it as something to get out of, I simply just thought of it as the way things were. But it was simply a matter of interest. The things which interested me were big things. So therefore I got interested in the Russian Revolution. It was true that [then] I got interested in Irish history.

I wrote a paper for an ANZAAS meeting on the impact of the Russian Revolution on the Australian and New Zealand labour movement – how this great news had been received in these remote parts, how people reacted and so on. That was published in the *International Review of Social History* in the Hague. When I gave that paper in Canberra … they were following it up, or whatever else, somebody said to me, 'The first Irish Ambassador has arrived, he's a Russian scholar, you should go and talk to him.' So I did. I went to call on him in Canberra, and we got on famously. His name was Oin MacWhite – we see his widow when we are in Ireland. He was killed in an automobile accident when he was ambassador to the Netherlands back in the 'seventies. Anyway, we got on famously. He was a man not much older than I was, and he'd in fact been pipped for a position in the Irish university system in Anthropology, which was his deal. But he was also interested in Russia, and he also spoke Russian, and he wrote in Russian – a man of very considerable accomplishments. But anyway – he suggested to me that I go and teach Russian history at UCD [University college, Dublin], and I was looking for some funding that would get me and five kids overseas for a sabbatical year. He proposed this and arranged it, with support from Hancock, which was very generous of him, and it was that which drew me into Irish history – from labour to Ireland through these individuals, and for the fact that University College, Dublin, made available a teaching post to me for a year so that the payment thereof (it was a thousand pounds, it wasn't a vast amount of money but it was certainly sufficient to get us all over to Ireland). Now, at this stage, I was interested in Irish history. I had done no reading prior to this at all, none whatever. So I started reading myself into it …

MH: Naturally you had an Irish family background. Was that just lying in the background waiting to be triggered, or was there some other process behind the interest?

O'Farrell: I didn't see myself as being Irish-oriented at all. My parents, as I've explained in Vanished Kingdoms – embraced the colonial life. They didn't look back to Ireland, nor did they inflict that on me. The only element of Irishness was in some of the teaching, as recounted (in fact I've a full chapter) in the book. Ireland was something of a joke, and it meant nothing to me at all. I knew nothing about Irish history except in so far as the various phrases which stuck in my mind, which were meaningless, from songs we were compelled to sing. They had no structure in terms of where they fitted into some historical pattern. So I knew nothing at all about it. So, 1964 I started to read Irish history, knowing I was going to be in Dublin, but teaching Russian history. So it wasn't a matter of being there for that purpose, but as I was going to Ireland, well, fine. And also, I'd decided, well why not look for topics in Irish history which could be explored. I thought, well, one of the things that might be interesting – nobody appeared to know much about the Church. Or to see that the Church would be an appropriate set of source materials. So I approached a judge, old Jock McClemmens, to see how I could get into St Mary's Cathedral. He said, 'Go and see Monsignor Duffy, he's the archivist'. The old archivist had just died. All these friendships and sort of contacts are extremely important. Jock McClemmens a Supreme Court Judge, was president of the Newman Society at that stage, and I'd joined the Newman Society as a Catholic – because I was a Catholic, and because people asked me to join, so I joined and eventually I got involved in magazines, editing a journal called *Manna*, and pretty heavily involved in Catholic intellectual life in Sydney. *Manna* was coming out of St John's [College, University of Sydney]. And Sancta Sophia, I guess. So he put onto the archivist at St Mary's, and I went in and met him, and there was absolute chaos in there, absolute chaos. It was just shocking, it was a mess. There were files actually heaped up like coal, bundles of stuff heaped up against the wall. The wall was dripping water (this was a little below the steps)' Terrible mess. Con Duffy said, 'well here it is.' So I spent weekends, nights, sorting through this stuff looking for material emanating from Ireland, reports of Ireland, of Irish conditions, to the Bishops out here. I found vast amounts of stuff. Then, of course, when I went over to

Ireland, I wanted to see the other end, not only in Ireland but also in Rome. So that was what we did . I was still not interested at all in 'Catholic history', but I thought as a sort of service to the archives, when I cam across stuff in Ireland, I would arrange, if I could, to get it microfilmed and bring it back so it would be available to scholars here. So I did that, mainly at the Irish College in Rome, which had a very big collection of Australian stuff, and al All Hallows College in Dublin, had a very big collection. I went to see them, and they were very happy for me to arrange to have it microfilmed at the expense of the Cathedral – actually Con Duffy's personal expense it was. So we did that – and I sent that stuff back. While I was in Dublin, there was Professor Desmond Williams, professor of the History Department UCD (who was also helped and arranged that I teach there). Now Desmond was an extraordinary man, a man who never published much, but was extraordinary as a person. He and I got on famously. And he was one of those curious people that was always accepting commissions for books – but never writing the book! In those days publishers would give you an advance, and Desmond was a very naughty man. He would accept, and had been know to accept (he was very eccentric, there are a vast number of funny stories about Desmond) advances from two publishers for the same book, and never writing it anyhow. Oh, horrors! Batsford came to Desmond and said, 'well, we'd like a book on the history of Ireland'. This is, of course, 1965, when Ireland is pretty tame stuff. The North was quiet, and looked as it if would get quieter, and everything would be lovely. Anyway, Desmond very kindly said, 'Well, look, I'm too busy (he was too busy doing nothing!) …' As a left over from Desmond, if I get sick I always put on my door Professor O'Farrell is indisposed'. Now that it is a straight take from Desmond, as he was very often indisposed. Actually, he had a terrible condition of osteomyelitis in his ankle – he had a stick, he was often indisposed. Anyhow, his secretary was instructed to tell students he was indisposed, and some students would get enraged by this. Because they'd come in for a tutorial, and he wasn't there, and the next time they'd come in he wouldn't be there, and invariably they would see 'Professor Williams in indisposed'. He was probably in Germany or something like this – you'd never know what he was up to. Actually, he and Trevor-Roper were the first two people who went into the archives – he was a German scholar – and Trevor-Roper being the scumbag he is, took all the cedit and ripped off all he could and gave old

Desmond nothing. Anyhow a famous story – some student actually lost his temper, and started carrying on 'where is he, I must se him, we haven't had a class for three weeks. Indisposed? What do you mean indisposed?' And the secretary said, 'He's indisposed to see you.' Anyhow, he passed Batsford's over to me. Anyhow, Peter Kemmis Betty, who was very English and a very pleasant young man, came to see me and said, 'Look we want a book on Ireland, and I understood that you would possibly write it.' And here was me just having started reading books about Ireland. I thought, well, this is one sure way that I'll read a lot more. So I said yes … Thus I wrote *Ireland's English Question*.

MH: Was that said with you swallowing your heart as you said it?

O'Farrell: No, just out of sheer arrogance, just out of sheer, what would you call it? Constructing obstacles so that they would have to be overcome. Which is not a bad way of getting things done, pushing oneself into the position where you have to do something that you might perhaps not be at that stage prepared to do, or whatever. I could see that it was a way of making a career. For an English publisher to walk up to you and say, 'will you write this book?', it seemed to me that you should take that approach fairly seriously. It wouldn't matter what they asked you to write, you'd do it, and you'd do it obviously as well as you could. Williams was willing to pass it on, which means that he was confident that I could do it. It didn't occur to me that I couldn't do it, I just did it. But not before a few other little things happened along the way. It was published in 1971. Fortunately, in a sense, that was a delay of five years. Because when I got back from a year in Ireland teaching Russian history, and teaching actually some broad courses on the nature of Revolution and a few things like this, and collecting this Catholic material, (which, as I say, I did for the good of others, I didn't have any idea that I would ever have any call to use it), I was approached again, by a publisher. Publishers are very important in one's life. I was approached by Thomas Nelsons out here, because they were just beginning to set up, by a guy by the name of David Rosenberg. He now runs Kangaroo Press – very nice guy, very pleasant guy, I see him now and then. Douglas Pike, editor of the ADB [Australian Dictionary of Biography] had said that he ought to come and talk to me about books that should be written. It was kind of Doug Pike to do

that, very kind indeed, because I was just a sort of young nobody. Rosenberg had probably gone to talk to 'x' number of other people, but among the people that he did talk to was me. I've always – as you know – got plenty of ideas, particularly for other people to do work! I put up a number of ideas about what hadn't been done. This was a new British company starting out in the market, trying to get a slice of it, and there were a lot of them here at that stage, British publishers flooded into the place in the mid-sixties, all looking for cream. Not all that many have stayed, but Nelson's have. I can't remember what the other topics were, candidly, but I said, well, you need a history of the Catholic Church, particularly at this time of the Vatican Council. He said, well, who would write it? I said, well, quite candidly, I don't know. He said, 'would *you* write it?' I said, no, I'm fully occupied with this other Batsford's matter. He said, would you think about it. So I came home and talked to Deirdre about it. And here is, I suppose, some genuine commitment coming to work. I thought that if I didn't write it, nobody else would – I couldn't see anybody else doing it. And it needed doing – simply just needed doing so that one could comprehend how these changes fitted in to this historical structure which had already existed, and which was already about to change. So I went back to them and said 'I will do it on condition (my own condition was that I do it in six months) that you only publish it as a paperback, because I don't think it really would be of sufficient standard and status to merit what a hardback publication signifies.' This would be a Penguin sort of thing. They instantly agreed to that, though it cost us, I guess, a lot of money when one thinks of what actually happened to the book, but the idea was to get a book quickly and efficiently done, and in that regard I then turned to teaching. I was running the department and teaching 10 hours per week at that stage over four courses. Crowley had arrived – he had arrived in 1966, so I arrived back to Crowley. We settled out differences by mail. He knew that I was runner-up for the job, which was an advantageous position to be in. He had issued various directives by mail, to which I replied the equivalent of 'go and get stuffed.' I simply wouldn't do what he suggested – I would do 'this' and nothing else.' The only way to deal with Frank was to stand up to him and tell him to get stuffed, and if you did, he respected you and you got on famously with him. Besides this, Frank had a sense of humour, and though he was a terrible rogue, and a man whose morals were those of a dilapidated tom-cat – (well, dilapidates in some

senses!) he had this marvellous sense of humour and an extraordinary sense of fair play. I've got a lot of time for Frank. Anyhow, I came back and did do it in six months, drawing on in very substantial part the new material which I had in fact brought back for others, but which gave what I'd been doing a particular insight, and a particular newness. I guess. And also, I'd structured it in a way that that structure has held firm over the years – it's very funny to see that happen, that people still think in the same 'phraseology' as I laid down at that time. There were a few secondary books – Tim Suttor's book, for instance, was around, and a very valuable book at that stage too. But otherwise, most if it is fairly straight original research, particularly the twentieth century stuff. There was nineteenth century material, but twentieth century stuff simply meant that I got into the archives and read the stuff that was there and wrote the book. And of course this did change things radically.

MH: So it wasn't really just a six month thing?

O'Farrell: Well the book was – it took six months to write. But no, it changed my life obviously, back into modes of the Irish and the Catholics in a way which I have found interesting. But I think the way of coming to it, as it were, by accident, gave me a sort of freedom in dealing with it which has been beneficial to the attitude that I have taken to it. I wasn't writing it to win friends and influence people. I wasn't writing it under anything other than the tolerance of the Catholic Church. There're lots stories that I could tell you – but I won't – about the ways that people reacted to the book, and the ways in which they acted. There are some lo9ng stories about that. But essentially it gave me a sort of freedom from clericalism and from any wish to please the institution. I wasn't there to please the institution. I was there to scrutinize it with, I hoped, as fair an eye as I had time available and with the sources I had available, and I had to call it as I saw it. Also, which is really something you wouldn't really understand either, it was essentially addressed not to Catholics so much as to non-Catholics, to try and put it into the corpus of [history]. By that time I guess I had fairly strong ideas on what history was and ought to be. And I had strong views in particular on what religious history ought to be. Again, you call it as you see it – you show compassion and humanity, and you recognise that the

institution is composed of human beings, and that the way they work is often flawed and incomplete and limited, and all of those sorts of things. But if that is indeed the case, as it will then that's what you say. You don't mask that or avoid it. You make it clear that it is despite these limitations that the Word of God gets preached and human beings find their way through a difficult world. That book led onto the documents, of course, two big volumes of documents the following year, and Deirdre and I nearly killed ourselves in doing that. The six months was one thing, but the documents was a shocking, a very great burden. These were documents from all over. I wouldn't say that they were exhaustive [but] the sheer volume of church documents - going through them, trying to get the best out of them and then Deirdre typing them, and then saying well, look, this should be cut … It was a very large task indeed, and it produced two volumes of stuff which was of great value to people thereafter. Are we heading in the right direction – we've only got up to B.C. 4001!

MH: You get to that stage, and yet you already have clear ideas about what religious history should be. Clearly there must be something else happening the background. You've got your Newman activity, your historical activity, and your School activity, and your writing – these different spheres – how do you being them together?

O'Farrell: Well what brings them together is that I get annoyed by people who produce either bullshit or unsatisfactory material. Ken Inglis wrote an article on the historiography of the Catholic Church. I like Ken, he's a nice bloke. But I thought that he just didn't get it right. In the first issue of *Manna*, which is this journal that I did for the Newman Association from 1960, I did an article on 'The Writing of History', in which essentially I took Ken to task for his views on the writing of Catholic history. Now this was 7 years before I had written any serious stuff, but I was interested in the philosophy I suppose. I had always been interested in philosophy, though I never did any at university. I suppose I was more interested in pragmatic philosophy than the theoretical stuff. But I was always interested, I suppose, in ideas, and in pursuing ideas to rigorous conclusions. I love analysing things right down to their nitty gritty, and I thought that Ken had it wrong, and I set out to prove that he had it wrong. Also we had

personal discussions about this, because I knew Ken. I think at that stage he was at the ANU. He then went to Papua New Guinea. But that interest in philosophy of history was always with me, and particularly applied to the writing of Catholic history, which I saw as being a sort of side interest to what I was doing in labour history at that stage, and subsequently in Irish history. I'm immensely grateful to Ken for having a go at that – I think that was a seminal article, that one, because Tim Suttor and many others have been moved by it. But I thought it was wrong, and I said so in a much more obscure context. I have since written, of course in *Historical Studies*, on 'Historians and Religious Convictions', at much more length, adopting what some people regard as an offensively arrogant view on the subject. But if they thought that then they should have come up and … it was amazing. Noel McLachlan asked me to write that article, which I did, on the presumption that somebody would reply, and nobody ever did! Noel was just as flabbergasted – Noel was editor of *Historical Studies* at that time – as I was. We thought for sure that there would be a reply, there would be people jumping up and down and having their say, but nobody ever did.

MH: Why was that do you think? Was it too good!

O'Farrell: Oh, they wee totally demolished by it! No, I think that it's one of those weird things. I've found only recently that all sorts of things happen that you don't think are happening. A person of my acquaintance, with whom I worked closely in an editorial context, gave me the manuscript of a book that he had written on Australia as a secular country. I read this book with increasing disquiet and amazement. It seemed to me, although I'd worked with this man for many years, and known him well, that he'd not read a thing I'd written. So he asked me to read it and I did. I rang up and said, 'Look, I've read this and I have to ask you one question. Have you ever read anything at all that I've written'? He said, 'No, I never have.' And I said, 'for goodness sake, most of what I've written bears upon what you were trying to get at here. Could you tell me why you haven't read it?' He said, 'Well, I know you'. I said, 'Sure, you do, but you don't know what I've written'. He said, 'Well, I sort of thought that as I've known you, I didn't need to read what you had to say'. That type of attitude I think in various quarters – the

amount of contempt for Catholic intellectuals is such as to suggest that that's a contradiction in terms in this country. I've found out only recently, for instance, that a very well known and eminent professor, at an institution which is half-way between here and Melbourne (well, not half way, but around that direction!) has indicated to my daughter that O'Farrell's Catholicism has made him 'soft in the head'. Now, as I've always been a Catholic, and known to be so, I don't follow the tenses of that – 'has made him'. Perhaps my daughter was not reporting it correctly, because I must have always been soft in the head. Was there a state in which I was hard-headed, but this terrible belief overtook me and softened this into mish-mash. But at any rate, that comment, which most certainly would have been known would get back to me, I regard as aggressively offensive, aggressively so. It is insulting to the 'nth degree', not only to me but also the whole tradition of Catholic intellectual life in Europe and wherever else (I won't refer to America because I don't think that there us much there). But it is fairly insulting. That sort of attitude I have found to be fairly prevalent in a number of other people that I won't bother naming, but who are also intellectually eminent, at both the academic and popular levels, at which there is this, what does Donald Horne call it? The 'anti-semitism of the Australian intellectual'. You can't be hard on Jews, because they'll get up and smash your teeth, or tell you that you are responsible for the Holocaust, but you can on Catholics, because they're prepared to take it. So one of the problems has been, I think there is this basic assumption that it is not worth engaging with a person such as myself, because my bigotry and my stupidity are self-evident.

MH: Isn't that the case with people of religious disposition generally in this country, though, and that there is the thought that if you have a faith of any kind, then you keep that tucked away, because that's not respectable. There is this public face that you can have as long as you don't bring into it anything regarding belief or whatever?

O'Farrell: Yeah, I've noticed that. In fact I've sometimes discovered that people have been religiously disposed but I haven't been aware of it. I think that is true. It's a sad commentary on people's intellectual limitations when they regard religious belief, which is after all, buttressed by intellectual developments which go back to Christ 2000 years

ago, it's amazing that they have the arrogance to brush all of that aside, but they do. I don't see how it follows, but it does, I mean that's actually what happens. I don't every treat anybody's intellectual positions in the way that mine are treated. I'm not complaining in a way, I just find it [inexcusable]. I guess that is also why the Catholic Church material that we've been writing on was so little regarded in some quarters.

Deirdre O'Farrell: There was also 'Socialism as Religion' which came out when you doing Harry Holland. And you always had that respect for Harry Holland, he was Salvation Army, so there was that interest: he was a good man.

O'Farrell: Deirdre is right, that article on socialism as religion is an important article. I am interested in ideas really, as well as people. I'm interested in people embodying ideas, really, and working them through. That article on 'Socialism as a substitute religion' was an extremely important article, and again, it was weird, it was expected that that article would spark off other people to do other work, but no one ever did. But, yes, it's a bridge between this social concern and the religious values. Noel McLachlan, for instance, was recently talking on the phone, and he asked me how on earth I came to write *Harry Holland.* Now this is sort of looking at it from the other end. Noel reviewed it for the *Times Literary Supplement*, he was then in Britain working as a journalist for the *Times*. How on earth could this person who was type case as Irish-Catholic come to write this extraordinary book, which is totally out of character. Now, it seems to me that obviously it's not. It's an evolution in a consciousness of my responsibilities as an historian and also my interests as an historian, in which I find, being brought up in the labour tradition, I find that immediately attractive. I want to also say that I like action. Boredom, as you know, - I've an article on this – is something to be avoided at almost all costs. So therefore anything that looks as if it is going to become boring, you eschew, and run away from as quickly as possible. Harry's not boring, but there is a level of Harry at which he is exhausted, and you can't get past that. I find that – and this is why I think the Irish are great – they are an inexhaustible source of perversity, and cunning, and contradiction and scummishness, and sanctity and the whole lot. They are capable of exhausting all my supplies of analytic power and of comprehension. As I think I've said

in something else, I'm defeated by them. That's the way it should be. As far as Catholicism is concerned, it has that humbling effect on you where you find that you're the smart guy pretending to be God, and sorting all of these people out into their categories, and saying so-and-so converted umpteen natives, and so and so builds these appalling churches which look dreadful, and so forth. But suddenly or slowly, you become conscious of things which are greater than you and people whose capacities of engagement with God and with spiritual things are humbling.

There's also a combative side to it. I wouldn't deny all of that either. I'm proud of my religion. I think it's a great religion – I should rephrase that I suppose, there are some aspects of my co-religionists which I regard with disdain and horror! But as a religion I think it is a pretty decent religion, because it's got intellectual guts. And if you want it to consist of dancing around the maypole, or telling your beads in some simply pathway, it'll do that job too. But for a person who tried to live an intellectual life, there're lots of characters out there in the big wide world, living or dead, who have giant intellects, who have been extended by this religion, and have penned their thoughts and so forth. I mean, Cardinal Newman, and so on. So he's one of these people that you encounter and say, 'here's a big brain!' Right through the centuries, before and after the Reformation and so on, you get people in the Christian tradition (not only in the Catholic tradition, but the Christian tradition) who are people who demand your respect intellectually. I'm proud to be of that company, and if I can add to that in my way, then I will. I also ought to say – though all of these things sound arrogant, and they are arrogant, they are truthful – I have on occasions thought to myself that I could do better than Australia, and I probably could. That is to broaden out and be like Jack McManners, you know, a world authority on the Christian religion(!) You know what I mean, to write pious bullshit of the most elevated level, for the Oxford University Press in Oxford. (I've done that actually, but on Irish topics, not on Christian ones). I feel a great obligation – which puts it badly, loyalty? -… Australia has done me great service, and I would like to repay, by enhancing the intellectual quality of the things I know most about in Australia. The things I know most about in Australia are Catholicism and Irishism, those are the things I know most about. I don't know much about 'Greekism' or Aborigines, or whatever else that might be worth going into (or not, as the case may be). But I do know about these things.

Therefore, I've got an obligation, as I see it, to put my life into those things so that when I'm dead, or hopefully before I'm dead, other people will be changed by those things, and it will make this place a better place to be. You see, I see the progression as quite natural – Deirdre has pointed out some of the bridges from Labour to Socialism to religious dimension. There are other bridges too. The history of the Catholic church was needed – to locate people, to give them a structure in which they could move, and to encourage them to write themselves, within the structures that I've set out for them, and they've used them in the same way that I've used other peoples' structures when I'm writing. You know, you build all the time. But it seemed to me that the Catholic angle was only in fact part of the total life experience of the people that I am interested in. And the people that I'm interested in are, you know, the other, the sub-culture, the Irish-Catholic brigade and their descendants. I'm also interested in the 'other lot', but if the 'other lot' persist in regarding me as a person whose brain's been softened by contact with Catholicism, or behave as if their world is the only world … And they do do that. Now, I've written a longish comment on Manning Clark for the *Australian Book Review*. Now, I've no objection to this in many ways, because it is more or less that same sort of thing that I've been trying to do myself, for another group of the population. But I'm not pretending that it is the only group in the population. If you're writing a history of Australia, and you write as if your vision encompasses the whole, they you have to be fairly sure of your ground. I think that the extraordinary arrogance of the assumption that lies behind much of the writing of Australian history – that this is all there is, or this is all there is that matters, is what happened to my like and my like and my tribe (you know, the ones who wear the red, white and blue feathers in their headdress), this is extraordinary. I find this just mind-blowing that this assumption should prevail amongst the historians of Australia, and it has prevailed for many many years. Now, I'm sufficiently combative (and cunning enough) to try and have a go at knocking that, to try intellectually to overthrow it, and culturally to assault it as being false. Now, I'm not going to come up with the idea that what I'm saying, is the totality of the truth. I'm quite prepared to live and let live, but they're not. They're going to try and say to me that I don't exist. Well, I'm telling them I exist, and that my lot exist, the way I look at the world exists, and I'm not going to be forced out of the common experience which is

Australia. I'm not going to let that happen. So, therefore, when I come and look at the Catholics I see them, in a sense, as being separate, as being a subjected and overlooked tribe of the lower orders (and I wrote a book about them more or less badsed on that assumption), later I realized to myself, ' well, bugger it, but that's accepting the definitions that are imposed by the other lot'. I'm accepting their initiatives and their terms of reference. Well now, I'm not going to do that any longer. I see myself as going through a process of gradually awakening. I hope this will never cease. I would think that my consciousness and the sort of work that I want to do, and my consciousness of the nature of society in Australia has been growing rapidly. I must have been very ignorant to start with – that's probably very true too. I mean I used to live in a lovely world where I thought that everybody was free, equal and tolerant. They're not. This sort of stuff, that O'Farrell has gone soft in the brain. That a university professor should say that seems to me to be totally and completely unacceptable. I don't wish to name names, not in a document that's going to appear in a book. I'm trying to be fair to you and myself in this regard. All I'm saying is that from a trusting little lad, believing the world to be fair and not full of ratbags, I have developed a certain degree of cynicism along the line, due to all sorts of things. Therefore, when I now look at the position of people who are my people (that's fairly broad too, I don't mean Irish Catholics only, I mean older colonial Australians of my kind – I would include New Zealanders of my generation) I se that they haven't had a fair go in the history books. And I see them as accepting a view of themselves from the history books which reduces them, and I think that's wrong, and I think that they should be given a much fairer picture. It's not a question of building them up, it's certainly not a question of triumphalism, it is more a question of depth, a question of trying to get them to emerge as real people, and also to draw on the profundities of their own culture. I think that one of the reasons why Christians have not stood up and been counted, and made a real contribution to intellectual life in this country is that they have taken the definition that has been imposed on them of the value of their own belief. Which is, that they are not valuable, that they are one among many superstitions. And you can see, here, as Deirdre has pointed out – the ABC is showing us recently how marvellous the Muslim faith is, and all the rest of it. We get enough of that pushed down our throats and we'll start to believe that yes we are inferior, the Koran's much more

beautiful than the Bible. Well, that's all old hat, and the rest of it. I'm trying, I really am trying, very consciously, and bloody-mindedly, to build up something that people will be proud of, not in any wrongful way, but to gain some self-respect. They will see that they have 2000 years, or longer in terms of the Greek and Roman roots of the Christian background, that they have a civilization behind them which is of greatest value, and which is being thrown away or neglected by people who are not aware of it, or people who don't value it, but also people who are suppressing it, and people who are the children of bloody clergymen because they are in reaction to that sort of thing. I'm in the advantaged position of not being the son of a clergyman, which in this country is a great plus. The afflictions of Marxism on many persons have been entirely deleterious, and I don't know what they are saying to themselves in view of the practical results of … I suppose I do, they're now just saying to themselves that like Christianity, it hasn't been ever tried, and they if they'd only done it properly, if Stalin had only behaved a little bit differently it would have been all right. Well, O.K., there will always be evasions, always somebody who can justify this, that and the other thing, but it will remain a faith. Because people need it, and that will be what happens – but that's done immeasurable harm. Again, important books. I can remember a book by a guy called 'Acton', called the *Illusion of the Epoch*, i.e. Marxism, and that book and its title influenced me greatly as well in that regard, because, as I say, accuse me not of being one of those people who just sling off at Marxism. I've spend a hell of a lot of time with Marxism, and I've come to the conclusion that it is precisely that. It is the biggest 'con' ever in the history of mankind, because so many people have been poisoned by it, intellectually diminished and enslaved by it. You see this is the weird thing about it, I suppose, that people say that 'O'Farrell is enslaved' – I've heard that said to my face, that I'm enslaved by this stupid and constrictive doctrine which prevents abortions and contraception and all this stuff. I'm just a hireling of the Pope! Well, I feel that this is the venom of people who are themselves enslaved. I don't go around saying to people that 'you're the hireling of Karl Marx, long dead', or 'you're a creature of Gorbachev', or whatever one would say to people of this kind. But yet this extraordinary attempt to diminish one's own position, or worse still, as we said before, simply not attending to what is said simply because it is categorized in a certain way, and dismissed even before there is any intellectual contact

made with it. You wonder about people like that, because if they can't make intellectual contact with it, or they won't, then I suppose invincible ignorance is something that you can't cope with, is it?!

So far as the question of faith goes, I think I said something provocative to you on the last occasion when we spoke about faith, but I've forgotten.

MH: It was to do with the question of 'Christian History'. Some people have attempted to argue, C.T. McIntyre among them about Herbert Butterfield, tends to argue that Butterfield was a Christian historian, because the confluence in his life was so unitary that you couldn't tell where one stopped and the other began.

O'Farrell: Well, I find a lot of that stuff in McIntyre to be very tedious and depressing, really. I think it is a sort of jargonised pseudo-attempt to deal with these problems. I suppose my respect for Herbert Butterfield was somewhat diminished by the fact that when I went to UCD, one of the staff members was Peter Butterfield. And in face when Deirdre and I were in Dublin, we walked into the secretary's office, and Peter was there. I hadn't seen him, obviously, for a long time. Peter's a nice guy. He is, but he's very much affected, put it that way, by being Herbert's son. I never had much respect for the vision of Herbert that was refracted through his son, quite candidly. I don't want that misunderstood. I thought Peter had been ill-served by his father. Peter seemed to me to be a genuine and nice person but he is not well-served by Dad. A lot of that stuff seems to me to be terribly confused and also extremely pompous. 'My faith', you know, oh dear me, 'my faith'! As if it is something you wear on your forehead. I don't see that at all. You are the person you are, and you write what you do. If it is properly integrated, then that whole situation will work, and will speak to people as working. But to self-consciously, somehow or other divorce the two, or to see than as separate operations, is quite false. I see myself as 'me' - but who doesn't! I happen to be these other things, but it is the me who speaks. Now, the me is obviously an amalgam of beliefs and emotions and thoughts, and whatever else that the me consists of. But insofar as that produces historical work, it is a totality, and it is also, of course, like any work of art, contrivance. It is the me working in artistic mode. If you write something then obviously

you're going to conceive it first, you're going to amend it, you've got to do all sorts of things with it, before you're finished, before you liberate it and set it off in its journey towards somebody else's mind. And of course what they make of it can be very different from what you intend them to make of it, because they've got their own subjective apparatus working away at it as well. The other thing – in writing books such as one writes about religion, what I'm anxious to do, I suppose, is to say, 'This is how it was, and not more than that'. If somebody else is to react to it, it has to be within them. If you do a good job at saying 'this is how it was', in depicting faith or good works, or whatever, the better the job you do at that, the truer the reaction of a person of good will will be to it. It has to be a person of good will, of course, but it will be them who make the leap to meet you. You can't go crusading in to them and saying 'I hereby evangelize you with this marvellous piece of historical literature', or whatever. That's just nonsense. Which is why I find a lot of these sorts of discussions extremely self-conscious and also extremely futile. What is to be gained by it? And the satisfaction that you get from it is the satisfaction of being true to yourself. If you are a good performer on the violin, then the satisfaction you get in playing Mozart is being true to what you understand is the essence of that music, and being true to the technical capacity that you have of exhausting the demands that that music makes on you. And that satisfaction seems to me to be what one is looking for. And what occurs next, is that your audience applauds, because they sharing in that gift, the gift that Mozart has made to us, and that your teacher and your self have combined in liberating. And having liberated it, the audience reacts in its own way of liberation to that, so that everybody is freer for that. Now, this is really portentous. I do see, I guess, the writing of history as an exercise in liberation, as freeing people from the past. I say freeing people from the past in the sense of enabling them to comprehend it more clearly, so that they can live with greater liberty. None of those are religious terms are they? But. They are basically religious terms, though somebody could say that they were more like the French or the American revolutions, that sort of concept. But basically I think that people in those great movements of humanity towards freedom are moving in a real religious sense, however anti-religious or secular those particular examples might be. These are people who are yearning to be unshackled from whatever is constraining them. I do find myself in a position of antagonism, of opposition to the

main currents in Australian historical writing. I've got to be careful, I think, that I don't find myself contriving that too much. That's a danger, manufacturing an isolation, or trying to overblow it for the sake of making a case. That's something you've got to watch. But on the other hand there is this Melbourne-generated imprisonment of the whole mode of conceiving Australian history, which is traditional, which has had its uses, but I think its uses are past. Even in the ethnic make-up of the country its uses have passed, but nevertheless it is a very considerable weight for Australian history to carry around. I said before, I think, about thinking in terms of some wider field. In the state in which this country is in at the moment, when you've got a cultural crisis, or I see it as such, I think it is extremely important that the right things are done, that are historically written in the country, because our future is at a cross-roads. We are always at a cross-roads, but I think there is a sense of real crisis about the identity of the country, about directions, about what should be preserved, what should be abandoned, and what should be fought for (and against), which is something that a writer should be concerned about. I guess the other point that is important – I keep thinking of new points that are important. The whole writing matter is important, the whole style is very important to me. I think it is vital that the historian communicate in a way in which the wider literary world can be involved, can react, can relate to the historical … And here Manning Clark has been of immense benefit, I think, despite some of the weird and wonderful crypto-phrases which he invented. He did communicate in a literary way and made people feel that this was part of the national culture, in a way which previously historians, putting aside your men at the beginning, didn't do, or fell out of doing because of the nature of the population changes and all the rest of it, but certainly weren't doing at the time when Manning started to write. I think we've got to get back, somehow or another, to bridging the gap between literature and history in a way in which we (I mean the historians and the cultural life generally) won't be taken over by the novelists and writers of literary criticism. Writers and that Eng-Lit type people. I don't wish to exclude them, I simply wish them to be on an equal basis with other creative people in the cultural store. That seems to me to be extremely important too.

MH: If I was to compare what you've just said about what you think your role in history is, compared to say, the McIntyre stuff, on the one hand you have someone from a Methodist background, inner piety and all of that, seeing the world as a bunch of individuals, while on the other hand, you are stressing history as vocation, as a purpose to change the world.

O'Farrell: You are hearing correctly. I feel very strongly. I think it does. If you don't exercise your vocation to change the world, somebody else will. Again, I have no apologies for having a combative attitude towards these sorts of thing. I do see civilization as a struggle between good and evil, between positive and negative, between growth and decline and all those sorts of things. I think I should be on the side of the angels, and I see so many people who are not, or who are just drifting or who are actively pushing back in the opposite direction. Yes, I see that certainly there is a vocation of history, just as there is a vocation of everything else. I've written an article very recently on Priest-historians, attacking the priests who have increasingly eaten into Australian Catholic history. In my view, they have a vocation already, and it seems to me that there is a contradiction between their vocation and the vocation of the historian. I've got great respect for the good priest – he's a better man than I am, etc. But I have no respect for people who want it all ways. I don't think that's an appropriate – well, it may well be appropriate to carry both vocations in special circumstances, but as an ordinary way of doing things. I think it diminishes historical work to simply one of those things which you can do in your spare time, or just to brighten a dull moment. To do it simply because you feel like doing it seems to me to diminish me, and what I'm trying to do, in a way in which I just won't put up with. I'm trying, like everybody else is (or anybody decent) to improve the world a bit, in the way in which I am trained and paid to do. So, on that I feel, not defensive, but combative. I'll fight for that. But also, I've got to recognise that the whole thing boils down to how many people you can persuade to read what you have to say. And it being a free country, then you've got to use all the wiles and all the devices that are available to you, not only in terms of what abilities you've got to write well or to do this that and the other, but also to get the stuff into the shops, and to produce something of which people like the cover, and those basic sorts of things. And that's all

part of the job as well, and ought to be done as well as possible. I get very cross, and I've written on this one too, about the quality of production of a lot of religious history. It looks dull – cheap, second rate, badly produced, all of that sort of stuff. I think that's extremely bad for a whole range of reasons, some of them theological (you don't offer up your worst gifts to the Almighty), but hard-headed, in the sense that these days merchandising is a matter of skill, and expertise, in which the sensible Christian is involved to the extent that he or she has to be to meet the world on its own terms. So you can write a masterpiece, and have it shoddily produced, and nobody will buy it. Then where the hell are you? So all of those things seem to me to be important in this vocation, although that is a word that I don't particularly like, I must say. It is a word which has been, I suppose, degraded. It has a sort of pious tinge to it which I'm not to happy with, eh?!