Abstract
In 1947, 90% of Australians described their ethnic origins as British or Irish (Price 1999), a period when religious affiliations were still a prime indicator of ethnic background: ‘Catholics’ were largely of Irish, and Protestants of British, origin. Catholic-Protestant sectarianism in 20th century Australia has been thoroughly documented, by Kildea, Campion, and other historians. Entrenched prejudice on both sides sometimes resulted in Catholics and Protestants living, working, socialising and being educated in distinct communities, with little or no intercourse, thereby perpetuating the divisions. But one group flouted the polarisation: those who married across the religious divide. One in five of all marriages from 1901-1961 comprised ‘mixed marriage’, a union between Catholic and Protestant (Mol 1970).

This paper examines the experiences of those who occupied this hybrid world, at the border between Irish Catholic and British Protestant Australia. While mixed marriage often caused hostilities between the spousal families, what of the next generation? Can they be seen as agents of reconciliation between the two groups? Did these children of mixed marriage foster the integration of two bitterly opposed cultures? Or did entrenched discrimination prohibit the creation of a mediated middle ground? If a hybrid ‘third way’ was fomented through mixed marriage, what were its tenets and its legacy, and what lessons does it hold for contemporary multicultural Australia?

The paper is based on 50 oral history interviews conducted for a doctoral thesis (McHugh 2010). The unexpurgated collection has been acquired by the National Library of Australia, to be made available as an online digital archive. Excerpts from the interviews were included in a radio documentary series, Marrying Out, broadcast nationally in Australia, Ireland and New Zealand, but this paper contains previously unpublished material.

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