Ted McGrath’s life found its focus when he met Eileen O’Connor. He was an active thirty-year old priest and she was nineteen. Enthusiasm gripped him as he discovered that this crippled girl, a mystic, then unable to walk, shared the same hope he had: of helping the sick poor in their own homes. Both believed they had been directly inspired by Our Lady, through Eileen, to found Our Lady’s Nurses for the Poor, the Brown Nurses. They agreed the only test needed to receive help was that the person was unable to pay.

The intensity of Fr Ted’s determination for this cause reflected the deprivation his family experienced in a small country village in north-eastern Victoria in the late 1800s. His father’s alcoholism caused his own death when Ted was three. Resulting impoverishment led to the deaths of two baby sisters the following year. His mother was killed in an accident over which the police charged a man with murder when Ted was seven. Surviving these events and limited education opportunities, Ted became a Missionary of the Sacred Heart (MSC), an excellent public speaker, with energetic self confidence, who was hard working and greatly liked.

Our Lady’s Nurses survived unexpected opposition, much of it focused on McGrath himself. It is revealed in this book as an intriguing clash of cultures caused by the Dutch, naturalised German Visitor, Hubert Linckens, in Australia as an agent of the MSC General Council. A man with an overbearing desire to control, Linckens took a set on McGrath, especially because of his commitment to the Brown Nurses. He expelled Fr Ted from the order, and suspended him from the priesthood.

McGrath and Eileen achieved Ted’s reinstatement in Rome and, although exiled from his homeland over many years, his life as a priest, and his deep commitment to the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, were undiminished. He worked as a highly regarded preacher of missions in parishes in England, Ireland, the United States and in Hungary with an order of Sisters not unlike Our Lady’s Nurses. Notably he was a military chaplain during the Great War in France on the Western Front, decorated with the Military Cross and recommended for the VC for outstanding bravery.

Ted returned to Australia in 1941 and continued in active ministry well into older age.
A Lonely Road

Fr Ted McGrath msc
A Lonely Road

Fr Ted McGrath msc
A Great Australian

John Hosie
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Foreword

John Hosie has described Father Edward McGrath as a great Australian. The extraordinary story he tells is full of remarkable people and incidents. In the telling he shows McGrath as being quintessentially Australian, but he creates in the setting of the life a vivid picture of the heroic struggles of the formative years of the Australian character. We all share a largely urban culture, but most of us have not-too-distant memories of rural experience. The young years of Father McGrath are instructive for anyone who asks: What is it that makes an Australian?

His later very long life tells us what makes an Australian Catholic. From unlikely origins McGrath lived intensely the faith, the devotion, the tradition of Irish Australia. He lived into the multicultural age, and his varied international experiences—unusual for his time—helped him to fit
into the new church. Yet the Irish-Australian background is still our home base. McGrath illustrates this.

There is a special lesson it can tell. Australian Catholics must be Catholic in an Australian way. For too long we were content to accept the experience of older national churches into our lives, but Australians are not Irish or French or German or American. Our church has to grow in Australian soil. We shall contribute the Australian experience of the Gospel to the universal church. Father McGrath and his co-founder, Eileen O’Connor, created a specifically Australian apostolate and religious order in Our Lady’s Nurses for the Poor.

A Catholic priest, he was not narrow minded in his loyalty. By nature gregarious, he made friends easily, and he was ready to work with anyone, irrespective of religion. His military service demonstrated this, and he preserved the same attitude in civil life. His opponents were, unfortunately, of his own faith.

McGrath’s life as a Missionary of the Sacred Heart was almost totally one of conflict. Only determination to save his vocation at any cost kept him steady in the face of incredible inhumanity from his religious superiors. The author frankly narrates the cumulatively crushing decisions that made Father McGrath’s life a continuing Way of the Cross.

His story teaches us a chastening lesson. Hosie makes clear that the shocking decisions and policies were the work of good men. Their view of life in religion and the relationship of authority to individuals may—or may not—have been appropriate in an earlier age. Pope John XXIII showed us that the church must always adapt its
methods to changing conditions. The sufferings of Father McGrath painfully speak of the cost of untimely rigidity.

John Hosie has mined many sources to tell his story. He tells it well. He reveals a new hero of the Australian church, one we ought to know to grow as Australian Catholics.

T P Boland
Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure to offer sincerest thanks, once again, to Our Lady’s Nurses for the Poor, congregational leader Sister Gabriel Bast OLN, the Leadership Team and all the Sisters for their invitation and encouragement in writing the story of their co-founder Fr Ted McGrath.

My thanks also to Fr Tom Boland who has continued to be a stalwart support, and has kindly shared his insights into the meaning of the life of this great Australian in a thoughtful foreword.

The Sacred Heart Fathers, both in Australia and overseas, were unfailingly generous in allowing access to their archives relating to one of their loyal members.

Many of his numerous McGrath and MacKay relatives have put on paper reminiscences of ‘Father’ that were most useful in helping see him through their personal knowledge or their care in preserving the reminiscences
of previous generations. Among them Ned Pelly of Yarrawonga enabled me to ‘find’ Fr Ted in his home areas around Bungeet, Devenish, St James, Thoona and Benalla. Tim Holland’s interest in his grand-uncle was shown many years ago when he recorded an interview with Fr McGrath in his retirement, and I am grateful for his continuing active support.

The Coogee archives of the Sisters house a treasure trove of material about their co-founder, including his letters that enable us to trace his travels overseas in Italy, France, Great Britain, Ireland, Hungary and the United States during the many years of his exile from his homeland. My sincere thanks to the Sisters for access to this vast collection, and to the archivist Chantal Celjean.

Graeme Elliott and the Benalla and District Family History Group were keenly interested in the story of an outstanding son of north-eastern Victoria, and assisted in a range of much appreciated ways.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Oszeb Bruckner in Hungary for his kind generosity. In response to no more than a few emails and a phone call from a stranger in Australia, he gave an entire day from his busy schedule to help me find and follow the journey, more than eighty years ago, of Fr McGrath, Sister Margaret Slachta and her Sisters of Social Service. We saw where they went from Budapest by train across the northern border to the city of Kosice in Slovakia, and then by coach to the village of Smolnik in the mountains, where he gave them an intensive spiritual retreat.

To these and so many others, my warmest thanks for helping let future generations know about a true
Australian who dedicated his life to helping those in need at great personal cost.

John Hosie
A Note on Sources

The following pages are drawn from a wide range of sources. The archives of Our Lady’s Nurses for the Poor, Coogee (OLNA) are most significant, and unless otherwise stated virtually all quotes from the range of Fr McGrath’s writings and letters to and from him are preserved there. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart archives were kindly made available to me in both Kensington Australia (MSCK) and Rome (MSCR), as were certain Vatican archives. Some events in Fr McGrath’s life have previously been expressed in more detail in the author’s Eileen: The Life of Eileen O’Connor: Foundress of Our Lady’s Nurses for the Poor (2004), and reference is made to relevant chapters.
Introduction

For a secular world this story of an Australian Catholic priest is surprisingly rich and rewarding. From a troubled early childhood in an impoverished family living in a rural hamlet Fr Ted McGrath rose to real greatness. His inspiration was to help those whose lives were like his own early years. His commitment to his faith was deep. But the serious challenges he faced did not come from people of other faiths—though it was an era when sectarianism was rife. In a more classic conflict, opposition came from powerful people within his own church.

At its heart was a clash of cultures, involving a man from a strongly European background coming to Australia and despising the attitudes to authority he found. He had no time for anyone who questioned his authority, or defended the right of an individual to a fair go.
Central to Ted McGrath’s life is that he was a member of a religious order, and co-founder of another. Many regard religious orders as deeply mysterious. Why do people join them? How do they work? Do the members of an order have any say in what they do? A few words of explanation are appropriate.

The reasons a person joins a religious order are personal and can be entirely different for any two people who take this step. They may wish to deepen their spirituality and their relationship with God, and give more meaning to their lives. At the same time they may want to work with a group of like-minded companions helping those in need. Religious orders are able to offer a sense of community, and the order becomes that person’s new family.

Orders have been part of the narrative of the Catholic Church right back to the early centuries of Christianity. Typically, orders were and still are founded by far-sighted leaders who attract followers seeking a greater personal dedication to God. In those early times some individuals wanted to live by themselves as hermits, but in what became the monastic movement, others formed into groups, and lived under the authority of a wise leader, as their abbot or abbess. In the West, especially from the time of Benedict, the sixth century AD, they lived and worked in monasteries—and still do today. Ever since, monasteries have been places in which anyone seeking help can find spiritual healing, or food, or shelter, or care when sick or injured.

But unlike today, these structures were originally established when the great majority of the population were unable to read or write. In such societies, rulers, whether
lay or religious, were much more parental. A kindly paternalism was expected of them. But to question, let alone challenge, the decision of the ruler was almost unthinkable, and sometimes dangerous.

The two religious orders mentioned here are of another, more active kind, that had their beginnings in the early Middle Ages. Their members dedicate themselves not only to personal spiritual development, but they also work outside the religious house, teaching in schools, helping in hospitals or elsewhere.

The active orders can be dedicated to missionary work, preaching conversion of heart, teaching or giving help in a range of other ways to those facing particular challenges. As people and their needs altered, new and old religious orders took different directions. For example, in the changing world of the 1800s, being unable to read or write became a serious social handicap, but thousands could not afford to learn. They were taught to do so by members of many orders founded for that purpose. Once free public education became a government responsibility, many of those teaching religious turned to other projects, and today few new orders are being founded in the West primarily for teaching.

Like the Catholic Church itself, religious orders work according to a hierarchical model of authority—with a pyramid structure. At the top of the church hierarchy is a pope; a local diocese is headed by an archbishop or bishop. Religious orders and their local communities are headed by an abbot or abbess, a superior or leader. Traditionally the work of the members of a religious order is co-ordinated under the leader’s direction. In a spiritual
sense the members agree to help achieve the goals of the congregation by taking a vow of obedience. It is rare for the vow to be called on, and church law requires that explicit words be used when giving a command to ensure the religious knows the vow is being invoked, but ordinarily the members accept the instructions of the leader.

Of course, notwithstanding their commitment towards doing good, all religious orders are made up of people, and like all human beings, they are capable of wrongdoing. Power, including religious hierarchical power, can tend to corrupt.

Contrasting with the term ‘hierarchy’, CS Lewis coined the charming word, ‘lowerarchy’. As will be seen, Fr Ted McGrath was in the lowerarchy and faced Fr Hubert Linckens who was very much in the hierarchy. At the time ‘blind obedience’ was often presented as the more perfect way to obey in religious orders—as an ideal. Fr Ted was close to the truth in summarising blind obedience as meaning, ‘subjects have no rights’. More precisely it meant the subject should do whatever the superior ordered, whether or not it even made sense. It was hardly likely to be put into practice as described in the classic story he had read during his novitiate: that in the early centuries of monasticism, an abbot in Egypt put one of his monks to the test by ordering him to plant cabbages upside down. But in theory at least, it could have been. In that account the monk was praised for obeying, with the reassuring biblical quote, ‘The obedient man shall speak of victories’ (Proverbs 21:28). Today it would be described as a senseless command that need not be obeyed. Blind,
unthinking obedience is not a virtue. In other words, members of a religious order do have a say in what they do.

When challenging the idea that ‘subjects have no rights’, Fr McGrath went on to say, with his authentically Australian outlook, ‘We here insist that subjects have very definite rights, and the Superior who does not recognize this is running absolutely counter to all that Our Divine Lord taught, and put into practice at all times and in all places.’

Socially, the beginning of the 1900s were years of dramatic world change. It is not widely realised that while it still had further to go on racial issues, Australia led the world in two major ways—as the country whose citizens had the highest per capita gross domestic product, and where virtually all the major processes of liberal democracy were first introduced. These included universal suffrage without property tests, secret ballots and votes for women. Within that concept of human rights Ted McGrath challenged the idea that subjects have no rights. Most other countries were still lagging in acceptance of such changes and it is interesting that his Australian views about rights of the individual, and a fair go, were condemned by a man who had been in a Germany where those Australian advances would be withheld for many tragic decades. During his years there, anti-Catholic legislation expelled the Jesuits, then other religious, and brought all schools under state control, making life very burdensome for Catholics. They kept their heads down. He achieved success in that hazardous world by having a carefully exact knowledge of the law.
This cultural experience convinced him that to suggest that what he found in Australia would be the way of the future was akin to believing in fairies. In his judgement, the egalitarianism of Australians revealed a stunning ignorance of the realities of life and was possibly very risky. He expelled McGrath from the order, and when Fr Ted successfully appealed this decision to a Vatican congregation, Fr Linckens rejected its judgement, stating he was opposed to appeals against sentences. He dismissed the Australian ethos as ‘Individualism’—seeing it as at least dangerous, if not evil.

The Brown Nurses were co-founded by Eileen O’Connor, and Fr Ted McGrath, member of a religious order, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC from French and Latin) founded in 1854. Almost exactly a hundred years later, the Brown Nurses became a religious order, Our Lady’s Nurses for the Poor. The story of these two orders illustrates the different times in which each was established and worked. As will be seen, at the time the Nurses first came together, in 1913, they could not have become a religious order approved by the Catholic Church without changing what the two planners saw as a fundamental element of their work, namely that individual Nurses would help the sick-poor in their own homes. This remained impossible for religious until years later. In the 1960s the Second Vatican Council invited religious orders to make a reappraisal of their mission, initially by turning to the writings of their founders to see how those early inspirations could be better achieved in the twentieth century. Many changes took place in the ways apostolic works were undertaken, and new ones were
added. At the same time, the model of religious life was re-examined. Over the next decade many religious orders began involving their members in making decisions on a range of issues. For instance, where new leaders had previously been chosen by a hierarchical appointment, democratic voting systems were introduced. But interestingly, a number of older orders had successfully followed such practices for centuries!

The life of Fr Ted McGrath MSC was lived in the context of particular countries, eras and circumstances. One of those contexts was his lifelong commitment to be a Sacred Heart Father. It hardly needs to be said that this biography of one man is not a history of the Sacred Heart Congregation in Australia any more than it is the history of Australia itself or of those many other contexts, eras and countries in which he lived his long life.

Fr McGrath was only one of many outstanding MSC priests and brothers, a number of whom are household names. It would be unfair to make a judgement about the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Australia on the basis of events in the life of one man, albeit a great one. The order was his family. Despite many vicissitudes he remained a steadfast MSC. He once wrote:

Let me make it clear that my stand, and fight, never was, and is not now, against our [MSC] Society. It was, it is, and while it lasts, will be a conscientious and determined battle against individual members of my own congregation.
The determination suffusing these words reflects Fr Ted McGrath’s deep personal commitment to remaining a Missionary of the Sacred Heart.

The lonely road he followed is revealed in the following pages.