

## BOOK REVIEW

*DARKNESS: The Conversion of Anglican Armidale, 1960-2019* by Thomas Fudge. St John University Press, Vancouver, 2024. pp864. ISBN 9798985989229. Hbk £34.00. doi:[10.1017/S1740355324000147](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000147)

This book is concerned with understanding how and why the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Armidale in New South Wales shifted, as it did in the 1960s and 1970s, from a previous position of a generously welcoming Anglican inclusiveness, marked by a rich diversity in terms of styles of worship and ways of presenting the Gospel, to a nearly uniform orientation towards an ultra-conservative biblicism (that some would say was ‘naïve’ or even ‘fundamentalist’) linked to a rigidly exclusive evangelicalism, that many Armidale Anglicans judged to be of a particularly self-opinionated and unattractive variety.

It has to be said at the outset that this is the quite monumental and thoroughly researched work of a professional historian. Professor Thomas Fudge teaches history at the University of New England at Armidale. He has a particular interest in medieval and Reformation Church history with a sustained research speciality focussed upon medieval heresies. His skills of research and analysis and his fluid writing ability have been brought to a phenomenon of the modern Church, of which he has himself had first-hand experience. The reader cannot but be impressed by the thoroughness with which Professor Fudge has researched the various published books and articles and other documentary materials relating to his subject, including the voluminous resource of the hitherto unpublished diary and press archive of Evan Wetherell who was a much-respected Dean of Armidale prior to his move to Christ Church, South Yarra in Melbourne in 1970. This big book runs to some 864 pages. The text is enhanced by the inclusion of an array of photographs which help to put faces on the protagonists. The book also contains a welter of anecdotal material, some of which at times seems to be somewhat incidental to the main thrust of the story and perhaps unnecessary, until it is perceived that this kind of material helps to put a human face on people. There is a discourse, for example, on Dean Wetherell’s dog named Perry which accompanied him everywhere for many years, but which eventually had to be put down. The diary account of the impact of the trauma of this helps accomplish a transition from Wetherell the Dean to Wetherell the human person.

In addition, Professor Fudge has augmented findings based upon these documentary materials through his direct contact with a substantial list of correspondents and oral interviewees – in the end, no fewer than 255 of them – so as to arrive at a closer approximation to the nature of the reception and response to the ‘conversion’ of Anglican Armidale that occurred from around 1964 onwards. Professor Fudge is very upfront in saying that he is telling the story not from the triumphalist point of view of those who accomplished the transition, for this story has often been told and celebrated, especially by those who have persuaded themselves that it was a work of grace accomplished through them by the Holy Spirit. Rather, Fudge tells the story from the point of view of those who to date have had no voice – those who viewed the evangelical take-over as an unhappy tragedy, accomplished not by grace but by plotting and intrigue, the calculated stacking of electoral bodies and the manipulation of unsuspecting parishioners, all with the quite deliberate intention of suppressing one form of church life and replacing it with another. As the author himself says, this book challenges the dominant narrative of the history of the Armidale diocese. It follows the sensible Latin dictum *audi alteram partem* ‘let the other side be heard’ (p.20)

In answer to the question of *how* this take-over was accomplished, Professor Fudge points out that the initial driver of this work was undoubtedly the gifted John Chapman, whom Fudge describes as ‘garrulous’. Chapman came to the Diocese of Armidale from Sydney and served in a number of diocesan posts that allowed him to operate in free-range across the diocese. The episcopal election of Clive Kerle from Sydney in 1964, which was widely understood to have been orchestrated by Chapman after a traumatic and drawn-out electoral process, was followed by the election of a succession of like-minded (and Fudge would say closed-minded) bishops who ensured that appointments to parishes were of priests in a single mould. While parishioners quietly left or became resigned to putting up with what was happening around them, more broadly Anglican clergy gradually accepted appointments in other dioceses or went to other Christian denominations. It was a quiet but systematic revolution that developed despite Clive Kerle’s benign desire not to interfere with parish worshipping traditions, though he triggered a good deal of consternation at St Mary’s, West Armidale when he sought to suppress the regular parish dance and the practice of fundraising by using raffles – social practices that Kerle believed were not sanctioned by biblical principles.

The theology that motivated Kerle to try to suppress these parish activities gradually morphed into a more sustained and rigorous determination to bring worshipping traditions into conformity with a preferred norm. Despite promises that parish worshipping traditions would be respected, chasubles ceased to be worn, often the lectionary was abandoned in favour of ‘teaching’ on preferred themes, and sequential studies of whole biblical books, and parishioners regularly complained of sermons of unwelcome length that tended to repeat a set formula, most notably the penal substitution theory of the atonement. Sanctuary lamps, and even Greek Orthodox icons, disappeared from churches without notice or explanation (and perhaps in spite of the fact that they may have been secured by faculty), leading some parishioners to report their theft to the police! Of course, the Church and its worship are always being reformed and changed, but usually only after considerable discussion and consultation, and very importantly, with the consent of the laity. The

'conversion' of Armidale into a colony of Sydney hardly stands as a paradigm of pastoral sensitivity.

By way of answering the question of *why* this occurred, Fudge accounts for the motivation of Chapman and his colleagues by highlighting the delusionary belief that they were the only true believers. What had gone before was viewed in a derogatory way as lukewarm and ineffectual, lacking 'proper' biblical teaching. The life of the Church was said barely to be sustained by people who hardly qualified to be called Christian at all. Professor Fudge's assessment is that: 'Cultures of fear and suspicion drive politicized theological cultures that are critical of other views and practices while simultaneously esteeming their own as godly, biblical, unassailable truth, and concluding that they alone are properly Christian' (p.12). In other words, the take-over was motivated by the belief that what had gone before was so 'wishy-washy' that the transition was justified. It quite simply *had* to be achieved by whatever means – as though the end justifies the means. In effect, it was a transition not from one style or expression of Anglicanism to another equally valid form of Anglicanism, but from something that was deemed barely to qualify as an authentic form of Christian faith and practice at all, to what was imagined to be the *only* truly Christian belief and practice. Bishop Rick Lewers, for example, produced a presentation to mark the centenary of the diocese from which those who heard it, necessarily concluded that authentic Christianity only came to Armidale *after* the 35-year ministry of Bishop John Moyes and the election of Clive Kerle as his successor in 1964. One episode in this story of take-over was actually described at the time as 'a victory for the Gospel . . . rising like the sun over the margins of an indifferent past' (p.418). Professor. Fudge has devoted a good deal of time to researching what he believes is a more balanced appreciation of the ministries of Moyes and former priests of the Diocese of Armidale, many of whom are shown to have been highly regarded as pastors of distinction, and Christians of unquestioned faith and devotion and generosity of spirit.

This book hardly makes for edifying reading, for as the title suggests, it lifts the lid off what is in fact a shadowy and dark side of the life of the Church, as unbecoming as it is regrettable. Nevertheless, it is a book that is certainly full of interest and has a great deal to teach us all. Even though it represents a concentrated effort to understand a single development in a small, largely rural Australian diocese, it has enormous relevance across the broad context of the Anglican Church of Australia as a paradigm of what could possibly eventuate elsewhere at the hands of unscrupulous political operators, whether Evangelical or Anglo-Catholic, who are hell-bent on recreating the Church in their own image. There are certainly lessons to be learned from the Armidale story about the need for prayerful vigilance, about the importance of a tolerable diversity in a broad and welcoming Church, and about the need for pastoral sensitivity in ensuring that newly appointed clergy are a 'reasonable fit' with the historical traditions of specific worshipping communities rather than complete misfits in terms of churchmanship, let alone the need to honour promises especially in relation to this.

In a discourse in Chapter 2, Fudge also highlights the importance of a carefully examined and critically assessed faith in the face of the persistent danger of falling into a somewhat simplistic naïve biblicism. The importance of genuine theological dialogue in the pursuit of truth is validly emphasized, instead of a defensive

apologetic based on the false belief that the truth is already the sectarian possession of an ecclesial elite. Not least, this book alerts us to the importance of sustaining an awareness of the limits of religious and theological knowledge that in an important sense ‘passes all understanding’ and of the pitfall of arrogantly imagining that we are always right and that others should click their heels and salute us because we always know what is best for them. We are thus all indebted to Professor Fudge for alerting us to the need always to seek to conform to the pattern of Jesus, the humble servant of others, rather than succumb to sordid ecclesial power politics.

*Peter Carnley*  
*Sometime Archbishop of Perth and Primate of Australia, Fremantle, Australia*