

Frightened Freethinkers
and
Timid Rationalists:
a case of attempted censorship

by
NIGEL SINNOTT

with a Foreword by
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IN NOVEMBER 2005, after a public seminar at the Unitarian Church in East Melbourne, I got talking to my friend David Miller, organiser of Atheist Society and Existentialist Society talks and meetings in Melbourne. During the course of conversation, David asked me if I knew about attempts to stop a book review being published some years earlier. I said that I had been the writer of the review. As a result of this conversation I decided to write an account of why I wrote this review and the extraordinary troubles I had with it. An article, and now this pamphlet, are the result. — Nigel Sinnott.

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FOREWORD

BARRY WILLIAMS

WHEN, in 1997, I received a review written by Nigel Sinnott of a book of interest to Skeptics, as Editor I agreed to publish it in *the Skeptic*. I later learned from Nigel and two old friends, James Gerrand and Ron Marke, that members of both the Rationalist and the Humanist societies in New South Wales claimed to have received legal advice that Nigel's article was both plagiarism and defamatory. I considered that advice to be risible and published the review; nine years later we still have yet to hear from any lawyers.

Nigel's original review, and his subsequent recounting of the events that followed, are fine examples of a freethinker thinking freely and he is to be commended.

Frightened Freethinkers: A Case of Attempted Censorship

NIGEL SINNOTT

THERE are often emotional reasons why a disbeliever in religion becomes an outspoken atheist and a noisy, rusted-on rationalist rather than a quiet agnostic. There were in my case, but this is not the place to discuss them. Suffice it to say that since 1963 I have been actively involved in humanist, rationalist and secular organisations in England and, later, Australia. But in the 1990s something happened that made me consider, for a short while, severing all my links with organised freethought.

In 1995 the Sinnotts, who were living in Alexandra, rural Victoria, had a visit from Ron Marke, who had been secretary of the Rationalist Association of New South Wales and editor for 23 years of its journal, the *Rationalist News*.

While he was with us, Ron bought at the local newsagent's a

copy of Sarah Hamilton-Byrne's book, *Unseen Unheard Unknown* (Penguin Australia, 1995), an exposé of Anne Hamilton-Byrne's cult, *The Family*. The book interested Ron because many of the events described had taken place near Alexandra at Kai Lama, *The Family's* property at Taylor's Bay on Lake Eildon.

I knew of the book's existence, but had deferred reading it as I was sure the contents would be very distressing. I had read about the cruel and scandalous activities of *The Family* in a number of reports and features in *The Age* (Melbourne), mainly in the late 1980s, and I had sent newspaper cuttings on the subject to the (then) editor of *The Freethinker*, Bill McIlroy, in England.

Ron Marke returned to Sydney and bought another copy of Sarah Hamilton-Byrne's book. He posted it to me as a gift, and I received it on 19 October 1995. I realised the time had come for me to "bite the bullet" and read the book. I did so, and found it moving and most impressive.

The book was a damning indictment of the depths of cruelty to which gullibility, authoritarianism and blind loyalty will lead. As I knew the area with which much of it was concerned, I decided I would try to contribute my mite to making the book better known. I wrote an article-length review, entitled "The Cruel Cult of Anne Hamilton-Byrne".

***The Freethinker* accepts but does not publish**

As the freethought press in Australia might already have reviews of this book in hand, I submitted my typescript to Peter Brearey, who had succeeded Bill McIlroy as editor of *The Freethinker*. In response, I received a letter (dated 8 November) thanking me for my "excellent piece". Brearey added:

Kindly check, amend and return the enclosed proof to Wakefield [Yorkshire] as quickly as you can; I would like to use the article in the December issue of *The Freethinker*. Thinking as a former Editor, are you content about the legal angles? Have there been any injunctions, threats of legal action or whatever against the author or publisher, etc., etc.? . . . Anyway, if you're happy about such things, I'm happy.

I was not concerned about libel because I knew that the serious allegations in the book had been given in evidence in the courts, and had been published in *Age* articles. However, the question was a reasonable one.

Brearey's letter and proofs arrived on the morning of 17 November 1995. I rang Penguin Books Australia and was assured that the book had not been found libellous by a court and that there was no legal action against it in process. (The Family's leaders were almost certainly keeping their heads well down!) I checked the proofs and returned them in the afternoon post with a letter saying I had 'phoned the publishers and was happy about the legal angles.

My review-article did not appear in the December 1995 *Freethinker* or, to my puzzlement, in any subsequent issue. I wrote to Brearey on several occasions (for instance 8 February and 30 May 1996) asking if my text was still going to be published. The letters were ignored, and I never heard from Brearey again.

I assumed that Brearey lacked the manners and courage to tell me he was not, after all, going to use my copy. Later I informed Keith Porteous Wood, general secretary (now executive director) of the National Secular Society and also secretary of G. W. Foote & Company, publishers of *The Freethinker*, about the matter in a letter (dated 22 June 1997), and added: "When I was *Freethinker* editor, I would never have treated someone in such a shabby way. Any contributor of an accepted article who asked me why it had not yet appeared got a return-of-post reply."

In December 2005 I received a letter from Barbara Smoker, a former president of the N.S.S. and regular contributor to *The Freethinker* who had known the late Peter Brearey. She agreed that I should have been notified of any decision not to publish my review, "but at that date I think Peter was already terminally ill" and "I well remember how gaunt and sallow he was looking in his last year." In a later letter Barbara suggested that the Board of G. W. Foote & Co. was probably dilatory in delegating Brearey's responsibilities.

It is just possible, therefore, that someone else took over Peter Brearey's duties, and decided to "kill" the review and not

answer any correspondence about this. On the other hand, Brearey accepted the review *two and a half years* before his death on 9 May 1998.

The *Rationalist News* response

When I was satisfied that my review-article was not, in fact, going to appear in *The Freethinker*, I informed Ron Marke and authorised him, probably in late 1996, to offer a copy of the typescript to his successor as editor of the *Rationalist News*, Peter Hanna.

In due course, Hanna asked me if there were any legal problems with the book. I again rang Penguin Australia, then wrote back saying all was well. I gave Hanna the Melbourne telephone number of the publishers in case he wanted to check for himself.

Hanna still dithered and prevaricated. After discussing the book and my review with Ron Marke, Hanna decided not to publish. The man who described himself on his rubber stamps as “PETER TOFEAH HANNA / 666 / ANTICHRIST” did not have the courage to publish a favourable review of an indictment of a child-abusing religious cult. (Hanna told me Ron Marke had called him “gutless”!)

Peter Hanna wrote to me (1 January 1997) about his decision, saying that “As editor I don’t think members want me to expose the Assoc[iation] or its committee to litigation, regardless of being remote — unless over a critically important issue. My position is that I do the job as a favor for the R.A., not to have myself in a position to be exposed to possible litigation.”

I replied (30 January 1997) as follows:

. . . Sarah Hamilton-Byrne’s book has been on sale for some time, and when I last inquired (for you!) no legal action was in progress against it. . . . If . . . you were concerned about possible litigation, you should have checked with Penguin Australia and, if necessary, asked to talk to the publishers’ legal department or solicitors. . . .

The only plausible grounds for not reviewing or publicising Sarah Hamilton-Byrne’s book would, in my opinion, be:

- . if legal action was *sub judice*;
- . if action had finished, and the author or publishers or both

had been found guilty of libel; or —

. if you had serious grounds for doubting the allegations in the book.

Unseen Unheard Unknown strikes me as a bravely written exposé by a much-abused and painfully truthful young woman. Its allegations of wholesale cruelty by an authoritarian religious outfit are exactly the sorts of things rationalist publications should be highlighting — the more often the better.

Sarah Hamilton-Byrne's book, and Kate Davies's *When Innocence Trembles**, are exactly the sort of publications the freethought movement should be publicising and selling. . . .

My membership of the Rationalist Association of N.S.W. was due for renewal at the end of December. I am not renewing. If I ever rejoin the Association it will be only when I am satisfied that you are no longer in a position of influence in it.

The Australian Humanist publishes

Once Hanna had made up his mind, Ron Marke suggested I offer the typescript to James Gerrand, editor of the *Australian Humanist* (published by the Council of Australian Humanist Societies). I knew James Gerrand rather well, as we were both members of the Humanist Society of Victoria, so I gladly complied.

A few weeks later Ron Marke had the satisfaction of telling Peter Hanna that my review-article had been accepted and was about to be published in the May 1997 *Australian Humanist*. Sydney's self-proclaimed "666 Antichrist" was not too pleased about this: he had apparently "crossed swords" with Gerrand on another matter!

However, in addition to holding various positions in the Rationalist Association of N.S.W., Hanna was also a vice-president of the Humanist Society of N.S.W. So he then uttered dire warnings to the Humanist Society's committee about the risk of libel action, and demanded that distribution to the Society's members of the May *Australian Humanist* be stopped.

The *Australian Humanist* was, and still is, edited and published in Melbourne. Copies are sent to Sydney in bulk, and are then distributed to members of the Humanist Society of New South Wales with the Society's state journal or newsletter, *Viewpoints*. (Rather similar arrangements apply in Queensland and Western Australia.)

In response to constant pressure from Hanna, the committee of the Humanist Society of N.S.W. decided to delay distribution of the May *Australian Humanist* until an A.G.M. in August. Ron Marke regarded this as a disgraceful form of censorship, as the issue had been distributed in other states, and he decided to do something about it. He wrote to Humanist Society president, Molly Campbell, and demanded his member's copy of the May *Australian Humanist*: he received one. Ron also asked James Gerrand for an extra supply of the magazine. On receipt, Ron posted about twelve copies of the May issue to various people in New South Wales with a covering circular letter:

12 June 1997

Dear Humanist Society Member,

You may or may not be aware that your Committee of the Humanist Society of N.S.W. has censored the attached latest edition of the *Australian Humanist* because James Gerrand, editor, has published Nigel Sinnott's well-written review article on "The cruel cult of Anne Hamilton-Byrne" . . . I understand from Molly Campbell, president of the Humanist Society of N.S.W., that the Committee decided not to send its members this particular edition of the *Australian Humanist* on the grounds that Nigel's article is libellous and that something was wrong with the present format of the journal.

. . .

I would like to know whether you think Nigel Sinnott's review article is libellous or not. I regard your Committee's action as censorship — presumably from paranoia. I understand that all other members of the state societies have received their copies without any interference from their committees. . . .

In my long working association in the freethought movement in New South Wales, both as an organiser, editor and printer, I have never seen such cowardly behaviour as this. . . .

James Gerrand decided to take action of his own. He got in touch with his friend in Sydney, Barry Williams, editor of *The Skeptic*, of which I was also a reader. Barry Williams regarded the libel allegations as ludicrous, and offered to republish the review almost immediately. It appeared in the Winter (June) 1997 issue of *The Skeptic* (with the title "Anatomy of a Cruel Cult"), giving the review a much wider readership in Australia

than I had originally expected.

Ron Marke's circular to members of the Humanist Society of N.S.W. attracted a response from a lady member:

Nigel's article . . . makes many claims about the punishment of children [by The Family] e.g. "The children were viciously punished." How does Nigel know this? Can he prove it?

Anne [Hamilton-Byrne] had "plastic surgery and liposuction". Can he prove this?

I . . . suspect that Nigel knows nothing except what he has read about it. I suspect the article is merely a badly written book review: that all the above claims should have been in quotes. If I were editor of AH, I would have asked Nigel to rewrite it properly.

I agree with Peter [Hanna] that sending out the article in our name would be very risky.

It would also be pointless, unless Nigel can substantiate all his claims. If the article turns out to be just a badly written book review we would have put ourselves in financial jeopardy to support someone's right to make unsubstantiated insults.

If it turns out that Nigel really has something important to contribute, that would be different — that would be freedom of speech. . . .

After receiving a copy from Ron of this letter, I wrote to the writer on 8 July saying, among other things:

Nearly all my knowledge of The Family comes from written information. I do, however, know the area around Taylor's Bay well: I have visited the area regularly since 1977, and have lived about half an hour's drive from Taylor's Bay since 1992. I have consulted one or two people in Alexandra and Eildon about the cult and its local profile.

My knowledge of The Family does not, however, come entirely from Sarah Hamilton-Byrne's book. The *Melbourne Age* reported the [police] raid on Kai Lama (1987) and there were various follow-up stories on it. The trials and sentencing of the "Aunties" were also reported in the same paper. I read as many of these reports as possible, and sent copies or cuttings to the *Freethinker* (London) and, I suspect, other magazines. . . .

In my review-article I said that a disappointment the children had to bear (after rescue) was "being told that the authorities were unable to prosecute members of The Family for cruelty, as more than twelve months had elapsed from the last date of

abuse". It is quite clear that the Victoria Police believed Sarah and the children's accounts of cruelty, and would have laid charges if they could. This loophole in the law has now been closed. . . .

No-one, not even in the seedier reaches of Sydney, has so far tried to tell me that Sarah Hamilton-Byrne is a liar or that her claims are grossly exaggerated. I regarded her book as brave and honest, and of particular interest to humanists, rationalists and freethinkers of all persuasions. My object was to publicise the book and encourage people to read it. If I had written a dismissive or scathing review of the book, then I could understand criticism from humanists. . . .

The Humanist Society of N.S.W. had also had the benefit of some written advice. In a memorandum of 23 June 1997 Mr "Keith R. Rex JP" informed the president and committee that:

Mr Ron Marke . . . asks me if I think Nigel Sinnott's article . . . is libellous. . . . It is indeed very libellous, and the HS *could* be sued for a vast amount of money for publishing it. . . .

While I take pains to write controversial material (since the non-controversial is boring), I am also at pains to avoid libel. Had I written a review of this book, I most certainly would *not* have written it the way Nigel has. Not only is it libellous, it is plagiaristic and in breach of copyright. Nigel writes as though this is all his personal experience and barely mentions the book in question and does so only scathingly.

When I write a review, I am careful to first give an account of the book and to keep my *personal* views of the quality of the book and my *personal* opinion of the subject matter, all separately identifiable. While I cannot be sure, I assume that Nigel is using the book as his primary source. But he does not make this clear and makes many apparently personal disparaging statements about the founder of the cult, which are clearly libellous.

Mr Marke also accuses the HS of cowardly behaviour and claims that the act of holding up the delivery of this AH is censorship. However, I do not regard this as censorship since the object [is] to protect the HS from terminal damages — not to deprive the readers of a view about a controversial subject. . . .

However, since we are faced with a critical legal problem I will give my views on consequences: As to what would happen if we were sued is simple. We would be wiped out — whether we won (most unlikely) or lost. But the real question is What is the likelihood of us being sued. That I would say is vanishingly

remote. The libelled party has a lot more important considerations and is most unlikely to even learn of this very tiny publication. What would I think be a greater risk would be a breach of copyright action by the author of the book, which this is supposed to be a review of. However, from my knowledge of her personality, I think that also pretty unlikely. . . .

In due course I received a copy of this memorandum from Keith Rex himself, with a covering letter (8 July) assuring me that his opinions were “Nothing personal of course — just a matter of law”. (Rex did, however, take me to task for my low opinion — expressed, probably, in a letter — of Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party.)

The Skeptic enters the fray

A few days later I received a letter from a half-amused, half-bemused Barry Williams, who commented:

. . . I must say I am astonished by the attitude of the NSW Humanists and Rationalists to your review. . . . Are they really basing their actions on legal advice they got from Peter Hanna and Keith Rex? Who do they take financial advice from? Alan Bond? Christopher Skase? . . . To put it bluntly, this advice is patently absurd. (Or, to put it even more bluntly, bloody ridiculous.)

I have managed to edit *the Skeptic* for the past seven years without even a threatening lawyer’s letter, let alone a law suit, so I can hardly be called reckless. As well, I have known James Gerrand as a friend for a goodly number of years, and I must say he has never struck me as posing a threat to western civilisation as we know it. I think I have a pretty good instinct for what is legal and what is not (as I am sure James does), but I don’t rely on that entirely. My daughter, Pita, is a very competent commercial lawyer and I usually run anything borderline past her for comment — I didn’t even think of doing that with this item. . . .

As for Rex’s claim that there was the possibility of plagiarism being involved, I doubt if I have ever heard a more risible suggestion (though understandably so, considering the source). Copyright law specifically allows for reasonable quotation for the purpose of criticism, and your article certainly did not transgress that. Further, can you imagine the recipient of a **positive** review arguing that the amount of quotation used was unreasonably

large? They would have to be certifiable. . . .

I hope the Humanists manage to sort out their internal problems, but rest assured, the Skeptics will only be taking legal advice from people who understand the law. Apart from anything else, I thought your article was both good and performed a useful service and an editor can ask for nothing more than that.

As far as I know, no legal action was ever taken against Sarah Hamilton-Byrne's book. In July 2005, however, Dr Sarah Moore, as she was by then known, appeared in court for writing dozens of prescriptions of pethidine for herself. She had been suffering from bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and pain "caused by an incision in her abdomen made as part of an initiation" into The Family. The presiding magistrate placed Dr Moore on a four-year good behaviour bond and imposed a community-based order of 250 hours of unpaid work. After the hearing Dr Moore referred to the effects of The Family on other children who had been in its clutches: "suicide and psychiatric illness and drug and alcohol problems".

Unseen Unheard Unknown was, and is, well worth reading as a detailed description of the horrors inflicted on children by a brutal, morally stunted religious sect. Ron Marke and I still think that the book was well worth reviewing. Efforts to suppress the review led to me stopping my subscription to *The Freethinker* until a new editor was appointed, and to Ron Marke's resignation from both the Rationalist Association of New South Wales (in which he had been continuously active for 26 years) and the Humanist Society of N.S.W. After 1997 the fortunes of the Rationalist Association of N.S.W. declined to a level where, in 2000, the *Rationalist News*, ceased publication, and in 2003 a member, alarmed by the Association's financial state, called in the police; but no charges were laid. In October 2005 a general meeting decided to seek amalgamation with the Humanist Society of N.S.W. Only Peter Hanna, who was no longer active in the Association, objected. On 11 March 2006 the members voted for a merger to create the Humanist and Rationalist Association of N.S.W. Inc.

* *When Innocence Trembles* (1994), by Kate Davies, is an account of the large-scale maltreatment of children by the Christian Brothers in Western Australia.

The Cruel Cult of Anne Hamilton-Byrne

NIGEL SINNOTT

Unseen Unheard Unknown; by **Sarah Hamilton-Byrne**. 220 pp.; paperback. Penguin Australia, 1995 (ISBN 0 14 017434 6). \$14.95.

IN THE twentieth century, engineers in Victoria dammed the Goulburn River where it is joined by the Delatite to form a large artificial lake. Beside the dam is the town of Eildon and between this and the Fraser National Park a small settlement emerged by the lake at Taylor's Bay. The area around the lake appealed to retired people, artists, fishing and boating enthusiasts, bushwalkers, trail-bike riders and holiday-makers. It was also secluded enough to attract a wealthy, secretive and sinister sect called The Family.

One of the founders of The Family (sometimes called the Great White Brotherhood) was Dr Raynor Johnson, a physicist and Master of Queen's College at the University of Melbourne. He was interested in Eastern mysticism and became "a world authority on religion".

The cult's doctrines were a syncretism or mixture of ideas from Hinduism, yoga, Zen, Christianity and other sources, combined with an uncritical adoration of the movement's female leader. Initiation involved the use of drugs — usually LSD but, if this was in short supply, psilocybin-rich toadstools would do. Secrecy and a low profile were encouraged by the motto "Unseen, unheard, unknown".

The co-founder was Anne Hamilton-Byrne, who claimed descent from the French royal family and the Biblical House of David. Her detractors believe she was the daughter of a railway engine cleaner and they further allege that her claims to have a pilot's license and qualifications in psychiatric nursing, homoeopathy and physiotherapy are groundless.

Anne became the Master of the cult and sought a wealthy, middle-class following. In the late 1960s she decided, as a "scientific experiment" (warmly accepted by Dr Johnson), to collect a group of young children and indoctrinate them to

continue her movement. They were supposed to become an élite leadership group after — she believed — most of the world had been destroyed by a massive explosion.

Children were acquired either direct from Family members or through adoptions arranged by cult doctors and social workers. The children's names were changed, their identities falsified, and they were sometimes provided with multiple false birth certificates. On one occasion they were baptised, *en bloc*, as Catholics, presumably so that Anne could acquire a swag of baptismal certificates.

For most of the time the children were kept at Taylors Bay, in strict isolation on a property called Kai Lama ("Uptop" to the children). They were dressed alike and often had their hair dyed blond to make them look alike. When Anne Hamilton-Byrne and her husband Bill were not around — which was most of the time — the children were looked after by rostered cult members called Aunties who had agreed to donate half their time to *guruseva* (Sanskrit for "service to the Master").

The children were rigidly controlled during their waking hours and had to speak in affected English middle-class accents. They were viciously punished — with beatings, lashings, starvation, vast numbers of lines to write and public humiliation — for the slightest infraction of Anne's rules. Children were routinely beaten for bed-wetting and even for fouling their nappies. The cult's maxims were "You can't murder a bum" and "A belting a day keeps evil away". On one occasion Anne asked someone to hold up the telephone while a child was being beaten "so I can hear the screams". She once held up a boy, less than two years old, by his ankles to show followers "the best way to belt a child". Cruelty to animals, on the other hand, was strongly denounced. The children received restricted and barely adequate food but vast amounts of vitamin tablets. They were routinely dosed with tranquillisers to keep them docile.

Anne had a horror of fatness, and any child she reckoned was overweight was put on even more restricted rations. The Master did not, of course, practise what she preached. She maintained her preferred body image with regular plastic surgery and liposuction.

If the children were ill, they were ignored or else punished for

“attention seeking” or making undue noise. Anne, on the other hand, doled out homoeopathic remedies for “disobedience” and “thinking wrongly”.

The children received a limited education of sorts and had regular hatha yoga and meditation sessions. The youngsters were occasionally taken to the cult’s other properties in Victoria, England and the United States. As they got older, the boys were sent off to a private boarding school in England (Stoneyhurst). Anne was, apparently, not too fussy about formal education for the girls, though in 1984 the Kai Lama property was granted recognition as a school, Aquinel College.

The children were, in other words, brought up in an atmosphere which was callous, oppressive and manipulative. They were denied the features of childhood most youngsters take for granted: freedom consistent with safety, unconditional affection, emotional security, and opportunities to acquire coping skills in the outside world.

The misery and deprivation to which the children were subjected were conveniently rationalised by Anne Hamilton-Byrne’s belief in reincarnation and karma. The Aunties, by the way, claimed that Anne was Jesus Christ reincarnated. Suffering, according to The Family, acquired merit (good karma) in this life and helped redeem sins in supposed former lives.

The children were trained to be afraid of outsiders in general and of the police in particular. But in 1987 a private investigator who had been watching The Family for some time, persuaded three teenage girls — who had broken away from the cult or were trying to do so — to meet two women officers of the Victoria Police. Further meetings took place and, after the girls had made detailed statements, the police planned a dawn raid on Kai Lama.

The cult’s daily timetable was, for once, convenient. Three busloads of police struck at 6:30 a.m. when the children were in one part of the building, doing yoga, and the adults upstairs. The raid went well and, once they had been reassured by the three older girls, the rest of the children started talking freely about their experiences. They had discovered that someone in the world was more powerful than Anne and Bill Hamilton-Byrne!

Sarah Hamilton-Byrne was one of the girls who went to the police and accompanied the raid. She has now written a book describing her experiences as one of Anne's children and her own efforts to break away and adjust to the outside world.

Sarah discovered, incidentally, that she was not Anne's real daughter as she had been led to suppose. Her real mother had been browbeaten, while dosed with tranquillisers, to sign adoption papers. The baby had been surreptitiously adopted by the family doctor, a cult member, and handed over to Anne. Coercion and subterfuge were the norm in most other cases as well.

After the raid at Lake Eildon the children were taken to the Victorian government's Allambie reception centre in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Sarah formed a high opinion of the staff there and of several police officers who continued to offer help and support. She gives a moving account of a little boy called David who, after looking at the refrigerator, was told he could help himself to anything he fancied. "I will never forget the look on David's face as he gazed into that fridge and realised he was free." A girl named Cassandra, who was much shorter than most children of her age, grew eleven centimetres in her first year of freedom. Another child received a vicious telephone call from an Aunty. She told him she was his real mother, reviled him, and then disowned him. Once again, as Sarah points out "the cruelty of the regime we had left was amply demonstrated".

The cult even obtained the services of a compliant journalist who claimed that Anne and Bill were the innocent victims of a witch-hunt and that they had taken in children who were retarded and "unwanted by anyone else".

The children's move to St John's Homes for Boys and Girls, an Anglican institution, brought problems. Unlike the people at Allambie, Sarah relates:

The hierarchy at St John's believed it was important that staff remained aloof. The few staff who tried to befriend or comfort us were encouraged to leave. No affection was allowed; that was interpreted as a risk to 'professional boundaries'. At the same time, the St John's hierarchy actively tried to stop us making outside friends; new people were discredited. . . The staff were rude to the few people who had befriended us. . . Some . . . were

especially vitriolic. . . The philosophy seemed to be ‘Don’t talk about it and it will all go away’. Whenever we tried to explain our background to them, they accused us of being self-indulgent and wanting sympathy.

Eventually the children decided to go their separate ways, though they still see each other frequently to celebrate anniversaries of the raid at Taylors Bay. A disappointment they had to bear was being told that the authorities were unable to prosecute members of The Family for cruelty, as more than twelve months had elapsed from the last date of abuse. Four of the Aunties were sentenced to a few months’ jail for social security frauds; these sentences were later reduced on appeal.

And The Master herself? She was finally extradited from the United States to Australia to face charges involving false registration of births. She was fined \$5,000 for making a false declaration. Sarah estimates Anne’s assets as being at least \$150 million.

Sarah is, if anything, a little too ready to absolve the Aunties. “Most of them were not intrinsically evil people” she writes. “They had merely subjugated all moral standards to the goal of obeying the Master’s will. . . They were told to discipline us to within an inch of our lives and that is what they did.” Elsewhere Sarah describes the Aunties’ chorus of “Good on you Anne, they need to be taught from an early age!” I may not be alone in regarding “only obeying orders” as a poor excuse for gross cruelty.

One of the more appalling features of The Family — apart from Anne’s egomania and double-talk — was the way in which its evil activities were furthered by a seedy coterie of morally defective professionals. The brutal Aunties were nurses or nursing students; then there were the doctors who provided the Aunties with prescription drugs (to sedate the children) or who supervised the abuse of LSD; psychiatrists who committed patients to a hospital run by a cult member; lawyers who fixed up the deed polls for bogus passports and birth certificates; and social workers who helped bypass normal adoption procedures. “Without their support and participation,” Sarah comments, “Anne Hamilton-Byrne would never have become what she is today. It was their names that gave her the credibility and social

power she needed. . . They looked respectable, therefore people thought they must be respectable.”

When reading Sarah’s book I found I could cope tolerably well with her descriptions of incessant beatings and humiliations; but when she came to describe the aftermath of the raid and her efforts to overcome her self-doubts, depression and fear of inadequacy, it became impossible to be objective or detached. No one should be put in a position where he or she has to write a first-hand account like this, but it needed to be done and has been written well. It has the ring of painful sincerity and a dogged concern for compassion, decency and honesty.

As far as Sarah is concerned, the worst thing The Family did to the children — as it had the most lasting effect — was the withholding of love. “I believe to deny a child love is to deny its existence as a human being.” Elsewhere she says that “Destroying life and liveliness in people is perhaps the true definition of evil.”

Thanks to a combination of luck, the help of loyal, perceptive friends and her innate intelligence and stubborn courage, Sarah has survived The Family’s efforts to suborn her to its designs, and she is well on the way to being something that the Master could only bluster about — a real healer.

Dr Sarah Hamilton-Byrne has rendered a valuable public service by shedding a bright light on the dark secrets of The Family and by exposing it for the cruel, parasitic monstrosity it was.

Note (1997) by the editor of The Skeptic, Barry Williams:

Readers who attended the Australian Skeptics 1995 Convention in Melbourne would have had the privilege of hearing Dr Sarah Hamilton-Byrne speaking about her horrifying childhood experiences. It was a presentation not to be forgotten.

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NIGEL SINNOTT was born in 1944 in London, but spent much of his childhood in rural north Oxfordshire. While living and working mainly in the London area in the 1960s and early '70s he became active in the freethought, humanist and secular movements. He was editor (1972-73) of *The Freethinker*, Britain's longest-running atheist magazine. He has lived in Victoria since 1976. His interests include mycology, botany, growing Australian plants, the English Civil War, the Italian Risorgimento, and the history of nineteenth-century radical and freethought movements. He is a member of many organisations, including the Atheist Foundation of Australia, the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, the Cromwell Association, the Freethought History Research Group, the Humanist Society of Victoria, the Oxfordshire Family History Society, the National Secular Society (Britain), South Place Ethical Society (London) and the Thomas Paine Society.

RON MARKE was born in London in 1936. He migrated to Australia in 1962 to settle in Sydney. He became active in the Rationalist Association of New South Wales in 1968 and held a number of positions over a period of twenty-seven years, mainly as honorary secretary and editor, as well as producing and printing many pamphlets. Ron was — and still is — a great believer in propagating freethought opinions through the written word. His motto became “Publish and be damned”. He was also active in the union movement, supported human rights and conservation causes, as well as holding down a full-time job as the head gardener of a large psychiatric hospital. He was involved in landscaping gardens and training staff in all aspects of ground maintenance. He is now enjoying his retirement in Bellingen and is active in a writers' group engaged in writing short stories.

Also by Nigel Sinnott:

Charles Bradlaugh and Ireland (1971).

Joseph Symes, the "Flower of Atheism" (1977).

Joseph Skurrie's Freethought Reminiscences (ed., 1977).

Matilda, Agnes and Stella Symes (1978).

An Australian Anthology of Poems (1986).

Sennett, Sinnott, Sionóid, Synnot and Related Surnames. (1999).

Place-Names of the Alexandra, Lake Eildon and Big River Area of Victoria (2003).