Power House or White Elephant?

Bishopscourt Melbourne - Official Residence and Family Home, by Elizabeth Rushen (Mosaic Press 2013 $49.95)

reviewed by David Woods

When Bishopscourt was our family home for 20 years the question as to whether the house was a price-less national icon or a bastion of privilege did not unduly concern me. The family got on with their lives and I as a student and young teacher nonchalantly enjoyed the spacious house and grounds and the permanence and security of the home that was ours for so long. We were not greatly interested in its history, but frankly nor was anyone else. The word 'heritage' was hardly known in the '50s and '60s and many fine old buildings were being brutally demolished with little public concern. Only in later years have I come to reflect on the rather unusual circumstances of our family life and begun to realise the extraordinary position that Bishopscourt holds in the life of the Anglican Church, the city of Melbourne and the State of Victoria.

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wides are unlikely to have planned the menu, done the shopping and cooking and served the food themselves. The archbishop has long since ceased to have anything like that kind of staff support, although living in Bishopscourt creates the expectation that that kind of housekeeping will be continued. Dr Rushen has produced a comprehensive exposition of the subject in her landmark study of Bishopscourt and its social history, and it is now possible for us all to understand some of the complexities of the role of Bishopscourt and the experience of living in it.

She unfolds a panorama of personal and public triumphs and tribulations stretching over 160 years. Three bishops and ten archbishops and their wives and families have lived at Bishopscourt continuously since 1853. The house has seen times of boom and times of depression, times of growth and times of stagnation, times of confidence and times of anxiety, times of peace and times of war and times of joy and times of sadness. Two distinguished laymen also rented Bishopscourt, a governor squatted in it, three wives died there and three archbishops died in office. The building has needed endless upkeep and repair, has had one major and one minor extension, has been divided, renovated and repeatedly redecorated. Meanwhile the burden of managing the household, looking after the bishop and organising the large scale hospitality expected of him has fallen fairly and squarely on the archbishops' wives. The way the house was run and the demands of their family which would frequently conflict with public duties. The book could well be subtitled 'Official Residence versus Family Home'.

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