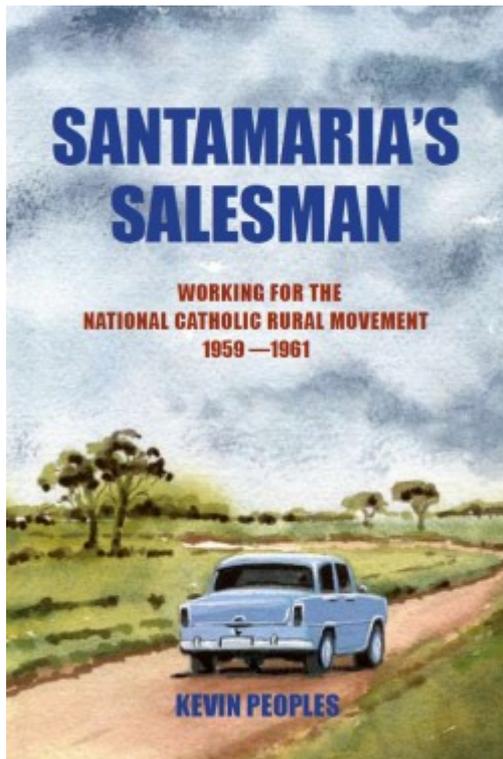


The launch of  
*Santamaria's Salesman: Working for the  
National Catholic Rural Movement 1959-1961*  
by Kevin Peoples

Melbourne John Garratt Publishing 2012

Bruce Duncan at Albert Park 29 April 2012



Kevin Peoples has written a truly remarkable book, shedding light on one of the most perplexing periods in our nation's short history and its religious and social movements. Kevin writes that in his youth he was "prone to reckless sacrificial acts", "drawn to lost causes and heroic stands" (p26). At times, he may have felt that writing this book was another sad case of lost causes, but I would like to assure him that this is a really splendid contribution to understanding our past and who we are today.

Kevin began writing as a way of sharing his story with his family, but the account grew and grew over time into a larger work than we have now, full of wonderful stories and anecdotes about characters he met along the way. Much of this social history has been trimmed back,

but I hope Kevin might recover it to publish elsewhere.

Kevin has offered us some wonderful pen sketches, such as of his mother in tears on hearing of the death of Ben Chifley because in his irregular marriage situation he may not have been reconciled with his God (p23), and of the YCW activist, Jim Ross, sleeping on the beach in Warrnambool because in his travels supporting the YCW he often had to sleep out (p66). He describes Fr Fahey at the wheel of the Holden car Kevin used, 'Powder-Blue'. Bill Crowe had warned Kevin that Fahey "liked to drive fast, very fast. He was right. Father turned out to drive Powder-Blue resembling Biggles. He wore long black boots, a tight-fitting black skivvy, a bomber jacket, and a scarf wrapped around his neck; he was dressed for low-flying." (p59).

Yet this is not an self-indulgent memoir, as you will see. There are painful events at times, even if set in the exuberant adventures of a young man exploring the countryside near and far in Powder Blue, his trusty Holden steed. Kevin exhibits an unusual ability to reflect on his early life and recover the thoughts and feelings of those days. But this

recovery of memories has not come easily, and he has wrestled and probed them constantly, where possible testing them through other sources.

He has also laboured under a constant threat, for, hanging over him, like the proverbial sword of Damocles, has hung the sharpened blue editing pencil of his wife, Margaret, employing all her literary expertise, ensuring every phrase and sentence stood to attention and loyally did its duty. The result is a beautiful writing style, simple, direct, personal.

Kevin describes working for the Rural Movement:

“In one sense, I feel something of a fraud – a young man of serious demeanour who trades on the loyalty of Catholic farmers, terrorising them on the dangers of communism and then, Houdini-like, quietly relieving them of their money; perhaps even more importantly, a young man who accepts his wages and the accompanying eulogies, yet seriously questions the NCRM's purpose, its philosophical base and certainly its status as a Catholic Action movement. Another part of me whispers, “it's just a job, you do it well and these people are happy, so relax and enjoy it.” (p52) “And what am I selling? I'm selling Santamaria and anti-communism.”

Kevin has not been quick to make judgments, but has tried to examine people, incidents, and motives from every which way, resulting in constant reworking of his text as he continued to develop his narrative.

It is a **personal story**, of Kevin's own thoughts and feelings as he moved from being a country boy with limited prospects to finding himself working as a fundraiser for BA Santamaria's National Catholic Rural Movement, and doing so amazingly successfully, until he falls victim to conflicts within the Rural Movement. It is a story Kevin tells candidly, in retrospect amazed at what he calls his naïveté about the politics and implications of his work with the Rural Movement.

It is also a **social history**, as Kevin captures so strikingly the mood and life of many Catholics and farming families in Victoria and southern New South Wales in mid-century. Many passages in this book are powerfully evocative of the hopes and fears of the period. You will likely feel this yourself as you read the book, recognising that, yes, this was the way it was. The largely working-class Catholics bound themselves loyally to the Church and its leaders, struggling for recognition and a place in this largely Protestant or Anglican land.

Yet Australia had been hit by the economic turmoil of the Depression, two world wars, long droughts and poor seasons, baffling fluctuations in the terms of trade and international markets, and especially the threat from communism, in Australia at first and later from overseas, a threat that seemed real and imminent. The ghetto structures of the Irish-Australian Church seemed inadequate in the face of this new threat, and so

Bob Santamaria and Catholic Action seemed to many to offer a providential answer to the crisis. Kevin writes:

“I was taught to fear and hate communism from my early primary school days in Terang. My sister told me recently she suffered terrible nightmares from what she was told as a very young girl in school about the communists coming to Australia. On this particular point I would say a whole generation of young Catholics was brainwashed. It seems clear I felt no guilt about my use of anti-communism as an argument to raise money for an organisation I considered a movement of Catholic Action. I should have.” (p73).

*Santamaria's Salesman* is a **religious history**, exploring the beliefs and values that sustained the Catholic community, priests, and people in securing a worthy place in Australia. “The Catholic Church was the centre of every aspect of my world. It wasn't separate from my being and I embraced it as the natural order of things.” “It is arguable that never before, and never since, did the Catholic church in Australia have such a devoted and loyal group of young people as those growing up in the 1950s.” (p14)

Yet Kevin also notes some unsettling questions and different ways of belonging. He writes: “At the time, most Catholics did not talk much about their religion amongst themselves. We were, in general, practising, but passive.” (p70)

Most importantly for this story, Kevin threads his way carefully through the debates about the nature and role of Catholic Action, rightly identifying the central issue as whether to accept Canon Cardijn's hopes for educating and empowering lay people for their unique vocation in the secular worlds of work and social transformation.

Kevin was captivated by the ideas of Cardijn. He writes: “The YCW... members were involved in hard-nosed, real-life problem solving. It was focused on earth not on heaven.” He continues that it was an anomaly within “a rigidly hierarchical and authoritarian church”. Most significantly, “The notion that everyone was God-filled was the big idea that drove me. I suspect that I was probably more passionate about this idea than about creating change.” (pp34-35)

The book is also a **political history**, shedding light on the Catholic Rural Movement and its relationship with its founder and animator, Bob Santamaria. The drama of the Labour Split and the Church involvement in the 1950s has been explored in various histories, but no one has so well as Kevin explained the arcane world of the Rural Movement, and how Bob could retain control of the NCRM despite the explicit and repeated directions of the Holy See, and specifically of Pope Pius XII himself, that Catholic Action bodies were to be quite separate to Santamaria's anti-communist Movement. Kevin has shed much light on these events.

*Santamaria's Salesman* fills the missing gap in the history of Santamaria's Movement and the Rural Movement. I say this out of my own experience of writing *Crusade or Conspiracy*, published in 2001. I believe I was the first to be given open access to many

of the Church archives about these events, and also had the good fortune of being able to talk with some of the key participants.

But I found much of the disputes about the Catholic Rural Movement impenetrable, with the written records often saying one thing, and participants another. For months and years I pored over these documents and accounts, trying to reconcile them and understand what had happened in the Rural Movement. I finally had to abandon much of this research, and concentrate instead on other aspects of the Movement disputes.

Kevin's book could only have been written by one who was there, who knew what was happening from the inside, and had the perspective and determination to pursue his detective work to a successful outcome.

Kevin very succinctly traces the development of Catholic Action movements in Australia from their lay origins in the 1930s and the role of Bob Santamaria, who even at the age of 21 was "a 'single-force' man. He thought in terms of mobilising a highly disciplined body of men to do his bidding." (p80). This was not what the Campions favoured, or the style of Catholic Action they advocated. "It was around this key principle, namely the separation between formation and training on the one hand and action on the other, that all future debates about Catholic Action in Australia were waged." (p83). "Bob wanted a single force of followers whom he could direct and control." (p107)

Kevin subjects the ideas in the NCRM to close scrutiny. The Rural Movement itself was "a city concoction of Catholic intellectuals" (p85), quite out of touch with rural matters. In a series of chapters, Kevin insightfully critiques Santamaria's agrarian dreams, about peasant and "independent" farming, about the drift to the cities, and population decline. Kevin concludes: "I can now confidently state that the NCRM's existence was based on untruths, half-truths, and half-thought-out socio-religious concoctions." (p127).

As Kevin indicates, the failure of the NCRM was also a failure in leadership, especially among bishops and clerical advisers. Kevin outlines the debates within the Rural Movement, but in the end, the buck stops with Santamaria himself. "Bob's leadership strategy was one drawn irresistibly to a command model with its characteristics of control, discipline, manipulation and power." (p171). He pressed the NCRM into being a cash-cow and auxiliary to his anti-communist Catholic Social Studies Movement, later the National Civic Council.

Kevin takes us through the final saga for the NCRM, when John Molony and Jim Ross were attempting to transform the NCRM in the Ballarat diocese into a movement based on Cardijn's principles. Jim claimed in 1961 to have read Cardijn's book, *Challenge to Action*, 27 times. Kevin was the one who had suggested to Bob Santamaria that Molony be asked to speak at the national conference at La Verna retreat centre in Kew. I won't tell you how this "high noon" event climaxed. You must read it for yourself.

It has not been an easy task for Kevin to write this book, especially given his family links to the Santamaria family. Kevin's challenge was to be frank and honest, but fair to all involved, especially to Bob, whom he had once admired so greatly. Nor was it simply a matter of Kevin speaking the truth as well as he could for its own sake. *Santamaria's Salesman* is relevant today as many of the key issues are still with us. Bob Santamaria typified a particular type of reaction to the currents of modernity. For all the weaknesses of that response, many of which Kevin clearly identifies, Santamaria doggedly pursued his course, with many swerves and accidents along the way for sure, but it was a considered endeavour.

In Kevin's view, one which I share, Bob's response was profoundly misguided. Bob's mistake was to reject totally the innovative ideas of Canon Cardijn and the Young Christian Workers (YCW), and instead to install himself as the authoritarian leader of a secret political movement to win political influence, all in the name of the Church. As Kevin demonstrates, instead of urging the Rural Movement to develop strong, educated and independent leadership in its members, Santamaria wanted foot-soldiers to carry out strategies which he had pre-determined.

As Kevin had experienced earlier in the YCW movement, the 'See, Judge, Act' method of Gospel reflection, discussion, and action offered a strong spiritual foundation, with a clear sense of mission and meaning in one's life work, and the motivation to pursue it all through life, but independently, acting on one's own judgment and initiative. This is what Kevin and Jim Ross wanted, along with John Molony and others, for the Rural Movement, to be based on the genuine principles of Cardijn.

One can understand how upset Bob Santamaria must have been at the Vatican Council, as it rejected so comprehensively his authoritarian model of political action and embraced the ideas of Cardijn, Pietro Pavan, and Jacques Maritain, all his old intellectual adversaries, who had so inspired the Campion Society, the *Catholic Worker* people and the YCW movements.

The Catholic Church today needs to listen again to Cardijn about the role of lay people in their work and their transformative task in the secular world, as well as in the Church. As the recent drift in Catholic circles back towards an authoritarian and narrowly dogmatic view of the world indicates, we are in danger of retreating into a cultural ghetto, instead of engaging constructively with the great issues of our day, especially the global social issues, of hunger, poverty, violence, and safeguarding the environment.

The recent appalling revelations about sexual abuse in the Church emphasise once more the need for transparency, participation, and accountability at all levels in the Church and in society.

Kevin Peoples' *Santamaria's Salesman* has recounted how an earlier generation attempted to translate the Gospel into mid-century rural Australia. Catholic Action can

be seen as a significant attempt to transform the rising currents of modernity into an increasingly humane and socially just way of life. Kevin rightly identifies the fatal flaw, the 'disastrous mistake (p100) in the whole enterprise that doomed it. But he also reaffirms the insight and importance of Cardijn's ideas for developing new mechanisms of participation and accountability if we are properly to sustain future generations. "To use a more modern terminology, in the Jocist system of Catholic Action, the secular and the sacred were one." (p112).

I sincerely congratulate Kevin, his faithful consultor, Margaret, the rest of his family, and all those who contributed in so many ways to this project, and John Garratt Publishing for such a splendid production. I encourage you to buy your copies of *Santamaria's Salesman*, and now declare this important book launched.