

Tribute to Professor Peter Hill, Gracijan Biršić OFM and Vladimir Novak OFM – Lest We Forget Them!

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In little less than four months, three well-known and highly respected men in the Croatian community of Sydney passed away between the 20th of February and the 19th of June, 2022. Their contribution to the Croatian community was immense and immeasurable. Two of them, Professor Peter Hill and Fr Gracijan Biršić, were pioneers of Croatian Studies at Macquarie University in the early 1980s. Together with Fr Vladimir Novak, they were the pillars of the Croatian Studies Foundation of Australia. About the life, works and merits of Professor Peter Hill, Fr Gracijan Biršić and Fr Vlado Novak, one could write exhaustively and extensively. In this article, I will limit myself to their contribution to the recognition of the Croatian language in Australia, and their contribution to and association with Croatian Studies at Macquarie University and the Croatian Studies Foundation. This article is a tribute and expression of gratitude to them for what they have done for Croatian Studies, the Croatian Studies Foundation (CSF), and the Croatian community of Sydney and Australia more generally. All three have left an indelible mark on the Croatian Australian community, so much so that their names and achievements should never be forgotten.

Professor Peter Manners Hill (16 October 1945 – 19 June 2022)

Professor Peter Hill was born in Perth, Western Australia, and attended Christ Church Grammar School where he studied French and Ancient Greek among other things. He went on to study German and Russian at the University of Melbourne, where he graduated in 1966 and received his MA in 1971. In 1972, he received his doctorate at the University of Hamburg and took up the position of Assistant professor, where he was later appointed Professor of Slavonic languages. He was based in Hamburg from 1982 to 1985, and in 1982 he was appointed lecturer at Macquarie University in Sydney, together with John Besemeres, to establish a program in Slavonic Studies.

The Slavonic Studies program, which began in February 1983, initially offered the study of Croatian, Polish and Serbian languages as well as courses in comparative Slavonic linguistics, Slavonic societies, and contemporary Polish politics. Macedonian and Ukrainian were added in 1984. Russian was introduced in 1988, and Slovenian was added to the Slavonic Studies program in 1989. While at Macquarie University, as an expert in comparative South Slavonic linguistics and the Macedonian language, Professor Hill initially coordinated the study of Croatian and Serbian, taught them at the introductory level and prepared the introduction of the Macedonian language to the study of Slavonic Studies.

Together with Fr Gracijan Biršić and myself, Professor Hill was instrumental in founding the Croatian Studies Foundation (CSF) in 1984. He was the first Vice-President of the CSF. As the Head of Slavonic Studies, he was often accused and even provoked by Yugoslav diplomats and politicians for separating the artificial hybrid form of their official or state language. But Professor Hill, as an excellent connoisseur of South Slavonic linguistics and philology, and as a very knowledgeable person of political games and circumstances in language politics, always knew how to position himself expertly and was able to repel these provocations with ease. He was firmly convinced that Croatian and Serbian are indeed sociolinguistically and historically different and separate languages despite all their similarities. I remember very well that he always carried several Yugoslavian paper currency notes (dinars) in his wallet, on which the amount was written in four languages (Croatian, Macedonian, Serbian and Slovenian). On such occasions, Professor Hill would take out bills from his wallet, show them to his provocateurs, and then in his very calm and quiet, almost blissful voice, he would ask: What does this say? What languages is this written in? Do you really think I did it?

Professor Hill left Macquarie University and Slavonic Studies in 1985 and returned to the University of Hamburg. From 1991 to 1995, he was again absent from the University of Hamburg and worked at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra. After that four-year engagement at ANU, he returned to Hamburg again. He retired there in 2001 and returned to his native Australia. For the next two decades, he would live in Canberra or on the NSW coast, holding the post of Visiting Fellow in the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at the Australian National University. There he was a regular contributor to the lecture program in that school's courses in European Studies, presented numerous conference papers, and continued to publish articles and book reviews. In retirement, Professor Hill taught Italian at the University of the Third Age in Bateman's Bay, took up environmental causes with great determination, and made use of a fine singing voice by singing in a choir.

Professor Peter Hill was an outstanding scholar in the field of Slavonic languages. His key research interests were initially issues of lexicology in South Slavonic languages; from the 1980s he specialised in the Macedonian language, then expanded his interest to the languages of Central and Eastern Europe (including Russian), to language in culture and society (sociolinguistics). Professor Hill is the author of many scholarly publications, too numerous to mention here. He was one of the founders of the Croatian Studies Foundation of Australia and one of the founders of the Slavonic Konstanzer Kreis.

Professor Peter Hill will be remembered as one of Australia's leading Slavists and Croatists. His scholarly research and numerous publications – and their quality – are the best legacy of his professional career. His contribution to the fields of his narrow and wider profession will be recognised by generations to come. We owe Professor Peter Hill our sincere gratitude for his academic achievements, but also for his friendship, understanding, sincerity and honesty.

He was a man of knowledge and a man of his word, an excellent colleague and friend. The Croatian community of Australia was saddened to learn of Professor Hill's passing.

Gracijan Branimir Biršić OFM (2 January 1935 – 11 June 2022)

Fr Gracijan Biršić was born in Koprivnica. After completing elementary school in his hometown, he entered the Franciscan seminary in Zagreb. He entered the novitiate of the Croatian Franciscan Province of St. Cyril and Methodius on 18 July 1950 in Vukovar. After a year of novitiate, on 19 July 1951, he took his first religious vows. He took solemn religious vows on 23 September 1956 in Zagreb and was ordained a priest on 25 January 1959 in Zagreb. He completed his philosophical and theological studies at the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Zagreb, where he obtained a master's degree in theology in 1960.

After his ordination, he performed his priestly duties as a young monk for one year in the Monastery of St. Francis in Zagreb, where he was a confessor and high school teacher. Fr Gracijan received his master's degree in philosophical and theological studies at the Faculty of Theology in Zagreb in 1960. In 1961, he graduated from the Faculty of Humanities, the University of Zagreb, in Croatian language and literature. While still a student, he prepared material for the Old Slavonic dictionary of the Croatian redaction at the Old Slavonic Institute "Svetozar Rittig" in Zagreb. After completing his studies, he taught Old Slavonic language and literature at the Faculty of Philosophy College in Samobor (1961/62, 1963/64), Trsat (1964.1967), and the Faculty of Theology at the Croatian Franciscan Province of St. Cyril and Methodius in Zagreb (1963-1965). From 1966 to 1978, he taught Croatian language and literature and philosophical subjects at the Franciscan High School Mater et Magistra in Samobor (1964-1977). He also held the position of director of that institution for some time. He participated in the leadership of the Croatian Franciscan Province as Secretary of the Administrative Council (1975 – 1978). He started and edited the newspaper "Kairos" (1965) for young Christians in Samobor.

In 1978, Fr Gracijan came to Australia as a pastor. There, in addition to his regular pastoral activities such as Sunday mass celebrations and other pastoral tasks, he found time to participate in the efforts of Croatians towards the official recognition of the Croatian language in education and public use in Australia. From the very beginning, he participated in efforts to achieve official recognition of the language. Upon the invitation of the Ministry of Education of New South Wales, he participated in the development of the Croatian language curriculum for the Saturday School of the Croatian language. He also edited the Croatian Reader for the school program (1979). He was one of the founders of the Australian Croatian Studies Foundation (1984), the purpose of which was and remains to preserve and improve the university study of Croatian language, literature and culture in Australia. He was the foundation's Vice-President (1989, 1990, 1991), Secretary (1984, 1985) and a member of the Governing Council for eight years. For several years he worked as a teacher and expert Associate adviser of the Central Council of Croatian Ethnic Schools in NSW (CCCES = SOHEŠ = Središnji odbor hrvatskih etničkih škola) in Sydney, and from 1984 to 1998 he taught Croatian language and literature at the School of Modern Languages of Macquarie University in Sydney. He was instrumental in the founding of the Central Council of Croatian Ethnic Schools (CCCES) and the founder of the Central Croatian Library at the Croatian Catholic Centre

in Summer Hill. For many years, he was the Head of the Macquarie University Extension Program (Pučko sveučilište), a cultural and academic forum through which lecturers from Croatia and other countries have been guests. Through this community program, we had the opportunity to listen to and learn from the late Cardinal Franjo Kuharić, Professor Michael McAdams (University of San Francisco, USA), Professor Zvonimir Šeparović (Rector, University of Zagreb), Professor Josip Matešić (University of Mannheim, Germany), Professor Marko Samardžija (University of Zagreb), Dr Vlado Šakić (Institute of Social Sciences 'Ivo Pilar', Zagreb), Dr Šime Đodan (University of Zagreb), Professor Mladen Ančić (University of Zadar), Professor Vinko Grubišić (University of Waterloo, Canada), Dr Ivan Čizmić, (Institute of Social Sciences 'Ivo Pilar'), Fr Živko Kustić, Editor-in-Chief of the "Glas Koncila" (Croatian Roman Catholic weekly newspaper), Professor Paul Garde (University of Provence, France), Professor Stjepan Babić (University of Zagreb), academician Dalibor Brozović (University of Zadar), Professor Ante Kadić (University of Indiana, USA), and many others.

It is worth repeating that the study of the Croatian language was introduced into the curriculum of the School of Modern Languages of Macquarie University in February 1983. It seems to me that the study of the Croatian language arose as a natural consequence of events preceding the recognition of the Croatian language in the late seventies and early eighties of the last century. From 1984 to 1998, Fr Gracijan taught morphology to our more advanced students and older Croatian literature. I often reflect and wonder whether things would have turned out the way they did in the 1970s if Fr Gracijan Biršić had not been in Sydney or Australia, or without his knowledgeable, scholarly, and academic arguments, because the opposing side did everything to keep the Croatian language from being separated from the political hybrid called Serbo-Croatian, Croato-Serbian, Croatian or Serbian, etc. Behind them stood the state and its diplomats, who tried in every possible way to prevent the recognition and introduction of the Croatian language into the Australian school system. And it was here that Fr Gracijan – who was invited by the New South Wales Ministry of Education to participate in the development of the Croatian language curriculum for Saturday Schools of Community Languages – played a decisive role. Many will say that someone else would have been here if Fr Gracijan had not. Yes, perhaps, but these individuals probably would not have behaved or positioned themselves like Fr Gracijan, since he had a special love for the Croatian mother tongue and an excellent knowledge of its history.

In 1985, Fr Gracijan moved from Summer Hill to St. John's Park, where the construction of the church of St. Nikola Tavelić had begun. With his arrival in St John's Park, a new period of pastoral care began for Fr. Gracijan. There, in addition to his duties as a priest, he became the initiator and engineer of several projects, all in collaboration with people of goodwill, who helped bring his ideas to fruition. He worked there for about fifteen years, bringing many of his life-long dreams and aspirations to life. As the Head of the Pastoral Centre in St John's Park, he directly participated in the construction of the Church of St. Nikola Tavelić (consecrated in 1985), the building of the Pastoral Centre (blessed in 1987), and the chapel of Our Lady of Trsat (blessed in 1991). He was also a founder of the neighbouring "Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac" retirement village (opened in 1992) and the monastery of the Sisters of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ (since 1985).

In one of his publications, “Croatian Catholic Community of St. Nikola Tavelić in St. John's Park”, Fr. Gracijan stated in his humble style: The initiative for the construction of all the facilities of the Centre was given by the Croatian faithful of that district. They also 'discovered' the location, that is, the construction site, on that hill, on which our church proudly stands today. The church, the building of the centre and the chapel were designed by a Croat, Šime Trinajstić, a native of Nova Bukovica. The construction works were taken care of by a Croat, Bernard Rončević, from Vrši near Nin, and the glassworks and materials were a gift from the Croatian company "Boka Windows," owned by the Franović brothers from Boka. The church pews were a gift of the Croatian entrepreneur Nikola Šarić from Livno, while the altar, sacristy, pulpit, baptistery (all made of marble), the marble staircase in front of the altar, the confessionals and all the doors, were the gifts of various local community members. All of the structures were built with voluntary labour (thousands upon thousands of working hours). All materials were bought with money donated by local Croatian community members.

During the construction of the church of St. Nikola Tavelić, the pastoral centre, the chapel of Our Lady of Trsat, and all other facilities on that small hill in St John's Park, all initiatives and efforts were governed by the principle of complementarity and cooperation in a common task. In the construction of these monumental projects, at a time when we, as a Croatian community, were experiencing an enthusiastic community revival and flourishing, Fr Gracijan, a hard-working and wise Franciscan, showed with his life and work how to serve God and the people. He was very devoted, consistent and modest, mentioning nowhere his merits and the fifteen years he invested in the construction of that beauty in St. John's Park, built in the shape of a large ship, and the other facilities around it.

Fr Gracijan was aware of Voltaire's observation: The only virtue a man cannot boast of is modesty. If he were to brag about it, he would no longer be modest! He was a caring visionary, a man of ideas, but simple, communicative, always cheerful and in the mood for a conversation, with a good sense of humour in the company of believers as a man and priest. He knew how to coexist with his believers and people in general. That is why he was loved and respected. He left behind “Fr Gracijan's Cathedral”, which is crowned not with a bell tower, but a huge white H. And from this H springs a large cross, which is luminous at night. The Croatian coat of arms, located at the foot of the cross, like a kind of trademark, tells every Croatian traveller and visitor that this is his/her church.

On Fr Gracijan Biršić's merits in the recognition, teaching and study of the Croatian language, and his contributions to the Croatian community of Sydney and Australia more generally, much more could be written and in greater detail. Indeed, his legacy is profound, and his name and achievements should never be forgotten. Here I want to mention only a few of his greatest merits and achievements since almost no monument bears his name. The exception is, of course, the “Fr Gracijan's Cathedral” – as the St Nicholas Tavelić Church was named by Croatian poet Joža Ricov in acknowledgement of Biršić's contribution to the preservation of the Croatian identity and language on this distant continent.

Many of his acquaintances and believers do not know that Fr Gracijan Biršić wrote several books. He wrote poetry, literary-historical, literary-critical and linguistic studies,

as well as travelogues and polemics. The book “Mary – The Beginning of a Better World” (Zagreb, 2005), which he calls in the subtitle “Little People's Mariology”, is particularly valuable. It could also be called Croatian Mariology. There is also the “Small Franciscan Gallery” (Rijeka, 2015), which can be categorised as memoir literature. It is certainly a special scrapbook, a collection of memories. In addition, he translated numerous texts from Latin, Italian, French and Slovenian into Croatian. About sixty of his chants of Latin hymns are in constant use in Croatian editions of the Franciscan and Carmelite chronology.

Fr Gracijan always used to say that he would remain in Australia until Croatia became a free, democratic and independent state. And here, as in everything else, he kept his word. He remained in Australia until 1999, after which he returned to his beloved homeland and was placed in Zagreb on Kaptol. He then went to the Osijek-Tvrđa Monastery, where he served from 2000 to 2008. After that he spent a short time in the monasteries of Trsat, Karlovac and Požega. He performed his last service in Rijeka on Trsat, after which, due to illness and old age, he was placed in the Home for the Elderly and the Infirm – Stepinac Home in Cugovec, where he remained until his death. God bless his soul.

Vladimir Klement Novak OFM (14 February 1943 – 20 February 2022)

Vladimir Novak was born on 14 February 1943 in Mačkovec (near Čakovec) to parents Ivan and mother Magdalena née Holetić. He finished elementary school in Mačkovec before joining the Franciscan seminary in Zagreb, where he finished classical high school. On 15 August 1959, he donned the Franciscan habit in Cernik and received the monastic name Friar Klement. He graduated from the Faculty of Theology in Zagreb and was ordained a priest on 29 June 1968. After his priestly ordination as a young monk, he served as a priest for one year in Zagreb at Kaptol, and then as a confessor, catechist and treasurer in Rijeka, Trsat from 1969 to 1975. In 1975, he came to Australia as a pastor for Croatian emigrants in Sydney, where he worked at the Croatian Catholic Centre in Summer Hill from 1975 until his death. He held the position of Head of the Centre from 1987 to 2011.

Since the Croatian Catholic Centre in Summer Hill is the original and oldest Croatian Catholic Centre in Sydney, from which many good things in the Croatian community originated and flowed, and since Fr Vlado Novak was its longest-serving pastor and Head, it is worth revisiting what Fr Vlado had to say about the Centre and his Franciscan brothers. In “A Word to Readers” in Dr Fr Emanuel Hoško's book, Fr Vlado Novak writes: “Croatian Franciscans have been living and working among the Croatians in Sydney since the middle of 1957 as caretakers of Croatian Catholics. In their activities, they followed the same path as the majority of Croatian post-war settlers: together with Croatian believers, they were first guests for more than a decade in Australian Catholic churches around the city, then in 1968 they bought the old church in Summer Hill to restore it for years and they built a Pastoral centre next to it. Finally, in 1985, they branched out into two more Croatian Catholic Centres. One is in Blacktown and the other in St. John's Park. Thus, today the Catholic Church among Croatians in Sydney is active through the Croatian Franciscans, members of the Province of St. Cyril and Methodius

with its centre in Zagreb, in three churches and three Pastoral centres. The oldest of these centres, the one in Summer Hill, has just completed 25 years of activity, and this is an occasion to record unforgettable details from the past activities of the Church among the Croats in Sydney.”

Fr Vlado offers more important historical details: “Organised church activity in Sydney was started by Fr Rok Romac. Almost a quarter of a century has passed since his death, but his memory is still alive. Fr Lambert Ivančić and Fr Euzebijije Mak worked together with Fr Rok Romac until 1970. After 1970, Fr Josip Švenda, Fr Marijan Glamočak and Fr Daroslav Miklaušić arrived in Sydney from Croatia and spent several years among Sydney Croats and then returned to Croatia. Fr Euzebijije Petar Mak, Fr Toni Mutnik, Fr Vinko Švogor, Fr Vlado Novak, Fr Gracijan Biršić, Fr Mijo Hrman and Fr Mato Mučkalović are working in Sydney today.”

In relation to their pastoral work and duties, Fr Vlado mentions two very important proclamations. The first was issued in July 1974, together with other Croatian priests in Australia. It identifies the spread of the Gospel as a priority, because God's message through the Croatian Church reaches Croats all over the world, including us in Australia. Our Croatian church sends us this message: Each Croatian Catholic house, wherever it is located, must be a sanctuary for all the values of the Croatian national and church tradition.

The second Proclamation by Sydney Franciscans focused on continuing the work of Fr Rok Romac and working on the tasks and obligations that will enable the Croatian people to preserve their identity in foreign environments, thus reinforcing the need for churches, priests, social, cultural and sports institutions. Only Croatian institutions that promote togetherness, harmony, love and peace can ensure the preservation of our communities.

They also diligently followed the message of the Archbishop of Zagreb Cardinal Franjo Kuharić to priests working among Croatian migrants during his visit to Australia in 1980. Cardinal F Kuharić told them: “Be aware that you give our emigrants the most when you give them the gifts of God; then you save all the values in it; then you raise them in true love of God, philanthropy and patriotism. You carry out the mission of the Church and that is why you are sent to every person bearing in mind his salvation... You must give your people what only you can give them and do: heal their souls, save their consciences, guard human values in them, guard their faith, as well as their Croatian identity.”

The Croatian Catholic Centre in Summer Hill, in those turbulent years for the community in Sydney and Australia, was not only a place of worship. It was also the strategic centre of the Croatian community in Sydney. This was a place where everything was carefully planned and from where everything positive and constructive evolved. Preserving the language and the organisation of the Croatian language schools were among the Centre's major tasks. According to Fr Emanuil Hoško, Croatian priests instructed the parents that they should first establish a Parents' Committee in the area of a certain school, then elect a School Committee that would express to the local director the desire and need for Croatian children to be taught the language in the form of supplementary classes. The Central Council of Croatian Ethnic Schools (SOHEŠ) was established here and enjoyed the hospitality of the Croatian Catholic Centre in Summer Hill for years. Monthly

SOHEŠ meetings were held there as well as CCCES teacher seminars. The Central Croatian Library was also available to teachers there (I wonder what has happened to it? Where are these resources located now?). In the 1970s, Croatian Franciscans at the Croatian Catholic Centre in Summer Hill were, among other things, very active in teaching the Croatian language in numerous suburbs of Sydney. Fr Vlado taught Croatian in Summer Hill soon after his arrival to Australia in 1975 and in Blacktown in the 1980s.

The Croatian Catholic Centre in Summer Hill was one of five Croatian community organisations instrumental in establishing the Croatian Studies Foundation in 1984. The others were the Central Council of Croatian Ethnic Schools (SOHEŠ) in New South Wales, the Croatian Society "Sydney" in Punchbowl, the Croatian Club "King Tomislav" in Edensor Park, and the Croatian Cultural Association "Bosna" in St Mary's. Fr Vlado often used to say that every ethnic community, including the Croatian community, needs enthusiastic people who are aware that cultural values, i.e. language, literature, customs, and traditions, are much more important than money, buildings, and even sports. He was one of those enthusiasts. He was an ardent supporter of the Croatian Studies Foundation and Croatian language studies at Macquarie University. He served on the Governing Council of the CSF for 11 years (1989, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001) and was its Vice-President for two years (2002, 2003). Fr Vlado, as he was popularly known, served the Croatian community of Sydney through his work at the Croatian Catholic Centre in Summer Hill from 1975 until his passing in 2022. God bless his soul.

To conclude, Professor Peter Hill, Fr Gracijan Biršić and Fr Vladimir Novak, with their dedicated work, have left an indelible mark in the history of the Croatian community in Sydney and beyond. In addition to their professional duties and obligations, they were socially engaged in the Croatian community and thus maintained and enriched not only the religious life of Croatians but also contributed to Croatian cultural and academic life in the last three decades of the 20th century, particularly in relation to the Croatian language. The personality, expertise and versatility of these three gentlemen significantly shaped the Croatian public scene during these three decades.

Their involvement in the recognition and teaching of the Croatian language, and their enormous efforts, contribution and involvement in the Croatian Studies Foundation and Croatian Studies at Macquarie University, have been extremely valuable. They have indisputably left behind indispensable treasures and memories for the Croatian community in Sydney. Their legacy, on which they worked self-effacingly, modestly and diligently, and sometimes painstakingly, will remain with us forever. At a personal level, it was a great honour and pleasure for me to be their friend, associate and colleague. In our joint work and efforts, we managed to accomplish some very significant projects and achieve many good things. The achievements and friendship of these three great men will forever remain in my memory. Eternal rest to them from the Lord and our due human gratitude for all their good deeds! †