

Monastic Musings: Some Notes On The New Norcia Archives

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The Benedictine Community Archives housed at Holy Trinity Abbey, New Norcia, 130 kilometres north of Perth contains a wealth of historical documentation. This collection details the history and achievements of a unique monastic community, and also significantly enhances the archival heritage of the Western Australian community as a whole. To illustrate the value of this collection a brief outline of the historical and cultural perspectives of the New Norcia community is given. This is followed by an examination of the contents of this archival collection and present initiatives to preserve, restore and develop the collection for future generations.

Historical Orientations

On 1st March, 1846 two Spanish monks, Dom Rosendo Salvado and Dom Joseph Serra, with three European companions, arrived at a spot a short distance from the site of the present New Norcia Monastery. They had been recruited the previous year by Bishop Brady, the first Catholic Bishop of Perth, to come out to Western Australia and to begin a mission to the Aboriginal people. The first thirteen years of the mission were difficult and demanding. Within months of the foundation of the mission, Salvado and Serra were left to themselves to survive as best they could. With one of their companions dead, and the other two resolved to return to Europe, the two monks laboured alone to establish their first harvest and slowly win the trust of the Aboriginal people.

Difficulties of various types continued through into the late 1850's. Serra, Bishop-Administrator of the Perth diocese during that period, became increasingly absorbed by the needs of the white colonists in Western Australia and tended to see New Norcia merely as a source of income for the diocese. On the other hand Salvado, now Bishop Salvado, remained determined to develop this mission and to dedicate his life to the Aboriginal

people. In 1858 a solution was determined by Rome: from that time New Norcia was granted spiritual and temporal separation from the Perth diocese. After this the New Norcia mission began to prosper as the majority of artisan monks living in Perth resolved to join Salvado in his enterprise. As a result of this decision, the New Norcia building programme and the development of the Monastery Farm were able to slowly but successfully prosper through the next forty years.

Salvado determined through these years to assist the Aboriginal people in two ways. He realised the necessity of teaching literacy skills but unlike other missions of the period understood that it was necessary to train them in practical, employment-appropriate skills as well. Therefore, he evolved an effective training programme by means of which each artisan monk was allotted a small number of Aboriginal apprentices to learn such skills as bee-keeping, farm and crop management, carpentry, cobbling, baking, butchering, horse-breaking etc. The girls were trained in areas such as needlework, housekeeping, cooking and other domestic skills. This programme received much attention and interest nationally and internationally. Aboriginal people from the New Norcia mission were readily employed throughout the colony by the European settlers.

Through the last forty years of his life Salvado maintained a keen interest in international affairs. An intimate of the Spanish Royal Family, he lived at the Escorial Palace in his own suite of rooms when in Madrid, and corresponded regularly with a wide circle of international churchmen and prominent citizens and statesmen of his day. His interests were many and varied: everything attracted his attention. His library contained publications on Medicine, Astronomy, Classical Music, Anthropology, the Natural Sciences and the Arts. In the Western Australian community at large and in international Church and Benedictine circles he became increasingly respected and admired as the century progressed.

In December 1900 Salvado died in Rome and three years later his body was transferred to the Choir of the Abbey Church at his own New Norcia mission. His successor, Bishop Fulgentius Torres, at the commencement of this new century found it necessary to evaluate current mission initiatives in the light of trends now obvious throughout the new Australian nation. Salvado had tried to keep his Aboriginal people somewhat apart and separate from the negative aspects of white colonisation. Torres could see that such a policy could no longer be maintained. The drift of the Aboriginal people towards white settlements would only accelerate and consequently Torres determined that new initiatives should be undertaken by the monastic community to provide alternative apostolates for the monks.

In 1908 St. Gertrude's Girls' College opened at the mission under the direction of the Australian order the Sisters of St. Joseph. Five years later, in 1913, the Boys' College, St. Ildephonsus College, opened under the direction of the Marist Brothers. These two buildings were simply the

beginning of a massive building revitalisation programme initiated by Bishop Torres. The north and south wings of the monastery compound were linked by a central three storied building of classical design and proportion. A new complex of buildings was created for the Aboriginal Girls' Orphanage and the Boys' Orphanage dating from the Salvado period was updated, enlarged, and modernised in the first decade of this century.

Above all else, Torres encouraged the development of art and culture in the mission settlement. He brought in the Spanish craftsman John Casellas to carve intricate gold inlaid wooden altars for the mission chapels and to build the shelving and tables for the monastic library and community refectories. When the building programme was completed he commissioned artist-monk Dom Lesmes to paint the monastery music hall, the Abbey Church and the Chapels associated with the college buildings. In 1908, at the request of the Australian Catholic Hierarchy, Torres opened the Aboriginal mission at Drysdale River/Kalumburu.

By 1914 New Norcia was revitalised. Torres had set the tone and style of the township which endures through to the present time. In doing this he had managed to exhaust himself and in that year he died. Many changes and developments have occurred at New Norcia in the subsequent seventy years: two more Spanish Abbots — Catalan and Gregory Gomez — followed Torres as superior of the community before the first Australian Abbot, Bernard Rooney, was elected in the 1970's. Each new superior and each generation of monks has carved its individual stamp on the New Norcia community. Each administration and each generation has therefore made its own impact on the distinctive Benedictine Community archival collection.

The Monastic and Cultural Environment

To comprehend the richness of the archival collection, one must understand something of the monastic life and rhythm. It is the singular beauty of the monastic environment and experience which has created and still maintains the existence of the collection. St. Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine Order, was born in 480 A.D. His rule is quite psychologically perceptive, since it does not attempt to drastically and abruptly change the individual, rather, it creates a setting, a harmonious rhythm and interaction between meditation, study and manual work lived in a communal context in which a variety of temperaments are able to develop a rich and supportive lifestyle for each individual. There is a quiet confidence about the monastic life. A confidence born of the knowledge that monasticism tends to ride the storms of history and civilisations. Carried by this sense of confidence and stability, the individual monk senses his life enhanced by a security and permanence within change which most members of modern society often hunger for, but seldom seek successfully or finally obtain.

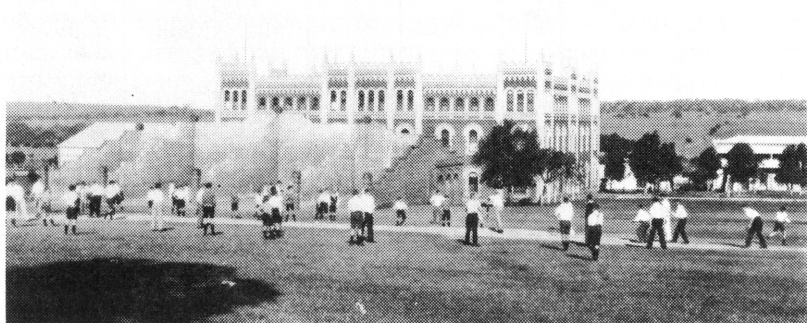
For the visitor or tourist to New Norcia, the first impact is one of cultural

<u>Nombre</u>	<u>Nacimiento</u> <u>Un. No. Día</u>	<u>Padres</u>	<u>Sueldo de su</u> <u>dotación</u>	<u>Oficina</u>	<u>Oficio</u>	<u>Observaciones</u>
Mano 39. <i>Francisco María</i>	1. Mayo 1816	Señor y Señora María Petra	Uny.	Uny.	Prof. de San Vito 17. Abril 1835	Profes. 26 Julio 1834. Moris el 29 Set. 1866.
<i>Francisco María</i>			<i>Francisco</i>	<i>Francisco</i>		Profes. del Monast. el 1. de Agosto de 1834. Dijo la Misión el 28 de Abril de 1836 para a Italia, regresó el 1.º de Mayo de 1836.
P. <i>Sebastián María</i>	9. Mayo 1816	Señor y Señora María	Cecilia	Orvieto	Substituto	Profes. del Monast. el 5 de Set. de 1817. muere el 5 de Set. de 1861 y el 1.º de 3 de Enero de 1887.
<i>Sebastián María</i> 38. Agosto	4. Nov. 1816	Sebastián y Señora Antonia	Gerona	Gerona	Labrador	
<i>Guillermo María</i> 20. Agosto	26. Enero 1815	Señor y Señora María	de H. de San	Gerona	Enfermero	Profes. del Monast. el 7 de Set. de 1817. muere el 5 de Set. de 1862 y el 1.º de 15 de Enero 1887.

A page from the New Norcia Admissions Journal, 1859. (Courtesy Benedictine Monastery, New Norcia.)



View from the Monastery cloister looking towards the Mission Church, c. 1924. (Courtesy Battye Library 23356 P).



Students of St Ildephonsus College at Sport, C. 1924. (Courtesy Battye Library 23357 P.)



de un... y los achasus de otros seoria disminuyendo cada
Monks at the Benedictine Monastery 1880. (Courtesy Benedictine Monastery, New Norcia.)

shock. In the midst of the Western Australia bush one suddenly comes upon the monastery township. The buildings are all quite different and yet each contributes in a unique way to the whole. The monastery compound itself with its two Salvado wings (north wing 1850's and south wing 1870's) and the central Torres administration wing (1903) present a unity of theme, design and pattern which is itself a tribute to the architectural competence of Torres. The Abbey Church with its mellowed natural stone, St. Gertrude's neo-gothic design and entrance drive lined with palms, St. Ildephonsus' byzantine design dominating the northern end of the township, along with the Kelly's pioneer cottage and the two nineteenth century mills. All these buildings and the monastery cemetery itself help to partially remove the visitor from the present and transfer him or her back to an earlier period — a period when the individual and his world were viewed from a slightly different perspective than they are today. One senses not only the colonial Australian period but also we catch a glimpse of an orientation and a lifestyle dating back to medieval Europe.

The Monastery art collection was built up over many years. It consists of some sixty paintings of European origins along with other works created here at New Norcia by Dom Lesmes and Dom Salvado. At the present time the entire monastery art collection is on public display at the Museum/ Art Gallery housed in the former Aboriginal Girls' Orphanage. Some of the European paintings were given to Bishop Salvado by wealthy Spanish and Italian benefactors, many were obtained by Abbot Catalan. Many are of a bygone pious and somewhat bloody mould or type but some are particularly delicate and beautiful. 'The Divine Shepherdess' (The School of Laredo) and 'The Madonna and Child' (attributed to Murillo) are excellent examples of the artists' craft. As a whole it presents yet another aspect of the Benedictine experience and, as part of the community heritage, it influences our understanding of the origins and context of the community archives.

The community library is housed at the monastery itself. Some 40,000 monographs are shelved on two levels of the south wing. The main room of the monastery library is the site of Bishop Salvado's original library and the highly polished library floor is that same floor which Salvado helped to lay and maintain. The most valuable aspect of the library collection is the rare-book collection consisting of nearly 3,000 volumes of which the *Margarita Philosophica* is the earliest published item (1508). Most of these rare books are theological and scriptural commentaries written in Latin and Spanish. There are, however, a small number of rare books in early English and these are a delight to the scholar or researcher to quietly browse.

As well as the rare book collection, the monastery library also contains some 20,000 monographs published in the 19th century, along with a steadily growing collection of current 20th century theological and scriptural publications. The various secular disciplines are well represented

also: including a collection of early Australiana, medical textbooks and treatises, a small but valuable art library and literature from nations around the world. Whilst the monastery library collection is generally used only by the monks, the Benedictine Community is always ready to give special permission to scholars and researchers to have limited but direct access to this outstanding collection.

The monastic lifestyle ever attempts to be simple and sparing of resources. This ideal and the sheer poverty of the early New Norcia monastic community tended to develop a resourceful attitude on the part of each monk. Nothing was wasted or thrown away if at all possible. Consequently, used envelopes, pieces of string, old bottles were all kept and pressed into service to meet new and varying needs. In this way, stamps were carefully detached from envelopes and tidily tied together in bundles by means of cotton thread. Thus began the monks' interest in collecting stamps. Succeeding generations of monks have contributed to this collection down to the present time and it is hoped in the near future to assess and further order this collection so that it can be eventually displayed at the museum/art gallery. Other collections preserved and maintained by the monastic community include an interesting coin collection, an Aboriginal artifacts collection and a variety of machines and mechanical appliances used by earlier generations in and around the monastery and farm.

Archival Origins and Beginnings

For many years after Bishop Salvado's death, the 19th century archival records and materials were located in a variety of areas in and around the monastery compound. Individual monks kept mementoes of the Salvado period in their own cells. Much of the 19th century documentation seems to have been stored at random in suitcases and trunks around the monastery building. Because the Salvado period seemed comparatively recent, there was not at that time any strong awareness of the historical importance of this scattered documentation. Given the fact that storage and preservation was at first so random and scattered, it is rather surprising that so much of the 19th century archival material has been preserved.

Three monks in the last sixty years have laboured at assembling, assessing and documenting the archival collection. In the 1920's Dom Romanos Rios, later Abbot Rios, a distinguished Latin scholar and theological writer, made a study of the early archival documentation. In particular, he made reference to a parcel of Torres correspondence which unfortunately has been lost since that time. Dom William Gimenez for thirty years made a detailed study of the 19th century archival materials in preparing his large scholarly study of the life of Bishop Salvado. This manuscript has never been published. However, it is to Dom Eugene Perez, the present monastic archivist, that we are indebted for the collating, preservation and assembling of the monastery archival collection. Over many years Dom Eugene has laboured with love and devotion in his study and preservation of the mission heritage. Without his detective work and

his scholarly mind, much would be now lost.

The Archival Collection

Soon after the foundation of the mission settlement, Bishop Salvado began to keep a detailed daily diary of events. He made the actual diaries himself, sewing them down the middle with thread and then, day by day with very few lapses, he recorded major and minor incidents and events in a minute, spidery style for the next fifty years. These diaries offer a well-spring of information. They tell of early struggles and conflicts, of initial successes in the mission to the Aboriginal people, of Salvado's trips back to Europe each decade and of his work and diplomacy in international church circles. The visits of governors (Weld, Robinson and Broome), of explorers (John and Alexander Forrest, Ernest Giles) and of bishops and cardinals (Cardinal Moran, Dr Reynolds, Bishops Griver and Gibney) are all outlined along with the welcoming ceremonies, concerts and liturgies that attended such visits.

As well as keeping his daily diary, Bishop Salvado was also a constant correspondent. He wrote to bishops, cardinals and popes, to royalty, members of the nobility, government officials, brother abbots and monks, fellow colonists, settlers and farmers. Much of this correspondence to and from Salvado has been preserved and is today stored safely in archival boxes. At regular intervals Salvado also wrote detailed reports concerning the development and condition of the mission to Cardinal Franzoni and the Propagation of the Faith in Rome. These reports have recently been translated into English by Dom Eugene and make fascinating reading for the detailed description of daily life at the mission. By means of these reports, the reader becomes aware not only of the development of the mission enterprise, but also of the development of the European colony in Western Australia.

The official community journal that is kept today dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. For much of this period it was written in Spanish, but in more recent years it has been kept in English. If and when gaps appear in personal diaries, this community journal helps to supplement and clarify such periods. It thus affords an uninterrupted account of events at the mission during those periods when the superior happened to be overseas. Other monks from the Salvado period, including Salvado's Prior, the dedicated and esteemed Dom Garrido, also maintained diaries, some of which are still preserved in excellent condition in the archives.

As the Benedictine monks were the first settlers on the Victoria Plains, they were also inevitably the first European settlers to explore and map the locality. The Benedictine Community Archives today still possesses a number of these original hand-drawn maps by the early monks. For much of the latter part of the 19th century, the monks leased and owned large tracts of pastoral land radiating in all directions out and away from the mis-

sion settlement. All the leases and documents of ownership were carefully filed by the monks and still remain today a mine of information concerning land holdings at different periods of the century. All original maps and many of the land deeds and contracts have now been assessed and microfilmed by the staff of the J.S. Battye Library.

As the prime work of the mission in the 19th century was the care and support of the Aboriginal people, it is to be expected that much of the archival material is related to this work. The early monks were very meticulous in keeping Baptismal, Marriage and Funeral Registers. These registers have proved to be invaluable for scholars researching Aboriginal statistics for the 19th century. The community journals and the Salvado diaries are also another source of information on matters Aboriginal. At the time of Salvado's death, there were over 200 Aboriginal people living in small, two-roomed cottages provided by the monks as well as at the Aboriginal Boys' and Girls' Institutions. The daily diaries and journals of the period detail the family life, customs and attitudes of the people and of the monks working with them.

When Bishop Salvado heard that his brother, Dom Santos Salvado, was to join him at the New Norcia mission, he wrote to his brother and asked him to delay his departure long enough to be able to train as a photographer. This Dom Santos did, and thus today the Benedictine archives contains a fine collection of 19th century photographs. Late in 1982 a large number of 19th century glass negatives of the same period was discovered at the monastery. These valuable negatives have now been handed over to the State Archives for preservation and copying, since it was decided that the monastery could not maintain and preserve this aspect of the collection. It will be some time before these negatives are cleaned and restored, but we await that time with a sense of anticipation and expectation. The 20th century photographic collection is somewhat less even and systematic. Certain periods of the century are reasonably well photographed, whilst other periods are barely recorded.

The Torres period at the turn of the century is not as comprehensively documented as is the Salvado period. However, it is sufficiently documented for us to be able to examine the period reasonably closely. Dom Eugene Perez has recently completed the translation of the Torres diaries and the remnants of the Torres correspondence. Where gaps occur in both the correspondence and the diaries, he has at times been able to supplement his information by using the community journal from that period. It is hoped that these Torres translations at present in manuscript form will soon be published locally in Perth. Dom Eugene has also been able to produce two publications on the Drysdale River/Kalumburu Mission as a result of his research and study of the Kalumburu Community Journals, correspondence and photographic collection.

Unlike many other organisations and institutions the area lacking in the

Benedictine Community Archives is not the foundation period of this institution, but, rather, a much more recent time period. The third and fourth administrations are not well represented in the archival collection, although we do have the community journals for this period (1915-1970), as well as a complete bound set of Abbot Catalan's correspondence (the third Abbot: 1915-1951). It was during this period that the distinguished organist-composer, Dom Stephen Moreno, lived and worked at the Abbey. Dom Moreno influenced a generation of Australian Catholic Church music and the Benedictine archives today contains a wide selection of his musical manuscripts, as well as some of his later correspondence. In 1954 he was invited to bring his music to Spain so that it could be published by the Spanish Government, but, unfortunately, he died of meningitis at Marseilles on his way to Spain from Australia.

Present Initiatives

In the last fifteen years there has been a growing awareness at New Norcia that current records, journals and correspondence need to be maintained in order to provide 20th century archival materials for future generations of monks. The present administration, and the two administrations immediately preceding it, implemented and maintained detailed and well-ordered records systems that ensure ample knowledge and materials will be preserved for future monastic scholars and researchers.

However, it has also been realised that comprehensive archival collections must contain records of community members, as well as information from succeeding administrations. Over the last four years the monastic community has been alerted to this need and reminded of the opportunity to contribute to the on-going historic consciousness and legacy of the Abbey. A series of notices have been placed on the community notice board, asking for photographs, ordination, profession and memorial cards, interesting letters, diaries etc. The response to these appeals has been good. A large number of interesting items has been handed in and, hopefully, community members are more aware of our needs.

For many years the Australian members of the community have not had access to the 19th and early 20th century archival records because of the fact that most of these records are written in Spanish. However, the present monastic archivist, Dom Eugene Perez, has begun to remedy that situation in recent years. As well as the Torres' diaries and correspondence, he has completed the translation of Salvado's regular and lengthy reports to Rome. Over the last eighteen months he has been working industriously on the Salvado diaries, and has translated twenty years' records from the middle period of the Salvado Administration. This work is vital and Dom Eugene with his detailed knowledge of 19th century events is the obvious person to undertake this gruelling programme. He is, however, an elderly man, as are all the Spanish monks in this community, and it is to be hoped that this undertaking will not tax his strength too much in the years ahead.

In March 1981, visiting American Catholic Archivist, Sister Felicitas Powers, assessed the condition of the Benedictine Community Archives and made a series of recommendations concerning the preservation and storing of archival paper and photographic items. We have attempted wherever possible, given the obvious limitations of our annual budget, to implement these recommendations. Early in 1984 we were advised by the instant lotteries commission that we had received a 'culture' grant of \$20,000 to help the community set up a suitable archival storage and research area. An architect has recently been appointed to help the community decide on the location of the archives, and it is hoped that work will soon get under way.

Battye Involvement

In the late 1970's, Abbot Bernard Rooney arranged with Margaret Medcalf and her staff at the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History to microfilm the bulk of the 19th century archival collection. It was felt at that time that it was highly important and urgent that this valuable collection be microfilmed before the paper collection deteriorated any further, or before fire or some other natural disaster destroyed the collection and thus deprived the state and the nation of a legacy both vital and quite unique.

Since then the Battye staff have been a great support to the Benedictine Community and its archivists. Presently, most of the 19th century materials have been microfilmed: this includes the Salvado diaries, community journals, all correspondence, land leases and contracts, accounts records and ledgers, parish registers and maps. Enquiries concerning these items can now be made directly to the Battye Library rather than to the Benedictine Community Archives. Robin South, the Battye Pictorial Collection Librarian, is working with her staff on the Benedictine Community Photographic collection. By the end of 1985 it is hoped that this collection will have been sorted and copied by the Battye staff, and from then requests for copies of New Norcia or Kalumburu photographs will be handled by the State Archives. I can only say once again that our debt to the Battye is immense.

Personal Reflections: Concluding Remarks

I hope that the above outline has given some indication of the origins, nature and singular value of the New Norcia Benedictine Community Archives. When one first arrives at New Norcia the immediate impact is that of the historical attributes of the township and settlement. There is much to see and far too much to absorb in one initial visit. The visitor tends to leave on the drive back to Perth with a head reeling with the complexity and richness achieved through the vision and the determination of one gifted Spanish monk and a steady succession of monks who have committed themselves to this same Benedictine vision through nearly 140 years.

For New Norcia is not simply a historic record of a 19th century

endeavour: it is today a living, growing and changing Benedictine community. It is a group of individuals committed to a way of life first determined and written down nearly 1500 years ago. And yet, it is a way of life which still today attracts many curious and interested observers from all areas of Australian society. In many ways it can be said that at New Norcia the past enhances the present but also that the present clarifies, explains and vitalises the past.

In conclusion, I can only say that this settlement needs to be seen and explored to be really understood. My own debt to this community is great, since they have generously allowed me to work with their heritage, have befriended me and shared with me their experience both personal, individual and collective. An archivist works with the past in the present moment in order that the future and its generations can be enriched.

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