14
Maverick Missionaries

An Overlooked Chapter in the History of Catholic Missions

Eugene Stockton

Many of the surrounding tribes were encamped in the woods. The Five Island blacks, when darkness had shrouded nature in her mantle, began to undress and immediately to paint themselves with a kind of white earth, that resembles our pipe clay. The figures displayed neither taste nor ingenuity. Longitudinal lines on the legs and arms, and curved lines from the breast to the arms, and a spheroidical figure on the breast, intersected without the least display of art, constituted their principal pencil display. Some were disfigured with a soft excrescense of iron ore which made them red; and around the eye they struck a circle with the pipe clay. Before the men were prepared for the Corrobbaraa dance, the females assembled at the order of one of the songsters, who muttered the song, beating time with two *waddies*, to sing. This was the invitation to commence the dance. And, presently was heard the imitatory snorting and stamping of the Kangaroos.

The dance was introduced by the louder singing of the man, and females. The females continuing to beat time with their hands on a bundle which they held before them. Their motions did not display great agility and, as for the *gracefulness* of the scene, it was of too shocking a nature too unseemly — too *disgraceful* to describe. Were not my duty concerned, my curiosity could never prevail on my sense of delicacy, to visit a Corrobbaraa. To a sensible and susceptible mind it is sufficient to say, they were naked. For the sustenance of the indelicate I have no descriptive food.

Before the commencement of the dance, a Roman Catholic Priest made his appearance. He sought out all the infants, and baptised them! A little girl, not more, I should conceive, than twelve years of

> age, officiated as sponsor, and while the Priest was gabbling his Latin forms of Prayer to gaping blacks, this girl was responding, where it is required, in English!! Unfortunately for the poor Priest's discernment, he gave one a double portion of holy water, — a double portion of salt and two names! However, soon as the double baptism was discerned, he dismissed the question with, *"O! Never mind"*. (Letter of W. Walker to Rev. R. Watson, Parramatta 26/11/1821)

A peculiar ambivalence marks the Catholic Church's dealings with Australian Aborigines. On the one hand there is the record of missions established in isolated corners of the continent (*cf.* Boland 1980; Hally 1973; see Appendix). On the other hand, the record of the official Church is one of general apathy, with intermittent stirrings of a troubled conscience.

Australian bishops have produced powerful statements, such as those of 1869, 1885 (repeated in 1895 and 1905) and as recently as 1978, but these were later to be shown to be nothing more than fine words without followthrough, typical of what often appears to Aboriginal eyes as "too much of the grandstand and bandwagon" (Boland 1980:12). Livingston (1979:188-9), investigating the correspondence and background discussions between the bishops from 1885 leading up to their meeting in 1919, has shown that they were pre-occupied with internal Church matters, such as Catholic schools, and were embarrassed by persistent questioning from Rome as to where they stood with regard to Aborigines. This is not to overlook that certain bishops stood out from the Australian hierarchy, men like Polding, Salvado and Gibney, but that is the point: they stood out. A refreshing change in recent years is the concerted effort of the Queensland bishops in fruitful interaction with the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council, in promoting Aboriginal leadership and ministry in the Church and in taking effective political action with government. It is to be hoped that their example will be emulated Australia-wide. But the record up to the present has been that, with notable exceptions, Australian Catholic bishops have not shown the kind of passion for the spiritual welfare of Aborigines which used to be called "missionary zeal".

It is easy to criticise bishops because they stand exposed in the public gaze, yet most often they are only reflections of their time and people. The Catholic community has itself been largely apathetic towards the Aboriginal people. From the beginnings of the colony Catholics have shared the attitudes of most of their fellow Australians about Aborigines: a primitive and degenerate people — pagan and corrupt beyond redemption — incapable of being civilised and Christianised — doomed to extinction — hopeless failures — ignorant and unintelligent — what can you do with them — why can't they be like us (Livingston 1979:178f; Boland 1980:11-12; O'Farrell 1985:273; Stockton 1987:127). I have heard such remarks from the highest offices of the Church, from many ordinary Catholics who regard themselves as well-intentioned towards Aborigines, and even from missionaries seeking thus to explain away their "failure".

The spiritual welfare of Aborigines has never attracted the popular generosity of the Catholic community, as have (for example) churches and schools. Recently conducting the archaeological investigation for the rebuilding of the Cathedral presbytery and school in Sydney I came across the likely foundations of Polding's projected monastery, plans of which are found in the Benedictine Journal of May

1843. It was a rueful reflection that Polding, only two years before, had unsuccessfully sought from the Colonial Secretary "a subsidy or aid in the work of converting the aboriginals of New Holland" (Moran 1895:225), yet had no hesitation in undertaking an ambitious building project, presumably with the financial support of the faithful. The 1840s saw the still-birth of the French mission at Albany and the death of the three year-old Italian mission on Stradbroke Island, both due mainly to lack of material assistance. Mission outreach was not a popular cause among Australian Catholics: when the bishops in 1885 decreed a yearly collection for Aboriginal missions only £795 was collected in 10 years (O'Farrell 1985:273). Determined mission appeals, of Fr. McNab in the seventies and of Fr. McKillop in the nineties, though more successful, met with opposition from bishops and parish priests (O'Farrell ibid; Livingston 1979:185). McKillop's efforts only delayed, by a few years, the demise of the Jesuit mission in the Northern Territory when its link with the Australian province was broken and local Catholic support proved insufficient. As the historian of this mission concluded: "The Australian church of the late nineteenth century was far more pre-occupied with building schools than thinking about Aborigines" (O'Kelly 1967:76).

Yet individuals stood out from the Catholic community in advocacy of Aboriginal causes. Livingston has brought to the fore these apologists for the Aboriginal people: "voices in the wilderness" (1979). Bishops such as Ullathorne and Polding, the priests McNab and McKillop in the last century, Healey and McGovern in this, and outstanding laypersons like John Hubert Plunkett, who as Attorney General was embroiled in the controversy over the Myall Creek massacres (1838), and who probably played a major part in drafting the 1869 bishops' statement. Another was the Scots convert, Duncan, who as editor of the *Australasian Chronicle* in the 1840s, made himself unpopular with the Irish Catholic establishment on social justice issues, including that of the maltreatment of Aborigines, and who was sacked in Polding's absence (O'Farrell 1985:66-70). These apologists are contrasted with the general Catholic community which, as the Duncan affair showed, was preoccupied both with finding a respectable place in Australian society, and with its own internal squabbles.

The Catholic Church in Australia as a whole has never assumed real responsibility for the evangelisation of Aborigines. It has lacked a sense of mission. Typically, whenever a decision was made that something had to be done, as in the 1869 bishops' meeting, a solution was sought by inviting foreign mission congregations, attracting also financial support from their countries of origin. Missions were established by Italian Passionists on Stradbroke Island, Spanish Benedictines at New Norcia (and later Kalumburu), Austrian Jesuits at the Top-End, French Cistercians followed by German Pallottines in the Kimberleys, French Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in the Northern Territory, Irish Augustinians in North Queensland. Even in the 1930s Fathers McGovern and Healey were deploring the lack of Australian support for local missions, both financial and personal: "Except for one Sacred Heart priest on Bathurst Island there is no Australian, Irish, English or Scotch priest working among Aborigines" (McGovern quoted in Livingston 1979:190).

This stands in contrast to the Australian Catholic zeal for overseas missions (Boland 1980:11, who cites a similar contrast among Protestants). In 1972, according to Cyril Hally's estimate, 1248 Australian Catholic missionaries served abroad as against 384 in Australia. Even that latter figure is misleading because it includes a

large proportion of Religious working in predominantly white parishes and schools in the Northern Territory and in parts of the Kimberleys. For example, at the latest count these two mission dioceses, Darwin with 28 priests and Broome with 14 (half of whom are foreign born), have each only half-a-dozen priests engaged full-time on missions. At the same time, there are 799 Australian missionaries working overseas, of whom 294 are priests. Australian Catholics think of missionary zeal as something to be expended across the seas, rather than to a people in their midst whose culture, after 50,000 years of isolated development, differs more from their own than any encountered elsewhere in the world (Stockton 1986:25).

The foregoing provides a context for the missionaries I am labelling maverick. Typically, they work on their own, unless it is with the help of those to whom they minister. As special needs arise they are inclined to use unorthodox methods. More than the conventional missionary, they are ready to baptise with a modicum of instruction, trusting in the continuing action of the Spirit in the neophyte. In the long run they are often proven to be more effective, and memory of them tends to persist together with the faith they tried to communicate. Rarely can such missionaries count on the moral or material support of the Church, but are sustained by a zeal which amounts to a passion. I believe there are two basic mission strategies, just as there are two ways of heating water, that is, by surrounding the water with heated metal as with a *saucepan*, or by plunging a heating element into the water as with an *immersion heater*. The mavericks tend to follow the *immersion heater* strategy. They are less likely to be encumbered by a mission compound and feel free to move with or between communities, as did Francis Tuckfield of Buntingdale (Vic. 1839-48; see Boland 1985:9-10) or some of the missionaries among the North American Indians. The best known of this type was, of course, St. Paul (*cf.* Stockton 1985b).

Significantly the first recorded Catholic missionary to Aborigines was a convict priest, Peter O'Neil. Moran (p. 50) records that during his penal servitude in the colony (1801-1803):

> he devoted his attention, as far as he was permitted, to the aboriginals whose state of ignorance he constantly deplored. He instructed many of them in the great truths of religion and led them to abandon their idolatrous practices.

One wonders at the reality behind the quaint hagiographic style of the author. On O'Neil's pardon and departure, he promised to try "to procure them some missionary aid", a promise fellow convict Fr. Dixon was to recall in a letter a few years later: "I fear that if it does not come soon... the natives will return to their old ways" (*loc. cit.*).

The priest who took part in the ceremony described in the opening citation (November 1821) must have been John Joseph Therry, at that time the only Catholic priest on the mainland. This ceremony was performed the year after Therry's arrival in the colony, so he must have turned his attention to the Koories of Sydney almost from the beginning of his long ministry. Combining a mass infant baptism with a corroboree raises an interesting question: was Therry a man before his time, inculturating Catholic Liturgy within an indigenous ceremony? It was probably more by instinct than by reasoning, for Therry was not an intellectual man. He was a notably compassionate person, seeking out the most degraded and abandoned, as was clearly evident in his ministry to convicts. He stands in contrast to Ullathorne

(O'Farrell 1985:24), who arrived in 1833 to take charge of the fledgling church. Ullathorne was a highly educated and intelligent man, who agonised over the conditions of the colony, and especially over the state of the convicts and Aborigines. As to the latter, he saw no hope for those living close to settlement, who he felt were too corrupted by white ways, and he believed the only means of Christianising Aborigines was for missionaries to go out to those beyond the colony's limits. This was impracticable, so nothing was done. Therry, on the contrary, did what came to hand: he baptised such Aboriginal children as their parents presented. Such a casual practice scandalised Ullathorne, as twelve years before it had done the Wesleyan Walker. At least he persisted over a number of years, which also suggests he developed relations with the local communities. Whatever the extent and methods of Therry's ministry, it anticipated the first Protestant foundations at Lake Macquarie (1825) and Wellington (1832) and the first Catholic institution at Windsor.

John Brady was appointed parish priest of Windsor on his arrival in Australia in 1838. He showed particular concern for the local Koories. In Moran's words (p. 555):

> He applied himself to learn their language, and he formed a native college, in which a considerable number of orphans were instructed and provided for in every way.

His predilection for Aborigines may have been a factor in his being appointed first Vicar General (1843) and later Bishop of Perth. Certainly his own expectations were to start missionary work on a large scale in the vast Western Australian colony. Hardly three months in office and he was off to Europe to secure missionary aid, returning with a thirty-strong contingent of priests, nuns and students. Local Catholic resources were insufficient to support this number on the three missions planned. Only the New Norcia foundation survived. After severe privation, the French team destined for Albany was recalled by their superior and diverted to Mauritius. The Italian Father Angelo Confalonieri set out with two Irish catechists for Port Essington. Shipwrecked in Torres Strait, only he and the captain survived. He found his way to Port Essington and alone for two years, till his death in 1848, he worked among the local Aborigines, mastering their language and customs and gaining "about four hundred of them to Christ" (Moran p. 560).

The gold strikes of 1851 profoundly changed the life and character of the Australian colonies. Governments and churches thereafter largely ignored the Aboriginal people for the next thirty odd years (Boland 1985:11). In the 1880s the states set up Aboriginal Protection Boards which interfered in the lives of Aborigines in the minutest detail: holding people on reserves under white management, restricting their movement, repeatedly relocating communities, removing children from their families on the least pretext. About the same time churches also set out on a new wave of missionary endeavour and, despite the undoubted zeal and care of missionaries, there was no questioning the single model of mission as a total institution to protect and Christianise the "native". It was the *saucepan* strategy of mission. It is easy now in hindsight to criticise mission methods — e.g. retention of management in white hands, cultivating dependence on store supplies, a policy of assimilation in church and school, removal of children to dormitories away from parental influence — but for most missions this was the only model. It is no wonder

Aborigines rued the period of protection and, while individually grateful for a breathing space amid rapid white settlement, and for some well-remembered missionaries, could not help but see the churches as being involved in a denominational version of government missions, and even as the pious arm of government. In Aboriginal vocabulary "mission" is not a good word.

During the preceding hiatus of some forty years, only New Norcia survived from the first wave of Catholic mission endeavour. The Benedictine mission strategy was, as it had been in the conversion of Europe, of a monastic community serving as an *immersion heater* in the midst of surrounding peoples (similar to that of Nundah and Hermannsburg; *cf.* Boland 1985:10). Salvado was a great charismatic figure, whose life and work are well enough documented not to need further comment here. Just to add a personal note: about 20 years ago an Aboriginal friend from Western Australia and a devout Anglican, Eileen Lester, was speaking to me in glowing terms about "a father we *have* in the west". On my asking his name, she replied "Father Salvado" — a comment on the man and on Aboriginal memory. Salvado kept before the eyes of the Pope the work of New Norcia, which stood out against the Australian background of general neglect, and it was the Pope who niggled Polding and the other bishops into making the episcopal statement of 1869 on the Church's responsibility towards the Aboriginal people.

The year 1869 saw George Dillon taking up his parish appointment at Camden. Though better known as educationalist, polemicist and academic, Dillon took an active interest in the Aborigines of the Burragorang Valley (Wynne 1950:304-6). He may have been influenced by the bishops' statement of that year and had probably heard of the successful Aboriginal farming enterprises at Acheron-Coranderrk (Vic.), Maloga-Cummeroogunga (N.S.W.), and at Port Macleay and Poonindie (S.A.). He launched an appeal to buy 70 acres of farmland, which was subsequently enlarged after a further appeal. It was handed over to the Burragorang community without strings attached and it continued to produce high yields well after Dillon's departure in 1878. A church and school on the farm property and a further eight schools throughout the valley served the black and white inhabitants, particularly taking account of the nomadic habits of the former. Each Sunday female teachers visited and instructed the women in their camps, while Aboriginal children were found to be the best catechists for their parents. Rosary was recited around the campfire every night. By 1874 he could claim that all but five were baptised.

In her history of the Kimberley missions (1969) Mary Durack has brought to the fore two priests who, though founding figures of that mission field, were truly mavericks passionate in their zeal for the Aboriginal people. Duncan McNab, the Scot, entered the seminary at an early age with the desire to serve Aborigines in far away Australia. Detained by his bishop in Glasgow till he was 47 and then forced by debt (incurred bringing out his elderly parents) to serve as pastor of Portland for another four years, he had already turned 50 by the time he could embark on his life's ambition in 1871. Beginning at Bribie Island in Moreton Bay he ministered for a dozen years throughout Queensland (see Loos, this volume), continually locked in struggle with church authorities for support, and with state authorities over landrights. Like Dillon he envisaged self-supporting communities. With the collapse of his labours in Queensland he was invited to Western Australia by Gibney, first as chaplain to Aboriginal prisoners on Rottnest Island, then to make the first foundation in the Kimberleys at Goodenough Bay in 1884. He was forced to retire two years later

at the age of 66. Again, this phase of his life in Western Australia was marked by struggle with Church and State authorities, but "poor old Father Mac-a-nab" left a legacy of endearment among the Kimberley people which ensured a welcome for later missionaries.

Nicholas Emo, the Spaniard, had already worked twelve years as a missionary in Patagonia when he decided to devote the rest of his life to the Australian Aborigines out of "the secret attraction I felt for this unfortunate race". For this purpose in 1896 he joined the French Cistercians, who had been offered the Kimberley mission, but six years later left that order when they gave up the mission, staying on himself until his death in 1915 at Lombadina. The Cistercian phase of his life he spent as parish priest at Broome, caring especially for Aboriginal and Filipino families amidst the cruelty and greed of the booming pearl industry. As a secular priest he subsequently served the Aboriginal communities on the coasts north of Broome living as a sea-going nomad on the lugger *San Salvador*. He too was in continual struggle with state and church authorities, and in particular he had the difficult task of overseeing the Cistercian withdrawal and of contending with the Pallottines who came in with efficient but set ideas at odds with his own. He too left a memory of endearment among the people he served. Mary Durack (p. 232) sums him up as:

> ...one of the most controversial figures ever to find his way to the multi-cultural peninsula of pearls. In his time both revered and despised, his actions sometimes honoured, often twisted and construed, he was a priest of true fervour, a man of practical deeds and romantic illusions.

In eastern Australia the Church did not set up missions in the full sense, but maintained establishments offering limited services to existing communities. Evangelisation remained the concern of individual priests and was usually carried out in the course of ordinary parish ministry. Some were particularly dedicated to Aborigines and had a large effect on local communities, although their efforts have not been adequately recorded. One hears of the Breton Pierre Bucas at Mackay in the 1870s, of Luckie in Brisbane where the local Murries "carried their affection so far as to choose him for their king" (Moran 420), of Phillip Cassidy at Moruya around the turn of the century, of Frank Lloyd during his term at Moree, of Frank Kelly at Armidale up to the mid-1970s. According to the 1981 census, while Catholics made up a quarter of the Aboriginal population of N.S.W., that proportion varied greatly from area to area, which can be partly attributed to the influence of individual priests and nuns. In some cases one can point to a succession of sympathetic parish priests, as for instance at Moree, Bourke and Wilcannia. Statistically, it appears that this quiet unrecorded ministry to Aborigines took place especially in parts of northern N.S.W. and in the far west, where the Catholic proportion is more than half the total.

Dennis Lyons, while pastor of Wilcannia (1971-77), compiled the unpublished manuscript *The Catholic Aboriginal Mission of Wilcannia (Notes for a History)*. Apart from chronicling the mission proper, he highlights the work of two parish priests, both of them expatriates, one a New Zealander the other Irish. Patrick Carmine, after ordination in 1931, was first assigned to the cathedral parish of Broken Hill. His far-flung territory included Tibooburra and Menindee, where he took a special interest

in the local Aboriginal communities. Baptismal registers record that he performed 41 baptisms at Tibooburra and 146 at Menindee between 1932 and 1939. At Menindee 117 people were baptised in a two week period in 1936. Oral history links this event with Patrick Moloney M.S.C.—a colourful figure who, besides conducting retreats and parish missions, started the Aboriginal Catholic missions at Palm Island and Alice Springs. Moloney's readiness to baptise Aborigines after little instruction was criticised by his comperes but was vindicated by lasting results over generations. On the scraps of information to hand, Lyons speculates that Carmine may have invited Moloney to preach at a parish mission at Menindee in 1934, and invited him back for the mass baptism in 1936. This involvement of a Sacred Heart Missionary may have led to that order setting up the Menindee Catholic mission in 1939, which later, with the "relocation" of the community, was transferred to Wilcannia (1949-63).

Carmine himself was resident priest for awhile in 1939. Between 1954 and 1958 he was parish priest of Bourke, where he would have met up again with people from Tibooburra after their "relocation". Succeeding him at Bourke was the Columban Patrick Killeen (1959-65), also noted for his love of Aboriginal people. Killeen baptised at least 261 Aborigines at Bourke. In 1964 his reputation was such that, when the Sacred Heart Missionaries left Wilcannia, the parish priest appealed to him to visit the mission, which he did twice baptising 12 people. I spent most of 1974 looking after Bourke parish and often heard the local Aborigines speak about Carmine and Killeen with affection. The more recent memory of Killeen was also laced with stories about his larrikin streak, which especially endeared him to their sense of humour.

The foregoing has concentrated on past priests simply because, although the information about them is scrappy, it is even more difficult to find data on others who fit the maverick label. Religious sisters have long had an association with the Aboriginal apostolate but until recently have been confined to convent communities and well-defined tasks, such as in schools and hospitals. Religious women are now excelling the men in finding innovative and effective strategies in mission. Future histories will need to record those who staffed state-run leprosaria when other nurses would not volunteer (e.g. Derby, Darwin, Fantome Island), sisters on reserves offering just a friendly presence (e.g. Cherbourg, Woorabinda), those retired from the classroom finding a new apostolate in visiting past pupils and their families (e.g. Broome), those responding to the outstation movement in community schools (e.g. Billiluna, Mulan, Turkey Creek), visitors to prisoners, supporters of the aged and disabled, providers of hostel accommodation. Brothers too are moving out of the traditional classroom, workshop and garden to stand alongside Aboriginal men, for example in the fight against alcoholism and unemployment. These new activities are calling for more imaginative Religious.

Lay missionaries hardly leave a story behind, yet they have included exceptional people who related closely and effectively with local Aborigines. Mention should be made here of the Filipino and mixed race helpers of Nicholas Emo (Durack 1969:115-7, 103, 305 *et al*), Francis McGarry of Central Australia (O'Grady 1977), and Ellen Banks at Menindee (Lyons 45-6). Still more interesting, but very rarely documented are the Aborigines who were evangelisers to their own people; Lorna Dixon at Bourke, former lepers who returned to their own communities, Mulinthin "the first missioner of Port Keats" are examples (Stockton 1985a). Now there are many more and their stories should be recorded before they are too long passed away.

In this account only those who have finished their run have been named for the record. They were individuals who typically worked outside of the set mould and the fixed system, and so often lacked the church support they deserved. They were driven by a passionate zeal for a people, and through the channel of an often quirkish personality, sought to bring them the gospel as they saw it. They attempted to meet the real needs of real persons. Following in their footsteps are many now alive whom it has been a rich experience to know, and in part this story of the past is meant as a tribute to the maverick missionaries of today.

Appendix I — Establishment of Catholic Missions in Australia

1843-1846	Stradbroke Island (Qld.), Passionists
1847-c.1900	New Norcia (W.A.), Benedictines
1882-1886	Rapid Creek (N.T.), Jesuits, Relocated at
1886-1902	Daly River (N.T.)
1890-1899	Beagle Bay (W.A.), Cistercians
1901-	Beagle Bay (W.A.), Pallottines
1906-	Kalumburu (W.A.), Benedictines
1910-	Lombadina (W.A.), Pallottines
1911-	Bathurst Island (N.T.), Missionaries of Sacred Heart
1930-	Palm Island (N.T.), Missionaries of Sacred Heart
1935-	Port Keats (N.T.), Missionaries of Sacred Heart
1935-1942	Alice Springs (N.T.), Missionaries of Sacred Heart. Relocated at
1942-1953	Arltunga (N.T.). Relocated at
1953-	Santa Teresa (N.T.)
1936-1949	Menindee (N.S.W.), Missionaries of Sacred Heart. Relocated at
1949-1963	Wilcannia (N.S.W.)
1939-	Balgo (W.A.), Pallottines
1940-	Melville Island (N.T.), Missionaries of Sacred Heart
1954-	Daly River (N.T.), Missionaries of Sacred Heart
1954-	Moree (N.S.W.), diocesan
1968-	Armidale (N.S.W.), diocesan

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