

Mt. Margaret

Missionaries and the Aftermath

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Mt. Margaret is a small Aboriginal community located 1,000 km from Perth, near Laverton in the North-Eastern Goldfields. A mission station was established there in 1921 by Mr Rod Schenk, who was associated with the fundamentalist Christian organization later known as the Melbourne-based United Aborigines' Mission. The U.A.M. withdrew from Mt. Margaret in 1976, passing responsibility for the running of the settlement to a group of former Mission 'inmates' (as they had earlier been called) who wished to retain Mt. Margaret as an essentially 'Christian' community.

Establishment of the Mission 1921 - 1927

As a Mission station, Mt. Margaret was largely the product of the inspiration of one dedicated man, Mr Rod Schenk. He was assisted in his chosen task by fellow-missionaries and by his family, but the settlement remains essentially the creation of his strong will and imagination. The people living there today clearly recall this earlier period when the Mission was a well-staffed, well-maintained and populous township, and very much under the control of Schenk — old 'Hallelujah' (as they called him) who walked through the Compound carrying sweets in his pockets to give the children. His was not an easy vocation; despite discomfort, disease and disappointment, Schenk and his colleagues concentrated on making Mt. Margaret one of the most noteworthy missionary achievements in the state, if not in the whole of Australia (*cf.* Marks 1960:79).

Schenk himself approved of the Roman Catholic rule of teaching directly from the Bible rather than from secular educational materials, even though he disagreed with the tenets of Catholicism. Surviving documents show, however, that he regarded material needs as playing a very important part in improving the life of Aborigines. Education and changing environmental conditions were always considered as important adjuncts to evangelization; as factors which improved the likelihood of inculcating Christian teachings and ensuring their adoption by Aboriginal people. Beyond his preoccupation with immediate necessities for 'civilized

living', Schenk's perceptions of the changing needs of this Aboriginal community expressed an attitude which was uncommon among Europeans of that time. He identified Aboriginal people in ways that today are not acceptable. There is, for example, little doubt that his approach was assimilationist, and his attitudes paternalistic. Nevertheless, few other people working with Aborigines at that period were as sympathetic and practical in their approach.

When Schenk left Melbourne early in 1921, he did so first with the intention of conducting an itinerant mission among Aboriginal camps in the Wiluna-Laverton area. This plan was supported by Aboriginal welfare administrators. They thought that it would discourage groups from any further congregation near the townships where they could become a 'nuisance' to local Europeans and would hence be forced to move elsewhere. However, such an approach was not particularly realistic nor immediately realizable. After a period at Laverton, he decided to establish a mission settlement and applied for a lease to the Mt. Margaret Common — despite discouragement and covert opposition from the local townspeople.

Schenk and his assistant built a bough shed on the site of the future Mission, but no Aborigines were to be seen in the vicinity and the Aborigines Department had declined an application for permission to use rations as a means of attracting the elderly Aborigines to Mt. Margaret.

By July, though, several groups of Aborigines were, to use their own words, 'sitting down' at the Mission: numbers fluctuated considerably, as people periodically moved elsewhere. The offer of rations and clothing in return for work attracted many men to labour through the summer heat pulling sandalwood. When the people travelled south for summer ritual activities, they left many of the elderly people at the Mission to be cared for. Some younger men had been taught to herd the goats, while others helped to build fences, and soon a group numbering about 50 adults came to regard Mt. Margaret Mission as their home, calling themselves 'Margaret blackfella' rather than 'Laverton blackfella'.

The local pastoral industry had, from the beginning, relied on Aborigines as a cheap and pliable source of labour. Not only did Aborigines appear to have an interest in stock work, but they demanded little in the way of shelter and food. Aboriginal labour was barred from contact with trades union membership by the *Aborigines Act (1905)* and this helped to prevent any agitation for improved working conditions. Pastoralists had the support of the Aborigines Department in securing permits for the employment of Aborigines, and in return the Department undertook to provide 'relief' from ration depots to these people during the summer 'lay-off' season. This absolved pastoralists from the financial burden of providing for their work-force the whole year round, and effectively made the cost of Aboriginal labour even cheaper. Schenk was not slow to attack these practices, and pastoralists complained at once that he was influencing local Aborigines in his demands for better conditions. In addition, he was attracting them to the Mission with the promise of cash wages at a time when few stockmen or women were receiving such remuneration in the Goldfields.

The missionaries had little understanding of traditional Aboriginal social customs and were quick to dismiss them. For example, they found it difficult to encourage the adult women to work, since to stay in the Compound they were also required to be clean and dressed in some of the old clothing sent from time to time to the Mission. "The husbands threatened to beat the women if they washed the mud

(ochre) off their hair, and when they did start Mrs Schenk had to hide them round the back of the house while they washed themselves" (Smith 1933:30).

On another occasion, an old woman was found on the Morgans track shortly after the people had left camp following the death of an old man at the Mission. She was brought back to Mt. Margaret and cared for there despite requests from other Aborigines to have her moved away. She eventually died, but such was the increasing reliance on Mission rations that on this occasion only the closest relatives left the settlement — and they returned after a short interval.

There are many reports, in the 'prayer-letters' of the period, of slow steps in the direction of evangelization, and also references to traditional religious life as 'the works of Satan'. But as often as not, the preoccupation was with the essentials necessary for their life: prayers for more rain, for money needed to purchase stock or building materials, or to finance a new well, and the like.

Many older Aborigines greatly resented the interference of the Christians in their social and ritual life. A number of such confrontations were recorded by the missionaries who saw them as demonstrating both the continuing 'work of Satan' and the need for ever more vigorous prayer. Schenk's attitudes drove the traditional life underground, and when from time to time it resurfaced, he viewed this as a backsliding. Such incidents provided further evidence (if he needed it) that Aboriginal people were 'depraved'. The difficulties the missionaries experienced in achieving conversions to their own faith were seen to be "witness to the strength of the powers of evil in savagery" (Schenk, in Smith 1933:62).

There were several immediate areas of potential conflict between the mores of Aboriginal society and the demands made upon them by the missionaries. An important issue was the way the missionaries constantly referred directly and by name to deceased persons, and to the manner in which they died. This was considered disrespectful if not dangerous. It was some time before people became used to such talk of the dead and were prepared to tolerate this aspect of missionary practice; they themselves refused to follow suit. Other conflicts could have been avoided, at least temporarily, by minor alterations to the content of prayers and hymns, but doctrinal preoccupations did not, in the eyes of the missionaries, permit such a modification. On some occasions, the Aborigines would start to sing or talk loudly in their own language whenever the missionaries began singing hymns or discussing the Gospel. Others refused to congregate in the large assemblies which were demanded periodically by the missionaries, many escaping these pressures by going into the bush to spend the day hunting, or preparing for their own ritual celebrations. Such strategies of avoidance have continued through to the present.

The education of the children was not neglected. Although an actual school building had yet to be erected, Mr Reichenbach started conducting classes in October 1926. The school was seen as an aid in converting the Aborigines to Christianity; lessons were based on the Scriptures, and full literacy in the English language was an immediate goal. Most children soon learned to read and write their own names, and from here they progressed to more demanding programmes. This was the beginning of an educational project that would distinguish Mt. Margaret from many other missions of the period; the remarkable achievements of the school in literacy and numeracy remain the singular success for which the Mission is remembered. Although it was a full decade before some of the results of this education programme were to be published (M. Bennett 1935; Schenk 1935), some

of the successes here were noted and implemented elsewhere in Australia at other mission stations and government settlements.

Halcyon Days 1927 - 1954

A turning-point in the history of Mt. Margaret Mission may be fixed in the month of May 1927, when two young girls of Aboriginal descent came into the custody of the missionaries through the local Police-Protector. These were the first of many Wards of State that Mt. Margaret was to foster. Acceptance of these 'half-caste' (as they were then called) children posed considerable problems for the Mission, since some European-Australians thought that they were better removed totally from camp life, to be raised according to European habits and manners. Others, who had noted the unhappy lives of many 'part-Aborigines' forced to live among 'whites', wished them "to stay in their own country and to marry back into their own people to make happy mothers rather than to fall prey to evil white men" (Smith 1933:35; cf. R. and C. Berndt 1951:273). Schenk and his staff decided that if such children were to be left at Mt. Margaret, then it would only be on the condition that they came under the direct control of the Mission in its own dormitories. Although no special facilities had been built at this time, acceptance of such children was seen as a way in which the Mission could promote the establishment of the school, since this particular policy was strongly supported by the Aborigines Department.

Aboriginal children of mixed descent had, until this time, been sent south to government settlements such as Moore River and Carrolup, without regard to the feelings of the parents or those of the children themselves (cf. Biskup 1973:143; Long 1979:359). Now, at least some of the children would not be far from their parents. The Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville, paid a long-expected visit to the settlement soon after the first wards were assigned there. He made a highly favourable report on the work that was being carried out (a version of this was published in Smith 1933:14-16), since he saw the establishment of a dormitory and school at Mt. Margaret as an important factor in encouraging Aboriginal groups to settle down and stay at one place for longer periods. Settlement would be further encouraged, he told the mission staff, by the imminent closure of the ration stations at Laverton, Linden and Morgans, so that the 250-odd 'indigents' in the area would be forced to travel to Mt. Margaret from the beginning of 1928 if they wished to continue receiving supplies of food and blankets.

Local pastoralist opposition to the Mission was immediately renewed, and many of the graziers wished to see it moved to Minnie Creek, a point 165 km east of Laverton, even though this 'spinifex country' was known to be utterly useless for any kind of agricultural enterprise. The government was unreceptive to this suggestion, and continued to support the activities of the existing mission reserve and its location as a potential ration depot strategically located between the Desert area and the Western Goldfields (cf. Rowley 1972:307).

It was some time before many Aborigines adopted more than the outward signs of Christianity. Girls and women were among the first to proclaim their faith, although a number of other conversions were alleged in prayer-letters dating from the latter part of 1928. The first baptism did not take place until March 1932, since the missionaries considered the old traditional religious beliefs (which they labelled 'dark superstitions') as being still too strong in the minds of all of them:

The natives had one of their biggest ceremonies a few miles from here. We are sure Satan is at the back of all these ceremonies, for the natives usually start fighting at them. This time a general fight took place, and one died of spear wounds. This caused the natives great trouble, as it was necessary for me to report to the police. (Schenk, in Smith 1933:67-8)

In December 1930, Elkin paid a visit to Mt. Margaret as part of a broad study of the conditions of Aborigines in Western Australia for the Australian National Research Council:

He was able to give us useful information . . . His views were not the same as ours, but we believe he was here long enough to see that the power of the Holy Spirit is greater than rational influence. One of our men made a comparison of what Dr Elkin thought and what he himself thought in these words: "Dr Elkin thinks our native stories and ceremonies came from some man long time ago, but I think they came from the Devil. What do you think, Mr Schenk?" Some of the ceremonies are harmless enough, but others are filled with evil, so I readily agreed with Steve. (Schenk, in Smith 1933:38)

We were well aware of the danger mentioned of our losing the natives at any time because of their migratory habits, but Dr Elkin, as an expert on these matters, said that he considered because of our position, etc., that we would be sure of our congregation for about 150 years. We feel sure that the Lord will come before that time, so we feel happy. (Schenk, in Smith 1933:50)

Elkin was, in fact, highly critical of the manner in which Mt. Margaret was operated, although he conceded that it was a useful buffer and training centre on the south-east pastoral frontier, stating:

The attitude of the United Aborigines' Mission at Mt. Margaret . . . was even more negative. Extremely fundamentalist in theology, the superintendent regarded all Aboriginal custom and belief as 'works of darkness' not to be countenanced. Moreover, preaching and conversion could not wait until proficiency in the local language was obtained: he forbade members of his staff to try to learn it...

During the 1930s he emphasized the training of shearers, carpenters and station-hands . . . but all this was a means to an end — evangelization. To him (Schenk), the gold stamping battery was 'salvation machinery'. This negative approach was not a firm foundation for either economic or spiritual building. The mission became in the next decade a home for children and the aged. (1979:301-2)

Schenk later bitterly accused anthropologists such as Elkin and Kaberry (who had also visited Mt. Margaret as a potential research project) of encouraging traditional

ritual activities and 'the resurgence of the Devil'; the same accusation has also been applied by Schenk's daughters to myself.

From May 1936, Schenk encouraged some developments in Aboriginal industry and self-sufficiency by mining gold, but in doing so he incurred considerable opposition from church groups and other supporters, who considered that the Mission had no right to become involved in sponsoring commercial enterprises. The same arguments had been made years earlier when the first experiments were carried out to train Aborigines to weave raffia goods and to carve wooden items for sale to Europeans. Schenk saw his policy of promoting vocational training for Aborigines as a primary function of the Mission if he was to achieve his goal of successfully placing these Aborigines in the Australian-European world.

The progress of the school provided some comment. The small books written by Mrs Bennett (1935) and the Superintendent (Schenk 1935), outline in some detail the methods that were being used in the classroom and the nature of some of the achievements of the pupils. Since there were over 50 children attending, there were not enough teachers and all the activities had to be taught in three two-hour shifts. Considerable use was made of improved and innovative teaching techniques that helped the children visualize the material they were learning. Their written and oral comprehension improved at a remarkable rate (even allowing for some bias in the glowing narrative of these books), and the children's use of a sectioned number board to make rapid and accurate arithmetic calculations helped put an end to the belief, common to the period, that it was impossible to educate Aborigines. In fact, *The Educability of the Native* was the title of Schenk's book, which reported some of the 'successes' at Mt. Margaret:

Those who teach the Aborigines very soon discover that they are no whit behind any other race in mental capacity, and that they can master the lessons that white children learn quite as quickly and completely as they can. Our educational systems still need a vast amount of improving, but all differentiation *against* other races should be discountenanced from the outset. What is good for white children is good equally for native children. (Schenk 1935:7)

The achievements in education and in industry at Mt. Margaret impressed many government and religious bodies throughout Australia. In May 1939, Tindale and Birdsell visited Mt. Margaret and stayed for eleven days gathering data on Aboriginal social structure and organization. On their departure they made the following comments in the Visitor's Book:

This station represents the best solution of the pressing half-caste problem seen in Australia. (Birdsell, in *U.A.Mr.*, June 1939:5)

No other station has solved so many problems of native adjustment to white life. (Tindale)

Decline of the Mission 1954 - 1974

Although many members of the earlier group brought up at Mt. Margaret had moved away by 1954, the population at the Mission continued to grow with an influx of people from areas of the Central Reserves. At the same time as these people arrived, often with school-age children, the size of individual families living at the Mission continued to grow. Improved sanitation and health care reduced morbidity and increased fecundity. The need for more accommodation facilities grew, since there were now over 95 'inmates' under the care of the Mission. Mt. Margaret applied for its first grant-in-aid from the state government so that extensions could be made to existing dormitories to cater for the increased numbers of children in the Homes.

In August 1954, Schenk decided to retire, ostensibly to give younger missionaries an opportunity to take over his work. The retirement was a decisive point in the history of Mt. Margaret, ending as it did a long association with the community. Thus began a period of change and reorientation for the Mission, reflecting the changing needs and perspectives of the Aborigines living there.

At this stage, the population was already taking on the features that were to be apparent some twenty years later. These were a large number of children, many pensioners, and very few young adults. Most of the men were away working on neighbouring properties, often with their wives and children, with the result that many cottages were left vacant and fell into a state of disrepair. Despite the overcrowding, the Mission was still functioning usefully as a children's refuge. The needs of the 'Easterners' (as the people who had come from the Warburton Range area were called) were, however, largely neglected.

Some of the younger Mission workers were urging that the settlement be closed in view of the massive shift in the Aboriginal population to centres elsewhere in the Goldfields. This process had been accelerated dramatically by the abolition in 1961 of the Exemption Certificate that had been required under the *Native Citizenship Act* (1948). In this Act, it had been necessary for any Aboriginal person wishing to live in a town to obtain, on the recommendation of several Government officers, a certificate to exempt that person from the Act. The removal of this requirement opened up a whole new range of educational and employment opportunities, since people were now free to reside wherever they wished.

The Mission was determined to encourage the development of an Aboriginal church with its own ministers, and to achieve this, Wilf Douglas established the Western Desert Bible School and Translation Centre. Although the language work of the school was later to be transferred to Kalgoorlie, and the Bible-training section to Gnowangerup, these early short training courses marked the beginning of the implementation of a new U.A.M. policy in the region. This new policy called for a fuller use of the linguistic approach espoused by the newly-established Summer Institute of Linguistics in order to improve communication and hence the possibility of conversion (Douglas 1957). Programmes were devised to assist in the introduction of the use of vernacular language by missionaries in the field (cf. R. and C. Berndt 1957:117-8).

The August 1969 Convention was the first Mission anniversary to be organized and run solely by Christian Aborigines. The annual Convention alone kept the spirit of Mt. Margaret's former glory alive. This set a precedent for the continued use of the Mission as an evangelical centre, and it re-emphasized peoples' claim to the locality.

In this period, the Convention Committee was headed by people such as Ron Bonney and Ben Mason. They were just two of the men who had once been in the Graham Homes for Children (named after an important benefactor) and had now achieved positions of some importance with government departments in Kalgoorlie. In the weeks preceding the August school holidays, during which the Convention was traditionally held, the Committee would encourage the people still living at the Mission to clean up the year's accumulated rubbish in an attempt to present a little of the old times to the visitors. The residents, though, had very little to do with the Conventions. Most would attend some of the activities out of politeness, so long as no other 'Law business' was also scheduled. On some occasions, ceremonies would be organized to coincide with the Convention, often with the encouragement of former 'inmates' who had rejected Christianity for the way of 'the Law'. Conflict arose between the two divergent groups on a number of occasions and the relationship between each and the U.A.M. became extremely strained.

At the Jubilee Convention in 1971, the proposal was first made that the former Mt. Margaret residents should themselves form a group with the aim of taking the Mission over from the U.A.M. Over 1,000 people attended this Convention, including many missionaries who had worked at Mt. Margaret over the past years. Mrs Schenk and members of her family were also present. With such support, a committee was formed before the end of the Convention to establish the group and the U.A.M. officials present were asked to hand the place over to the ex-Mt. Margaret people. The missionaries held a special meeting of the Field Council and voted in favour of the proposal, and suggested that an Aboriginal person be appointed Superintendent immediately. There were no volunteers, not surprisingly, so negotiations were begun with the Federal Council in Melbourne, and steps were taken to have the new group registered as a corporate body (*U.A.Mr.*, April 1976:9).

Some difficulties were encountered in obtaining the approval of the Federal Council, as well as the support of Government departments which would eventually be asked to assist in the redevelopment of the settlement. Problems in securing a stable leadership for the new group emerged amid a contest of factional interests. Another five years were to pass before the constitution of the new group, now known as the Aboriginal Movement for Outback Survival (A.M.O.S.), was to be finally approved by interested parties as well as the Registrar of Companies. Meanwhile, the running of the Mission was left to the U.A.M. Staffing had become even more difficult since few missionaries were willing to work in such an unsettled situation. In an attempt by the U.A.M. to force A.M.O.S. to work toward a definite deadline, another Superintendent was appointed early in 1974, this time for a temporary period of just six months. This strategy was singularly unsuccessful, as the group was still deeply divided over matters of policy and personnel. There was no way that the U.A.M. would consider handing the Mission over in the absence of a formally established body.

A.M.O.S. at Mt. Margaret since 1974

Two more years were to elapse before A.M.O.S. was to assume control of Mt. Margaret Mission. It was a time of uncertainty for those living at the Mission: government officers were unwilling to support any requests for aid to re-develop the settlement until the intentions of A.M.O.S. were clarified and the continuance of

the Aboriginal Reserve was guaranteed. Facilities continued to deteriorate, and many of the Aboriginal pensioners were tiring of the repeated refusal of all parties to improve their dismal living conditions. By this time, two groups resided at Mt. Margaret: the life of the settlement was dominated by the Easterners, but the influence of the 'old Mob' remained.

This was a setting within which considerable conflicts over basic values emerged. The missionaries were primarily concerned with the day-to-day management of the community, but they perpetuated the structural domination of the Mission in all spheres of life on the settlement. This came at a time when changes in traditional values placed a heavy pressure on local leaders who were themselves trying to maintain and indeed entrench their influence.

The nature of the conflict was based on a mutual incompatibility between the bases of the two systems of religious belief. Open antagonism was absent by this period, and features of the confrontation had become much more subtle since both missionaries and local Aborigines were heavily reliant on each other for their continued occupation of the settlement. Members of the Aboriginal community needed the Mission as a 'home' and at the same time the missionaries met their more immediate requirements of food and clothing. Likewise, the continued presence of these Aboriginal people was the only guarantee for the missionaries that they could retain a base for evangelical activities. The alternatives were unacceptable. If individuals or groups exerted heavy pressure on the mission staff or the U.A.M. itself (through, for instance, demands for improved facilities), they may have been requested to leave the settlement. Such a threat had existed in the past. The 'keepers of the Law' saw the adjacent towns as sources of potential danger both for themselves and 'the Law'; while more distant communities like Wiluna and Warburton Range were viewed as having their own drawbacks, particularly as 'trouble places'.

As a result, members of the community were loath to leave the settlement for anything more than a brief period for ritual or recreational activity. They attempted to conform with those expectations of the mission-workers that they perceived as being most significant to the Christians and least demanding to their own convictions. Such a degree of 'conformity' was aided by the relatively low level of interaction that took place on the settlement between mission-workers and the Aborigines.

In this manner, the missionaries and the Aborigines were attempting a strategic cooperation: they did this both in terms of protecting their own presence at Mt. Margaret and by combating disruptive behaviour. This cooperation between the two groups could take place despite a low level of communication: the convergence of aspirations was seen as a product of external forces threatening 'the Mission' rather than a sharing of beliefs and attitudes.

Earlier contacts with European-Australians, and life on the mission-station, have shaped present attitudes between the two groups. In particular, factors such as the minimal levels of communication between the missionaries and the 'new Mob' (though this is not so for the 'old Mob' whose special relationship with the Mission was firmly entrenched), and socio-historical factors such as the changing nature and composition of the Mt. Margaret population, all contributed to the state of tension in the community. This tension remained covert and largely concealed from members of the other group. Neither had been in a strong enough position to coerce the other into action with an ultimatum, since such a conflict at this time could result in the permanent closure of the settlement and both groups would lose to the forces of bureaucratic rationalism.

Pressures from outside the community remained crucial in determining the future of the settlement. On one hand, the Federal and State Councils of the U.A.M. were anxious to minimize their liability, and instructed their field representatives accordingly. On the other, several government departments whose activities centre on Aboriginal affairs played a significant but ill-defined and somewhat vacillating role in determining the role of the settlement in the future. These government departments were viewed by those living at Mt. Margaret as threatening the future integrity of the settlement, and perpetuating the present situation of uncertainty. They were seen as alien institutions attempting at times to curry favour with local Aborigines with promises for action but invariably failing to 'deliver the goods'. People came to view these agents with cynicism, and at times tried to manipulate them, not always with much success, to their own advantage. Missionary attitudes to these departments were closely allied. Grants-in-aid were sought on pragmatic financial grounds due to the inability of the U.A.M. to continue to sponsor exclusively the continuing development and maintenance of the settlement and its associated facilities.

Despite the mediation of interpersonal relationships in conflicts that emerged between the missionaries and the Aborigines at Mt. Margaret, several issues remained unresolved, and these provided the most deep-seated sources of dissension within the community.

The most contentious difference of opinion concerned the interference of mission staff in ritual and other traditional activities. All 'Law' activities had been banned by the Mission since Schenk's time, so that larger gatherings were forced to take place some distance from the camp. Since most of the important rituals were commonly held during the summer, and often involved several hundreds of people who travelled from the Central Reserves, a good supply of water was essential. Apparently to emphasize their opposition, the missionaries refused to provide transportable water tanks on such occasions.

The missionaries had for a long time made every effort short of physical confrontation to prevent or at least discourage any Law activities at Mt. Margaret. It was always easy for small ritual gatherings to take place in one of the secluded creek-beds that lie adjacent to the Mission, but for more important meetings, it was necessary for the ritual ground to be prepared on the far side of the boundary between the Mission reserve and the two neighbouring pastoral stations. The attitude of the Mission was reiterated in 1972, when the Department of Aboriginal Sites at the Western Australian Museum (operating under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act* (1972)) applied to erect a store-house for sacred objects. The U.A.M. refused permission to permit such a building to be erected on what they viewed as Mission land, although legally this was an Aboriginal Reserve like any other, and had been vested in the Aboriginal Lands Trust under the *Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act* (1972). As a result, it was necessary to obtain permission from the leaseholder of the adjacent property to the east, Mt. Weld Pastoral Company, for the storehouse to be erected there instead. It was a source of concern for the men that this arrangement could be endangered if the lease expired or changed hands.

This antagonistic attitude toward 'the Law' has hardened since A.M.O.S. assumed control. The construction of a dancing ground immediately to the north of the settlement (outside the surveyed boundary, in fact) attracted considerable opposition from A.M.O.S. members. The plight of local residents received wide

newspaper publicity. The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs directed the Perth office of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to arrange a meeting between the two parties to the dispute. The outcome was inconclusive, since the Department supported the activities of A.M.O.S. at Mt. Margaret (though not their present action) on the condition that they improved their attitude to the local people and took steps to involve them in decision-making processes. If that did not happen, the Department gave an undertaking to direct funding through Wiltjinit Community Incorporated which had earlier that year been set up by the local community in order that they could be in a position to bid for funding should A.M.O.S. continue to neglect local interests and perspectives (cf. Stanton 1982:81).

Stereotypes were imposed by members of both the Aboriginal and the missionary groups, and were not dissimilar to those functioning between members of both ethnic groups in the context of the wider Australian society. These images were much less effective, however, within the confines of such a small-scale community, since personal relationships assumed precedence permitting the maintenance of an appearance of intra-community consensus. In the eyes of the missionaries, though, there were few members of the Aboriginal community who could be considered devout, practising 'Christians'. While some people thought of themselves as 'mission-fella', as disciples of the Mission, they did not see their commitment to be an exclusive category of affiliation.

Most Aborigines viewed the call from missionaries for exclusive affiliation to Christianity as pretentious and clearly inappropriate to the tenets of their own belief-system. In part, this attitude reflected their knowledge that most European-Australians in the neighbouring towns, pastoralists and others had a profound dislike for missionaries, and that strong efforts had been made in the past to move the settlement elsewhere. In this context, they chose to overlook the notion that it was they who were the objects of such hostility. The memory of having their children forcibly taken away from them is close, and they resented the attempts that had been made in the past to intervene in marriage arrangements and betrothal. The 'new Mob' see Mt. Margaret as a place for Aborigines to live in relative solitude rather than as a base for spreading the Gospel.

The experience on many other mission stations (cf. R. and C. Berndt 1945:32-3; Gould 1969b:185; Tonkinson 1974:134) has been that 'true' conversions to Christianity (as defined by the missionaries) have been relatively uncommon, although during Schenk's time the Mission appeared to be one of the most successful in this respect. The memory of the dormitory system at Mt. Margaret is still fresh in the minds of many, and the missionaries remained committed to converting young children and women to Christianity. Men who were still preoccupied with their own ritual activities were viewed by missionaries as "too difficult" to convert; and constant parental contact with children posed a strong threat to the success of any programme of evangelization. The missionaries found it harder and harder to justify their characterization of parents as "the children of Satan", about to be "consumed by the Devil" forever cursed to be "in the grip of the fiery one", as they did in the past. Nevertheless, still prominent on the wall of the Store is the graphic poster from the 1960s depicting 'the Two Ways' [Plate 1]. In this image, dark naked figures worshipping "debil-debil sticks" are being consumed in flames on the one side, and on the other are children struggling up out of the grasp of sin to the glory and light at the top of the mountain. It is a powerful image, but the significance of it is lost to



1. A poster on the wall of the Mission Store depicts the 'Two Ways' of Christianity and 'the Law'. (Photo: J.E. Stanton #1220)

many children (cf. Calley 1965:50). Parents find it objectionable, reinforcing their impression that missionaries are ignorant about the things that have the deepest significance to Aboriginal people.

More recently, the emergence of what came to be called the 'Desert Crusade' may be seen as a response to the frustrations of the 1970s. The early expectations engendered by changed federal policies for the development of the community were to a large extent unfulfilled, and more and more Aboriginal groups experienced the demoralizing and destructive effects of alcohol. The movement itself was said to be initiated by Aboriginal evangelists from Elcho Island (Galiwinku), N.T., who brought what they called 'the Fellowship' to groups on the Central Reserves. Eventually, it reached Kalgoorlie, Wiluna and Jigalong. The annual Mt. Margaret Convention has for some time played a notable role in the affirmation of Christian evangelism in the Western Desert, but its 1982 meeting attracted national media coverage. Articles in the journal of the U.A.M. proclaimed the success, at last, of an Aboriginal Christian assembly which achieved the conversion of large numbers of Desert people. The headlines speak for themselves: "Revival at Warburton Ranges" (*U.A.Mr.*, 51(1):8-12); "Warburton Range report" (*U.A.Mr.*, 51(5):6-7); "Miracle days at Mt. Margaret" (*U.A.Mr.*, 51(5):12-15).

This event appears to have had a lasting influence on community relations at Mt. Margaret, providing the A.M.O.S. group with additional leverage against traditional religious activities. The 'rule' of 'the Law' has been further weakened because several of the 'bosses' have aligned themselves to the Desert Crusade.

Moreover, today some of the bosses' own children are singing and preaching the Gospel at both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal settlements throughout the region.

The long-term implications of this recent Christian 'revival' cannot yet be evaluated, although other studies provide comparative data for analysis (e.g. Calley 1965; Kolig 1981). But one point is clear: the pressure against traditional religious beliefs is coming for the first time from primarily *within* the group (see Plate 2), with the support of the U.A.M. and, of course, the 'old Mob'. It is all the more effective for this. As Kolig noted, "some of the newly proselytized Aborigines become even more fanatic and intolerant toward their 'heathen brethren' than the missionaries themselves" (1981:23). People living at the Mission are no longer able to maintain the carefully managed pattern of interaction with the outside world in the way they have done in the past. Selective responses are once again necessary, but in this case with less reliance on the 'traditional' Aboriginal patterns and with increasing commitment to the demands of the wider society.



2. In early 1980, this resident leads her own Christian service with the aid of a poster, after the withdrawal of the U.A.M. left the settlement without a pastor (Photo: J.E. Stanton #3298)

Implications

The socio-historical experience of 'the Mission', as it is still called, established a pattern of expectations for both missionaries and Aborigines living at the settlement. The past achievements of Mt. Margaret remain important influences on present developments. These developments include not only processes of social change among the more traditionally oriented people who until very recently comprised the majority of the present population, but also involve the realignment of the power structure consequent on the assumption of settlement administration by a group of Aborigines having entirely different aspirations and perspectives from those normally residing there.

Alone among Desert mission stations, Mt. Margaret achieved what was considered by the missionaries to be a highly successful level of Christian conversion. That this was attained largely through such practices as the enforced segregation of children from their parents, the prohibition of the local vernacular in the school, and the ridiculing of traditional religious beliefs, is partly a reflection of the period but also due in part to the narrow-mindedness and ethnocentrism of the missionaries themselves. People at Mt. Margaret have experienced frustration observing developments in Government policies since the 1960s (often at first hand) without being able to participate. Their response was an attempted rejection of involvement with any form of external administration. The Easterners directed themselves increasingly into activities associated with 'the Law'. This was influenced in part by my own presence: I had the only reliable form of transport on the settlement and was able to assist them in carrying out ritual activities and obligations.

The missionaries were forced to play a waiting game, not knowing when A.M.O.S. would assume control, and having insufficient funds to undertake any further development of the settlement. Repeated rumours that the community would be forced to move to Laverton and the Mission closed down were met with strong opposition from both the 'old Mob' and the 'new Mob', who saw their security threatened by such an action. With few exceptions, members of the community did not welcome visitors from government departments. It was not until the Aboriginal Housing Panel (later re-named as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Panel Inc.) was invited to supervise the design of a prototype housing project that attitudes to administrators softened and a future at Mt. Margaret again seemed possible; the Seaman Inquiry into Aboriginal land rights further enhanced this expectation although with little result (Stanton 1984-85).

The experience of such large-scale social disruption has had a lasting influence on all groups within the region, just as it has provided a major justification for the presence of missionary activity at Mt. Margaret. Its strategic position on the fringe of the Desert has contributed to what came to be seen as the long-term success of the mission. Ironically, the location is that of the first settlement in the region, a place where the pattern of interaction between Aboriginal and settler first became established. The Aboriginal attitude toward outsiders is guarded and cautious, and the restricted opportunities for participation in an alien socio-economic order have encouraged retention of traditional or modified-traditional forms of social organization. People have managed to maintain their own customs despite missionary efforts to enforce European models of behaviour and expectation.

The Mission was a convenient place in which to conceal 'the Aboriginal problem' from the wider society. Missionaries persuaded some people to leave the

fringes of the towns where they were a reminder of the more brutal aspects of European occupation of this region, including the exploitation of Aboriginal women. It was the desire to 'save' part-European children that presented the missionaries with what became their operational goal — not one of broad evangelization of the entire Aboriginal population, but one of selective salvation. The Graham Homes, the school, the cottages, and the industries were oriented toward the perceived needs of a particular group of people while the rest were left to survive as best they could on the fringe of the Mission. However, it was in being left largely alone and to their own devices that members of this group were given an opportunity to survive on their own terms, rather than on those of the dominant society.

Government policy remained essentially *laissez-faire* up to the late sixties. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, mission activity became an essential part of administrative policy, enabling successive state governments to ignore the need for direct participation on the part of Aborigines and, perhaps more importantly, the need for greatly improved funding.

Assuming a *de facto* role from the government, missionary organizations were assured of a continuing presence regardless of their efficiency or contribution to Aboriginal welfare. Schooling and vocational training aside, the Mt. Margaret Mission served to create and perpetuate a divergence between the young and the old, the Christian and the 'Law-keeper', despite immediate ritual and kin-based linkages which otherwise emphasized a broader group identification.

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Abbreviation

U.A.Mr. — United Aborigines' Messenger.