

**BISHOP ROSENDO SALVADO'S
VISION OF ABORIGINAL
MISSION WORK IN
THE VICTORIA PLAINS
OF THE COLONY OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

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Rosendo Salvado was one of thousands of missionaries swept up in the great missionising drive of British and European colonial empires during the nineteenth century. However, he is one of only a few whose memory is still honoured today.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century governments, churches and humanitarians seeking to temper the human destruction wrought by colonisation on Indigenous populations looked to missionaries to spearhead a process of benevolent change. The recommendations of the 1837 Select Committee of the House of Commons, known as the Buxton Report, set out the strategy for ‘Christianising and civilising’ Indigenous peoples to become British subjects and concluded that ‘every tribe of mankind is accessible to this remedial process’ (British Parliament: House of Commons 1838, p. 44). However, many settler colonists in Australia were no longer convinced of such achievements and emerging theories of race, evolution and social Darwinism reinforced their pessimism over the nineteenth century. Transnational humanitarian optimism and settler colonist pessimism framed the development of Salvado’s idiosyncratic vision of missionizing, which was judged as enlightened and compassionate for its times and a showcase of charitable reform. Yet, like other missionaries Salvado’s philanthropy inevitably became enmeshed in the dynamics of colonial dispossession and loss with repercussions that resonate into the present. This paper addresses Salvado’s life work through the fractured lens of competing and clashing forces that enabled and challenged his determination to achieve his vision in the distant outpost of the Swan River Colony on the west coast of Australia.

Salvado dedicated his life to the Church. Born in Tui, in Galicia, Spain in 1814 into an educated and musical family, he entered the Benedictine Abbey of St Martin of Compostela at the age of fifteen, where he was the organist and studied philosophy and the liberal arts until he went into exile in Italy in 1838

following Spain's 1835 anti-clerical revolution. He was ordained as a priest in 1839 and 'his great epic' in the Australian colonies began to take shape (William 1967, p. 1). The Bishop of Sydney and English Benedictine, John Bede Polding, proposed that Salvado join him in Sydney but a meeting in Rome with the Bishop of Perth, John Brady, decided his vocation to work with Aboriginal people in Western Australia. Pope Gregory XVI, also part of the Benedictine monastic family, farewelled Salvado and fellow missionary Joseph Serra with this reminder of the order's great missionary tradition:

[...] remember you are sons of St Benedict, our great founder. Remember all those Apostles who were your brothers, who converted whole peoples and nations to the faith, and educated them in the ways of civilized life. Remember that you are setting out on the same road as was trodden by them. (Cited in Russo 1980, p. 21)

The men sailed with Bishop Brady and arrived at the Swan River Colony in January 1846. Their prospects in the colony seemed grim. Founded in 1829, this was a struggling colonial outpost of British Protestant settlers attuned to the antagonisms of nationality and religion. Support for Aboriginal missions had flagged in the colony after they failed to turn out useful workers to relieve the disastrous labour shortages plaguing the colony. A likely powerful ally, Governor Hutt, known for his philanthropic efforts to protect, educate, train and reform Aborigines, left the colony the month after Salvado and Serra arrived. Governor Fitzgerald, who arrived in 1847, was preoccupied with the introduction of convict transportation in 1850 to solve the labour crisis. Outside the colony, the Church hierarchy in Sydney, led by Bishop Polding, welcomed its fellow Benedictines and Salvado could always find a sympathetic ear in Rome. However, the local parish, of predominantly Irish working class families, had little interest in Spanish monks and the fledgling Catholic diocese was without political influence or money. The only other Catholic missionaries in Australia at the time were Passionist priests on Stradbroke Island, off the Queensland coast, who left in 1846, and the Sisters of Mercy in Perth. The men had little in common with other missionaries to the Swan River Colony, who belonged to British Evangelical Protestant movements that were spreading their philanthropic endeavours out into the colonies. Jessie Mitchell described them as being

‘characterised by lower-middle class or artisan backgrounds, passionate religious faith and a strong belief in hard work, individualist aspirations and the value of the respectable bourgeois home’ (Mitchell 2011, p. 4). They were typically married couples with families and little money and in Perth they worked with Aboriginal children, who they kept in dormitories, away from their parents’ influence. The only missionary in the colony in 1846 was the Methodist Reverend John Smithies, who in 1845, after repeated deaths, moved his children’s mission to the suburb of Wanneroo and then to York, east of Perth, but the deaths continued and the mission was closed in 1854.

Salvado was fortunate to begin his work in 1846 in the Victoria Plains, north of Perth. Lands to the east and south of the town were already settled and under cultivation but in this district the Aboriginal custodians of the land, the Yuit people¹, continued to live as hunters and gatherers in small family groups on defined tracts of land according to their strict codes of law and sustaining spiritual beliefs, seeing only the occasional explorer or shepherd. Initially Salvado and Serra chose the approach of itinerant missionising to come to know the Yuit people and their culture and, through personal example, to begin their conversion. Salvado’s party of men lived and travelled with them, shared their food and shelter, tended their children, healed their sick and wounded and performed other tasks that their hosts ‘found most bothersome’. Etchings in a document presented to the Pope to elicit his support depicted the men as benevolent figures ministering to grateful noble savages but their lived experience was far different (State Library of Western Australia, 77600P). Salvado recorded that their Yuit hosts tolerated them but rejected their efforts to evangelise. Instead the Europeans were being transformed as they trudged through the bush in their black habits, patched with kangaroo fur and tied at the waist with kangaroo gut, and shoes made from wood and kangaroo skin (Stormon 1977, p. 53). The men suffered extreme hardships and emotional strain and one of the party died. After months of debilitating conditions Salvado felt obliged to find a permanent mission site and, drawing on Yuit knowledge, he selected excellent pasture and farming land on the banks of the Moore River, some 161 kilometres from Perth.

¹ Also spelt as Yuid. Bob Reece notes that Salvado called the Victoria Plains Aboriginal people Murara but that they now refer to themselves as Yuet. This name was used in their 1997 Native Title Claim (Reece 2008, fn 46, p. 141).

The site was named Nova Norcia or New Norcia after the birthplace of Saint Benedict (Harris 1994, p. 296). A small synod met to discuss future directions for the Benedictine mission effort in Western Australia and the mission was opened on the 1st of March, 1847.

The foundations of Salvado's vision were explained at the synod meeting. The mission would comprise a Spanish village-based farming community of Benedictine monks and local Aboriginal land-owning groups. Salvado believed that this was vital for success: remaining within their traditional territories with their land held in trust for them by the missionaries would give Aborigines a sense of 'social stability' denied to those forced off their lands (Russo 1980, p. 136). Salvado believed that only in this way would they come to respect a civilised way of life. On the mission families would adopt a settled life in cottages grouped around a central monastery and chapel. Instructed by the monks the men would work on mission land and their own small plots and contribute to their keep while their wives looked after the home and the children attended school from home for a few hours each day. Through patient explanation and the monks' lived example, they would all gradually learn the Christian way of life as well as 'moral and civil improvement' (Russo 1980, pp. 158-9). The result would be a community where monks and Aborigines shared the 'products of their labours [...] the values of their lives' and 'a sense of belonging' (Russo 1980, p. 125). Salvado insisted that the mission be kept segregated from the outside world. His observations of colonists' abusive treatment of Aborigines and their 'degrading' influence drove his determination to create a 'buffer zone' where they could remain until they were 'mentally and technically prepared to live among the white population' (Russo 1980, p. 136).

This vision may have appeared novel to local colonists, accustomed to the small mission children's home, but the model of settled farming villages had precedents in centuries of Catholic missionary endeavour with Indigenous peoples in North and South America; for example, the 21 missions set up in Texas and California by order of the Spanish Crown in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to convert Native Americans to Christianity and sedentary agriculture and to extend settlement in the area. Salvado was also heir to the Benedictine missionary tradition dating back to the earliest years of the Christian Church in Europe. The Benedictine path involved far more than preaching for

conversion. Through their own labour the monks created productive farming lands, built monasteries, churches, schools and villages, encouraged local people to adopt agriculture and the habits of work, improved their social and cultural conditions and promoted a love of learning amongst their children. For the monks the Benedictine Rule laid out a common-sense, practical monastic way of life based on spiritual devotion and manual labour as the essence of spiritual discipline, organised around the ideals and bonds of monastic family life and values of obedience, humility, charitable care for the sick, young and the elderly and hospitality to visitors (Dubos 1974). This created a meaningful and sociable way of life that contrasted with the isolated, lonely lives of most missionaries in the Australian colonies. The 1846 Synod had explicitly recognised the central importance of the Benedictine Rule for Salvado's mission:

[...] the way of life of the Benedictines, occupied as they are with prayer, preaching and work in the fields, was the only one, according to the verdict of experience, to inspire confidence and secure the conversion and proper civil formation of the natives. (Stormon 1977, p. 71)

Over the years Salvado steadfastly maintained the Benedictine stance that in mission work 'religious instruction and physical work, both at the same time, ought to take the first and leading place' (cited in Hasluck 1970, p. 98).

There were also glimpses of Salvado's vision in the 1837 Buxton Report's exposition on British colonial policy, especially its advocacy for missions on large reserves of land to achieve Aborigines' 'social and political improvement' through instruction in the techniques of agriculture, the habits of work and a settled and Christian way of life (cited in Hasluck 1970, p. 55). The report recommended the recognition of Indigenous land ownership and rights to negotiate payments and compensation for land taken over for settlement. Revenue raised in this way would be used to finance the missions. What was missing was Salvado's insistence that the people should live in missions on their own land. Also, in contrast to Salvado, who looked to work with all age groups, the Report recommended that education and training of the children should be 'among the foremost of the cares of the missionaries' (British Parliament: House of Commons 1838, p. 83). Although the Report was received enthusiastically in

Britain, its recommendations were largely ignored in the Australian colonies, which had contributed little to the report, and the British government did not actively promote their implementation there.

As we have seen, Salvado's vision was out of step with the profound pessimism about mission endeavour in the Australian colonies, where the fate of Protestant children's homes had convinced most officials and missionaries that they were 'doomed to failure'. In the early 1840s the British Secretary for State concluded: 'I have the greatest doubts as to the wisdom or propriety of continuing the missions any longer. I fear that to do so would be to delude ourselves with the mere idea of doing something' (cited in Harris 1994, p. 23). His sentiments were repeated in evidence from Lutheran missionary William Schmidt to the 1845 Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines in New South Wales, appointed to consider 'the best means of promoting their welfare', that efforts to civilise had been 'in every experiment a pitiable as well as a mischievous failure' (cited in Harris 1994, p. 120, p. 131). Missionaries pointed to the many practical reasons for their problems – lack of funding, internal disputes, the colonists' immoral example and Aboriginal deaths – however, most blamed what Schmidt called 'their deplorable degradation and wretchedness' (cited in Harris 1994, p. 120). Salvado later commented that their ideas were 'nothing better in fact than [those] of the settlers, and for this reason the result was much the same' (Stormon 1977, p. 120).

The missionaries' conflicted opinions blocked their vision of any positive outcomes for the future. They agreed that Aborigines had souls and were capable of redemption but also that they were on the lowest scale of humanity and that contact with colonists only further degraded their condition. There was a growing conviction that they were doomed to extinction and so mission work was futile. They could see no further than protection in segregated missions from the worst abuses of colonisation and removal of Aboriginal children from their families to be 'Christianised and civilised'. An exception was Bishop Polding, who offered an explanation based on Aboriginal experiences of colonisation that must have influenced Salvado's strong convictions:

[...] the want of success must be attributed to the bad feeling and want of confidence, naturally caused by the mode in which possession has been taken of their country – occupation by force, accompanied by murders, ill-treatment, ravishment of their

women, in a word, to the conviction on their minds that the white man has come for his own advantage, without any regard to their rights. [...] Let charity and Christian equity [...] be used, and from esteem and affection will proceed confidence. Without this you will neither civilise nor Christianise. (Cited in Harris 1994, p. 121)

The missionaries' views reflected general attitudes in the Australian colonies that were driven by the imperatives of economic development and expansion and buttressed by racial doctrines and belief in the absolute superiority of the 'British race'. These attitudes would crystallise in the late nineteenth century in social Darwinian beliefs in the inevitable, God-ordained extinction of Aboriginal people. But already in 1851 an editorial prefiguring these theories in the *Perth Gazette* explained that 'so certain is this result to follow colonisation that we may almost look upon it as one of the mysterious ways of Providence, it is out of human power to alter or fathom' (Shellam 2012, p. 114). Salvado was 'attuned' to the influence of racial theories and challenged his contemporaries' assumptions, explaining that the deaths were the result of 'white man's disease, arsenic poisoning, and murderous shooting' (Shellam 2012, p. 115).

New Norcia Mission was opened on 1 March 1846. During its formative years, from 1846 to 1867, Salvado advanced his vision 'by the sweat of his brow': 'dressed in dungarees [...] he drove his bullock cart, felled trees, ploughed, sewed, and planted' (William 1967, n. p.). He also honed his skills as entrepreneur, politician, businessman, religious leader, negotiator and musical performer, notably raising 70 pounds at a piano concert he staged in Perth. Developing the mission meant creating links with powerful individuals, obtaining funding and recruits, acquiring sufficient and suitable land, establishing a profitable pastoral and agricultural enterprise and attracting Aboriginal people to the mission. In doing so Salvado had to work across several local and transnational domains: the Swan River Colony, Australia's other settler colonies and the British colonial government; the Catholic diocese in Perth and the colonial Church hierarchy; the Benedictine Order and the Roman Catholic Church, centred in Rome; his allegiances and patrons in Spain; and the Yuit people inside and outside the mission. This required a leader with intellect and vision, a man of the people who was also a sophisticated cosmopolitan with the patience and stamina to surmount the obstacles he encountered.

Salvado could expect little financial assistance from Perth. The governor provided no funding to establish the mission and from 1862 contributed only 100 pounds per annum. Nor could the small Catholic congregation in Perth assist; for a time mission earnings were siphoned off for its support and Salvado had to resist pressure to make New Norcia an ongoing source of revenue for the Perth diocese. The mission had to rely on its developing pastoral and farming enterprises and the generosity of benefactors in Europe. Campaigning for funds and recruits necessitated Salvado's long absences in Europe and he travelled there five times between 1846 and 1900. Using his erudite skills and contacts in high places he gained the patronage of leading Church figures in Rome and royalty in Europe, including the Queen of Spain and the Spanish Royal Family and the Kings and Queens of Sicily and Naples. Generous donations and volunteer recruits were the foundation of a prosperous, self-supporting mission. On his first trip between 1849 and 1853 Salvado raised over 7600 pounds in donations and recruited a band of thirty-eight mainly Spanish and Italian Benedictine lay and religious brothers, many of them skilled artisans and farmers. Such support distinguished Salvado's enterprise from other missions in colonial Australia that struggled to survive with limited funding and unskilled workers. However, Salvado's intention to train two Yuit boys who accompanied him to Rome to become missionaries for the West Australian field was not so successful. Conaci and Dirimera, baptised Francis Xavier and John Baptist, were introduced to Pope Pius IX and royalty and entered training to become Benedictines, showing great promise in their studies. Tragically, both died: Conaci in Italy in 1853 and Dirimera two years later on his return to New Norcia. Dirimera's brother, taken to Rome by Bishop Polding, had died there in 1850. The boys reportedly 'pined away' and the priests were devastated by their loss. Salvado made no further efforts to recruit Aborigines to the order (Brendan Hayes, cited in Zwartz 2010, n. p.).

Salvado also differed from other missionaries in the way he was able to negotiate differences with fellow colonists and his religious colleagues and leaders. He became actively involved in Church politics in the colony and in Rome, principally to protect the interests of New Norcia. Between 1853 and 1855, while in charge of the Perth diocese, he built up support for his work by reuniting divisions in the parish, calming anti-Catholic sentiments and meeting

with political and business leaders. His decision in 1848 to take on British citizenship no doubt assisted. Earlier conflicts with the Perth diocese convinced Salvado of the need for independence from its control and he petitioned the Pope to this end. In 1859 the Pope declared New Norcia an abbey free of any diocesan control and appointed Salvado as Bishop and Abbot of New Norcia. In the same year all mission lands were transferred to his name. Salvado's involvement in church affairs in Europe ensured a public profile there and ongoing support. In 1864 he visited Rome to speak against central Church control of Catholic missions and three years later the Pope issued a statement guaranteeing the independence of New Norcia with Salvado as Abbott for life. This earned New Norcia the nickname of 'little Paraguay', reflecting the political and economic independence insisted on by earlier Jesuit missionaries for their reductions in Paraguay.

Salvado needed all his skills as a negotiator and communicator to persuade local Yuit people to settle at the mission. They could not be forced to live there, although spreading white settlement increasingly circumscribed their choices. As Salvado later recorded, they had their own strong code of law and a deep and satisfying system of spiritual beliefs. He wrote that it was by healing their sick and wounded and sharing food with them and appeasing their curiosity about the harvests of wheat and his explanations of Christianity that he gained their trust and drew them into the mission (Stormon 1977, p. 82). However, observers elsewhere have noted Aborigines' purposeful use of missions to protect themselves from settler violence and obtain food as their land and resources were taken over, as well as their feelings of friendship and compassion for the missionaries. Perhaps the Yuit people envisaged a kindly sharing of resources with these clumsy strangers met in the bush. Certainly during the early years at New Norcia families came and went between the bush and the mission, taking their children with them or leaving them behind where they could be fed and taught new skills. Salvado wrote in 1856 how they helped with ploughing and the harvest: '[A] few days ago there were 25 Australians here; more have arrived. They have to be given time, and allowed to go away on their own business they usually come back, and bring others with them. It is hard work, but not, as some say, impossible' (cited in Shellam 2012, p. 117). Clearly the people had no intention of simply abandoning their way of life.

From Salvado's return in 1853 the mission began to resemble Salvado's imagined monastic village. The contribution by the Benedictine lay and religious brothers to the self-sufficiency of the mission merits special mention. Their integrated regime of manual labour, prayer and strict discipline made Salvado's plans a reality. They provided a willing and reliable pool of skilled labour and knowledge not readily available to other missions that typically depended on one or two overworked married couples and unpaid and often forced Aboriginal labour. Led by Salvado the men were bound together by the rhythms of life laid down in the Benedictine Rule: 'mass, meals, saying of offices, study and manual work throughout the day' and their shared missionary and religious vocation (Woodward 1994, p. 29). Photographs show the men lined up in monotonous black habits, many with faces hidden behind long beards. The diary of Spanish brother Manuel Beleda documents the psychological and physical pain they often experienced. Some repeatedly sought to escape into the bush despite becoming disorientated and lost and their fears of 'savage' natives. The diary also notes a 'strong sense of caring and affection' for their Aboriginal charges but also misunderstandings and conflict, an inevitable outcome of the collision of cultures (Woodward 1994, pp. 21-36).

Salvado's optimism and faith in his enterprise was in contrast to his fellow colonists. He recorded his admiration for Aborigines' intelligence and physical stamina and was convinced they were capable of learning a new way of life. While most colonists believed they could only become labourers and domestic servants, Salvado wrote in his memoirs that 'if the natives carefully cultivated their intellectual faculties, they would be capable of any kind of training, whether in the arts or in the sciences' (cited in Conde 1999, p. 112). He had the example of the success of Dirimera and Conaci, who excelled in their studies in Latin and other subjects in Italy. He was also eager to learn about their way of life. He learned to speak the Yuit language and wrote admiringly that 'it has many sonorous sounds, like the most harmonious ones in Spanish, and supple sweet-sounding ones, like the most attractive in Italian' (Stormon 1977, p. 132). He appreciated the strong moral code and recognised the significance of music, dance and ritual in their lives, all of which he documented along with invaluable information about religious beliefs, myths, foods, healing practices, social organisation, marriage rules, land ownership, funeral rites, body decoration, language and songs (Stormon 1977).

Concerning marriage and family Salvado recorded that the girls were married at puberty, usually to older men in polygamous relationships. Young men went through long stages of initiation in religious beliefs and practices before they could take a wife. Mothers bore a small number of children who were 'few and well spaced' (cited in Green 1989, p. 197) and Salvado noted that parents had a 'most intense feeling' for their children and that a father 'would not give his son to anyone else for all the gold in the world' (Stormon 1977, pp. 137-8). They demonstrated an 'excessive' tenderness towards their children:

They are never punished, whatever they do, because their parents say they are too small to understand the reason. [...] The only correction given by parents is a scolding, which may or may not be listened to, and even this takes place only after the children have had their own way. (Stormon 1977, p. 137)

However, like other missionaries Salvado was also a 'self-conscious agent of change' who articulated the need for development and intervened to remodel and transform the people and their way of life (Jolly & Macintyre 1989, p. 7). He endeavoured to prohibit practices he considered sinful or degrading or that hindered conversion, such as polygamy, although he objected to the ruthless suppression of traditional ways practiced by many other missionaries. He advocated instead a process of 'change by degrees' (Russo 1980, pp. 158-9) and an holistic approach that endeavoured to meet Aborigines' needs – 'temporal as well as spiritual' (Stormon 1977, p. 86). Salvado's approach allowed some mixing of the cultures that can be seen in mission photographs of the period. Nevertheless the missionaries brought dramatic changes to the Yuit way of life through their evangelising, appropriation of the land and labour, introduction of European modes of work and material goods and intervention into marriage and family life and schooling for the children. Although Salvado spoke of learning 'by degrees' and presenting chores to Aborigines as 'continual childish play' he was also prepared to use corporal punishment to discipline adults and children (Stannage 1984, p. 34).

Salvado used his knowledge of Yuit language and spiritual beliefs and customs to explain Christianity and later prepared a catechism demonstrating connections between the two (Russo 1980, p. 163). He also drew on the

people's love of music and performance to create choirs and instrumental groups to perform in church ceremonies and for visitors and he generally encouraged them to be part of the church community. This approach may account for the significant number of baptisms recorded in the mission records. However, while missionaries typically portrayed such outcomes as miraculous interventions, researchers suggest that there was no simple causal relationship and provide responses ranging from cooperation to active resistance to conversion (Jolly & Macintyre 1989, p. 9). Indeed, some anthropologists question the veracity of claims of conversion, arguing that Aboriginal religious beliefs are such that true conversion is 'a virtual impossibility' and that 'conversions' were usually 'related to economic need or social deprivation or both' (Yengoyan 1993, p. 234).

The Yuit people staying on the mission learned European labour and work skills through daily routines of regular and orderly work, beginning with early-morning devotions and a meal before the monks and Aboriginal men left to work together in the fields or on mission building projects. Salvado was convinced that the men would respond positively to proper recognition and remuneration for their work:

It is no use saying that the native cannot appreciate the value of money or take pride in possession; he readily learns to do both, and then devotes all his energy to increasing his store of worldly goods and to bettering his lot. But if he is made to feel only the burdens of civilized life and not the benefits, and his wages are so low that he sees no point in working for other people's profit, then he prefers the freedom of his nomadic life to the limitations of our civilisation, and goes back to the bush. (Stormon 1977, p. 86)

From 1854 two-roomed brick and iron cottages were provided for the married men who did paid work in communal farming projects or under individual work contracts. Profits from bountiful harvests were shared with them and their families. As their skills progressed they were allocated their own small farming blocks, which they worked under mission supervision with help with equipment, seed for crops, advice and labour. From this they reaped the fruits of their labour and learned values of personal ownership and progress. Salvado told the men that the land belonged to them 'by right [...] and that no one could take it from [them]' (Russo 1980, p. 154).

Women's work shifted from food gathering to supervised domestic duties. The promotion of the model of wage-earning husbands and submissive, dependent wives and children shifted the balance between the genders. While men were allowed to work outside New Norcia, the women were obliged to remain on the mission unless accompanied by their husbands and approved by the missionaries. Missionaries typically saw Christianity as improving the lot of the women by rescuing them from abuse by white and Aboriginal men. Salvado was convinced that their changing roles and responsibilities would also impact on their husbands and children. The women and young girls were trained 'wholly in European ways' in domestic work and church activities, including singing in the mass and playing musical instruments and the missionaries held up to them 'the ideal womanhood of the Virgin Mary' (Russo 1980, pp. 166-7). These changes acted to undermine women's traditional powers and independence and subjected them to close surveillance to ensure appropriate standards of sexual modesty and behaviour. The missionaries promoted an idealised image of the sanctity of the Christian family and of appropriate relations between men and women. Their interventions changed fundamental aspects of domestic life, notably 'values that centered on kinship, patterns of marriage, the division of labour, residential patterns, eating and sleeping arrangements and the care of children and the sick' (Jolly & Macintyre 1989, p. 2). They encouraged monogamous marriages between young people of the same age, directed them in the choice of marital partners, supervised their courtship and directed married couples to live as nuclear and Christian families in mission cottages, thereby creating the basis for an enduring mission community. Father Miro was the mission matchmaker who organised girls' marriage partners for decades between 1865 and his death in 1908 (Russo 1980, p. 166). At the same time Salvado used traditional Yuit marriage laws to approve appropriate marriage partners and reject others.

Schooling of the children to prepare them for a settled life at the mission further undermined Yuit culture, yet it was done through a balanced approach that introduced them to vital new skills. Salvado's pedagogy was 'an expression of his Benedictine philosophy of "civilizing" the Aborigines: a balance of spiritual and elementary education with outdoor exercise, practical skills training and Aboriginal cultural practice' (Shellam 2012, p. 122). The building of boys'

and girls' dormitories (referred to as 'orphanages') in 1858 and 1861 gave Salvado the opportunity to conduct his benevolent work in his own way. An official report in 1854 noted that the boys were doing as well as white children in their lessons and the *Perth Gazette* write in 1862 that the ten girls in the dormitory were 'as clean and decently clothed as could be expected' and 'gave every sign of being both contented and happy' (cited in Green 1989, p. 67).

Salvado's civilising ideals for the children were represented in a series of photographs for mission patrons depicting them engaged in various religious and secular activities. An 1867 photograph of a lay brother with a group of boys and girls holding the tools and harvests of farm labour demonstrates the rewards of regular and orderly work through the routines of daily and seasonal labour that were crucial to the children's training (State Library of Western Australia Photograph Collection 5770B/9 [73684P]). Harvesting may have been a time for all hands to help, but in fact most work was gender-specific. Boys learned manual work (farming, gardening and trades to earn a living) while girls learned household duties (sewing, washing, cooking and embroidery) and light manual work in the mission orchards and at harvest time. But the photographs also showed the children's drab mission uniforms pointing to the institutional regime of the orphanages: rise at sunrise, dress and wash, prayers, go to church and assist at mass, sing the 116th Psalm, 7 am breakfast, work to 11 am and then take lunch.

Initially at least, Salvado resisted the practice of separating children from their parents in dormitories as well. He sympathised with to their refusal to leave their children with colonists:

[...] would we blame a white man for not sending his son to a person whom he does not know or trust? [...] They would and do hand them over to those white men who have gained their affection, but otherwise they prefer to keep them at their own side, without benefit of education, rather than risk losing them forever. (Stormon 1977, p. 138)

However, once built, the mission's dormitories predisposed the missionaries to adopt the practice of separating children from their parents. This also promised to prevent parents removing their children from school at will,

perhaps to put the boys through initiation or to fulfil marriage arrangements. However, the practice of sending girls on to the Sisters of Mercy in Perth to be trained to be domestic servants had tragic results, the Sisters reporting that 'civilization seemed to be more than they could bear. They all died young' (Russo 1980, p. 130).

By the mid-1860s it seemed that Salvado's vision had been realised. Archbishop Polding wrote to him in 1863: 'You are the only one who has been able to civilize the unhappy natives' (cited in Conde 1999, p. 113). In the same year the English health advocate and nurse Florence Nightingale, reporting on her extensive survey of indigenous child mortality rates in British colonial native schools, congratulated Salvado as the only one to recognise the 'physiological necessity of engrafting habits gradually through the means of systematic physical training' (cited in Shellam 2012, p. 124). An anonymous watercolour vista of the mission from 1864 depicts this success in a large cleared site with fields of wheat, vineyards and gardens with Aboriginal men and the monks working side-by-side and the mission monastery, chapel, cottages, dormitories and cemetery. The original 'wilderness' is confined behind fences surrounding the site on all sides. In the foreground are the outsiders – the painter with his tethered horse and Aboriginal men wearing traditional buka (cloaks made from kangaroo skins) standing with their weapons of wood and stone before a *mia mia* and a smoking fire and their visitors from the mission – a monk and an Aboriginal child dressed in mission clothes.

Tragically this was also the turning point when Salvado's dreams began to come crashing down. From the late 1860s to the 1880s successive epidemics of measles, influenza and whooping cough and a 'fatal melancholy' attributed by Salvado to Aborigines' deep despair and grieving for family and homelands now lost to them cut a swath through the New Norcia mission population. New Norcia seemed doomed to follow the fate of missions elsewhere that began with high hopes 'sustained during the first couple of years, followed by a period of gradual decline and ultimate collapse' (Hamilton 1989, p. 244). We can only imagine the grief and trauma experienced by the families losing so many loved ones and the tragic legacy for the survivors. In such a close community no one is immune and Salvado and his men, who had been living with the people for over a decade, must also have grieved deeply. There was also the loss of the

shared vision of forging an enduring community. Salvado refused to give in to the 'dying race' proponents and responded to Nightingale's driving question 'Can we civilise the natives without killing them?' by seeking answers to the deaths in 'practical causes [that] could be solved with practical resolutions and prevention' (Shellam 2012, p. 125).

Salvado had to be pragmatic in seeking new ways to save his now threatened mission enterprise and he turned to his friends amongst the colony's rich and powerful, like Governor Weld (1869-1874), a practical family man from a leading English catholic family whose solicitude for Aboriginal welfare attracted private commendation from his superiors in London (Louch 1976). Salvado was drawn in to advise on matters such as protection of Aborigines in employment and women from sexual abuse and he helped to implement the new laws as a Protector of Aborigines under the 1886 Aborigines Protection Act. Significantly for the future of New Norcia he joined in the resurgence of mission work with Aboriginal children inspired by humanitarian concern about the welfare of children of mixed descent in town-fringe camps. In 1871 the Anglican Swan Native and Half-Caste Mission was opened in Perth. New Norcia was already receiving Aboriginal children from government officials, priests and some concerned white fathers. Aware that he had no legal powers to detain the children or to force them to attend school, Salvado lobbied Governor Weld for powers of guardianship over them claiming that this would be 'a step in the right direction towards civilizing them' (Russo 1980, p. 190). The resulting 1874 Industrial Schools Act provided that all children voluntarily surrendered by their parents to institutions would remain under the control of the managers until they were twenty-one. Their parents had no further say over their future and children could be apprenticed to employers to the age of twenty-one or put into service for up to five years without their permission. New Norcia and the Swan Native and Half-Caste Mission and the Swan Boys' Home subsequently became industrial schools under the Act. Although not directed specifically at Aboriginal people the 1874 Act marked the first step in eroding the legal rights of Aboriginal parents and children in Western Australia.

All this marked a distinct policy change and break from Salvado's original vision. The new children became the focus for the foundation of a reinvigorated mission population. A visiting doctor commented in the 1890s that 'the main

hope of the missionaries is centred on the children' and by 1900 there were ninety resident in the New Norcia Orphanages (Russo 1980, p. 191). Photographs show their resemblance to the drab children's institutions found throughout the British Empire and the children in their mission uniforms gazing unhappily out at the viewer mirror images of institutionalised children everywhere (SLWA 73743P; Haebich 2000, p. 250). Most of the children came from distant parts so they were true exiles, cut off from family and home and the outside world, forcibly kept in an institution designed to propel them into a future as permanent mission residents. Salvado claimed that most were orphans but his heated response to an official inquiry about which of them qualified for government funding as orphans suggested otherwise:

Some [of the children] are bereaved of fathers, others are bereaved of mothers, others are not orphans at all, and others I do not know what they are. They may be orphans in the full sense of the word from what I know of it. I do not know if they are orphans because I never took any interests in that particular matter. (Cited in Harris 1994, p. 300)

Harking back to his original vision he added that 'this Benedictine Mission of New Norcia was never intended to be, and is not at all an orphanage' (cited in Harris 1994, p. 300).

Salvado's abrupt retort suggests his growing frustration with escalating difficulties at the time. To outsiders the mission still seemed to be a thriving village community of monks and Aboriginal families living amicably together. In 1885 it held a million acres of grazing and farming land and was running sheep, cattle and horses and producing wool, wheat, wine, olives and other produce. It was a popular site for official visits and inspired congratulatory public reports. However, the reality was that the mission had changed. Many of the cottages were empty as epidemics continued to ravage the people. Some residents expressed their opposition to new interventions in family life by seeking work outside the mission and children repeatedly escaped from the orphanages in a bid to rejoin their families. Movement of people between the bush and the mission was curtailed and more adults were expelled for bad behaviour (Russo 1980, p. 213 ff).

Particularly annoying for Salvado was the unaccustomed government interference and criticism that brought him into conflict with colonial officials. A government commission in 1883 unfairly berated New Norcia for showing 'no striking evidence of its good effects (outside of the institution itself) in the neighbourhood or in the colony' (cited in Hasluck 1970, p. 99). During the 1890s Salvado clashed with Premier John Forrest after he ruled that the mission must take full financial responsibility for adult Aboriginal residents. Salvado was angered by discriminatory funding arrangements introduced in 1892 that threatened to reduce New Norcia's annual grant to a quarter of that supplied to the two Anglican children's missions (SNHC and the Swan Boys' Orphanage) when it supported three times the number of children (Hasluck 1970, p. 96). When an inheritance tax law was introduced in 1897 Salvado, who was registered as the sole owner of the mission's land holdings and property, acted quickly to avoid future financial loss by having the mission declared a charitable institution.

However, the real calamity now facing the mission was the threat to its economic survival as a viable pastoral and agricultural enterprise as the Victoria Plains district was opened up to establish a wheat export industry in the colony during the 1890s. This brought a dramatic shift in patterns of land tenure and usage in the region and mounting pressure for New Norcia's extensive land holdings to be resumed by the government or sold off to be carved up into small farming blocks. By 1909 the mission held only 100,000 of its original holdings of 967,000 acres (Haebich 1992, pp. 16-17). Aboriginal farmers who had been encouraged to take up farming plots outside the mission also faced cancellation of the reserved land.

Salvado was well into his eighties when he set out on his final trip to Europe in 1900. While there he appointed a successor who would negotiate new directions and strategies for the Benedictine mission endeavour in Western Australia. Salvado died while he was in Europe and in 1903 his remains were returned to the mission that he devoted his life's work to establish. Under the new direction of Bishop Torres Salvado's vision of a self-supporting community of monks and Christian Aboriginal families was progressively abandoned. The effort to convert Aboriginal souls shifted to establishing Kalumburu mission in the north Kimberley and at New Norcia boarding schools were built to cater for

the superior education of white children with labour provided by children from the Aboriginal orphanages. Torres also directed the religious community to take up a more refined and secluded way of life. With less need for their labour, Aboriginal adults left to find work with local farmers and by 1911 only 10 men were regularly employed there. Despite Salvado's assurances that the farms they had worked were theirs by right, they also found they had no recognised claims over the land they had tilled. With encouragement from the monks, some families left their children behind for schooling but access to the children was increasingly curtailed. Growing tensions finally erupted into conflict in 1908 and three of the mission's former upstanding residents were sentenced to three months' imprisonment. One of the men subsequently wrote that New Norcia was now 'no home for the native at all. They keep a few hands here to carry bricks because they are cheap but I can assure you that if you are sick they have no time for such a native' (cited in Haebich 1992, p. 19).

Families now living in the surrounding Midlands district found they could only get menial farm work despite their schooling and skills in farming, trades and domestic duties. Accustomed to living a settled life in the mission cottages, they now had to live in tents in temporary camps, often in desperate conditions. Once protected by the mission community, they now experienced the virulent racism of settler farmers moving into the district and the full force of strict legislative controls enshrined in the 1905 Aborigines Act, which now directed the lives of Aborigines in the state and left them vulnerable to forced removal of their children, who could be sent to live in the New Norcia orphanages, which continued to operate until the 1970s.

Despite the disillusion and suffering the memory of Salvado continues on with celebrations on the centenary of his death in 2000 and the occasion of the bicentenary of his birth in 2014. Remnants of his vision and legacy also persist. The mission site has survived, with many buildings still standing, including the monastery. The enduring spiritual devotion of the small Benedictine community, mixed with an entrepreneurial flair, has transformed the monastery town of New Norcia, with its unmistakably Spanish architecture, into a popular religious and tourist destination. The unique New Norcia Archive, built around Salvado's voluminous records about Aboriginal culture, life at the mission and relations with colonists and the Church, survives and prospers with the continuing work

of translating these records into English. There is also the Aboriginal cultural centre and museum, with a new exhibition opening in 2014 to celebrate Salvado's work. And there is the ongoing connection of Aboriginal families to New Norcia and their determination to document their account of mission history and to assert their custodianship over mission lands that Salvado assured their ancestors of so long ago through actions such as their Native Title Claim, lodged in 1997.

Finally, there is Salvado's enduring Christian legacy, with most Aboriginal families associated with New Norcia today identifying as members of the Catholic Church.

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