

SALVADO: A MAN OF AND BEFORE HIS TIME*

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Bishop Salvado wrote his *Memoirs* during the formative period of our State's history. Sir George Grey had published his *Journals* in 1841, George Fletcher Moore his *Descriptive Vocabulary . . .* in 1842. With his missionary group, Salvado arrived at Fremantle in 1846. The Wesleyan missionary, Smithies, was operating a school for Aboriginal children in 1840¹; there were other experiments, too (at Fremantle under the Anglicans)². Salvado did not waste time. His initial depot was founded in the year he arrived in this State, and his first meeting with armed Aborigines (pp. 37-8) is an illuminating demonstration, not only of practical religion, but also of good sense and insight into human nature: it was pacification through the gift of food³. In 1847 the mission was moved to a site on the Moore (or Maura) River. Today, looking back at the hardships endured by Salvado and his companions – going into what was then virtually unknown territory – it is difficult to realize that it was only eighty miles north of Perth. Here he was in contact with Aborigines who had little or no knowledge of the European settlers.

Quite soon after his arrival at his first site, Salvado commenced learning the local language. He realized the importance of undertaking this task if he were to communicate with the local people, if any headway were to be made. He was certainly not unique among missionaries in this respect, but he was indeed rare among the colonists of that period: few recognized the vital need for this approach. With the use of notebooks, he began to record 'every word, with the meaning opposite', and, by this means, 'our knowledge . . . developed very

¹ An account of the early years of the Swan River Colony based on the letters of the Rev. John Smithies is being prepared in the Department of Anthropology, University of Western Australia. These letters were collected and assembled by the Rev. W. McNair, under the title 'Pioneer Christian: Western Australia's First Aboriginal Mission'.

² P. Hasluck, *Black Australians* (Melbourne, 1942), pp. 89-91.

³ Salvado's moderate description of this meeting as described in his *Memoirs* is in marked contrast to the exaggerated account in *New Norcia: The Remarkable Aborigines Institution of the Australian Commonwealth, the tribute of an Irish priest* (London, 1908), p. 12.

slowly' (p. 39). Appendix I provides us with a vocabulary: not in the sophisticated terms of today's linguists, but identifiable because he supplied the key to his orthography.

Bishop Salvado was a man of his own times: his attitudes and approach to the immediate problems facing him were reflective of those more generally held. But they also expressed more than this – he was intelligent and of an enquiring mind. On one hand, he wanted to know more about the Aborigines – not simply because this was useful in terms of evangelization, but because he saw them as being theoretically important. On the other hand, he was interested in them as persons, and had an appreciation of at least some areas of their socio-cultural life; and he was concerned about their contact with the settlers and about their place, economically, in the emergent European-dominated society.

Salvado, in these *Memoirs*, presents the reader with an ethnography of the local Aborigines. At the time when he wrote, Anthropology as a discipline was just becoming established. What we call 'the Convergent Period'⁴, between 1835 and 1859, was just getting under way. Darwin had not yet published his *Origin of Species* (1859), nor Karl Marx his *Zur Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie* (1859). J. C. Prichard had published his *Natural History of Man* in 1843, and earlier his *De Humani Generis Varietate* (1808), to which Salvado refers. Prichard's work had an immense influence on his contemporaries, and this is reflected in Salvado's own work. There was an upsurge of interest in the ways of life of various peoples. Australia came in for its share of this during the first sixty years of that century, and Salvado's contribution must be numbered among the more important. It is true it is written in the idiom of that day, as one would expect, and it shows a concern with issues that are mostly less central to our problems (as ethnographers or anthropologists) today: the question of an Aboriginal divinity (p. 126), the concept of the soul (pp. 61, 127), patriarchy in relation to family life (p. 130), and – more generally – migration theories (p. 112), and a discussion on the races of man (Part 2) and linguistic variation (p. 112). These are to be expected; but the account is remarkably free from unrewarding theorizing or speculation: Salvado tried to adhere to the empirical facts. To obtain these facts, as I have noted, he

⁴ T. K. Penniman, *A Hundred Years of Anthropology* (London, 1952), Chap. III.

learned the local language and he tackled this study systematically. Moreover, and this I believe is important as well as being ‘modern’, he involved himself in what we call today (in our field-work seminars on methods and techniques) participant observation (p. 54). He recognized the need to intermingle with the people, to listen and to enquire. When the Aborigines were relaxed around their fires, talking among themselves, discussing daily events or plans for the morrow, telling stories or singing – at these times, much could be learnt. ‘If the missionary knows how to make the best of this situation, he will learn far more in a single night than in months spent walking with them through the bush’.

On the other hand, Salvado was first and foremost a missionary – he came with a task to perform, to ‘work among the natives’, to ‘convert and civilize’. This was all perfectly natural, as it still is in certain contexts – even though it may be framed differently these days. In speaking of the Aborigines’ use of kangaroo fur skin cloaks (p. 70), he touched on the question of nudity. He admitted that this gave them no concern. But in order ‘To begin the work of civilizing them, and to lift them above their wretched condition, we thought it wise to make a rule that whoever came to the monastery for soup . . . had to wear a kangaroo-skin. But we did not tell them the reason for this rule to avoid giving them feelings of shame’; they ‘had no sense of shame’, however, ‘. . . I have never been aware of any unchaste or improper action’. He perhaps comes closest to the conventional missionary attitude of the period in his statement (p. 84) about Aborigines whom he met in 1846, ‘. . . men who fled from the white man as from a savage beast, who were utterly unacquainted with work, who had no religious worship, and who thus worshipped no god, true or false (although they had an idea of an evil spirit)’. But he does write of ‘Religious Beliefs’ in Chapter 16.

At the same time, he mentions on several occasions his appreciation of Aboriginal life and of the people themselves. When making the road from New Norcia to Perth, via Bindoon, with a party of his Mission Aborigines, on the second day they met a number of Aborigines unknown to Salvado. He describes the meeting, which was highly formalized, expressing friendship between the two parties. Salvado notes that he ‘was surprised to see demonstrations of courtesy that suggested civilized man rather than the savage’ (p. 66). His account of the fire which threatened the corn fields and the miracle which resulted, is a

further example. No sooner had the picture of the Blessed Virgin been placed before the approaching bush-fire, than the wind changed and the crop was saved (p. 67). Salvado records the attitude of the Aborigines to this event.

Or again, 'Often I have found natives who, in their physical beauty, their dignified gait, and in their bearing – which is that of an impartial and attentive observer – not to mention their facial features, which resembled those of Europeans, reminded me of persons whom one looked up to with respect in former times. Some boys of six or seven years of age, in particular, had limbs of such distinction and beauty that they surpassed the finest creations of Greek sculpture' (p. 116). Writing of Aboriginal poetic language – their songs – he says: 'I, on the many occasions when I have sat with them at the fire and watched their performance, enjoyed it no less than they'. 'Native music includes a graceful and beautiful style that makes one think of the Phoenician type, and a grave and serious one that makes one think of the Doric' (p. 133). But there were songs of amusement too. Salvado had an ear for music, as the concert he describes (on pp. 42-3) shows. This was held to raise funds for the mission. And although he does not mention this in his *Memoirs*, the volume written by an Irish priest in 1908 (p. 22: see note 3) mentions that he gave a rendering of a 'Black-fellow's Corroboree' to his own accompaniment on a piano. 'It completely brought down the house'.

The Aborigines he came among in 1846 were the Yuet (Juet), who occupied the area around New Norcia and Moora, Mogumber and the Moore River generally to the coast. Very close indeed to New Norcia were the Balardong, who took in Wongan Hills, Northam and York. Both languages are virtually extinct today, except for short vocabularies known by a few descendants of the people⁵. As social entities they have disappeared, the part-Aborigines who do survive are an admixture of those from other areas and Australian-European settlers.

⁵ Salvado's language material in Appendix I of his *Memoirs* is arranged in three columns; the first is Yuet and the second probably Balardong. He has a further brief list in E. M. Curr, *The Australian Race* (Melbourne, 1886), Vol. I, pp. 318-21. It is interesting to note that the tribal term 'Yuet' means *yuat*, 'no!' It was quite common for terms like this to be singled out as tribal names distinguishing one group from others which used different words for (in this case) 'no'. W. H. Douglas's study of south-western languages,

Little is known of the ethnography of these people, except from the writings of Salvado, Grey and Moore⁶. Daisy Bates did publish some social organizational material in 1905-06, 1914 and 1925, but these last are not especially reliable. In the Curr volume (see note 5), Salvado produced what he called 'a genealogical tree'. This is a drawing of a tree with six major branches, each relevant to what he called a 'family name'. The 'name' was inherited matrilineally, and marriage took place only between intermarrying groups: a person was forbidden to marry within the same 'name' and one or two others. This is a lucid statement of Salvado's and an interesting one anthropologically. Radcliffe-Brown did collect some 'scanty information' in 1910 but was not clear about the system: the information available is, unfortunately, not sufficiently detailed⁷. The six 'family names' are not, apparently, sections⁸. Radcliffe-Brown speaks of exogamous moieties operating in this area, but from Salvado's data that seems unlikely, since the 'family names' cut across any rule of moiety exogamy. As both Salvado and Radcliffe-Brown suggest, these names represent matrilineal 'totemic' divisions (clans), each being associated with a 'totemic' creature or spirit being. Salvado's names are: Mondorop, Jiragiok, Tondorop, N-oiognok, Tirarop and Palarop. N-oiognok is probably Nagarnuk, named after *nagarn*, a small fish; and Palarop, Balarak, named after *balard*, a species of possum (see Radcliffe-Brown, p. 217: there are also other translations). It also seems clear from

undertaken in 1965 when he was attached to the Department of Anthropology in the University of Western Australia, is particularly important in this context. (See *The Aboriginal Languages of South-West Australia*, Australian Aboriginal Studies No. 14, Linguistic Series No. 4, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1968, second ed. 1976; and the language of south-western Australia, in 'Aboriginal Man in Southwestern Australia', *Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia*, Vol. 56, Parts 1 and 2, 1973, pp. 48-50.) Douglas classifies the New Norcia language as a dialect of Njungar (Nyungar) and states that it was called Tjapanmay (Djabanmai). He worked with an old Aboriginal woman who in 1965 was 'reported to be the only remaining speaker of this dialect' (p. 3). East of Tjapanmay was Watjanmay, of which no living speakers are known. In his Njungar vocabulary, Douglas gives the word *yuwat* or *yuwad* (that is, 'yuet') as meaning 'no!'

⁶ For a brief outline of Aboriginal life in the south-west of Western Australia, see R. M. Berndt, 'Aborigines of southwestern Australia: the past and the present', in 'Aboriginal Man in Southwestern Australia', *Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia*, Vol. 56, Parts 1 and 2 (1973), pp. 50-4, note particularly figures 2 to 4.

⁷ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, 'The Social Organization of Australian Tribes', *Oceania*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1930), pp. 216-19.

⁸ See R. and C. Berndt, *The World of The First Australians* (Sydney, 1968), p. 49.

Salvado's statement (pp. 130-1) that territorial units (probably patrilineal) were significant. But he emphasized that the basic Aboriginal unit was the family, monogamous or polygynous; and, as we know today, this is (or was) true for all of Aboriginal Australia.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Salvado's ethnography is his discussion of the overall population of Aboriginal Australia (p. 114). He observes that, for the most part, such calculations are of little value. At the time he wrote, much of the continent was unknown to Europeans, and the Aboriginal population could be said to be 'unevenly scattered and wander from one place to another *ad infinitum*'. However, he puts forward an interesting view: 'it must be admitted that if we estimate the total population from the numbers ascertained in many particular parts of the country, we have to conclude that it does not exceed 300,000'. Now, this was written prior to 1851. Since that time, until the present, the *same* figure has been repeated. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, in 1930, brought together all available evidence⁹. He systematically looked at various areas throughout the continent, and estimated that the original population of Australia was certainly 'over 250,000, and quite possibly, or even probably, over 300,000' (p. 696: see note 9). Elkin also suggested that in 1788 the Aborigines would have numbered 300,000¹⁰. I mentioned the same number, quoting from Elkin, and others have done the same. This is quite remarkable, and must surely be more than a coincidence. Salvado himself, as I have pointed out, suggested the figure tentatively and was quite unsure of it; and it is obvious that it was quite impossible to make any reasonably accurate calculation. But *he* gave it as a 'ceiling' figure. It should be possible now, with our knowledge of the number of Australian 'tribes' and language units over the whole of this continent, the varying socio-natural environments, the nature of semi-nomadic life and food collecting and hunting activities, together with the man-land ratio in certain regions, to come up with something better than this rough assessment – Salvado's and Radcliffe-Brown's. If Salvado is right, and recent anthropologists *have* validated that figure to some extent, it was both far-sighted and perspicacious on his part.

⁹ 'The Aboriginal Population: Former Numbers and Distribution of the Australian Aborigines', in *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, No. 23 (Melbourne, 1930), pp. 687-96.

¹⁰ A. P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* (Sydney, 1954), pp. 10-11.

The ethnographic material presented in these *Memoirs* is particularly interesting. Typical of the time in which he wrote, he considered the position of Aboriginal woman to be completely subordinate to her husband and in fact to all men (pp. 83-4). This is emphasized in his discussion of beauty in Aboriginal women and how disastrous that can be (pp. 139-40). Nevertheless, in spite of men's not interfering in women's quarrels (p. 83), and indeed in Aboriginal Australia this *is* an unwritten law, the revealing account of women urging men to defend their honour (pp. 167-8) gives the other side of the picture.

Cannibalism, too, attracted his attention (pp. 84, 162). He says that this was practised in times of extreme famine, but apparently did not witness any actual instances himself. On the other hand, again in cases of extreme need, so he reported, a recently dead person might be exhumed (p. 162) and eaten. References to exhumation (after three days and two nights) are very rare indeed in Aboriginal Australia¹¹, although it was prevalent in parts of the Eastern Central Highlands of New Guinea¹². Salvado's account, although not that of an eye-witness, has a ring of truth about it; he notes that the eating of the decomposed flesh could cause diarrhoea, and that the deceased's relatives would react violently against violators of the grave.

In discussing their religious life, Bishop Salvado emphasizes that Aborigines 'carefully [hide their] special habits and beliefs from strangers' (p. 125). To a certain extent, he was able to lift this veil. He speaks of Motogon (which he translates as God) as a creative being, and he draws an analogy with Genesis. He also speaks of particular myths (those of the Sun and Moon, for instance, and the Morning Star, p. 128, and also of the great Rainbow Snake common to so many Australia areas, living in particular waterholes, p. 128). But on much that one would expect within this category, he is silent. It is obvious, however, that he did hear sacred songs (speaking of these, p. 132, he says that some were 'handed down with a sort of traditional veneration') and see sacred ritual dances (pp. 134-5). As far as these last are concerned, he notes kangaroo and emu posturing and songs which refer to 'historic feats'. But balancing this is sorcery (the guardian spirit being apparently Cienga, a malignant character,

¹¹ We note no cases in R. and C. Berndt, pp. 400-3.

¹² R. Berndt, *Excess and Restraint* (Chicago, 1962), pp. 183, 272, 284, 287, 289.

pp. 126-7), and the native doctor (pp. 127-8, 170ff.), who is both sorcerer and healer.

Lack of space prevents me from commenting further on the wide range of material covering pregnancy and birth and infanticide (p. 136), marriage and betrothal, fighting and death. This last brings in some particularly interesting information on the treatment of the corpse, removal of nails, and the building of a but at the grave-side with reference to the deceased's soul (pp. 174-5). Probably the most detailed material is contained in Chapter 19 on methods of adornment, in Chapter 20 on weapons and tools, and Chapters 21 and 22 on hunting and food collection.

As I have said, Bishop Salvado was interested in all aspects of Aboriginal life, and not only the ethnographic. Especially, his concern crystallized around practical aspects of welfare. From the beginning, he saw that spiritual sustenance had to go hand in hand with material well-being (p. 86). His medical treatment, and some effective cures (pp. 50-1), paved the way. But he also provided portions of cultivated land from which Aborigines could harvest their crops and so purchase goods ('clothes, sheep, pigs and other animals', p. 82). His dictum is vividly expressed: 'It is no use saying that the native cannot appreciate the value of money, or take pride in possession; he rapidly learns to do both, and then he devotes all his energy to increasing his store of worldly goods and 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 civilization, and goes back to the bush' (p. 86). Much the same thing is said today well over a hundred years after Salvado wrote these words – in slightly different phrasing, but in essence the same; self-respect and economic viability, which are *still* sought for the remnant, part-Aboriginal population of these areas¹³.

Salvado spoke out, and firmly, against the treatment of Aborigines by the colonists, against their economic exploitation, against their neglect and maltreatment (p. 119). He offers examples of what *can* be done. He discusses their 'intellectual powers' (p. 118ff.) and suggests that 'there is every reason for

¹³ See R. Berndt (ed.), *Thinking About Australian Aboriginal Welfare* (Perth, 1969).

thinking that if these are carefully trained, they will succeed in every form of education both in the arts and the sciences'. 'The first thing to do is to teach him as quickly as possible how to fend for himself by means of agriculture or the basic trades, and after that one can improve his mind by forms of knowledge that belong to a civilized society.' These were cries in the wilderness at that time, and it was many years before something constructive was attempted on a broader scale. But he, and others like him, set the guide lines for future welfare activity, and our debt to them is great. However, it was not until about 1860 that the way was clear for progress at New Norcia, and its biggest role in this respect was played between the eighteen-seventies and the end of the century¹⁴.

From his *Memoirs*, Salvado emerges as a great humanist. Although this is a personal account, he does not sing his own praises: it is rather through his deeds and his words that we can gauge the man: deeply interested in the Aborigines around him, tempering his missionary zeal with practicalities, concerned for the material and spiritual wellbeing of those under his jurisdiction, and a defender of their rights – rights which were then barely recognized. He was a man of, and out of, his time: and it is because of this that his document is not simply one of historic interest, but has direct and indirect relevance for the present.

¹⁴ Hasluck, in *ibid.*, p. 98.