

**SEARCHING FOR
ROSENDO SALVADO
IN 1978**

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Monsig. Salvado, Vescovo di P. Vittoria
in cerca del Selvaggio No. 130. che
nell'Australia Occidentale -

The year 1978 marks an important date in the now long and fruitful association of the Department of English Philology of the University of Barcelona with Australia. It had not been an easy task to introduce such an exotic subject as Australian Studies into our traditional programmes dedicated to the Cultures of Great Britain and the United States of America. But that year we initiated a great new project. Under the rather ambiguous title of *Civilisation* we would cover all the countries of the British Commonwealth considering the relations between colonisers and indigenous people. Australia was the first to be considered.

That year 1978 is also memorable as being that of my first encounter with the impressive figure of Dom Rosendo Salvado. By fortunate coincidence, a medical friend in Barcelona who was also a keen collector of rare books sent me a copy of the *Memorias* of Rosendo Salvado, written originally in Italian but available in a Spanish translation. I found it an extraordinary narrative written with exceptional verve and humour. Who was this curious character who had set his mind on going out into the wilds of the Australian bush, making contact with the Aborigines and devoting his whole life to these mysterious and unknown inhabitants of the region?

I enquired and discovered that his abbey, founded in the mid-19th century with immense difficulties and setbacks, still existed and had grown and prospered under the wise rule of successive Spanish abbots. I wrote asking for more information and received a very friendly reply from Father Anscar McPhee, librarian and custodian of the artistic treasures of the monastery. With him I established an interesting correspondence.

At that time Australia was pervaded by a curious phenomenon which the Australians themselves described as a “cultural cringe” – a sort of cultural inferiority complex, believing that their history and literature were not sufficiently known or considered in the rest of the world. So the news that

Australian Studies were being taught in the University of Barcelona aroused the interest of Australian cultural authorities. We began getting visits from distinguished Australian academics. Presumably the information they took back was favourable because in 1980 I received a surprising and very generous invitation from the Australian government to visit their country. I was asked to prepare an itinerary of all the places I wished to visit. I sent a project covering a large part of the country but suggested that my first stop should be Perth, in Western Australia, with the idea of visiting the Abbey of New Norcia.

This rather unusual request attracted the attention of Professor Bob Brissenden, then president of the literary branch of the Australia Council in Canberra, and also that of Dr. Michael Costigan, with a similar post in Sydney. They had both heard of New Norcia but neither of them had ever thought of visiting it. The journey from east to west in Australia is very long but they both declared themselves willing to undertake the trip. They would meet me in Perth and accompany me on this adventure.

So we all met up in Perth: the two professors from the east together with Dr. Veronica Brady, a nun and lecturer in the University of Western Australia who was very well-known throughout the country as a fierce defender of Aboriginal rights. At that very time these people were embroiled in a bitter dispute with the regional government where strong mining interests were threatening sacred Aboriginal land. Also with us on this journey was George Russo, an Australian of Italo-Irish ancestry with whom I had also corresponded. He had written a book about Salvado which was not yet published at the time.

Travelling in two large, comfortable cars, the 120 km journey was interesting and agreeable, but we could not help thinking how arduous it must have been for Rosendo Salvado and his Catalan companion, José Benito Serra, on that first incursion into that wild “terra ignota” on rough paths with only an oxcart for their baggage.

In New Norcia I received a very friendly reception from the now reduced congregation of Spanish monks – visitors from Spain were rare. They were all rather old, the last vestiges of the Salvado era. They had been many years in Australia but retained a beautiful *castellano* and were still interested in their homeland. They subscribed to a Spanish newspaper. The conversation was animated until it suddenly took a rather melancholy turn when we thought

about their being the last Spanish survivors. After their decease New Norcia would become wholly Australian and English-speaking. After Dom Rosendo there had been three more outstanding Spanish abbots. Now the current abbot Bernard Rooney, appointed in 1971, was of Irish ancestry.

I was accustomed to Benedictine monasteries, having in my childhood often accompanied my father to the Abbey of Quarr in the Isle of Wight, to enjoy the beautiful Gregorian chant. Later I had frequented that other great Abbey of Silos. I quite understood, therefore, that these abbeys were cloistered and much of their buildings out of bounds for women. Father McPhee was, however, determined for me to see at least some of the most valuable things that Dom Rosendo has brought all the way from Italy to enrich his abbey.

Later we visited the small cemetery, where 120 modest iron crosses marked the tombs of Spanish monks and also labourers and artisans imported from Spain to construct the abbey. These were mostly recruited in Catalonia and sailed for the far land from Barcelona. I took note of some names to report back to their relatives in Spain.

Having completed my stay in Perth, I moved on to Melbourne and went in search of Father Edward Stormon, a Jesuit who had recently, in 1977, translated the *Memorias* into English. I spent an agreeable afternoon with him at his home while we discussed that remarkable man. What had been the secret of his exceptional ability to gain the confidence and affection of those unhappy people whose ancient way of life, surviving for thousands of years in a harsh land, had so suddenly and so brutally been destroyed. For the white invader they were no more than troublesome vermin fit only for extermination or exploitation in hard white man's work.

Salvado was a highly cultured man, a fine musician, familiar with great works of art. A man of imposing presence and determined will. Like Ulysses, resourceful in adversity. Well liked and respected by his equals but also endowed with what Rudyard Kipling called "the common touch", a rare sensibility when dealing with simple or primitive people, on the line of those Dominican missionaries, Fray Tomás de Berlanga and his successor Bartolomé de las Casas, who centuries past had understood that, before converting indigenous people to a new faith and a new culture, it was necessary to study their languages and their beliefs and know the nature that surrounded them.

Salvado had no special training in ethnology. He was an eminently practical man who knew how to make the best of the natural talents of these people. He admired their great manual skills, their artistic sense, their love of music and dance. He taught them how to dig wells and grow food. But above all he defended their right to exist and, as far as possible, adapt to this strange new world that had come upon them.

To conclude. One more thought. Certainly Dom Rosendo spent most of his life away from his homeland. But he was undoubtedly a *gallego*. In his childhood and youth he must have been familiar with that rural Galicia of Celtic origins where ancient pre-Christian traditions still survived: a world of spirits and superstitions and a close relationship with the land. Would this not be another element in his sympathy for his beloved Aboriginals?