

# Cloistering the Mission: Abbot Torres and changes at New Norcia 1901-1910.

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The Benedictine mission of New Norcia in Western Australia enjoyed an enviable reputation for success in the nineteenth century, and Bishop Rosendo Salvado continues to be remembered as a visionary founder by the local Aboriginal people as well as by scholars.<sup>1</sup> But in accounts of New Norcia to date, Salvado's successor has been identified with a turn away from the mission and work with Aboriginal people. Abbot Fulgentius Torres has been blamed for distorting Rosendo Salvado's aims, and credited in contrast with inaugurating an era of 'superior education' for Europeans at New Norcia.<sup>2</sup> The two schools Torres established seemed to seal his reputation, as from 1908 St Gertrude's College and from 1913 St Ildephonsus's College became reliable, even distinguished, rural boarding schools for the daughters and sons respectively of Irish Catholic families. In particular the foundation stone of St Gertrude's College has stood as an accusation to Salvado's successors. A lengthy Latin

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1. For example, John Harris, *One Blood: 20 years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity, a story of hope* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1994); David Hutchison, *A Town Like No Other: the Living Tradition of New Norcia* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995); George Russo, *Lord Abbot of the Wilderness: the life and times of Bishop Salvado* (Melbourne: Polding Press, 1980).
2. For example, Anna Haebich, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia 1900-1940* (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1988), 17-18; Clement Mulcahy, 'Fulgentius Torres', *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Supplementary Volume* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 383-4; South-West Land and Sea Council, John Host with Chris Owen, *It's Still in My Heart My Country: the Single Noongar Claim History* (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2009), 145, 287, n.95.

inscription set in white marble in September 1906 declared the stately new building was for ‘the education of indigenous girls [*puellis indigenis*] to the Christian religion.’<sup>3</sup> It dedicated the building to the glory of God, the honour of the fourteenth-century Benedictine scholar Gertrude of Helfta, and announced on behalf of Torres that the school would be ‘a perpetual memorial’ to New Norcia’s founder. But from the beginning of classes in February 1908 and through all but the last phase of the colleges seventy years, there were no Aboriginal pupils at St Gertrude’s. Instead the Aboriginal girls and young women at New Norcia continued at St Joseph’s Native School and Orphanage, a modest whitewashed complex renovated in 1910 and separated from St Gertrude’s by a high wall of New Norcia bricks. Over the decades the phrase in the foundation stone came to be translated as ‘Christian education for Australian girls’ on the possible grounds that ‘*puellis indigenis*’ meant something like ‘native-born’, and silence descended on how this could possibly have been imagined as a monument to Salvado the single-minded advocate of the mission to Aborigines.<sup>4</sup> Among Aboriginal people and others who remembered, the dedication of St Gertrude’s ‘for Aboriginal girls’ was attributed to Salvado, while Torres was remembered as responsible for their exclusion.

But far from a deliberate policy to distance New Norcia from the Aboriginal people after 1900, this article reconsiders the English sources, and draws on material in Spanish, and especially the monastery’s internal dairy or *Chronicle*, to argue that the changes Torres initiated were not so much ‘anti-missionary’, as ‘pro-monastic’ in their focus. Torres aimed to support observance of the *Rule of Benedict* and, in particular, to establish a monastic zone, something approximating a cloister for the monks, in the mission-town. While the second abbot’s policies undoubtedly did impact on the way the Benedictines at New Norcia interacted with the local people, and also indirectly led to the exclusion of the Aboriginal girls from St Gertrude’s, Torres nevertheless sought to continue Salvado’s work. His moves to refine monastic observance were not intended to downgrade the monks’ commitment to missionary work; but he did assume the mission and the monastery could, and should, be separated. In trying to distance one from the other, the monastery’s *Chronicle* points to a series of misunderstandings and mistakes that were a source of anxiety for Torres and the leadership at New Norcia as well as for the Aboriginal people.

In the historical discussion of Torres so far the test of his attitude to New Norcia’s Aborigines has been a cluster of questions centred around two issues:

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3. The foundation stone remains in place at New Norcia, see also *Chronicle*, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia (ABCNN), 15 September 1906.
  4. For example *Golden Years: St Gertrude’s College New Norcia*, *Golden Jubilee Magazine* 1958, (ABCNN). More recent histories acknowledge a more complex story, but assume St Gertrude’s was founded as a non-Indigenous school, see Anne Carter and Elizabeth Murphy, *A Rich Harvest: St Gertrude’s College* (South Perth: Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, 2006), 24-5; Marie Therese Foale, *The Josephites Go West: the Sisters of St Joseph in Western Australia 1887-1920* (Fremantle: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 76.

the foundation of St Gertrude's as a school for non-Aboriginal girls, and barriers and restrictions in town that prompted Aborigines to leave.<sup>5</sup> These two issues are woven through the five priorities agreed at the Community Council held just days after Torres was formally elected as abbot in early October 1902. They are a key to understanding the mixture of his administration. At the meeting the monks agreed unanimously firstly to complete the work on existing buildings of the monastery, and secondly to build a 'house for the [Aboriginal] girls.'<sup>6</sup> They did not vote on the third proposal to bring nuns to New Norcia to educate the girls because there was no consensus about which group of Sisters would be invited; neither did they vote on the fourth decision to bring Salvado's body from Rome but left both of these initiatives for the new abbot to pursue. But finally and fifthly, they unanimously foreshadowed plans for a new monastery near the telegraph office on the hill overlooking the town.<sup>7</sup> In hindsight we can see the seeds of conflict in the commitment to build monastic spaces alongside the decision to upgrade the mission's facilities with a school and expand its personnel, but it is clear that Torres saw no contradiction. The discussion that follows sketches the background to Torres's connection with New Norcia, and then moves to consider in turn the foundation of a new girls' school, originally intended for Aboriginal pupils, in light of the related development of an exclusively monastic area. In each case it seems that just as Torres sought to bring the founder's body home to the mission, he hoped to honour the memory of Salvado.

### ***Torres the unexpected new superior***

It is important to remember that gifted polymath that he was, Fulgentius Torres arrived at New Norcia as part of Plan B. Salvado's appointed successor, the former lay brother and butcher Fr Fulgentius Dominguez, had died in April 1900.<sup>8</sup> As co-adjutor abbot for thirteen years Dominguez had 'barely exercised that office' in Salvado's absence,<sup>9</sup> let alone his presence, but he had arrived in Western Australia in 1855, and had had some forty-five years experience of the mission. In contrast, the forty-year-old Torres, a monk of Montserrat near Barcelona had only heard of Australia. Recently appointed Salvado's European agent after two years missionary experience in the Philippines, Torres had received Salvado in Naples when he arrived there in December 1899, and made

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5. See Haebich, *For Their Own Good*, 19, citing George Shaw to Mr Beachall, SROWA, 29 December 1910.
  6. *Chronicle*, 6 October 1902. See also 'Chronicles of the Benedictine Abbey of New Norcia WA from January 1 to December 31, 1902', trans. Mary Chamberlain, *New Norcia Studies*, 10, 2002, 92.
  7. *Chronicle*, 6 October 1902.
  8. Fulgentius Salvador Dominguez, *Index of the Monks*, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia (ABCNN).
  9. *Chronicle*, 15 April 1901. See also 'Chronicles of the Benedictine Abbey of New Norcia WA from April 10 to December 31, 1901', trans. Mary Chamberlain, *New Norcia Studies*, 9, 2001, 66.

several visits to Salvado in Rome in 1900. He was with Salvado in his last illness in Rome and, when Salvado died on 29 December 1900, it was Torres who sent the news through the missionary's networks.<sup>10</sup> However, he had little preparation for being named apostolic administrator of New Norcia on 15 January 1901. When he arrived in Western Australia on 9 April 1901 Torres recorded in his diary that 'the state of the Monastery and the Community made a deeply sad impression.'<sup>11</sup> The New Norcia community was aging and under pressure. Agricultural expansion fuelled by the recent gold rush and population growth was pushing into the Victoria Plains, the White Australia policy ignoring Aboriginal people was newly enshrined, and well-entrenched anxieties in wider Western Australian society were leading towards the so-called *Aboriginal Protection Act* (1905) that would restrict Aboriginal access to towns, segregate state education, and further undermine Salvado's hope that New Norcia could equip Aborigines for equal participation in the colonising culture.<sup>12</sup>

It is significant that while the new superior shared Spanish as a first language with the monks and could also communicate in Latin and Italian, he did not speak English. In his first months at New Norcia Torres worked late into the night reading everything he could find about the mission,<sup>13</sup> but presumably he went first to material in Spanish and Latin. He could read English, but he was clearly less at home in this language. Government correspondence, newspaper coverage, and the network of local support and influence so cherished by Salvado, were at least a little opaque to him and at best a challenge for the cautious Torres to assimilate. His lack of spoken English filtered his understanding of New Norcia through formal and official sources, and stylised his ordinary interactions with people outside the monastery. Even if reading Salvado's records in Spanish at night told Torres about the local people, and the history and challenges of the mission, they did not interpret the situation confronting the new administration. During the day it might have seemed a simple task to bring New Norcia's monastic observance into line with international practice compared to understanding and resisting the prevailing currents of Aboriginal policy.

A focus on the internal questions of monasticism rather than the mission and the people who spoke to him in English was a natural enough choice for the new superior, but his initial reserve was noted early by the West Australian press. Public opinion quickly marked a shift from the industrious outward-looking

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10. *The Diary of Bishop Torres*, (1900-1914) trans. E. Perez, ed. Pratt and Millington (Perth: Artlook Books, 1987), 16, 19-22.

11. *Diary of Torres*, 10 April 1901, 33.

12. See also Peter Milnes, *From Myths to Policy: Aboriginal Legislation in Western Australia* (Perth: Metamorphic Media, 2001); Penelope Hetherington, *Paupers, Poor Relief and Poor Houses in Western Australia 1829-1910* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2009); Geoffrey Bolton, *Land of Vision and Mirage: Western Australia Since 1826* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2008).

13. *Diary of Torres*, 43.

mission of the sure-footed Salvado to a more aloof and less worldly enterprise. For example, Perth's illustrated weekly the *Western Mail* published an account of Torres at New Norcia nine months after his arrival and before his confirmation as abbot.<sup>14</sup> Written by a 'Lady Visitor' who had spent the Christmas of 1901 at New Norcia, the report recorded impressions of Torres that have become standard: elegant, intelligent, remote. The unnamed journalist was 'the first lady who has come to write about us',<sup>15</sup> and the superior delegated a local woman Eliza Tainan Willaway, one of two Aboriginal matrons at 'St Joseph's Native School and Orphanage' for girls, to show her around the mission. This account therefore paid unusually close attention to the girls' school that was the focus of decisions at the first community council.

As Bob Reece has shown, the *Western Mail's* 'Lady Visitor' could well have been Daisy Bates on the first of her visits to New Norcia.<sup>16</sup> Certainly the article suggests a writer who was interested in the 'deep problems presented to the mind by this attempt of Spanish Benedictine monks to civilise West Australian natives.'<sup>17</sup> Sceptical enough to ask, 'Do the natives enjoy being civilised?',<sup>18</sup> her apparent celebration of achievements of the mission and its growing prosperity had an elegiac subtext. There was more than a hint that the idyll of the founding days may have been passing away as 'not a few...half-castes' played on the hill, and the magistrate imposed fines of what Eliza described as 'vera [sic] much money' for drunken fighting. It all fitted with the 'passing of the Aborigine'.<sup>19</sup>

The 'Lady Visitor's' account of New Norcia was also preoccupied with the importance of Bishop Salvado for the Aboriginal people as 'our father who loved us.'<sup>20</sup> Torres was presented as an aloof authority whom 'they do not love...as they loved Bishop Salvado.'<sup>21</sup> He greeted her and farewelled her but he did not converse. He spoke through an interpreter even to wish the congregation a happy Christmas. She contrasted the 'sweetness and intellectual force' of the young superior who looked like a Renaissance portrait and 'governed with his eye'<sup>22</sup> with Salvado's easy warmth, and reported her Aboriginal informants implied Torres was still finding his way: 'This new Superior, he very good, vera [sic] kind, but he noo [sic] speak English. He noo [sic] understand yet.'<sup>23</sup> Offered in the *Western Mail* as

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14. Lady Visitor, 'New Norcia Mission', *Western Mail*, 18 January 1902, 11.

15. Lady Visitor, 11.

16. Bob Reece, 'Killing with Kindness: Daisy Bates and New Norcia', *Aboriginal History*, 32, 128-145.

17. Lady Visitor, 11.

18. Lady Visitor, 11.

19. The book of this title by Daisy Bates was first published in 1938. Its treatment of her trip to Beagle Bay as 'the first woman' echoes the style of the *Western Mail* journalist. It praises New Norcia in Salvado's era, and the subsequent decline of the people by 1913 in chapter 7: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/b/bates/daisy/passing/chapter7.html>. Accessed 22 August 2011.

20. Lady Visitor, 11.

21. Lady Visitor, 11.

22. Lady Visitor, 11.

23. Lady Visitor, 11.

if a verbatim report of her Aboriginal informants we cannot be sure whose voice we are hearing even in the direct quotes (although it is categorically not the monastery's *Chronicle* as Reece claims<sup>24</sup>), but it presented New Norcia as a community mourning a recent loss, where further and probably unfortunate change was in the air. As Eliza Willaway walked the sites of the mission with her visitor, she accurately announced the monastery's plans to bring nuns to 'take charge'<sup>25</sup> of the institution for Aboriginal girls, remarking (and so erasing the memory of the early non-Aboriginal school-teacher Judith Butler) that the missionary Sisters would be the first White women to assist the monks. Eliza and the Aboriginal women at St Joseph's were responsible to one monk, Br Froilàn Mirò, who had overseen the institution since 1871 and perhaps earlier. The reporter noted the 'quarters' for the children 'sent from all parts of the state to be trained and educated by the monks'<sup>26</sup> were as much a feature of the town as the cottages for married couples. St Joseph's looked like one of the other domestic buildings, but there were plans to upgrade it on a different model: the reporter noted 'a convent is now talked about'. We do not know whether Eliza herself called the proposed new building a convent, but the more formal, ecclesiastical word implied a separate space that would affect the interaction with monks, and with local families.

The decision to upgrade and expand the school for Aboriginal girls has been attributed to Salvado,<sup>27</sup> but Salvado had resisted any such project. Salvado had simply allowed St Joseph's to grow as something like a larger version of the cottages for Aboriginal families around the church, perhaps even like the monastery's own dormitories. He had been reluctant to establish an institution for girls, and only acquiesced in August 1861 when the missionaries' early associate Tacagnut, whose son had died in Rome as a Benedictine novice, insisted that Salvado make space for the boy's sisters at the mission.<sup>28</sup> St Joseph's grew from this beginning but Salvado actively discouraged education that would not have a practical outcome in meaningful work.<sup>29</sup> The daily routine of the Aboriginal children both boys and girls at New Norcia described for French readers in 1880 had the hallmarks of a modified monastic pattern, and also self-consciously maintained the connection between children and parents partly through interspersing periods of work with study.<sup>30</sup> The ideal presented by Théophile Bérengier, Salvado's agent in France, was certainly not a boarding

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24. Reece, 'Daisy Bates', 131, n.14, n.15.

25. Lady Visitor, 11.

26. Lady Visitor, 11.

27. Haebich, *For Their Own Good*, 18, citing H. Willaway; author's personal communication with New Norcia Aboriginal Association, 2001.

28. Salvado's report to *Propaganda Fide*, cited Ian Esmond, 'Bush to Building: the First Aboriginal Cottages of New Norcia,' *New Norcia Studies* 15 (2007), 20.

29. 'Some Account of the Spanish Mission to the Aborigines of Western Australia' by a visitor with Cardinal Moran, 1887, cited J.T. Reilly, *Reminiscences of Fifty Years in Western Australia* (Perth: Sands and McDougall, 1903), 111.

30. Théophile Bérengier, *La Nouvelle Nursie* (Paris, 1880), Chapter IX, cited Henry Norbert Birt, Benedictine, *Pioneers in Australia* (London: Herbert and Daniel, 1911), 485.

institution, and perhaps not so much a description of a school, as a formative lifestyle governed by monastic principles. If Salvado acquiesced to the necessity presented by Tacagnut, he was in no way swayed by arguments that he should expand New Norcia's work by inviting women to join the mission. He was suspicious in particular of the motives of one nun from Corella in the north of Spain who promoted herself as a solution to his problems. He cautioned that 'the whole business of nuns needs to be thought about 'thrice three times'.<sup>31</sup> A girls' school and Sisters to support that work were not among Salvado's priorities. However, they became a matter of urgency for his successor.

### *Plans for separate monastic spaces*

Here then are the signs of a significant change of direction, not so much against involvement with the Aboriginal people, but focused first on protecting monastic observance through enclosure. The *Chronicle* noted that 'the *great inconvenience* (sic)', or irregularity, of the monks being in charge of St Joseph's 'is obvious to anyone who thinks about it',<sup>32</sup> and so securing a group of missionary women was a priority for the new superior. Torres focused quickly on the need to replace Br Mirò as superintendent of the Aboriginal girls as a matter of monastic discipline, but either did not see the role of Eliza Willaway and the other matrons who were at St Joseph's when he arrived, or distrusted this role for lay women as a threat to the status or reputation of vowed monastics.

A concern to protect the Benedictines against interaction with non-monastics and especially women runs through the *Chronicle* in these years. Alongside attention to the timetable for prayer, the frequency of communion, the style of reading and serving in the refectory, and the introduction of china, napkins and tablecloths, to replace tin plates, handkerchiefs and bare boards, Torres instituted a monastic zone. The *Chronicle* saw this as a self-conscious move away from the permeable boundaries that had characterised the mission. The first spatial changes affected the monastery's distribution of food.

It was arranged to leave the first cell of the infirmary unoccupied in order to convert it to a dispensary for food and to channel the people through it, especially the women who are walking through the Cloister at any hour. The [Benedictine] old ones don't find it strange and they are satisfied to say that this is a Mission. As if Missions didn't have to keep the Holy Rule and the ordinances and Decrees of Holy Mother Church!<sup>33</sup>

Visitors from Perth were still offered hospitality, but in the precinct of the old novitiate, not with the community itself. The *Chronicle* recorded the change as break with the past, and affirmed it tersely even when it disrupted the

31. Salvado to Garrido, 20 March 1866, 2-2234A/21.069. Salvado Correspondence (ABCNN).

32. *Chronicle*, 11 December 1904.

33. *Chronicle*, 15 June 1901.

expectations of old friends. Three Sisters of Mercy spent nine days at New Norcia in late September 1901, until ‘this afternoon the nuns left and it seems, not very happy; they thought it would be as in the time of Bishop Salvado when they were accommodated in the monastery and were able to walk freely everywhere. It is not permitted now for women.’<sup>34</sup>

The door to restrict access to the *patio* or cloister, planned in June 1901 was actually hung in September 1902, so that ‘the women don’t have to enter, they give them meat in the dispensary.’<sup>35</sup> Two years later the system was tightened again, as the *Chronicle* recorded that ‘girls at the school have been forbidden from coming to the monastery for meat, etc. because of abuses.’<sup>36</sup> Tension about the provision of rations continued, although Torres’ concern was to regulate not raise prices at the store,<sup>37</sup> and to assess needs more carefully rather than what the *Chronicle* saw as ‘judging all families by the same standard, [with] the result...that while some have more than enough, others are lacking even bread, etc, etc.’<sup>38</sup> By 8 May 1907, after an unsuccessful negotiation with a shopkeeper in Perth, the monastery had delegated the operation of the New Norcia store to the local Irish settler Mr Lanigan.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, monks were ‘forbidden to walk outside the Monastery talking’ with each other, or ‘to speak with the natives except for those who have some business to transact with them.’<sup>40</sup> Torres did not consult the people about his scale of need, or about the new scale of daily wages to end Salvado’s arrangement where ‘some work and earn more than others and are paid the same,’<sup>41</sup> or about restricting the monks’ contact with the local people but the one Aboriginal voice directly on record about New Norcia in this period complained to the government about all three. In a series of letters George Shaw protested that ‘this New Norcia mission is no home to the native at all.’<sup>42</sup> Just as there was no hint that Torres even thought about consulting the people, neither was there any hint that he imagined he was downgrading New Norcia’s role as a mission. However, he was regulating and controlling interactions, concerned to formalise arrangements so that initiative lay with the monastery. Similarly, in relation to the Aboriginal girls’ school, Torres assumed it would be ongoing, but wanted to see it conform to European standards in a pattern that would not disrupt monastic life. He intended that a group of missionary women, members of a religious congregation, would give the monastery the distance that it needed.

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34. *Chronicle*, 5 October 1901.

35. *Chronicle*, 2 September 1902; also *Chronicle*, 29 January 1902.

36. *Chronicle*, 14 March 1904.

37. *Chronicle*, 1 August 1901.

38. *Chronicle*, 29 July 1901.

39. *Chronicle*, 20 April 1907, 8 May 1907.

40. *Chronicle* 16 June 1901.

41. *Chronicle*, 29 July 1901.

42. George Shaw to Mr Beachall, SROWA, 29 December 1910.

*The Company of St Teresa of Jesus (Teresians) August 1904*

Abbot Torres had known the first members of the Company of St Teresa and their founder Fr Henry de Osso in Barcelona, and had followed the history of the missionary congregation in the 25 years since its foundation in 1879. They were an impressive international group, trained as teachers, and especially committed to the education of women.<sup>43</sup> Crucially for Torres, they included members from Mexico who could speak English well. Thus, after negotiations, a party of nine women missionaries arrived in New Norcia on 25 August 1904.<sup>44</sup> Two members of the Teresians' provincial council accompanied seven other travellers, including the superior Montserrat Fito, and the new 'Director of the College' Consuelo Batiz, who would stay 'to care for the education of the girls.'<sup>45</sup> But only Consuelo spoke English. In the misunderstanding that had sent only one English-speaking teacher are the seeds of another mistake.

However, all went smoothly at first, and everyone assumed the new building of St Gertrude's rising on the horizon would replace St Joseph's as the 'college for the native girls' (*colegio de las nativas* and *colegio de las niñas nativas*). Until it was ready, work continued at St Joseph's. Sister Consuelo, from Chalchicomula in Mexico, took over the school, and by all accounts won the love and respect of all: the Aborigines, and the Europeans, both the monks and their neighbours. Fragments give us a sense of a working household of some twenty Aboriginal girls and young women and seven Teresians. When Fr Edmund McCormick gave evidence on behalf of New Norcia at the Roth Royal Commission in 1905 he highlighted 'a considerable amount of mending for the community'<sup>46</sup> over 'their own cooking and washing under the superintendence of the Sisters', and so-called 'light work' gathering olives and helping to make the olive oil.<sup>47</sup> St Joseph's developed a reputation for fancy work and the annual trip to the local Agricultural Show to collect first prize for under 12s and in the 12-14 year old age group was quickly a tradition.<sup>48</sup> Other social excursions, such as the fundraising concert with coffee and cake attended by Consuelo and the girls at the home of their neighbours the Davidsons of Glentromie in 1906, were enough of a rarity for the *Chronicle* to comment.<sup>49</sup> It was all hinged on the single English-speaker Consuelo.

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43. Alejandro Fernandez Pombro, *Saturnina Jassa de la Compania de Santa Teresa de Jesus* (Madrid: Ediciones STJ, 1991). See also Company of St Teresa of Jesus, *Company of St Teresa of Jesus*, <http://www.teresians.org>. Accessed 25 April 2007, 26 August 2011.

44. Katharine Massam, 'To know how to be all for all: the Company of St Teresa of Jesus at New Norcia 1904-1920', *New Norcia Studies*, 15, 2007, 44-52.

45. *Chronicle*, 22 August 1904.

46. 'The Aborigines Question: Evidence taken by Dr Roth', *Western Mail*, 20 February 1905, 19-20.

47. *Western Mail*, 20 February 1905, 19-20.

48. *Chronicle*, 12 September 1906.

49. *Chronicle*, 1 December 1906.

As Consuelo's leadership of the school became more significant, a rift grew in the Teresian community; significantly this division also pivoted on sensitivities about how to live a religious vocation in a mission context. In May 1907 Montserrat, as the superior at New Norcia, had written to Barcelona complaining of 'the notice and respect' shown to Consuelo, and 'the plots and rumours existing between the Abbot's cronies and Sr C.'<sup>50</sup> Excluded from decision-making and apparently fearing that Consuelo was about to be promoted over her, Montserrat accused Consuelo of betraying 'the spirit of the Company'.<sup>51</sup> The thwarted superior did not deny the gifts of 'this very talented Sister with the importance and protection they have given her', but studded with references to 'liberty', 'freedom' and 'abuses against the Rule', the letter stung the distant authorities in Barcelona into action. The superiors recalled both Consuelo and Montserrat. All of New Norcia saw this as error of judgment: the *Chronicle* noted 'the sorrow and tears at her departure were common to both the Aborigines and the European women'<sup>52</sup>, and the 15 Aboriginal girls in residence at St Joseph's protested using the most effective means available to them and 'spent two days in which, in the Church, they could not respond to the Priest leading the Rosary.'<sup>53</sup> In August 1907 the replacement teacher arrived from Barcelona: she could not speak English. The errors had multiplied. Torres found his decision to replace Aboriginal matrons with European and South American nuns now compounded by the assumptions in Barcelona they could teach in Spanish. He sought help from Mary MacKillop's Sisters of St Joseph as a stopgap while he asked the Teresians to reconsider.

### ***St Gertrude's College and the wall of the 'Golden Gaol'***

It was at this time between August and October 1907 that plans for St Gertrude's first explicitly included non-Aboriginal girls. Marie Foale suggests Torres may have been persuaded by the visit of Fr Patrick Phelan, future bishop of Sale, that the facilities were 'too good'<sup>54</sup> for the Aborigines alone. Salvado had seen Australian attitudes to Aboriginal people harden and had known to distrust the surrounding culture, but perhaps Torres was less sure of his ground. By December 1907 the Spanish records begin to prickle with the term 'white girls' (*niñas blancas*) and 'college for the whites' (*colegio de las blancas*). Abbot Torres was resisting the withdrawal of the Teresians on the one hand, urging the leadership in Barcelona to let the community remain 'and see if some sister or sisters reach the stage of being able to teach the white girls'<sup>55</sup> while also arranging for English-speaking teachers to open the school to 'white girls' in the new year. In January 1908 the *Chronicle*

50. Montserrat Fito to Teresa Blanche, 13 May 1907, trans. Fr David Barry, (ABCNN).

51. Montserrat Fito to Teresa Blanche, 13 May 1907, trans. Fr David Barry, (ABCNN).

52. *Chronicle*, 11 July 1907.

53. *Chronicle*, 11 July 1907.

54. Foale, *Josephites Go West*, 76.

55. Fulgentius Torres to Teresa Blanche, 29 January 1908, *Visitation Report*, 39, (ABCNN).

noted with some relief that Mary MacKillop's group had agreed 'to take over the direction of the college for the white girls at least in the short term.'<sup>56</sup> Opinion held that the Teresians were unlikely to stay. Abbot Torres began planning to refurbish the old St Joseph's cottage as a second convent and school.

St Joseph's was renovated and updated over several months between September 1908 and August 1910. When it was complete the monks recorded the praise the neat new building attracted from the Josephites at St Gertrude's.<sup>57</sup> It was in itself a school 'superior' to many in Perth, but for the Aboriginal people there was another issue: the most striking new feature was a high dividing wall.

Enclosure had preoccupied Torres as we have seen, and it was an especially powerful theme for women, but this wall organised space along racial rather than religious lines. There had been no move towards a formal cloister for the Spanish sisters before 1910, and this move sequestered them with, not apart from, the Aboriginal girls. The monastery's *Chronicle* gives the only accounts we have of reaction to this change and the focus is on the horrified response of the Aborigines. As well as dividing the white and native colleges, the *Chronicle* read reactions against the wall as a sign of lack of civilisation. The Aborigines' nickname for the new enclosure, 'Golden Gaol', suggested a wry appreciation of the quality of the work, but was a clear rejection of the project. It would also be intriguing to know if they intended to echo the name given to the Salvation Army's house in Perth, the 'Golden Gate', where young women also worked in a laundry.<sup>58</sup> The day it was completed in February 1910, the *Chronicle* recorded in some bewilderment:

Finished the brick enclosure near the college of the native girls, and God knows who it will be useful for because the coloured people both within and without abhor nothing so much as the 'Golden Gaol' as one of the girls who escaped from it called it recently. The place is spacious and beautiful and can only be hated by bush people.<sup>59</sup>

The escape the *Chronicle* referred to may have been as simple as the dignified exit described a few weeks earlier when Katie Yapo, one of the older girls, simply left quietly after supper 'having served the rest of her companions'.<sup>60</sup> Touching on the realities of institutional life the *Chronicle* discounted other likely reasons for her Katie's decision: 'nothing about repression on the part of the Sisters nor about a quarrel with her companions'; she had told her friends she was leaving 'because she didn't want to be in the college any longer.'<sup>61</sup> That she had wanted to be there but now had changed her

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56. *Chronicle*, 8 January 1908.

57. *Chronicle*, 17 July 1910.

58. Hetherington, *Paupers, Poor Relief and Poor Houses*, 132.

59. *Chronicle*, 18 February 1910.

60. *Chronicle*, 30 January 1910.

61. *Chronicle*, 30 January 1910.

mind is significant, as it is significant that the ‘Golden Gaol’ had only recently been nicknamed a prison. What had changed, the *Chronicle* said clearly, was the wall.

The true reason [for her leaving] seems to be on seeing how advanced they were with the walled enclosure of the college which stinks for them as it does for all the natives in the village. They all regard it as a prison.<sup>62</sup>

Declaring itself against their protest by condemning the illicit trysts that freedom would make possible, the *Chronicle* inadvertently confirmed the high value the young Aboriginal women placed on ‘liberty’, against the new situation the Sisters found themselves supporting. ‘Praised be God,’ the writer observed ironically, ‘In this way [by leaving] they will have an opportunity to give themselves to X...They are not worried about the hunger they will have to endure for the sake of this liberty...[sic].’<sup>63</sup> The walled enclosure defined a racial and gendered zone; the assumption that protection and even privilege lay inside it reflected a shift in the missionary approach at New Norcia. Significantly too, the women were enclosed together; the Aboriginal girls shared their enclosure with the Spanish sisters. In this instance, New Norcia had merged a form of monastic observance with the mission itself.

### ***Interpreting the monastery and the mission***

Debate about how the monastery and the mission relate has become one of the touchstones of New Norcia’s history, not only for the interpretation of the early twentieth century but into the twenty-first. Like Torres, who hoped to build a memorial to Salvado, later interpreters also kept the question of what the founder might have thought in mind. In 2001 New Norcia’s sixth abbot, Placid Spearritt engaged by the discussion between Salvado and the missionary founder Joseph Moreau followed up the footnotes of an exchange between them. A former monk of Maredsous in Belgium, Moreau would have joined the community at New Norcia (if Salvado had agreed) and held that Maredsous had not suited him because it was ‘not raised up to train monks-missionaries, but nothing but monks.’<sup>64</sup> Abbot Placid told readers of *New Norcia Studies* he was pleased to discover himself on common ground with Salvado. Salvado’s reply to Moreau in June 1882 challenged the view that monk and missionary were separate vocations.

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62. *Chronicle*, 30 January 1910.

63. *Chronicle*, 30 January 1910.

64. Moreau to Salvado, 1 June 1882, cited Placid Spearritt, Letter to the Editor, *New Norcia Studies* 9 (2001), 91.

A good monk will also be a good missionary; just as one cannot be a good missionary monk if one is not a good monk. I have never heard that the monks sent to England by St Gregory the Great were prepared by him for that task in their novitiate, but [they] were trained to become good monks. Being good monks they were also good missionaries.<sup>65</sup>

We do not know whether the newly arrived Fulgentius Torres found the draft of Salvado's letter in his late-night efforts to orient himself to the mission,<sup>66</sup> but perhaps he did. Like Salvado and Spearritt, Torres saw the missionary work of New Norcia contained within monastic life; but each of New Norcia's abbot confronted unique and particular choices about how to foster, and even protect, the Benedictine life that had drawn the missionary community together.

In an administration that sought to foster scholarship, Placid Spearritt hoped New Norcia's historiography might move beyond the account of abbatial eras and into attention to deeper prevailing currents in the life of the community.<sup>67</sup> Such a move would situate Fulgentius Torres not as the man who mishandled Salvado's mission, nor as the monk who brought refined education to town, but would find the leader of the monastic community at the hub of a complex web of competing claims. Close attention to the sources certainly shows the range of challenges Torres faced, and points to a tragic and poignant story. Torres never repudiated the mission at New Norcia, but he did struggle with the style of monastic observance that had grown up around it. The monastery's internal records, haphazard but finely-grained, help us to see the cumulative impact of several misunderstandings, apparently unrelated tragedies, that culminated in the abbot's decision to build a wall between two separate schools, rather than a flagship for Aboriginal education.

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65. Salvado to Moreau, cited Placid Spearritt, Letter to the Editor, *New Norcia Studies* 9 (2001), 91.

66. There are 61 letters from Moreau to Salvado, and two from Salvado to Moreau extant at New Norcia. Teresa de Castro, 'New Norcia Archives Revisited: Correspondence from years 1880-1883', *New Norcia's Studies* 12, 2004, pp. 30-45.

67. Interview with Rachel Kohn, *Spirit of Things*, 13 April 2003, [www.abc.com.au/rn/spiritofthings/stories/2003/827543.htm](http://www.abc.com.au/rn/spiritofthings/stories/2003/827543.htm). Accessed 7 February 2012.