

Katharine Massam, Creating spaces between: women and mission in Oceania
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Historians are fundamentally storytellers,¹ and this chapter offers two stories, one from the Pacific in recent times and one from Western Australia in the late nineteenth century. Each story deals bears on the question of women in mission, and the power of the space 'between' conventional categories. The discussion begins in the Pacific, moves through discussion by historians and others about the significance of place and space, picks up the nineteenth-century example from Western Australia, and then reflects briefly on the intersections in the material, or to put it another way, on the significance of the disrupted categories. In all there are four short sections in what follows.

1. The Visit of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union of Vanuatu

In November 2011, 34 members of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union of Vanuatu travelled to Melbourne to visit sites that were sacred to them. The trip had been a focus of fundraising concerts in Vila for three years, before the PWMU President Anne Kare proposed it to a Uniting Church network of former missionaries to Vanuatu. The Australians were surprised and a bit perplexed. The practicalities of the visit were daunting and the aims unclear, but bound into this community by traditions of hospitality and also deep affection, they rallied their own network to host an extraordinary fortnight.

At the welcome in the auditorium of the UCA Centre for Theology and Ministry in Melbourne, a large portrait of Rev John G. Paton filled a section of the wall. In dark frock coat and carrying his top hat, the nineteenth-century dress of the famous 1840s missionary to the New Hebrides presided over the gathering. In

¹ This view undercuts some assumptions about history as concerned with 'material facts' in relation to theology, but is mainstream in the discipline itself where interpretation of evidence ("facts") has always been a governing concern. See for example, Inga Clendinnen, *The History Question: Who Owns the Past?* Melbourne: Black Inc, 2006; W.K. Hancock, *Professing History*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1976.; Robert A. Orsi *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.

stunning contrast, the women had given Island shirts and dresses to the local organisers, and they were themselves wearing their choir uniforms. This “Island Dress” had been adopted in Paton’s day, modelled on the pattern for children’s rompers. The pattern proved practical however, and the now ‘traditional’ choir uniforms were claimed proudly by the women as a symbol of Presbyterian identity.

[figures 1 and 2 near here]

Also in contrast to the Tom Robert’s painting, the next day the women unveiled a banner they had made. It shows two turtles approaching the island of Ambryn carrying traditional lamps. In this banner the women said, a traditional creation story was re-told in relation to the foundation of the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union in the New Hebrides, and the two turtles represented the Presbyterian deaconesses from Victoria Miss Amy Skinner and Miss Catherine Ritchie who had made a crucial journey to the New Hebrides in 1944. It was to honour these two as their ‘founding mothers’, to hear their stories and to mark their graves that the Ni-Vanuatu women had come to Australia. The banner named the enterprise as ‘Returning Mission’.

In the opening ceremonies the following day, the visitors re-enacted the story of the Australian deaconesses. In 1944 after nearly a century of mission work in the New Hebrides, the Presbyterian church in Australia resolved to send two deaconesses to explore ways to connect with the Pacific women. The metaphor was that in the same way as you need to fix an outrigger to a canoe to be able to steer it and make it stable, so the church needed the women if it was going to go anywhere. So Amy Skinner and Catherine Ritchie, who had both previously worked in Korea, travelled through the Pacific war zone, to visit and report. As a result in March 1945, Amy Skinner returned to Vila and began to network women already connected to the church. As she reported to the *Missionary Chronicle*, the magazine for mission work within the Presbyterian Church:

We really wanted to see whether or not the women would like some form of women's meeting. Seventeen women turned up when we rang the bell in the afternoon, and we initiated what I believe to be the first PWMU in the Islands.² From that gathering the local structure of the PWMU went from strength to strength. And women set out in teams of three to visit villages across the whole network of islands, investing their time and energy generously. This was not always appreciated by the men who found there was plenty of other work to do also. A message sent to one party of missionary women on a village visit, said simply: 'Tell our wives to come home. We are tired.'³

The heavy work and low status of the Island women, and the Christian challenge to the idea that the wife came last in the family after the pig was often repeated in the missionaries' stories.

It is an example of the intersectionality feminist and postcolonialist scholars have remarked on for a decade now:⁴ the way in which religion can work within a set of mutually constituted categories of analysis so that belief intersects with gender, class, and race to open up discussion of 'identity', or make neat categories unstable. The power is in the 'between'. But the Returning Mission group did not comment directly on the impact of gender in their lives, or comment explicitly on the reasons the memory of Miss Skinner and Miss Ritchie drew them so strongly. Through the fortnight they gave concerts, talked about church structures, networked in Melbourne, avoided when they could the staggering escalators and other unfamiliar even frightening trappings of the industrial city, and marked the graves of Amy Skinner and Cath Ritchie in simple and moving ceremonies.

On the last day of the visit, a copy of a newspaper article circulated quietly through the group. It concerned findings of combined task group from the United States and Australia that had heard shocking details of the level of violence against

² *The Missionary Chronicle*, 9 August 1945. Copy held at the Archives of the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

³ Sheila Jamieson, Talk on Furlough, c.1950. Papers of Sheila Jamieson.

⁴ Devon W. Carbado, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Vickie M. Mays, Barbara Tomlinson, "Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory", *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol 10 (2013), 303-312.

women in Pacific countries; including Vanuatu.⁵ Our visitors were weighing luggage, piling into the bus, and promising to keep in touch. There was also talk about a wider conversation back in Vila about Women and Leadership. In the intersections, in the co-incidence, some of us thought that perhaps at last, we understood, why the memory of Amy Skinner and Cath Ritchie mattered so much.

We had also seen that there were places in Melbourne that were sacred for these women. Powerfully so, and sacred in a way that connects to wider discussion of sacred place more generally, as the second part of this paper will show.

2. Sacred Space and Place

Belden Lane is an American historian and theologian who has been working on sacred place since the 1990s.⁶ He suggests there are four axioms that Christians and others might use in discussion of sacred place. In an overall context of sacred space as 'storied', as carrying memory, he offers the touchstones that such places are firstly not chosen, but instead choose us so that we notice or remember them. Secondly, they are ordinary sites, somehow made extraordinary perhaps by being approached in silence, or with a ritual sense; thirdly, our awareness of their sacredness is not automatic, it cannot be predicted or guaranteed, it might vary from individual to individual or from day to day. Finally, sacred places do not just draw us in, but they also, perhaps after a time, send us out; they do not absorb us permanently, but refresh and reinvigorate us. Most of the stories of sacred place Lane offers are relatively simple: an awareness of being drawn in to a place that is sometimes quite familiar, certainly ordinary, somehow made distinct, and of being

⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 November 2011.

⁶ Belden Lane, *Spirituality in Time and Place*. London: The Way, 1992; Belden Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002; Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. <<http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=716685>>.

drawn in not to stay there, but to be changed, refreshed, restored, affirmed, sent out.⁷

The idea that Australia has such sacred places for non-Aboriginal Australians is one we have trouble with. Other papers in this collection describe our strong assumptions about being alien, and point to the unresolved history of invasion that means we have a 'tenuous psychic hold on the land'.⁸ How do we belong? The reality is that for many Australians our heritage, or at least part of it, was 'brought here' transported like plants in a flower pot, to form a complex mix.

Among several writers who urge us gently to explore this, David Malouf has argued for accepting this reality as a foundation for an authentic relationship with place. Both his novels and his social commentary show a strong interest in place and space. When he gave the Bouyer lectures for the ABC in 1998 he talked about the immigrant experience, shared by all non-Aboriginal Australians, and the complex mix of what was brought meeting what was already here. He offers an encouragement to acknowledge the reality that there is no alternative to the mix. He urges immigrant Australians to claim the local place, and to move from assumptions about transportation to assumptions about translation, moving between, claiming both.

The belief we must make a choice [between heritages] is an illusion, and so, I would suggest, if we are to be whole, is the possibility of choosing.

It is our complex fate to be children of two worlds, to have two sources of being, two sides to our head. The desire for something simpler is a desire to be less than we are. Our answer on every occasion when we are offered the false choice between this and that, should be, 'Thank you, I'll take both.'⁹

⁷ His paradigmatic example at the beginning of *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 13-15, for example, is of an unexpected encounter with a deer in a familiar clearing.

⁸ James Paull, *An ambivalent ground: re-placing Australian literature*, PhD Thesis, University of New South Wales. English, Media, & Performing Arts, 2007.

⁹ David Malouf, *A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness*. Sydney: ABC Books for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1998. See also his more recent trilogy on related themes: *A First Place*, North Sydney: Random House, 2014; *The*

So rather than assuming faith is only 'transported' brought in pots, this is an invitation to consider how the heritage of faith can be read in the context around us, drawing on what we brought, and on what we find. It is not possible for the place not to make a difference. European stained glass lit up by the Australian sun is not the same thing as it was in the completely different light of Birmingham or Dublin.

This encouragement to claim the reality of connection to place also comes through the work of Peter Read. Read is perhaps best known in Australian history circles as the man that coined the phrase 'stolen generations', one of the founders of Link-Up, and the biographer of Charles Perkins,¹⁰ so he's certainly not someone who would downplay the importance of Aboriginality. But he is also vitally interested in questions of belonging for non-Aboriginal people here.¹¹ He warns Europeans in settler societies not to downplay the power of environment just because we are not Indigenous. We inherit a disrupted sense of place, one that is provisional and uncertain, perhaps, but nevertheless a sense of place. Read is opposed to Stanner's contention that 'white man got no dreaming' and insists instead that all Australians need to pay attention to the spirituality of place and our own response to that located sense of the sacred.¹²

It is in his 2003 book *Haunted Earth* that Read explores the question of inspired place in non-Aboriginal Australia most intensively.¹³ In one of a number of 'site visits' described in this work, he travelled to the former mission town of New Norcia in Western Australia, and canvassed the views of the monks who live in the

Writing Life, North Sydney: Random House, 2014; *Being There*, North Sydney: Random House 2015.

¹⁰ Read, Peter and New South Wales Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Aboriginal Children's Research Project, *The stolen generations : the removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*, Sydney: Government Printer, 1982; Peter Read, *Charles Perkins: A Biography*, Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 2001; also Read, *Tripping over feathers : scenes in the life of Joy Janaka Wiradjuri Williams , a narrative of the Stolen Generations*, Nedlands: UWA Press, 2009.

¹¹ See his discussion especially in *Returning to nothing : the meaning of lost places*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge ; Melbourne, 1996.

¹² Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹³ Peter Read, *Haunted earth*. University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2003.

place that has been the site of Christian liturgy in constant repetition since 1846. Read was rather disappointed to find the Benedictines were generally unmoved and unromantic about place. But in his interview with Dom Placid Spearrit, the sixth abbot of the community, he finds both a detachment from place and a respect for the interconnectedness of the created order of God's world against the vast eschatological horizon.

On a short excursion to the dry creek bed that it a favoured place for prayer and meditation, the abbot succinctly re-framed the historian's questions.

The country does not know I'm here, and conceptually that's important to me. Nor does the country change. Rather it changes me and changes itself at the same time. It's not bothered by me, nor are those galah's over there. Those trees just receive what they've been given, they don't try to change themselves.It's not the site, it's the view I get from there. I can stop just as well as look at the road trains going through the town. Let things be what they are.¹⁴

Does the phrase 'let the road train be the road train' have potential as a worthy catch cry for the meditation movement, and perhaps Australian spirituality more generally?

3. *The Aboriginal Telegraphists of New Norcia*

New Norcia is a very particular place. If my first story was a relatively unproblematic mission story, the second one is more complex, also about intersections.

The broad outline of New Norcia's history as a mission settlement is relatively well known. In brief, the founder Rosendo Salvado established a Benedictine town in the 1840s with the hope that the Spanish monks and Aboriginal families would work the land together.¹⁵ The mission enjoyed a reputation for success and local Yued families remember Salvado as a friend of the Aboriginal

¹⁴ Read, *Haunted Earth*, 181, 183.

¹⁵ For example David Hutchison, *A town like no other : the living tradition of New Norcia*. South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996.

people.¹⁶ However, the 20th century story is more mute. To explore this, I will sketch to related two examples of Aboriginal women's work.

Firstly, from the 1870s, and arguably at the high point of the mission's enterprise, the skilled work of Aboriginal women as telegraphists astonished colonial authorities. Mary Ellen Pangerian Cuper, Sarah Caruingo Ninak and Carmine Gnarbak, all managed the complex task of postmistress well. We know their names (and in the case of Mary Ellen and Sarah we have their photographs) because the postal authorities, and the government, and other missionaries, thought they were exceptional and requested their images.¹⁷

[Figures 3 and 4 near here]

Salvado was proud of their achievements but resisted any celebration of these women as remarkable. He noted that Aboriginal Australians were often gifted; their capacity for intellectual work was, he said, simply like the capacity of fire to heat and to burn.¹⁸

Fifty years later, in a new century, under a different Benedictine leader, Aboriginal achievement at New Norcia continued to surprise the wider culture but in a much more conventional arena. As New Norcia's women and girls won local prizes for their embroidery and saw the work featured in national and international exhibitions, newspapers reported their 'almost unbelievable aptitude' for fancywork that would be 'the envy of cultured ladies'.¹⁹ The tone was as astonished as the reports of amazing feats with Morse code, but expectations had narrowed considerably; the field of work was domestic and generally unpaid.

So, if we ask again what changed in this mission town from the later-nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century, there are several things to notice, and once again it seems a matter of intersections and interconnections, not single causes and simple effects.

¹⁶ For example, the Aboriginal Corporation of New Norcia, Preface, in John H. Smith *Salvado 1814-2014*, Benedictine Community of New Norcia, 2014.

¹⁷ See Katharine Massam, 'The Spiritual and the Material: women and work in the Benedictine mission of New Norcia, 1860-1910', *New Norcia Studies*, vol 22 (2015), forthcoming.

¹⁸ Rosendo Salvado, *1883 Report to Propaganda Fide*, trans. Stefano Girola, forthcoming 2015, working draft, mss 99.

¹⁹ For example, *West Australian*, 29 April 1885, 3; *Freeman's Journal* 7 November 1891, 15, *Daily News*, 28 September 1891, 3.

Aboriginal agency is crucial: in essence the women withdrew their labour. Mary Ellen fell sick, and moved away for her health but died after a strange wasting illness. When Sarah also fell ill, Aboriginal opinion was against the role, and she and Carmine resigned.²⁰ Secondly, the Aboriginal community was under greater pressure as European population increased dramatically with the gold-rush of the 1890s and pastoralism and agriculture stretched out.²¹ A measles epidemic in the 1880s decimated New Norcia in particular, and after legislation in 1905 the proportion of children in town and being sent to the mission from elsewhere made institutional care a stronger focus. The separate world of New Norcia was much harder to maintain. Thirdly, Salvado's successors brought a more clerical mindset, perhaps a racialised one, to the mission.²² They failed to see the work of the Aboriginal lay people at New Norcia. While they held to the Rule of Benedict that valued all work as equal, they did not take account of Benedict's insistence to pay close attention to the gifts and capacities of the all the people. There were no longer Aboriginal matrons at the girls' hostel as the local women were replaced by Spanish nuns, the Aboriginal choir director was replaced by a monk.²³

As the theologian Timothy Gorringer says at the outset of his *Theology of the Built Environment*, 'to be human is to be placed',²⁴ bodies must be somewhere. The people of New Norcia found they were effectively displaced. They were not seen for who they were, the relationships that had been at the heart of creating the particular sense of place dissolved. Aboriginal families protested that the town was no longer their home.²⁵

²⁰ 1883 Report to Propaganda Fide, trans. Stefano Girola. Working draft. On avoidance of a place of death see South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, John Host with Chris Owen, *It's Still in My Heart, This is My Country. The Single Noongar Claim History*, Crawley, WA: UWA Press, 2009.

²¹ Ian Esmond, "Bush to building: the first Aboriginal cottages of New Norcia", *New Norcia Studies*, vol 15 2007, 14-33; Penelope Hetherington, *Settlers, servants & slaves : Aboriginal and European children in nineteenth-century Western Australia*, Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 2002.

²² For more on the changes under New Norcia's second abbot see Katharine Massam, "Cloistering the Mission: Abbot Torres and Changes at New Norcia, 1900-1910", *Australasian Catholic Record*, 89 (2012), 13-25.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Timothy Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 1.

²⁵ George Shaw to the Chief Protector, 12 December 1910 and 28 April 1911, State Record Office of WA, 1911/ 0474; Jackamarra to the Chief Protector, 27 April 1911, State Record Office of WA, 1911/ 0474.

The shift from Aboriginal workers in positions of responsibility being replaced by monks fostered a very different style of missionary work – less collaborative, and reflecting clerical and probably racial hierarchies. We can trace that change spatially – in the development of the cloister, in the definition of zones within the town, divided by neat new walls.²⁶ There was already an east west axis that linked the first camp site to the monastery buildings across the river, running through the church and up to the cemetery. Whereas in the time of Salvado the women had had free access to the work areas of the monks - the butcher and the baker shops especially, now a north south axis developed, broadly gendered, with women on the south, men on the north, the shop was moved to the edge of town and access to the monastery restricted. Both the permeable boundaries of Salvado's town and the walls of the later cloister speak metaphorically.

4. Themes of intersection and the power of 'between'

Returning to the idea of 'between' and the significance of 'intersection', it is important to note there is a tension in Christianity between a sense of place and of placelessness; between God's place as 'here' or 'local' on the one hand, and 'beyond' or 'universal' on the other.²⁷ We have traditions of pilgrimage in which faithful people are both moving towards a future place, holy ground promised by God, and holding firmly to the presence of God-with-us in the particular circumstances of the journey, of being already on holy ground.

Part of this paradox, or intersection and even interconnectedness of opposites, is that just as we distinguish between *chronos* and *kairos* in terms of time, so there are two ways of understanding place in relation to God. The steady measured time of *chronos* and the elastic, clock stopping moments of revelation that are *karios* correspond to the Greek concepts of place as *topos* and *khora*. *Topos* on the one hand about the map, the topography, and *khora* about the site of encounter, the space for being, the 'interval' between musical notes. The interval between two firmer points is where the new insight often appears. In the Vanuatu visit we sensed

²⁶ See Massam, "Cloistering the Mission".

²⁷ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity*. London: SCM Press, 2001, 1-4.

the creative edge of hope for a new way of addressing the questions of gender that might emerge through reclaiming memory. In the New Norcia story we saw the collapse of the creative space occupied by the telegraphists as boundaries became ordered, conventional and tight; at the same time as the memory of their achievement and their own resistance to being categorised is inspiring. Awareness of the dichotomous thinking that limited the prospects for Aboriginal women, for other women defined as 'other', also invites us to consider the potential for dynamic interaction between other paired categories. Reflecting on these stories perhaps we can see more in the in-between of 'secular' and 'sacred', 'innovation' and 'tradition', 'world' and 'church' than we find in a firm dividing boundary. In the play between categories we might expect to find space for the unexpected.