

Decades of disaster . . . In place of Gsell's sawmill, the collapse in 2009 of the timber scheme in the Tiwi Islands. In place of schools teaching literacy in English, a generation of children too tired from noise all night to even get to school. In place of vegetables and melons, alcohol and kava. In place of relative peace, endemic violence.

THE BISHOP WITH 150 WIVES

By Jim Franklin

IN 1956, the year of *Quadrant's* founding, Angus and Robertson published a remarkable memoir, *The Bishop with 150 Wives*. It is as anti-communist as *Quadrant* itself. The author, François Xavier Gsell, describes in vivid detail his decades as a missionary in the Northern Territory. In view of the gross and continuing failures of aboriginal policy since the time of the missionaries, it is well worth a look to understand how the missions created oases of peaceful and productive activity where others have failed.

Gsell was born in Alsace in 1872, apprenticed as a cotton-spinner, joined the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and studied in Rome. After a dispiriting time in administration in Randwick, he spent a few years in Papua before being appointed Apostolic Administrator of the Northern Territory, charged with re-founding the Church there. He did so with success but was keen to move on to strictly missionary work among aborigines. In 1911 he established a mission at Nguuu, Bathurst Island (fictionalised in the movie *Australia*). Naturally conditions were at first very difficult, but he made it a success. In contrast to the failures of recent times in those regions, he ran a peaceful settlement with children attending school and with real economic activity, including a market garden and a sawmilling business.

Gsell had some strokes of good luck (or, as he took it to be, help from God). On arrival he dug a well and, despite the appearance of a rainbow which the aborigines believed was a warning to stop, found water without being struck dead. A few years later, he



Bishop Gsell MSC [centre] with [l-r] Father John McGrath, MSC and Father Paul Fleming, MSC. Father McGrath tried unsuccessfully at 9.35 am on the 19th of February 1942 to warn Darwin that a large number of Japanese planes [188] had overflowed Nguuu [Bathurst Island] but his warnings came too late. By 9.58 am the port was attacked.

spent a large part of his funds having a schooner built at Thursday Island. The Filipino crew, disobeying their instructions to bring it along the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, tried to sail directly to Arnhem Land. Missing it, they were about to die of hunger and thirst near the Cocos Islands. Fortunately (for them), World War I had just broken out and the Australian Navy was combing the area for the German cruiser *Emden*. They fed the crew, pointed the schooner towards the Western Australian coast and all was well.

His book shows a close attention to aboriginal culture. His interest is not anthropological, and he is neither interested in nor concerned by aspects of native culture that he sees as morally

neutral, such as ceremonies. What he takes a negative view of are those aspects of traditional society that are severely incompatible with Christianity – as we would now say, violations of human rights. The perfect communism of aboriginal society – “demand sharing” as it is now called – has, he says, the same result as communism in Europe: it does not lead to equality, since everything is run in the interests of the Party (that is, the elders). Women are chattels, and he especially objects to the practice of betrothal of female infants and their addition to elders’ harems at young ages. (Other evidence suggests Gsell may have underestimated the independence of older women, but his picture of betrothal of the very young agrees with

others?) The burying alive of decrepit old people also attracts his criticism.

Actual missionary success was slow. There was not a single adult convert in thirty years. But in 1921 there occurred a remarkable event, the first of the incidents that give the book its title. Martina was one of the young girls about the mission. A "hairy anonymous man" comes to fetch her, his promised wife according to tribal custom. Martina refuses to go but Gsell accepts that tribal law is final and nothing can be done; "trying to stifle her sobs, she goes with that man to begin a life which, I know, has less joy than that of the lowest beasts of the forest." Five days later she is back, speared in the leg but determined to stay at the mission. In the evening an angry mob of tribesmen arrive and demand her back. Not forgetting to call on God's help, Gsell welcomes them with flour and tobacco and suggests a good sleep before talking in the morning. Overnight he lays out calico, tobacco, a mirror, pots of meat and tins



Bishop Francis-Xavier Gsell MSC with his successor in the See of Darwin, Bishop John O'Loughlin, MSC.

of treacle. When the tribesmen have woken up and had a good look, he names the price: Martina is to stay. After an interminable council, they agree. Martina is brought up by the nuns and contracts a free Christian marriage with a

mission youth. (Gsell appreciates that an attraction of the mission to young men is that they can marry without waiting for the elders to die off and free their harems.)

In the ensuing years, Gsell bought a hundred and fifty girls, all considered under tribal law as his wives.

Although Gsell was sceptical of native customs, he was not exactly in favour of assimilation, in the sense of integration into wider white society. That is because he was sceptical of white society as well. The missionaries always preferred sites away from other white settlements, so that their aborigines were not subject to exploitation by unscrupulous whites or to the temptations of an idle life on the fringes of white society. Gsell's ideal, a self-sufficient semi-monastic community well away from cities, might seem to modern economic rationalists a touch communistic.

Gsell had trouble from real Communists. According to Comintern policy as laid out in the Australian *Workers' Weekly* in 1931, aborigines have been the subject of a campaign of mass physical extermination. The missions are party to a plan to kidnap children and sell them into slavery. Missions must be liquidated. In the late 1930s, Sydney communists, followed by those in Prague, attacked Gsell for buying native girls. As he put it, "Since, to the communists, the aborigines as an 'oppressed colonial people' are already in a state of communistic grace, it naturally follows that the missionary is Enemy Number One." Nothing much came of



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Communist complaints at that time and the missions retained the support of government authorities. (At one point a telegram arrived from Canberra, "Please explain purchase of women", but he had the support of the Northern Territory administration.)

Although the invasion of the mission by Japanese troops portrayed in the movie *Australia* is grossly unhistorical, Gsell did experience a Japanese invasion of another kind. In the late 1930s a Japanese pearling fleet visited Bathurst Island and outbid Gsell for women, resulting in the mission having to take on the care of twenty-five half-Japanese babies.

The problem of "half-castes" exercised Gsell considerably. As Bishop of Darwin in the 1940s, he oversaw in the Territory the Catholic Church's share of the policy of child removal of infants of mixed blood, now called the Stolen Generation. He has this comment:

But, I may be asked, is it not cruel to tear these children away from the affectionate environment of their homes? The question is naïve. What homes and what natural affection have these little ones? Yes, if they had families, and if they were surrounded by that love and affection family life offers to the young even amongst primitive peoples, it might be cruel. But these creatures roam miserably around the camps and their behaviour is often worse than that of native children. It is an act of mercy to remove them as soon as possible from surroundings so insecure.

To accommodate the "half-caste" children, a settlement was made at Garden Point on Melville Island (Melville and Bathurst are the two islands in the Tiwi group) and after a period of difficulties Gsell reports visiting "my little City of Co-operation" and seeing houses and gardens built and industry well under way, and writes "Garden Point seems well on the way to inaugurating a Golden Age."

Is his account self-serving and inaccurate? It would be very desirable if there were a memoir by one of the inhabitants. As far as I know, there is no such account (although ex-Garden Point people became prominent in Territory society). But there is one from another mission that may serve as a proxy. It is *Last Truck Out* (Magabala Books, 2009) by Betty Lockyer, who lived as a young girl at the Beagle Bay mission. The mission, north of Broome, was founded by the Trappist order in the 1890s on principles similar to Gsell's. Its church's altar, elaborately decorated with pearl shell, is now a tourist attraction. Lockyer was born in 1942, the daughter of a Malay diver and an aboriginal mother. She is critical of the actions of the Commissioner for Native Affairs in separating her parents (as she is entitled to be after researching and quoting from her file) and of child removal policies generally. But she is remarkably positive about most aspects of life at the mission, which she recalls as a "Garden of

Eden" with enormous gardens full of vegetables and melons.

The men had their jobs to do, each going to their own workplace, whether it was the bakery, gardens or checking the windmills. The women stayed at home to look after the babies and little ones, or worked elsewhere for a few hours. Some helped out at the church, convent, presbytery or the Brothers' houses. There was no such thing as idle hands. They all knew their jobs and did them well ... Our people were shown how to live an orderly lifestyle and in that short time they learned to conform.

The Communists won. Although the Communist Party of Australia passed into history, the missions were liquidated and the Comintern's theory of child removals became official policy. Their view of aborigines as an oppressed colonial people needing self-determination was passed on to a later generation of activists such as Judith Wright and "Nugget" Coombs. Coombs was given his head with aboriginal policy, resulting in the decades of disaster recounted in books like Geoffrey Partington's *Hasluck Versus Coombs* and Gary Johns' *Aboriginal Self-Determination: The Whiteman's Dream*. In place of "no such thing as idle hands", the ineffectual "job creation" and "training" schemes of CDEP and its successors. In place of Gsell's sawmill, the collapse in 2009 of the timber scheme in the Tiwi Islands. In place of schools teaching literacy in English, a generation of children too tired from noise all night to even get to school. In place of vegetables and melons, alcohol and kava. In place of relative peace, endemic violence.

Afterword: *Northern Territory News*, May 20th, 2012

YOUNG KIDS STEAL PETROL TO GET HIGH

A remote shire council will not consider banning unleaded petrol from an island town – despite young kids stealing fuel from its work yard to "get off their trolley". Ten children were busted sniffing on the roof of the Wurrumiyanga [formerly Nguui] primary school, on Bathurst Island, on Friday. It's the latest in an outbreak that began in January, police say.

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Persuasion, not Suppression

AN INTERESTING observation from Bishop Gsell concerns the place of anthropology in the missionary endeavour:

'Fifty years ago, when I started my missionary life, anthropology was still in its infancy. If it had been developed, as it is in our days, it would have been very useful to me and would have helped me to avoid many mistakes. I had to establish contact with the natives, alone, slowly, prudently; I had to endeavour, to the best of my ability, to learn gradually their habits and customs so as to penetrate into their minds and hearts without hurt or shock.'

Father McGrath, MSC, whose ministry on Bathurst Island spanned the latter years of Bishop Gsell's leadership there and the first part of Bishop O'Loughlin's episcopacy, followed the approach of Bishop Gsell. He became fluent in the Tiwi language, and examined the traditional Tiwi belief in conversation with the elders, 'discussing its weakness' with them. His 'manner of producing change was through persuasion and not through suppressing existing beliefs.'

- Father Peter Hearn, MSC, *A Theology of Mission: Diocese of Darwin 1949-1985*, Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, Kensington NSW, 2003 p.37.