

It would be remiss of this reviewer were he not to note that there are a number of educators who have been most significant contributors to the evolution of Catholic education during the period covered by this volume who are not included in it. Fortunately for us all, they are still alive. While we look forward to their inclusion in subsequent volumes, we pray it is not too soon!

BOOK REVIEW

A Bridge Between: Spanish Benedictine Missionary Women in Australia

Author: Katharine Massam

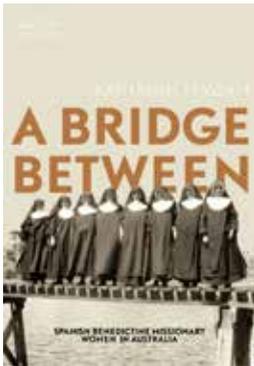
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Reviewed by Kym Harris*



“Don’t praise anyone” was the feisty injunction given to the author by Sr Teresa, one of the Spanish Benedictine Missionary Sisters who had lived and served at New Norcia for many decades and it is a refrain that she, Katherine Massam, often used to guide her research. I was knocked sideways by it, as there *was* much to praise in their work, as my sister saw, when she was a relief nurse at Kalumburu in the 1980s. And not only what she saw, but also heard in the stories about the sisters shared by the local indigenous people. Still, Sr Teresa was insistent.

This book is primarily an account of the years the Spanish Benedictine Sisters spent in Western Australia, but it also includes the story of the Carmelite Sisters who preceded them at New Norcia in the first decade of

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last century. They had come to New Norcia to run St Joseph's Orphanage and School at New Norcia, originally founded by Abbot Salvado in the 19th century for indigenous girls. Interestingly, he did not want religious sisters to run it, rather local Aboriginal Matrons. The second Abbot of New Norcia, Torres, not having the same faith in the Aborigines, nor in women, had a different idea. He recruited Carmelite Sisters from Spain, a new congregation, trained in modern educational techniques and living in a convent designed by Gaudi, to come to his dry, isolated monastic town. From the outset, there were problems, largely centred around authority and workload. They had come to teach, yet were expected to do, with the indigenous girls in their care, the laundry work of the monastery, boys' school and orphanage as well as care for their own institution and basic teaching of the girls. When they withdrew after a few years one of their number, Sr Maria Harispe, remained, convinced her vocation was to be identified with the local "natives" (*sic*). Around her, over time, the Benedictine Missionary Sisters formed. It was a long and troubled birth: nearly twenty-five years till Constitutions were drawn up, over a decade till they were confirmed. Eventually, they elected their own superior and, in 1962, opened their own bank account. Clearly the Abbot of New Norcia determined much of their lives, from recruitment of members in Spain to the opening of new houses in Australia, to where and how they worked. But the core of their story was their faith in God and the relationships between the sisters and the residents of St Joseph's.

Even though she had begun her research some years before, Massam opens this history with the extraordinary Reunion in 2001. Over twenty years after most of the sisters had left Australia (three had chosen to remain at Kalumburu), indigenous women who had been former students organised and financed a reunion at New Norcia of the sisters who had cared for them in St Joseph's. They came from three continents, and included Sr Veronica Willaway, a local Yued woman, who has lived in Nebraska, USA for some decades. (She provides the Foreword to this history.) Over three days, in story, ceremony and silence, the mystery of their lives together was honoured. It was in this context that Sr Teresa gave her injunction, not to praise. While there was much love and laughter, there was also the telling and acknowledgement of pain, some of which could only be shared in silence. I found the final pages amazing in an academic history. After describing the final confused departure of the sisters in 1975, she invites the reader

to imagine reconciliation through a sustained reflection on the concluding Mass of the Reunion. Not since Salvado's times had so many indigenous people congregated at New Norcia. Both their lives and the sisters were honoured in the symbols presented at the Eucharist. In that celebration, they looked beyond the past, and even the present, to affirm in God the unity that God desires for us. It is that faith Massam sees as giving the vision and courage to bring about reconciliation in our present.

The history of these women in Australia covers nearly 75 years and is complex. The sisters stood on the margins in so many ways. Not-monks in a monastic town, women in a man's world, Spaniards in an Anglo-Irish church, Catholics in a Protestant society. Their marginality is tellingly highlighted by language. No effort was made for decades to ensure they learnt English. Indeed, the early sisters picked up their English from the Aboriginal girls in their care. Only in 1950 was one of their number given the opportunity to learn the language of the country they were living in. Massam sees their marginality as the basis of opportunity for them to build bridges. I can see her point but wished she had drawn out this image more clearly.

This book is presented as the first account of the history of St Joseph's, with the sisters as the focus but Massam recognises the need for another history from the perspective of the indigenous women and girls who had passed through St Joseph's, preferably written by an indigenous historian. This close and detailed history, built on a diversity of resources, opens us to the complexity of the Spanish-Indigenous Encounter. Massam's research took over twenty years, across three continents: there is an extraordinary wealth of material. It repays close reading. Many times, I had to stop, think and reconsider. Having taken seriously the injunction, not to praise, Massam has an edge in what she draws out. As much as she does not praise, she does not condemn and, in the vexed arena of the history between Indigenous and European peoples, this has much to commend it. It underscores how much time, listening, reflection and patience is needed to come to an understanding of what was happening in situations that are largely foreign to our own. In that understanding we may gain some wisdom in how to act in our time.