

AUSTRALIAN PILGRIMAGE 2018
In the Footsteps of Saint Mary MacKillop

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

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Mary MacKillop Memorial School Hall, Penola, Sunday 28 October 2018

On the eve of your departure from Penola, just imagine how delighted Saint Mary of the Cross would be to see you celebrating this part of your Australian pilgrimage here in the Mary MacKillop Memorial School hall. It is 152 years since she and Father Woods established the first St Joseph's School – cradle of a 19th century education revolution – in a renovated six-stalled stable that would have fitted comfortably into this beautiful, creatively used space. And it is now eight years since Mary was canonised as Australia's first saint. The significance of this for us, as Australians, was highlighted by her longest serving Postulator and our much loved Jesuit chaplain, the late Father Paul Gardiner sj:

All saints are the same from the point of view of holiness, but we are psychologically far readier to make a friend of somebody in heaven who knew our country, our floods and droughts and bushfires, our summer heat and dusty roads, our distances, our flies and mosquitoes; someone who had looked up at our southern skies and seen the Cross; someone who once wrote, 'It is an Australian who writes this...'¹

Father Paul also wrote an article entitled 'A Saint at Penola' for a National Trust historical publication that I edited in 2010, in which he highlighted 'the invisible reality behind the visible evidence displayed by the demure young woman who first arrived in Penola in 1860':

Anyone could see she was no ordinary person but she was far more out of the ordinary than anybody imagined. What arrived in Penola was a saint – not a future saint, but a saint in the flesh, with her feet firmly on the ground, her hands in the washtub and...her head in heaven.²

It is now 158 years since that 'young woman', 18 year-old Mary MacKillop – of whom her Jesuit brother Donald once said 'My "Holy sister" did not always kiss her Cross'³ – arrived here to take up her new position as governess to her wealthy Cameron cousins at Penola Station.

Although Penola was then to her 'a strange place',⁴ many of its people were very familiar. In fact, she was surrounded by a thriving clan network of Scottish Highland Catholic relatives and family friends, who had migrated from the Braes of Lochaber and gradually moved westwards through the colony of New South Wales, usually accompanied by a mob of sheep, to settle in the South East of South Australia. Members of her immediate family visited their Penola relatives and friends at various times over many years and they often stayed for extended periods.

Her lively young sister, Annie, for example, had lived at Penola Station with the Camerons for a few years prior to Mary's arrival, and she had many happy memories of her stay:

[Cousin] Nellie and I were nearly of the same age: and Father Woods used to spend most of his spare time [at Penola Station], take us children for walks and tell us stories, also play games – hide-and-peek, puss-in-the corner, and mushrooming...I was there until 1860, when my father insisted on getting me home. Then Mary went as governess...and met Father Woods...⁵

Mary arrived in 1860 to replace the eponymous Miss Caroline Kane, whose private school in Melbourne she had attended as an eight year-old, but whose tenure at Penola Station had been terminated in circumstances later described most vividly by Annie:

When Father Woods first went to Penola [in 1857], the governess [at Aunt Cameron's] was a Miss Kane – a convert and a tartar... On the strength of being 'my mother's friend' she used to cane me most unmercifully...and at last my cousins told their mother, and the woman who had charge of us sent for my aunt, and showed her my body black and blue all over. The lady was not long there after that. Later Father Woods used to regret those years of mine...⁶

This experience of Annie's, and personal memories both he and Mary had of unjustified corporal punishment at the hands of teachers, doubtless underpinned his strong view, which they shared, that 'A good teacher makes good children and a good school where punishment is rarely required.'⁷ Encouragement and reward were Mary's preferred forms of instilling self-discipline in children. Combined, of course, with that time-honoured method used to great effect by good teachers everywhere, namely the 'look', which one of her Cameron cousins clearly remembered: 'You could not face cousin Mary with ill-done work; she would give you a look you couldn't forget.'⁸

In addition to her teaching commitments, Mary enjoyed such social functions as the Race Balls with her relatives the Camerons and the MacDonalds (who were then at the Inverness Inn, Glenroy), close family friends like the MacArthurs of Limestone Ridge, and also Scottish Presbyterian friends like the Robertsons of Struan and the Riddochs of Yallum. Mrs Henry Jones of Binnum Binnum Station, who often invited Father Woods to dinner because his wit (in English and French) enlivened such occasions, gave the following account of a Penola Race Ball, with herself featuring as 'Ethel':

...The tall, fine Highlanders – the Camerons, Gordons, MacDonalds and McBains – performed the reels in the grandest style, and with all the zest and activity which that inspiring dance requires...Look at Ethel, with Sandy Cameron for a partner: what a mite she looks; how she winds in and out in the figure of eight, between these great big men...and how she laughs as they hoot and crack their fingers, and away again, until Ethel, too tired to go on any more, had to be led to a seat near to Mrs Cameron. "Ye'll be very tired...and Sandy should be ashamed. Will ye come up to luncheon tomorrow with us? We will be proud to see you." What a nice motherly woman she was, and Sandy such a handsome man – wealthy squatters, hearty and hospitable, like all the rest...⁹

The Penola correspondent for *The Border Watch* aphoristically described such balls as 'the only reunion held in the district where everybody worth knowing can see everybody worth seeing once a year.'¹⁰

In April 1862 Mary left Penola to become governess to the children of the widowed Sarah Cameron in Portland. Her subsequent teaching position in the Catholic Denominational School gave her the knowledge and experience essential for her work in Penola when, at the age of twenty-four in January 1866, she was finally able to return here, accompanied by her fifteen year-old sister Lexie. They were welcomed by seventeen year-old Annie, who had arrived with an ailing twenty-two year-old Maggie the previous November, to supervise the newly-married Matilda Johnston's remaining private Catholic school pupils.

There to greet them as well were Uncle Donald and Aunt Eliza MacDonald, who were now running the Royal Oak for Uncle Sandy Cameron. They lived there before moving into a

cottage located closer to the Queen Street stable transformed by their nineteen year-old brother John, who thereby earned himself ‘a place in history’.¹¹ It was quite a family affair. John had come to see his sisters in Penola after returning from his first sojourn in New Zealand with their father. He helped his Uncle Donald in the bar of the Royal Oak and said, ‘Father Woods, ever kind, set about getting me a ‘situation’ of some sort or another.’¹²

As well as being a handy carpenter and builder, John had also made his mark at the 1865 Penola Caledonian Games by winning both the light hammer and the cricket ball throwing events (the latter with a distance of 86 yards/78 metres), as well as the vaulting without a pole event.¹³ He would have been very proud when the ‘first St Joseph’s School’, which Mary later described as having ‘its origin in a six-stalled stable’,¹⁴ opened in March 1866. It flourished under Mary’s leadership and with the invaluable support of Annie, and Lexie, before she moved to the Mount Gambier school with Blanche Amsinck. Their thirteen year-old brother Donald also attended the stable school for a time, having ridden John’s horse, Smokey, all the way from Portland by himself so that he could join his sisters in Penola.

In February 1867 Father Woods, who had just been appointed the inaugural Director General of Catholic Education in South Australia by Bishop Sheil, left Penola for Adelaide via Melbourne, where he had business to attend to for the Bishop. Mary’s description of his departure from Penola after ten years in the South Eastern bush is one of my favourite passages from her writing:

On his last Sunday Father Woods preached his farewell sermon amid the tears and sobs of his people. With Father O’Connor he started for Portland in a buggy driven by Mr [Donald] McDonald, who was accompanied by his niece Annie [MacKillop] at the request of Father Woods.

It was a fearfully hot day and bush fires were prevalent...Father Woods had witnessed many a bushfire, and he had a grand one as a send-off. After leaving Penola, while ploughing through the dreary sand over the Victorian border, thick smoke enveloped the travellers; but soon, blazing trees added to their discomfort, crackling branches snapped off and fell in their way.

The horses reared and snorted, but the brave old Highlander managed them, his familiar voice and steady hand encouraged them, and his perfect knowledge of the locality brought them through the danger...

Instead of going on to Portland, they stayed for the night at Dartmoor, and continued their journey next day.

Never did the quiet loveliness of the drive near the Bay, which is said to be unequalled in Victoria, appear so delightful as to the weary travellers through the charred or burning logs, cinders and dust till at length the beautiful town of Portland gladdened their eyes. A short rest in that delightful climate, where the heat of summer is tempered by the soft wind of the Southern Ocean, was most refreshing.

A last glance at the luxuriant vegetation, the blending of sky and sea in the distant horizon, the graceful curves of the Bay, the island where he had often watched the seals basking in the sun – and the earnest naturalist, the scientist priest, the lover of the wild and the beautiful turned to a new and busier phase in his varied life.¹⁵

During this period of separation, Mary and Father Woods communicated by letter and we are very privileged to be able to read them still. At his urgent request in May 1867, she sent him a detailed account of her organisational and teaching methodology so that it could be published and distributed to ‘all [Catholic] schools’¹⁶ in the colony. They also dealt with other practical issues such as the Josephite habit, Father Woods declaring:

Of course, I don't want your appearance to frighten the children, but I want some sort of Habit adopted at once which shall be becomingly religious in appearance and sufficient to distinguish you as religious hereafter...¹⁷

Annie's letters to Father Woods from Penola had never been quite so serious, for example:

...We went for a picnic last Saturday out to the new Cemetery, but we didn't know for what the place we were playing in was intended. Harry Roden died last Sunday and was buried in [that] very place...so we hadn't our picnic too soon. He left all his money to Mrs Air and one shilling to his wife, so they say that it is troubling his mind and that his ghost appears between the Chapel gate and the lane, so don't you think he wants to get to the Church now that it is too late? Old Wilson, Laidlaw and a good many others have seen him. Some say that he appears as a kangaroo, others as himself in his burial clothes.

Mrs Mooney suspects that she was the ghost herself, for she had on a light dress on Monday, and she was going home by your fence with Katie in her arms and a light shawl around both of them, when she heard someone coming behind, and so she went in close between the fence and the bushes till the man passed. She thinks it was old Wilson. He says that it disappeared suddenly (I suppose when she hid herself) but that he knew Harry's ugly face...

PS Mrs Mooney was not the ghost for some people in the Temperance Hall dressed up an emu and sent it after Mr Wilson.¹⁸

Such letters would have provided welcome relief from the many difficulties Father Woods faced when establishing, in Adelaide, the first system of Australian Catholic education. He desperately needed Mary to join him there as she, and the Sisters of St Joseph, would be crucial to its success.

On 21 June 1867, having overseen the move into the newly-opened Schoolhouse and prepared the children for their successful mid-year examination, Mary left Penola and her anxious mother Flora – who had travelled here to farewell her beloved eldest daughter – and undertook the long land and sea journey to Adelaide. Leaving Annie to supervise the school in Penola, she collected Sister Rose Cunningham from Mount Gambier, where Sister Blanche Amsinck was left in charge, before continuing to Port MacDonnell, where these two young women boarded the steamship, *Penola*. When they finally arrived at Port Adelaide, they were welcomed by a relieved Father Woods, who took them to the small cottage awaiting them in the city. They soon continued God's work in the Cathedral Hall School, which also became a pioneering 'Model School'¹⁹ for the training of teachers, both lay and Josephite, in Mary's excellent 'Method'.

Ten months later, in April 1868, Mary returned to Penola with two novices, the twenty-seven year-old Scot, Sister Teresa McDonald, and Irish-born Sister Agnes Smith, a bright, vivacious young girl who was not yet seventeen. Mary stayed long enough to settle them in, and after she left, their mandatory letters and diary entries kept her fully informed of what kept them busy from '5 o'clock till 10 at night' (13.5.68), seven days a week. The generosity of local people, and also the children, shines through, as does the Sisters' sense of humour: 'Mrs McDonald [Mary's Aunt Eliza] sent two teals, a tin of jam, a chicken, a piece of mutton, a large piece of bacon & butter. Sr Teresa said she ought to set up a butcher's shop.' (8.6.68) Young 'Johnny [McDonald] and [his cousin] Peter [MacKillop] came to see if the Sisters have everything for breakfast.' (12.5.68) And there is Sister Agnes' classic comment in a letter to a friend soon after she arrived in Penola: 'I am sent off, I think, to convert the kangaroos but I am happy and St Joseph will take care of me.' (4.5.68)

Arrivals and departures. Welcomes and farewells. People meeting people. All of significance to those involved. Some of greater import than others. The meeting of Mary MacKillop and Julian Tenison Woods here at Penola in 1860 is one such. Her return in 1866 to Penola and its people, and to Father Woods, is another.

Mary recalled that particularly significant time in her life in a circular to her ‘own dear Sisters’ in Australia and New Zealand, written from St Joseph’s Glen Innes on 4 March 1891, when she was in her fiftieth year:

Twenty five years ago we first kept up St Joseph’s day as the special feast of our proposed Institute and little did either of us then dream of what was to spring from so small a beginning. First we had Mass and Holy Communion in the Church and then a feast for the school children. On that day was our Glorious Patron first honoured as Patron of little children, and our work committed to his care. Our poor Father [Woods] was happy that day, and so was I, but we said little beyond wondering whom God would call to assist us – and how He would make His way clear.

Ah, my Sisters, God has done wonders for us. He has tried us sorely – and comforted us wonderfully. He has protected His Foster Father’s work, and brought good out of many evils. Be grateful, my Sisters, my children; pray to be worthy children of St Joseph’s great Institute – pray to have the true spirit of the same – that prosperity may not elate, nor adversity ever shake your courage and generosity in the service of God...²⁰

In 2018, Mary, who was filled with God’s gracious gift of loving kindness, speaks still to all of us travellers here. And her Penola friends wish you well on your very special journey.

Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop, pray with us

¹ Paul Gardiner sj, ‘My life with Mary’, ABC Religion and Ethics, 13.10.2010. Mary MacKillop, ‘The Necessity for the Institute’, London, October 1873, *Resource Material from the Archives of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, Issue No. 3*, Sydney, August 1984, p74

² Paul Gardiner sj, ‘A Saint at Penola’, *Penola Historical Selections Volume VI*, ed, Margaret Muller, Penola 2011, p125

³ Donald MacKillop sj, quoted by Paul Gardiner sj, *An Extraordinary Australian Mary MacKillop*, 1993, p34

⁴ MacKillop to Monsignor Kirby, Rome, 22.5.1873

⁵ Annie MacKillop to George O’Neill sj, *Life of the Reverend Julian Edmund Tenison Woods*, 1929, p111

⁶ *ibid.*, Annie MacKillop

⁷ Woods, ‘St Joseph’s Schools, Rules for Teachers’, Adelaide c1870

⁸ Penola cousin, cited by George O’Neill sj, *Life of Mother Mary of the Cross*, 1931, p14

⁹ Mrs Henry Jones of Binnun Binnun, *Long Years in Australia*, 1879

¹⁰ *The Border Watch*, 26.3.1866

¹¹ Paul Gardiner sj, *An Extraordinary Australian Mary MacKillop*, 1993, p34

¹² John MacKillop to his mother, Royal Oak Hotel, Penola, 29.4.1866

¹³ *The Border Watch*, 22.4.1865

¹⁴ MacKillop to Kirby, May 1873, ‘History of the Congregation 1866-1900’

¹⁵ MacKillop, *Julian Tenison Woods A Life*, Canonisation Edition, pp81,82

¹⁶ Woods to MacKillop, Adelaide 13.5.1867

¹⁷ Woods to MacKillop, Adelaide 27.5.1867

¹⁸ Annie MacKillop to Woods, after 2 September 1866 and the death of his sister-in-law, Lizzie Woods. Quoted by Paul Gardiner sj, *An Extraordinary Australian Mary MacKillop*, 1993, p65, with the comment ‘Life in Penola was not dull.’

¹⁹ Marie Foale rsj, *The Josephite Story Mary MacKillop and the Sisters of St Joseph 1866 – 1893*, 1989, p28

²⁰ MacKillop, Circular to Sisters, 4.3.1891. Bernadette O’Sullivan rsj, *One Door Closes Another Opens*, 2018, p91, for extract from letter to the sisters, Glen Innes NSW, 6.3.1891.