



The Life and Work of St Mary of the Cross: A View from Sandhurst

Part 1 of 3: An Introduction



By Jackson Saunders

The Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart (Institute) were established in South Australia by Mary MacKillop (Mary) and Julian Tenison Woods (Woods). The pair met in Penola and shared the same dream of providing education to rural poor children. Mary aspired to become a religious sister and to teach and was influenced by her experience of poverty in her family. Woods' concern was for his parish. Mary discerned her vocation, while she worked to support her family. She received support from Woods; firstly, in Penola, and later in Portland, before returning to Penola to establish the Institute. The Institute's mission expanded to Adelaide, before spreading to Brisbane and Bathurst. However, issues arose over governance with diocese's wanting control and the Institute seeking its independence to be able to provide education anywhere. This led to Mary's invalid excommunication and her subsequent trip to Rome for their blessing of the Institute's mission. Rome was supportive of the Institute's Rule, but issues again arose in Brisbane, Bathurst and Adelaide upon her return. These challenging years in the establishment of the Institute in South Australia led to Mary seeking refuge in Sydney and the support of Archbishop Patrick Francis Moran, who was commissioned by the Holy See to review the Institute's work. Their status was also discussed at a Plenary Council and again in Rome, before a Roman Decree upheld the Institute's vision that they were a non-Diocesan institute and could minister in various Dioceses with a superior general. The Institute was now formally established and able to minister anywhere in Australia. The first Diocese in Victoria to welcome the Institute was Sandhurst when their mission began in Numurkah. Their presence later expanded to Eaglehawk, Nagambie, Rushworth,



Pyramid Hill, Tallangatta and Corryong. Their ministry in these places included both education and various pastoral works.



The statue of Mary outside Australian Catholic University in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, where she was born. PICTURE: Jackson Saunders.



MARY'S CHILDHOOD AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE INSTITUTE

Mary was born in Fitzroy on January 15, 1842, to parents, Alexander MacKillop and Flora McDonald.¹ She was the eldest of eight children and her experiences supporting her family influenced the establishment and ministry of the Institute. Mary's father, Alexander, had initially enjoyed success as a landholder, but did not have the business acumen to further his prosperity. This became clear in his decision making and led to him needing to sell the family mansion in Brunswick Street while Mary was still a baby.² Sister Helen Smith, museum coordinator at the Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre in East Melbourne, explains that Alexander struggled to keep jobs, which meant that the MacKillop family was poor and depended on relatives. "We know that in 15 years they'd lived in 18 different places mainly around Melbourne."³ Alexander only had an irregular income from farming.⁴ There was also a period when Alexander was away for seventeen months from 1851 to return to Scotland when Mary was 10.⁵ The family property at Darebin Creek, which had been left to Alexander by his father, had also been mortgaged to his wealthy brother, Peter, to finance his overseas trip and to leave money behind for Flora to support the family in his absence.⁶ This led to further complications in the MacKillop family, however, as Flora was unaware of these arrangements, which led to an ugly family dispute with their home in jeopardy.⁷

Even at a young age, Mary was involved in negotiations with her aunt and uncle, Peter and Julia, which saw the MacKillop's vacate their home in Darebin and move to another property in Plenty, thanks to a "grudging settlement" with Flora's brother, Donald MacDonald.⁸ Mary also experienced grief during these years with the tragic death of her grandfather MacDonald who drowned in the Darebin Creek in April 1847. Six months later her eleven-month-old brother, Alexander, also died.⁹ These personal hardships as a child gave Mary an appreciation of poverty and would later in life be expressed through her desire to provide an education for poor children and broader social welfare through the Institute.

¹ Lesley O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled* (North Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1994), 9.

² O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 12.

³ Helen Smith, *Interview*, Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre, 12 May, 2021.

⁴ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 13.

⁵ Paul Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian: Mary MacKillop* (North Sydney: Trustees of the Sisters of St Joseph, 2011), 31.

⁶ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 19.

⁷ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 20.

⁸ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 21.

⁹ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 29.



Jackson sits to read books on the life of Mary. PICTURE: Nicolas Calandra.

MARY'S EMPLOYMENT AND VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

A key moment in Mary's family life, which took place after her father had returned to Australia, was when Alexander was sacked as Clerk of the Goldfields by future Victorian Premier, John O'Shannassy, in 1857. It was at this time that Mary's mother, Flora, realised that Alexander was incapable of holding down employment.¹⁰ About this time, Mary discovered a sense of responsibility to support her mother and six younger siblings through providing an income. She initially gained employment with the L'Estrange family as a nursery-governess and gave any earnings she made to her mother.¹¹ In 1858, aged 16, Mary took on a "higher-paying job as assistant forewoman with stationers Sand and Kenny in Melbourne."¹² For the next nine years, Mary would become the "principal 'bread-winner' of the family."¹³ During this time, Mary's vocation grew, as she thought about "the work she might have been doing as a nun, helping

¹⁰ O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 22.

¹¹ Paul Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross, Mary MacKillop: 1842-1909*, vol. I (Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 2015), 65.

¹² O'Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 23.

¹³ Felicity O'Brien, *Called to Love: Mary MacKillop* (Homebush: St Paul's, 1993), 15.



those struggling Australian families she grew up amongst.”¹⁴ These experiences, which enabled Mary to help provide for the needs of her family, taught her about God’s providence, which is a central charism of the Institute.¹⁵



Jackson in front of the bust of Mary at Corpus Christi College in Carlton. PICTURE: Jackson Saunders.

In 1860, when Mary moved to Penola to work as a governess for the Cameron’s at Penola Station, she met Parish Priest, Father Julian Tenison Woods. Mary expressed to Woods her desire to become a religious sister, which she feared would not be possible, because of her responsibility to provide for the family.¹⁶ Mary saw Woods as a kind of spiritual director.¹⁷ Mary wrote: “At last He (God) gave me a director to whom for the first time I told all my

¹⁴ O’Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 24.

¹⁵ Pauline Wicks, *God Will Take Care of Us All: A Spirituality of Mary MacKillop* (Strathfield: St Paul’s, 2009), 52.

¹⁶ William Modystack, *Mary MacKillop: A Woman Before Her Time* (Adelaide: Rigby Publishers, 1982), 14.

¹⁷ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 95.



desires and encouragements, explaining also my position towards my family.”¹⁸ During this time, Mary and Woods also discovered that they both aspired to provide “a Catholic-based education to children of poor families.”¹⁹ A key concern for Woods in his parish was that for parents in his parish “education for their children was a luxury they hardly dreamt of.”²⁰ This also recognised how the Education Act of 1851 had stopped funding of religious schools in South Australia, which meant that by 1858 only two Catholic schools remained open in the colony.²¹ South Australia was the first state to abolish state aid for denominational schools—the rest followed.

While thinking about the expenditure to pay staff at a school, Woods recalled how in France a religious group of sisters had provided education for children. He envisaged that a group of sisters adapted to the Australian context could provide a solution to his concern.²² They did not “have grand convents or elaborate educational establishments, but lived simple lives of poverty in country areas.”²³ The providence of God in bringing together Mary and Woods would later be shown in the establishment of the Institute, which would see Mary’s vocation needs connect with the apostolic concern of Woods to provide education in the parish.²⁴

Woods had regular contact with Mary during her initial years in Penola, as he was a regular visitor at the Cameron’s family home and when Mary was at Mass.²⁵ In April 1862 she left Penola and by June was in Portland. Mary continued to discern her vocation there and support her family, initially as a governess, before accepting a job in October 1863 as a teacher in Portland’s Catholic Denominational School.²⁶ For this position, Mary sat an examination and passed with little study beforehand.²⁷ Mary’s family followed her to Portland in 1864.²⁸ There was, however, a tension between her family life and her vocation, as “the day when she might finally leave them to become a nun seemed more remote than ever.”²⁹ The connection between

¹⁸ Mary MacKillop, “1873 May 22nd Ascension Thursday,” Letter to Monsignor Kirby: Rome, in *Mary MacKillop 1873: One Year of an Extraordinary Life*, ed. Sheila McCreanor (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2016), 86.

¹⁹ O’Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 28.

²⁰ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 94.

²¹ O’Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 32.

²² Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 19.

²³ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 94.

²⁴ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 96.

²⁵ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 95.

²⁶ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 47.

²⁷ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 48.

²⁸ O’Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 37.

²⁹ O’Brien, *Mary MacKillop: Unveiled*, 39.



Mary and Woods continued in Portland, as Woods was occasionally asked to supply for Masses there and could provide spiritual direction to Mary.³⁰ The seeds for the establishment of the Institute were being planted.

Woods and Mary also exchanged letters while she was in Portland from June 1862 until the end of 1865.³¹ In one letter, Gardiner notes that Mary is likely to have written about her social life and latent vocation as a nun, as Woods replied: “When you are a nun you will find it the easiest thing in the world to turn to prayer which will then be to you a source of rest and refreshment.”³² In 1863 Mary expressed interest to Woods in a teaching position at his school in Penola and it is likely that the pair also discussed the topic when Woods visited Portland for a holiday. Woods was supportive of Mary and her desire to teach in Penola. However, he expressed concerns about her family life.³³ He suggested that Mary would at some stage need to leave her family to follow her vocation, emphasised her father’s indiscretion and advised her not to purchase a family home in Portland.³⁴ His advice would help Mary to discern her vocation and is part of the story of the formation of the Institute. Sister Helen believes that an unfortunate incident in Portland with a visit from a school inspector “was the catalyst that actually helped (Mary) to go to Penola and actually become a Sister and follow that dream.”³⁵ The incident took place when the head of Portland school, Mr Cusack, juggled the rolls so that he took Mary and his sister Annie’s academically advanced class, while they were given his struggling class. Alexander protested in fury to Mr Cusack, which meant Annie lost her job and salary for the family.³⁶ About this time, Woods thought that it may be a good time for Mary to begin teaching in Penola, as the local teacher there, Miss Johnson, had retired. However, Woods was concerned about Mary’s family and if they would survive without her income, especially in light of the debts they had, and proposed a plan to help accommodate the family in different places.³⁷ Subsequently, Mary left her mother, Flora, and joined her younger sister, Lexie, in departing for Penola in January 1866 to join their sibling, Annie.³⁸ For Mary this moment “was the beginning of the fulfilment of her dream of devoting her life to God in the

³⁰ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 97.

³¹ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 98.

³² Julian Tenison Woods, quoted in Paul Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross, Mary MacKillop: 1842-1909*, vol. 1 (Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 2015), 95.

³³ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 100.

³⁴ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 101.

³⁵ Smith, *Interview*.

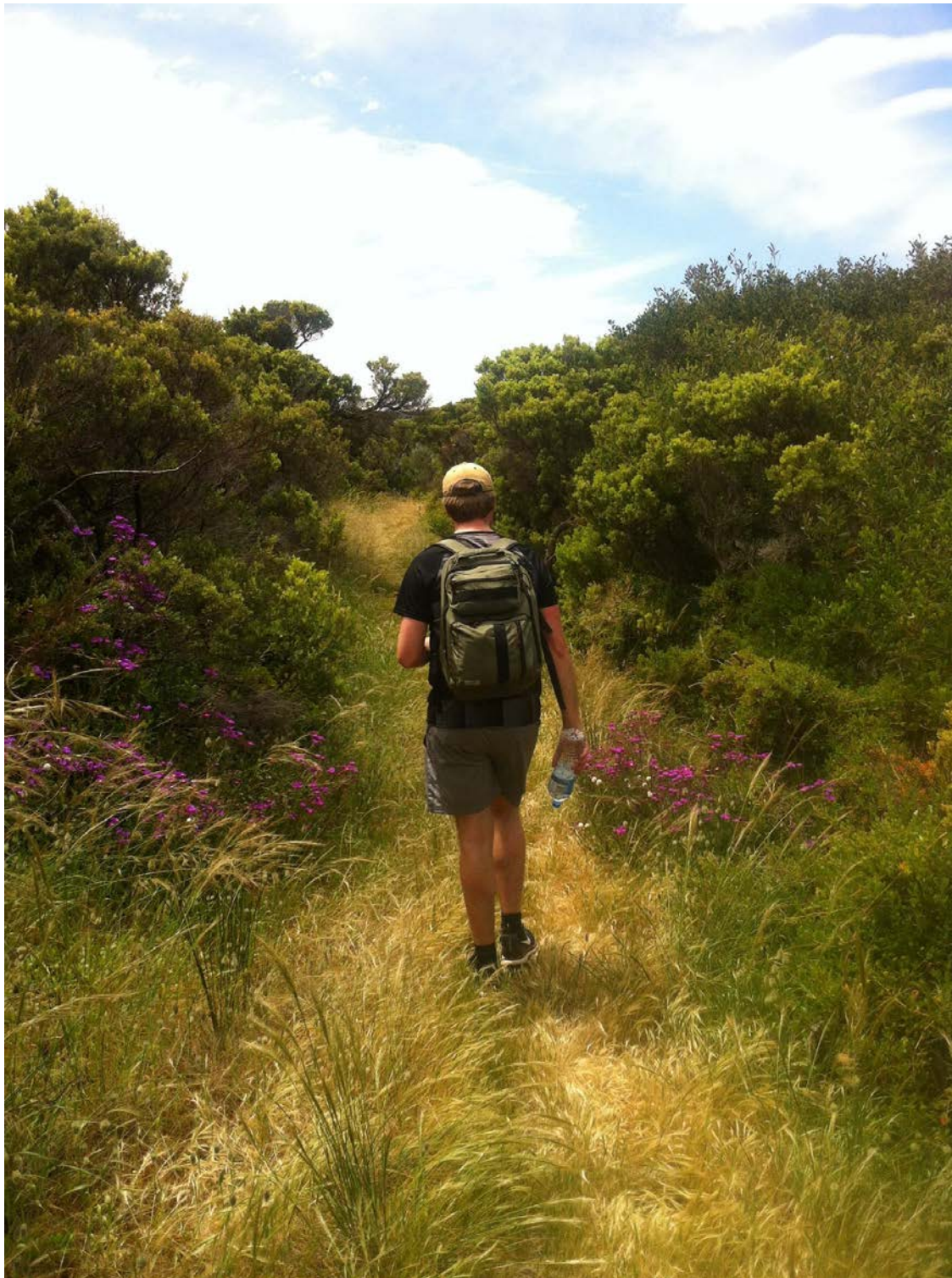
³⁶ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 51.

³⁷ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 52.

³⁸ Gardiner, *The Life of St Mary of the Cross*, 113.



service of his poor and neglected ones.”³⁹ So, this marked a significant moment and allowed for the beginning of the establishment of the Institute.



Jackson completed the 200-kilometre ‘Aussie Camino pilgrimage’ in the footsteps of Mary in 2017 from Portland to Penola. PICTURE: SUPPLIED.

³⁹ Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian*, 111.



NEXT: In the second article of this three-part series, we look at the establishment of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart. This will be included in the next edition of the *Sandpiper e-News*.