

**‘The Bishop with 150 Wives’: Interrogating the Missionary and Ecclesiastical Career of
Monsignor Francis Xavier Gsell MSC (1872-1960)**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides the first comprehensive scholarly investigation into the missionary and ecclesiastical career of Monsignor Francis Xavier Gsell MSC (1872-1960). Remembered as the apocryphal ‘Bishop with 150 Wives’, Gsell is famous for his work among the Tiwi people, from whom he purchased the marriage rights of young women as part of a broader evangelisation strategy. A mythic figure in popular histories of the Northern Territory, Gsell’s complex legacy, however, has rarely received thorough academic scrutiny.

Going beyond the many myths and legends, this thesis uses Gsell as a lens through which to examine race relations in northern Australia during the first half of the twentieth century. It locates Gsell within the context of evolving Indigenous policy in the Northern Territory, over which he exerted significant influence through strategic collusion with Commonwealth authorities, while simultaneously demonstrating the ways in which Gsell stood at the forefront of shifting Catholic attitudes towards First Nations peoples.

It reveals a man of strong conviction, incredible political reach, and conflicting legacy. Gsell worked as an advocate for Indigenous welfare and challenged the racist attitudes of his contemporaries. Notwithstanding his ethnocentric paternalism, the missionary’s gradualist approach to Christian conversion helped ensure the preservation of a great many aspects of traditional culture on the Tiwi Islands. Yet Gsell also wholeheartedly endorsed assimilation policies which saw the forced removal of mixed-descent children from their families from as early as 1910. This resulted in the destruction of many Indigenous languages and cultures as, torn from kin and Country, these children became members of the Stolen Generations.

By interrogating the legends, this thesis ultimately provides a new and holistic appraisal of Gsell’s life and legacy in the Northern Territory.

WARNING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this thesis contains images and names (as well as a link to a video recording) of persons who have died.

DECLARATION

The thesis comprises my own work toward the Doctor of Philosophy – Arts. Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, illustrations, bibliographies, and appendices.

Michael Philip Francis

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TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
DD	Doctor of Divinity
LOH	Legion of Honour
MSC	<i>Missionarii Sacratissimi Cordis</i> (Missionaries of the Sacred Heart)
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NTTG	<i>Northern Territory Times and Gazette</i>
OBE	Order of the British Empire
OLSH	Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart
OP	Order of Preachers (Dominicans)
OSB	Order of Saint Benedict (Benedictines)
PFHA	Propaganda Fide Historical Archive
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
SJ	Society of Jesus (Jesuits)
WWI	First World War (1914-1918)
WWII	Second World War (1939-1945)

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NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

Most sources upon which this thesis relies were written in the English language. However, the thesis also draws upon French, Italian, and Latin sources. Transcriptions of these texts in their original language have been included in the footnotes for absolute clarity. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations can be attributed to Dr Catherine Kovesi. The thesis also contains a host of Tiwi language words and texts alongside English translations which have been cited appropriately. Similarly, the thesis cites German, Portuguese, Indonesian, and Garig words which have been translated by academics in secondary literature. Thanks is owed to Professor Regina Ganter, Dr Laura Rademaker, and Rev Malcolm Fyfe MSC who provided some translated copies of primary source documents already in my possession which were cross-checked with the final translations provided by Kovesi. Appreciation is also owed to the Very Rev William Uren SJ, Hillary Mansour, Joshua Chang, and Darren Zhang for their assistance and advice with some of the primary documents.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In its use of terminology, this thesis takes its lead from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.¹ At the time of invasion, British colonists labelled the first peoples of the Australian continent ‘Aborigines’. This unifying pronoun comes from the Latin ‘*ab origine*’ meaning ‘from the beginning’ and denotes the original inhabitants of a given country. Grammatically speaking ‘Aborigine’ or ‘Aborigines’ – always capitalised – was used as a noun, whereas ‘Aboriginal’ was used as an adjective. The term ‘Aboriginals’ was often used inappropriately as a collective noun. First Nations peoples, however, reject these terms as relics of our colonial past and its systematic oppression. They prefer to refer to themselves using a variety of alternatives.

First Nations people may use ‘saltwater people’ if they are from the coast, or ‘desert’, ‘freshwater’, or ‘spinifex’ people if they live on Country characterised by these features. They may also use regional terms dependent on the state to which they belong. For example, people from Victoria may refer to themselves as ‘Koories’ and ‘Kooris’ if from New South Wales; Queenslanders may call themselves ‘Murris’, or ‘Bama’ in the far north; those in South Australia may use ‘Nunga’ or ‘Nyoongars’ in the south west; whereas Tasmanians may prefer ‘Palawa’. These are considered preferable to ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Indigenous’, terms which are

¹ AIATSIS with Bruce Pascoe, *The Little Red Yellow Black Book: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2018), 8-10.

commonly used by non-Indigenous Australians to describe First Nations peoples. This is because names like Koori or Murri were adopted by themselves, rather than designated to meet the bureaucratic needs of the Australian nation-state.

The term ‘Indigenous’ – likewise capitalised – has become a convenient term for those who speak broadly about Australia’s two separate indigenous populations, referring to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Here ‘Aboriginal peoples’ refers to the original inhabitants of mainland Australia and its adjacent islands including Tasmania, whereas ‘Torres Strait Islanders’ refers to the inhabitants of the hundred or so islands of the Torres Strait which separates the northern tip of Queensland from Papua New Guinea and whose cultural origins lie in nearby Melanesia rather than mainland Australia. While some feel that ‘Indigenous’ is too generic, the term is acceptable to many First Nations persons and is frequently used preferentially in the Northern Territory. It is therefore utilised throughout this thesis where appropriate.

The term ‘First Nations peoples’ is used most frequently throughout this thesis because it better expresses the diversity and unique identities of the Australian continent’s first peoples, while also acknowledging the legitimate claims to sovereignty of individual national groups. Indeed, where possible, the thesis refers to specific nations – Tiwi, Larrakia, Iwaidja – rather than umbrella terms. This is in line with current thinking on terminology which stresses specificity rather than generality. It is particularly appropriate for Tiwi people who, like Torres Strait Islanders, generally consider themselves distinct from mainland Aboriginal peoples.

The thesis does not use regional terms such as ‘Nunga’ or ‘Bama’ because they are inappropriate in the Northern Territory context. It also avoids terms such as ‘Aboriginal Australians’ or ‘Original Australians’, owing to the complexity of feeling among First Nations peoples about their relationship with the Australian nation-state. While many identify as Australian, others feel they cannot fully belong to the nation until constitutional recognition has been sincerely achieved. The campaign for this, so eloquently expressed in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, is ongoing.²

As a work of historical scholarship, this thesis must also quote terms from the historical record which are considered offensive to First Nations peoples. Insensitive and unpalatable words like ‘nigger’, ‘native’, ‘savage’, ‘myalls’, ‘lubra’, ‘gin’, ‘black-fellow’ and ‘aborigines’ are quoted

² See National Constitutional Convention, *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, 26 May 2017.

throughout when absolutely necessary. I take no joy in repeating these derogatory words, conscious of the hurt they inflict. They are included both for accuracy and to interrogate the racist discourse which demeaned First Nations peoples and provided the justification for policies and practices which resulted in acts of genocide and dispossession. Censoring such terms would contribute to a white-washing of our past which denies the historical reality and may cause more harm than good.

Relatedly, as parts of this thesis deal with European attitudes toward miscegenation, pseudo-scientific terms such as ‘full-blood’, ‘half-caste’, ‘quarter-caste’, ‘quadroon’, and ‘octoroon’ are also quoted. These terms were used by Europeans to categorise levels of so-called ‘racial purity’ in First Nations people. These forms of categorisation were ultimately used to justify the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of mixed-descent from their families, now known as the Stolen Generations. The thesis uses the term ‘mixed-descent’ when referring to people with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage. It does so conscious of the fact that a preoccupation with racial admixture is a harmful product of our colonial past and can still be used in a contemporary setting to question and deny the rights and identities of First Nations people. I hold that someone is Indigenous if they are of Indigenous descent, identify as such, and are in turn acknowledged as such by other Indigenous people within the community in which they live. In this context, culture and connection are fundamental, not skin-colour or archaic notions of ethnic fractions.

INTRODUCTION

Beyond the Legend: Interrogating the ‘Bishop with 150 Wives’

A pleasant stroll in equal measure from Villa Borghese and Termini Station, ‘Domus Australia’ is promoted as a ‘home in Rome’ for Australian pilgrims visiting the Eternal City. An initiative of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, the guesthouse offers visitors a ‘fusion of Italian history and charm with great Australian hospitality’.¹ Adjoining comfortable hotel accommodation is a chapel dedicated to Saint Peter Chanel, a French missionary priest martyred on the Polynesian island of Futuna in 1841. Formerly a Marist convent, the entire complex was renovated at an estimated cost of AU\$30-80 million and opened by Pope Benedict XVI in 2011, following the one-year anniversary of the canonisation of Australia’s first and only saint, Mary of the Cross MacKillop. Featuring a restaurant which is perhaps unique in Rome for including Vegemite on its menu, the site offers a compelling snapshot of a very particular brand of Australian Catholicism, in this the heartland of the institutional Church.²

In many respects the chapel draws upon motifs which are distinctive to Australia. The eucalyptus-green and wattle-gold interior evokes Australia’s national colours, while the Federation Star and the Commonwealth Coat of Arms are visible within the sanctuary. Prominently displayed to the left of the main altar is Paul Newton’s *Our Lady of the Southern Cross #2* (2010). Commissioned especially for the chapel, the painting features a solitary Madonna and Child beneath a twilight sky, inhabiting an Australian landscape. In place of a halo, Mary is crowned with a garland of wattle, while the Southern Cross constellation is visible in the background (see Figures 1 and 2).

Presumably in homage to the longstanding connection of the Australian Church to that of Ireland, the vault of the nave is adorned with a very large painting of a Celtic cross, echoed by several smaller such crosses scattered about the chapel. This connection to Ireland is further reinforced by images of Saints Patrick, Brigid and Carthage hung within various side-chapels (see Figures 3 and 4). Indeed, the space features a great many portraits of prominent Catholics considered to share a connection with Australia, and which present a predominantly Anglo-Celtic vision of the Church. Among the Irish pioneers are Daniel Mannix, Patrick Moran, and John Joseph Therry, while the English are represented by John Bede Polding, Roger Vaughan

¹ ‘Domus Australia: Your Home in Rome’, *Sandhurst Diocese*, <https://www.sandhurst.catholic.org.au/item/1237-domus-australia-your-home-in-rome>.

² ‘Cardinal Moran Restaurant’, *Domus Australia*, <https://www.domusaustralia.org/food-beverage/cardinal-moran-restaurant/>.

and Caroline Chisholm.³ In these side-chapels, Irish saints are accompanied by English martyrs and theologians such as Saints Thomas More, Edmund Campion, and John Henry Newman.⁴ Diverging somewhat from the general trend, a portrait of the Venerable Francis Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận (Figure 5), commissioned by the Vietnamese community of Australia, hangs alongside Saints Andrew Kim Taegon and Paul Miki SJ. Saint Mary of the Cross is the only Australian-born Catholic depicted in the chapel.

I visited this space on 28 January 2018, two days after a thanksgiving Mass was celebrated by the Archbishop of Sydney, Anthony Fisher OP, to mark Australia Day. The Mass was attended by 150 people and the national anthem, *Advance Australia Fair*, was sung as the recessional hymn. I was in Rome examining collections in the Propaganda Fide Historical Archives. The purpose of my visit was to find documents relating to Monsignor Francis Xavier Gsell MSC (1872-1960), the central figure of this thesis. An Alsatian, Gsell entered the religious order of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1892, before travelling to Australia in 1897. He founded the Bathurst Island Mission in 1911 and devoted the following four decades of his life to work among the First Nations peoples of the Northern Territory. Gsell is best remembered as the apocryphal ‘bishop with 150 wives’, famous for his rather extraordinary practice of trading in the marriage rights of Tiwi women as part of a broad evangelisation strategy. Though a mythic figure in popular histories of the Northern Territory, Gsell’s complex legacy has rarely received comprehensive academic scrutiny.

A few days prior to my visit to Domus, I found a letter written on 19 May 1937 by the Apostolic Delegate to Australia, Archbishop Giovanni Panico, to the Prefect of Propaganda, Cardinal Pietro Fumasoni-Biondi, which declared Gsell: ‘*un santo Missionario, considerate qui da tutti come il vero e l’unico apostolo degli aborigeni*’; that is: ‘a holy missionary, considered here by all as the true and only apostle of the Aborigines’.⁵ Despite this rather remarkable title, Gsell is not included among the collection of pioneer Catholics honoured in the Peter Chanel chapel.

³ Those Australian pioneers honoured in the chapel include Saint Mary of the Cross Mackillop (1842-1909), Daniel Mannix (1864-1963), Patrick Francis Moran (1830-1911), James Duhig (1871-1965), John Joseph Therry (1790-1864), John Bede Polding (1794-1877), Roger Vaughan (1834-1883), Caroline Chisholm (1808-1887), Mary John Cahill RSC (1793-1864), Ursula Frayne RSM (1816-1885), Julian Tenison-Woods (1832-1889), and Rosendo Salvado (1814-1900).

⁴ Catholics venerated in the chapel include, Saint Peter Chanel (1803-1841), Saint Patrick (385-461), Saint Carthage (555-637), Saint Brigid or Ireland (451-523), Saint Dominic (1170-1221), Saint Thomas More (1478-1535), Saint John Fisher (1469-1535), Saint Edmund Campion (1540-1581), Saint John Henry Newman (1801-1890), Venerable Mary Ward (1585-1645), Saint John Paul II (1920-2005), Saint Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997), Saint Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897), Saint George Preca (1880-1962), Saint Andrew Kim Taegon (1821-1846), Saint Paul Miki SJ (1564-1597), Saint Francis Xavier SJ (1506-1552), and Venerable Francis Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận (1928-2002).

⁵ Panico to Fumasoni-Biondi, 19 May 1937. PFHA: NS 1327, 1030-1034.

Indeed, except for Rosendo Salvado, no notable Australian missionaries, much less Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are celebrated on its walls.

Aside from Nguyễn Văn Thuận and Kim Taegon, the only persons of colour represented in the entire space are the three Futunans viciously clubbing Peter Chanel to death (Figure 6). A painting completed in 1918 by Italian artist Luigi Guglielmino depicts the saint kneeling in a gloomy hut, eyes drawn heavenward to a cherub bathed in light and holding aloft laurels and a palm, symbols of his martyrdom and ultimate heavenly triumph. In contrast, the Polynesians bearing down upon the priest are anachronistically painted with charcoal black complexions and appear as dark, hulking shadows. Thus, the only indigenous people in this chapel are rendered little more than strikingly racialized tropes of atavistic barbarity.

While the chapel is full of emblems of white Australian nationalism, there are no Aboriginal designs in the religious space itself. This is perhaps surprising, as the Indigenous community of Australia presented Domus with a collection of artworks in 2010 to mark the canonisation of Mary MacKillop. These now hang in a corridor opposite reception, leading to accommodation within the hotel complex proper (see Figures 7 and 8). A tall cross intricately decorated in the abstract style of Indigenous dot-painting is positioned beside a plaque which reads:

As you join with others from many lands and cultures in this special place Domus Australia we ask you to pause and acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples of Australia. YOU ARE WELCOME to this home away from home and we hope that the spirit of Australia enriches your time here.

On the opposite wall, hang *Madonna and Child (Mimi Ngairé)* and *Crucifixion* (2010) by Gumbaingirr/Dhungutti artist Richard Campbell. Containing many traditional motifs, both artworks eloquently connect Indigenous spirituality to Catholic iconography. Arguably, their location means these artworks will be seen by more hotel visitors and the plaque is a welcome, albeit rather generic, acknowledgment of First Nations peoples. Nevertheless, its position outside the religious space of the chapel is certainly emblematic of the wider marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives within the Australian Catholic Church.

Notwithstanding the aesthetic beauty and spiritual force of Newton's *Our Lady of the Southern Cross*, I could not help but compare its fair-skinned subjects with Karel Kupka's *Aboriginal Madonna* (1970). This painting portrays Mary and the infant Christ after the manner of First Nations people from the Daly River region of the Northern Territory and currently hangs in the

Darwin cathedral (Figure 9). Nor could I help but contrast the chapel with the Church of St Therese at Wurrumiyanga on Bathurst Island (Figure 10), which I had visited a few months earlier. Built on the site of Gsell's mission, the church was completed in 1940 and the sanctuary redecorated in the 1980s to reflect the blending of Tiwi culture with Christian faith. Indeed, despite the many examples of Aboriginal Catholic art in churches across Australia, Domus has put such iconography to one side.

When Pope Benedict officially blessed and opened the complex, he remarked that it had brought 'a little corner of Australia to Rome'.⁶ Indeed, here was an opportunity to make a strong statement about what it means to be Catholic in Australia. However, I would argue that the exclusion of Indigenous devotional objects and perspectives in this chapel is symptomatic of a broader historical exclusion. The preoccupation with Irish experiences and the concomitant formation of a particularly Hibernicised Catholic identity meant that the efforts of religious congregations from continental Europe conducting outreach to Indigenous peoples in western and northern Australia were often overlooked. More fundamentally still, First Nations' experiences and understandings of Catholicism risk being marginalised by both the Church and its historians.

A related result of this systemic neglect has been that the careers of Catholic missionaries, those who first brought the Christian message to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, have also suffered from a lack of detailed scholarly consideration. When these men and women do appear in the historical narrative, they are usually depicted as peculiar outliers and there is always a risk that popular legends are repeated as academic fact. This is problematic because it means that the complexities of the tripartite relationship between missionaries, governments, and First Nations peoples are often glossed over or ignored altogether, particularly within Catholic scholarship. This inhibits accurate truth telling and ultimately frustrates efforts towards sincere reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia. Still largely shrouded in myth, Gsell remains a particularly prominent example of this ontological shortcoming and a detailed historical study of his life is long overdue.

This thesis provides the first comprehensive academic investigation into Gsell's missionary and ecclesiastical career. Going beyond the many myths and legends, it uses Gsell as a lens through which to examine race relations in northern Australia during the first half of the

⁶ Timothy Norris, 'A Little Corner of Australia', *Australian Confraternity of Catholic Clergy* (Winter, 2012). <https://www.clergy.asn.au/history/a-little-corner-of-australia/>.

twentieth century. It locates Gsell within the context of evolving Indigenous policy in the Northern Territory, over which he exerted significant influence through strategic collusion with Commonwealth authorities, while simultaneously demonstrating the ways in which Gsell stood at the forefront of shifting Catholic attitudes towards First Nations peoples. It reveals a man of strong conviction, incredible political reach, and conflicting legacy. Gsell worked as an advocate for Indigenous welfare and challenged the racist attitudes of his contemporaries. Notwithstanding his ethnocentric paternalism, the missionary's gradualist approach to Christian conversion helped ensure the preservation of a great many aspects of traditional culture on the Tiwi Islands. Yet Gsell also wholeheartedly endorsed assimilation policies which saw the forced removal of mixed-descent children from their families from as early as 1910. This resulted in the destruction of many Indigenous languages and cultures as, torn from kin and Country, these children became members of the Stolen Generations. By interrogating the legends, this thesis ultimately aims to provide a more holistic appraisal of Gsell's life and legacy in the Northern Territory.

Background

Monsignor Francis Xavier Gsell MSC DD OBE LOH (Figure 11) was born in Alsace in 1872. He began secondary schooling in France in 1887 and entered the religious order of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (MSC) in 1892. He studied philosophy and theology at St Apollinaire University in Rome, earning a doctorate in divinity and being ordained to the priesthood in 1896. He travelled to Sydney in 1897 where he began teaching seminarians within the order's missionary college. In 1900 he was reassigned to the mission fields in Papua New Guinea and eventually appointed Apostolic Administrator of the Northern Territory region (see Maps 1 and 2) in 1906. Having re-established the institutional Church in the township of Darwin, he founded a mission settlement at Wurrumiyanga on Bathurst Island in 1911 and spent the following three decades ministering among the Tiwi people. During this time in charge of the diocese, he also oversaw the establishment of new parishes at Alice Springs (1929) and Tennant Creek (1935), as well as new missions at Port Keats (1935), Garden Point (1941), and Arltunga (1942). For his services to the crown, he was awarded an Order of the British Empire in 1935, and, for his services to the Church, was consecrated Bishop of Darwin in 1938. Gsell was appointed Titular Bishop of Paros in 1948, before retiring to Sydney in 1949. In 1951, the French Fourth Republic granted him the award of *Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur*, while Pope Pius XII made him a Bishop-Assistant at the Pontifical Throne. He

published his memoir in French in 1954 and then in English in 1955. Gsell died in 1960 at the age of 87. His body was buried in Sydney but later re-interred in Darwin in 1982.

Gsell is best known for his work among the Tiwi people; the traditional custodians of Bathurst and Melville Islands, a region located approximately 80 kilometres to the north of Darwin (see Map 3). Unlike the Yolngu of Arnhem Land, the Tiwi lived in relative isolation prior to the late-nineteenth century. They had minimal contact with other First Nations groups, much less the peoples of Southeast Asia, and managed to resist all prior European attempts at invasion and colonisation. This historical and geographical isolation made them the ideal subjects for Gsell's missionary evangelism. When he arrived in Darwin, he made a rather bleak assessment of Europeans living in the pioneer town; mercenaries and misfits, prone to drunkenness, gambling, and all manner of impropriety. Such men were not considered worthy standard bearers for western civilisation. Gsell believed that establishing a mission station on the outskirts of town could only have a deleterious effect on First Nations peoples, as free and easy contact with European corruptors would seriously hinder Christianising efforts. Instead, he resolved to have the entirety of Bathurst Island declared a reserve, effectively prohibiting all unauthorised non-Indigenous persons from entering the region. In this enterprise he enjoyed the unfailing support of the Commonwealth government.

Gsell's approach to Christian conversion is best described as gradualist. A firm believer that 'sincere paganism is better than false Christianity', he sought to introduce Catholicism by degrees. He paid the Tiwi in rations to construct mission houses, a church, school, and convent. With time, two nuns belonging to the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart joined the mission staff and began to teach local children alongside mixed-descent children from the mainland. The Tiwi appear to have accepted the missionaries and soon developed a relationship of trust and mutual benefit. Gsell studied Tiwi practice in order to realise his evangelising mission by working with Indigenous culture, rather than against it. This willingness to engage with Tiwi customs earned him the remarkable title of 'the bishop with 150 wives'; a title which requires explanation.

While there was much that Gsell tolerated in Tiwi culture, he could not abide polygamy, a practice which he considered to be a major obstacle to Christian conversion. Under traditional Tiwi law, women were promised in marriage before their conception. During puberty, a young woman left her parents and joined her promised husband who allocated her a son-in-law. Any daughters born to this woman became the automatic wives of her pre-allocated son-in-law.

Promised husbands were always fully initiated men, and normally had to wait until their late thirties or early forties before they could claim their teenage brides. A man could have multiple mothers-in-law and claim as many wives as he could support. When he died these wives passed to another.⁷ Though these cultural practices were opposed to Catholic doctrine, Gsell never challenged this custom until circumstances allowed him to do so.

Around 1916, a young Tiwi woman named Martina asked Gsell for assistance. She was promised to an older man with many other wives. He had come to claim her, but she wanted to remain at the mission. Following a series of complex negotiations, Gsell purchased Martina from her husband in exchange for trade goods. She therefore became Gsell's wife according to Tiwi law. Martina lived at the mission, was educated by the nuns, and eventually (re)married a young man of her choosing who accepted the Christian understanding of marriage. Thereafter, Gsell bought 130 young women and girls in this manner – though the number was inflated to 150 – spreading the Catholic faith through the mission school and ensuring that Tiwi women would marry men, closer to their own age, who upheld monogamy. Subsequent children of these unions were baptised and likewise attended the mission school. Though many elements of traditional custom were retained, Gsell's strategy proved quite successful and by the 1950s Wurrumiyanga supported a thriving Tiwi Catholic population.

Understandably, Gsell's methods led to some alarmed inquiries as the years went by. Yet he always enjoyed the backing of key officials such as John Anderson Gilruth, the first Administrator of the Northern Territory, and Sir Baldwin Spencer, whose term as Chief Protector in 1912 set the tone of Commonwealth Indigenous policy for the next two decades. Gsell also received papal approval during visits to Rome in 1921 and 1948.

Gsell's career in the Northern Territory spanned over four decades, two world wars, and major developments in Commonwealth Indigenous policy. Yet, until now, he has never been the sole subject of a comprehensive academic study.

Literature Review

Gsell is included in dictionaries of biography or similar publications. Short entries by Georges Knittel, Jean-Paul Blatz and Peter Donovan provide a brief chronology of Gsell's life and achievements, while more detailed records by Robin Hempel and André Dupeyrat tend to read

⁷ Jane Goodale, *Tiwi Wives: A Study of the Women of Melville Island, North Australia* (London: University of Washington Press, 1974); 1-57. See also Esther Babui, *History of Bathurst Island People* (Nguiu, Bathurst Island: Nguiu Ngingingawila Literature Production Centre, 1983), 11-13.

as hagiography.⁸ Few entries question Gsell's motivations or challenge his attitudes, nor do they point to greater historical questions. Yet, while not always making critical evaluations, they at least acknowledge the significance of his contributions to history. The same cannot be said of his treatment in broader historical scholarship, which is fragmentary at best or else excludes Gsell entirely.

His story is conspicuously absent from mainstream scholarship on both the Catholic Church and academic histories of the Northern Territory. While Edmund Campion makes passing mention of Gsell, Patrick O'Farrell neglects him completely, making scant reference to Indigenous Australians, much less the missionary congregations which operated in northern Australia.⁹ In a similar vein, Anthony Caruana's history of the MSC's Australian Province touches only briefly on the northern missions. When Caruana does mention Gsell, he appears to diminish his importance, attributing the expansion of the northern diocese in the 1930s not to its long-term leader but rather to an Australian-born subordinate.¹⁰ This is curious, but common. Stefano Girola identifies the previously noted tendency of Australian Catholics to privilege the perspectives of the Irish diaspora and thus diminish the attention paid to 'foreign' missionaries and the First Nations peoples they sought to convert.¹¹ In this context, Girola recognises Gsell as one of the missionaries who were relegated to the margins and treated as peculiar outliers in the history of the Church. This peripheral position is likewise reflected in his treatment in academic scholarship on the Northern Territory. Alan Powell, Douglas Lockwood, and Kathy De La Rue, for example, make only brief mention of the missionary

⁸ Georges Knittel, 'Mgr François Xavier Gsell (1872-1960)', *Évêques Missionnaires d'Alsace* (Strasbourg: Société d'Édition de la Basse-Alsace, 1965), 163-166; Jean-Paul Blatz, 'Gsell, François Xavier', *Dictionnaire du Monde Religieux dans la France Contemporaine*, edited by Jean-Marie Mayeur and Yves-Marie Hilaire (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), 171-172; Peter Donovan, 'Gsell, Francis Xavier (1872-1960)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-6502>; Robin Hempel, 'Gsell, Francis Xavier (1872-1960)', in *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2008), 246-248; André Dupeyrat, 'Épilogue', in *The Bishop with 150 Wives: Fifty Years as a Missionary* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1955), 162-174.

⁹ Edmund Campion, *Australian Catholics* (Ringwood: Viking, 1987), 100; Patrick O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community of Australia: A History* (West Melbourne: Nelson, 1977).

¹⁰ Anthony Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill: A History of the Sacred Heart Monastery, Kensington 1897-1997* (Kensington, NSW: Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, 2002), 188.

¹¹ Stefano Girola, *Rhetoric and Action: The Policies and Attitudes of the Catholic Church with Regard to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, 1885-1967*, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, The University of Queensland, 2006; See also Naomi Turner, *Catholics in Australia: A Social History* (North Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1992), 116; Kevin T. Livingston, 'Voices in the Wilderness: Apologists for the Aborigines in the Past', *The Australasian Catholic Record* 56, 2 (1979): 187-188; G.J. O'Kelly, 'The Jesuit Mission Stations in the Northern Territory, 1882-1899', Honours thesis. Monash University, 1967, 76; Lindsay Proudfoot and Dianne Hall, *Imperial Spaces: Placing the Irish and Scots in Colonial Australia* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), 209; O'Farrell, *Catholic Church and Community*, 273; and Campion, *Australian Catholics*, 96-97.

bishop, while Tony Austin largely excludes him from his otherwise comprehensive examination of Commonwealth Indigenous policy.¹²

Gsell receives greater attention in popular histories of the region. These draw heavily upon the mythic figure of the ‘polygamist priest’ and ‘bishop with 150 wives’, which became a staple of rather flamboyant magazine and newspaper supplements throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. While Gsell appears to have accepted such appellations in bemused good humour, it is important to note these were not strictly of his own making. Articles about the Bathurst Island mission appeared in Australian newspapers from as early as 1911, the year in which it was founded. Yet these stories did not report specifically on Gsell’s interventions into Tiwi marital customs until October 1929.¹³ These articles explained that he had purchased girls from their elderly promised husbands but it was not until much later that journalists began to clarify that, from an Indigenous perspective, Gsell was much more than a legal guardian. In October 1937, the *Sydney Morning Herald* described Gsell as ‘the owner of 121 wives’, and, in April 1939, *The Sun* gave the missionary the sensational moniker by which he would forever be known.¹⁴ When Gsell completed the manuscript draft of his memoir in 1951, which he had dictated to an Australian colleague in the English language, he entitled the book *My Fifty Years of Mission Life*.¹⁵ However, when the finished product was picked up by Parisian publishing house, La Colombe, and translated into French in 1954, the title was changed to *L’Évêque aux 150 Épouses*. Presumably, this was done to make the memoir more marketable by using both an eye-catching title and the alias for which Gsell was already famous. When the French version was translated back into English and published by Angus and Robertson in 1955, they too went with the more memorable title of *The Bishop with 150 Wives*, as did the German publishers of *Der Bischof mit Seinen 150 Brauten* in 1956.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Gsell obviously approved these

¹² Alan Powell, *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2015), 164-5, 186; Douglas Lockwood, *The Front Door: Darwin 1869-1969* (Melbourne: Rigby Limited, 1968), 115-116; Kathy De La Rue, *A Stubborn City: Darwin 1911-1978* (Casuarina, NT: Historical Society of the Northern Territory, 2017), 144; Tony Austin, *Never Trust a Government Man: Northern Territory Aboriginal Policy, 1911-1939* (Darwin: NTU Press, 1997), 47; see also Glenville Pike, *Frontier Territory: The Exciting and Colourful History of Northern Australia* (Darwin: Adventure Publications, 1988), 195.

¹³ ‘In Unknown Australia: How Abo. Girls were Slaves to Cruel Custom’, *Evening News* (Sydney), 5 October 1929. 3.

¹⁴ ‘Owner of 121 “Wives”’: Monsignor Gsell in Sydney – Tells of His Work at Bathurst Island’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 September 1937. 17; ‘Bishop with 150 Wives’, *The Sun* (Sydney), 26 April 1939. 13.

¹⁵ Francis Xavier Gsell, ‘My Fifty Years of Mission Life’. Unpublished manuscript. Uncatalogued item. Diocesan Archives, Darwin, Northern Territory.

¹⁶ See Francis Xavier Gsell, *Der Bischof mit Seinen 150 Bräuten: Fünfzig Jahre als Missionar im Australischen Busch*, translated by Lorenz Häflinger (Munich: Rex-Verlag, 1956); Francis Xavier Gsell, *L’Évêque aux 150 Épouses: Cinquante Années de vie Missionnaire en Australie* (Paris: La Colombe, 1954); and Francis Xavier Gsell, *The Bishop with 150 Wives: Fifty Years as a Missionary* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1955).

changes and they did much to legitimise and enshrine his legendary status in Australian folklore. Perhaps motivated by a similar desire to sell a good story, popular narratives tend to obfuscate the realities of the historical person and render Gsell little more than one of the many colourful characters who pioneered the Territory in its early years. Ernestine Hill is emblematic of this approach, describing him as ‘a gentle-mannered priest from Alsace-Lorraine, blue-eyed, with a square-cut beard like a medieval saint ... [who] bought over two hundred babies ... [and so] triumphed over tribal custom.’¹⁷ These works do much to promote Gsell’s mystique but provide little by way of historical analysis or contextual detail.

The tendency toward romanticising the figure of Gsell is most evident in Catholic histories produced within the Darwin Diocese. Though these works chronicle his life in considerably more detail than their secular counterparts, they often constitute a hagiography celebrating the ostensibly triumphant progress of the Church in the Northern Territory. The numerous works of Frank Flynn are typical of this approach, as is the account of Gsell’s successor, Bishop John Patrick O’Loughlin.¹⁸ Aside from their notes of partiality, a key limitation of this scholarship lies in an apparent overreliance on Gsell’s own memoir as a definitive source.

Written in his retirement, the memoir traces Gsell’s career in the Northern Territory, paying close attention to his time on Bathurst Island. It serves as a manifesto to missionary gradualism, an amateur ethnography, and a general history of the diocese. Though his reflections and recollections can be very candid, the memoir is, nevertheless, a selective document. For example, writing at the end of a celebrated career, the diocese flourishing and his legacy assured, Gsell paints a rather harmonious picture of his relationship with Church colleagues, an image which is belied by a judicious examination of the archival record. Indeed, Gsell’s memoir contains no hint of an extremely acrimonious dispute with the Australian Province, as well as members of his own staff, which raged throughout the 1920s and almost destroyed the northern mission. Perhaps the passage of years rendered what was then a massive disruption, little more than a temporary setback, seemingly insignificant to Gsell in hindsight. More likely, the decision was made to spare the reputations of his confrères. With the slight exception of Martin Wilson, Church historians likewise exclude this episode from the historical record.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ernestine Hill, *The Territory: The Classic Saga of Australia’s Far North* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1951), 9, 220.

¹⁸ John Patrick O’Loughlin, *The History of the Catholic Church in the Northern Territory* (Darwin: Library Services of the Northern Territory, 1986), 7; Frank Flynn, *Northern Gateway* (Sydney: F.P. Leonard, 1966), 87.

¹⁹ Martin Wilson, *Gsell Centenary: Missiological Reflections – Occasional Address*. Delivered at Nungalinga College, Darwin, 14 August 2006.

This is problematic, not only because it denies historical truths, but also because the conflict was illustrative of the wider divergence in attitudes between northern missionaries and the mainstream clergy in southern Australia. More concerning still is the tendency to repeat uncritically Gsell's opinions about First Nations peoples.

Gsell's memoir is a complex document. At times he exhibits an admirable sensitivity and compassion towards Indigenous people which was certainly rare among his contemporaries. The memoir provides abundant testimony to the intelligence and practical capacity of First Nations peoples, serving as a rebuke to the racist slanders which often depicted Aboriginal people as stupid and useless. Nevertheless, Gsell is quite disparaging of traditional Indigenous culture and displays a great many ethnocentric attitudes. While lauding the virtues of his converts, he often characterises those who remained obstinate in their ancestral beliefs as little more than 'big children' beholden to magic and superstition. Naturally, this leads him to mispresent and unfairly malign many elements of Tiwi culture and social organisation. Those who rely upon the memoir often fall victim to a tacit acceptance of Gsell's paternalism and ethnocentric presuppositions or else quote selectively in order to make his writings more palatable to modern readers. Anne Gardiner, Elizabeth Little, and John Pye are representative of the latter approach, whereas Flynn and O'Loughlin represent the former.²⁰ A notable exception is the evaluation offered by Peter Hearn, which at least acknowledges Gsell's European exceptionalism and critiques this to some extent.²¹ Fortunately, a more analytical approach is taken in academic scholarship concerning the Tiwi Islands.

Many historians and anthropologists have conducted detailed studies of Tiwi culture which also assess the effect of missionaries on traditional beliefs and practices. These are far more honest about Gsell's disdain for Aboriginal religion and social customs than their Church counterparts. The works of Regina Ganter represent the most detailed example of this scholarship. Indeed, her online database and extended biographies of northern missionaries, including Gsell, are very comprehensive. This thesis draws upon her work and builds upon it.²²

²⁰ Anne Gardiner *We are Wiser for Their Words: Celebrating 100 Years of Catholic Faith, Nguiu – Wurrumiyanga, Bathurst Island, 1911-2011* (Darwin: Nguiu Ngingawila Literature Production, 2011), 2-5; Elizabeth Little, 'Our Darwin Diocese – History in Brief – Part 5 – 1911-1912', *Unity – Catholic Community of the Northern Territory*, 5 (September 2010), 4-5; John Pye *The Tiwi Islands* (Darwin: J.R. Coleman, 1980), 29-46.

²¹ Peter Hearn, *A Theology of Mission: An Analysis of the Theology of Mission of the Catholic Diocese of Darwin in its Ministry to Aboriginal People during the Episcopacy of John O'Loughlin MSC (1949-85)* (Kensington: Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, 2003), 30-38.

²² See Regina Ganter, *German Missionaries in Australia: A Web-Directory of Intercultural Encounters*. Griffith University. <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/>.

There remains a deep rift in academic scholarship about the overall efficacy of Gsell's approach. All acknowledge that Gsell set out to change Tiwi society. Anthropologists such as Charles Hart, Arnold Pilling and Eric Venbrux argue that the missionary priest caused significant cultural disruptions.²³ Over decades, he eroded the authority of male Elders while simultaneously converting large numbers of children and young people to Catholicism, effectively transforming the social system from a polygamous gerontocracy to monogamous patriarchy. As we have seen, the cornerstone of this mission policy was the purchase of young women from their much older promised husbands. Corinna Erckenbrecht describes this as 'one of the most bizarre testimonies to overseas mission history'.²⁴ Gsell was certainly unique among Australian Catholic missionaries – not to mention Protestant ones – in taking this approach. Yet more so than a method of evangelism, Gsell justified this decision by claiming that he freed young women from child marriage and the supposed tyranny of their polygamous husbands. Gsell declared that women were hitherto considered nothing more than 'chattels' and 'slaves' who existed in a state of moral and physical degradation. In this context, the missionary bishop positioned himself as a liberator and protector of women who succeeded in elevating their status. This appraisal of traditional Tiwi culture has been challenged by a great many anthropologists. Jane Goodale and Diane Bell, for example, dispute Gsell's assertions that Tiwi women were disempowered under traditional polygyny and instead demonstrate the many ways in which women exerted their autonomy and indeed cultural authority.²⁵ These build on the work of Hart and Pilling who argue convincingly that older women held considerable sway, even if their younger counterparts enjoyed limited agency.²⁶ Anthropologists maintain that Gsell was too quick to judge and irrevocably altered Tiwi marriage customs in the process.

Yet historians such as John Morris, James Franklin and Ganter argue these interventions produced an ultimate good. Morris, for example, notes that many mission policies were

²³ C.W.M Hart and Arnold R. Pilling, *The Tiwi of Northern Australia* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1988), 100-109; Eric Venbrux, *A Death in the Tiwi Islands: Conflict: Ritual and Social Life in an Australian Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 40-43.

²⁴ Corinna Erckenbrecht, 'Der Bischof mit Seinen 150 Bräuten', *Jahrbuch des Museums für Völkerkunde Leipzig*, 41 (2003): 303-322. Cited in Regina Ganter, 'Gsell, Francis Xavier Ep. (1872-1960)', *German Missionaries in Australia*, Griffith University. <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>.

²⁵ See Goodale, *Tiwi Wives*; and Diane Bell, 'Choose Your Mission Wisely: Christian Colonials and Aboriginal Marital Arrangements on the Northern Frontier', in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose eds. (Bedford Park, South Australia: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1988), 338-352.

²⁶ Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 53.

formulated in consultation with Tiwi people and were implemented with their consent.²⁷ Franklin and Ganter also argue that these policies constituted an early expression of human rights. Notwithstanding Gsell's ethnocentrism, they assert that his attacks on polygamy and child marriage came from a place of deep concern.²⁸ As Ganter asserts: 'Gsell came under criticism for his intervention in child marriages ... Recently international interventions in child marriages have not been subjected to such criticisms. The detrimental impact of child marriage on health, well-being, and education is now well documented, and the United Nations considers child marriage as a violation of human rights.'²⁹ Though Gsell did not employ the language of human rights, he nevertheless sought to protect girls and young women from what is now readily considered sexual exploitation. There are few in Australia today who would defend the practice of child marriage. Similar statements can be made about polygamy, which is currently considered unlawful in Australia. But it is not so much Gsell's aim as his methods and underlying attitudes which should be subject to analysis.

While historians debate the morality of Gsell's interventions, a more significant consideration is the extent to which Gsell used the issue of polygamy and child marriage as a means by which to justify more comprehensive attacks on Aboriginal culture. Such questions cut to the core of missionary endeavour in Australia. In the interest of brevity, this thesis confines its discussions to Catholic missions, yet it is certainly necessary to acknowledge that there is a significant body of scholarship relating to Protestant enterprises.³⁰ While these largely fall outside the present scope of inquiry, it is also worth identifying briefly key points of difference between denominations so as to further demonstrate the place of Catholic case-studies within the overarching history of the Christian churches and the settler-colonial project in Australia. Except for the Lutherans and Moravians, most Protestant missionaries identified strongly with British cultural traditions. This is a major point of difference with Catholic missionaries who

²⁷ John Morris, *The Tiwi: From Isolation to Cultural Change – A History of Encounters Between an Island People and Outside Forces* (Darwin: Northern Territory University Press, 200), 125.

²⁸ James Franklin, 'Catholic Missions to Aboriginal Australia: An Evaluation of Their Overall Effect'. *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 1, 37 (2016): 45-68.

²⁹ Regina Ganter, *The Contest for Aboriginal Souls: European Missionary Agendas in Australia* (Acton, ACT: Australian National University Press, 2018), 192.

³⁰ See for example, Peggy Brock, ed., *Indigenous Peoples, Christianity and Religious Change* (Boston: Brill, 2005); Joanna Cruickshank and Patricia Grimshaw, *White Women, Aboriginal Missions, and Australian Settler Governments: Maternal Contradictions* (Boston: Brill, 2019); Patricia Grimshaw and Andrew May eds, *Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Exchange* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2010); Felicity Jensz, *German Moravian Missionaries in the British Colony of Victoria, Australia, 1848:1908: Influential Strangers* (Boston: Brill, 2010); Christine Lockwood, *The Two Kingdoms: Lutheran Missionaries and the British Civilising Mission in Early South Australia*. Doctoral thesis (The University of Adelaide, 2014); and Laura Rademaker, *Found in Translation: Many Meanings on a North Australian Mission* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018).

were predominantly from continental Europe. While Protestants typically viewed their work in the light of British humanitarian movements and the so-called ‘civilising’ mission, the motivations of Catholic religious were more often associated with the objectives of the institutional Church as directed by Propaganda Fide and the Pope. This had the potential to impact upon their relationship with secular governments as well as the ways in which they perceived material and spiritual success in their endeavours. Another key difference related to staffing. Whereas Protestants often depended on married couples to operate their enterprises and were anxious to avoid sending single men, Catholics filled their missions with celibate religious who had taken vows of poverty and obedience. Naturally, this affected social dynamics at the missions, not to mention the longevity of certain initiatives. Overall, the presence of nuns remains the most distinctive feature of Catholic missions, providing, as we shall see, opportunities for acculturation which were simply unavailable to their Protestant counterparts. By focusing on the Catholic Church in the Northern Territory, this thesis offers insight into distinctive mission narratives which both challenge and reinforce prevailing understandings of Christianity on the Australian frontier.

Indeed, extensive comparative studies by historians such as Ganter and John Harris demonstrate that Christian evangelists operated on a broad spectrum of behaviour and opinion, from relatively benign to utterly destructive.³¹ Some were quite tolerant of traditional culture and can rightly claim their missions operated as safe-havens for First Nations peoples during the catastrophic period of European invasion and colonisation. Still others were so ineffectual, and their time in operation so brief, as to be rendered utterly insignificant. Under the guise of bestowing the gift of Christianity and western civilisation, others actively sought to obliterate Indigenous culture altogether. They imprisoned people and campaigned against traditional languages, religious beliefs, and customary practice. Some became centres of industry and provided residents with technical skills, while others became sites of near starvation, disease, and suffering.

A key question for historians, then, is where Gsell sits on this spectrum. Anthropologists have been quick to demonstrate that the Tiwi remained resilient in the face of encroaching European culture. They have retained their language and a great many traditional ceremonies, even if they accepted monogamous marriage and converted to Christianity. This is clearly a testament to their adaptability, but it also raises the question as to whether this situation may have been a

³¹ John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1990); Ganter, *Contest for Aboriginal Souls*, ix-xxxii.

consequence of Gsell's own missionary gradualism. Morris, at the very least, points to Gsell's sensitivity and restraint:

He could have banned local cultural practices and the customary lifestyle, even forced people to attend church services through threats to withhold their food rations, as occurred on some other missions. He did none of these. ... He may have failed to understand and appreciate aspects of the culture and lifestyle, and no doubt, when he sought to punish those whom he saw as wrongdoers friction did arise from time to time. Nevertheless, he was loved and respected by the Tiwi, and his memory is still revered by them.³²

Indeed, to this day, Gsell is held in high esteem by the Tiwi people. In 2012, Francis Xavier Maralampuwu Kurrupuwu became a member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly. Named after the bishop, Kurrupuwu is the great-grandson of Martina, the woman who first challenged the Tiwi marriage system by rejecting her promised husband and becoming Gsell's 'bride'. In his maiden speech, Kurrupuwu paid tribute to his great-grandmother and to Gsell: 'Many will know of Bishop Gsell as the Bishop with 150 wives. This occurred as Bishop Gsell became the protector of young promised wives who did not want to marry an old man under Tiwi law. This was a major change for Tiwi culture. It is a measure of the strength of the Tiwi that they were able to cope with the change.'³³ Gsell's actions seemed to have earned more criticism from non-Indigenous scholars than from the Tiwi themselves.

While Gsell's life among the Tiwi has attracted the most scholarly attention, less understood is his relationship with the Commonwealth government and his broad influence over Indigenous policy in the Northern Territory. While historical scholarship notes the general collaboration between religious organisations and the secular state in forming and implementing policies affecting the lives of First Nations peoples, these links have not been well established in respect to Gsell. Naturally, this relationship was shaped and necessitated by circumstances peculiar to Australia. At the time of invasion and colonisation, Britain declared the entire continent *terra nullius*, asserting that Australia was previously uninhabited and ignoring the fact that First Nations peoples had occupied the island continent for at least 60,000 years, or from time immemorial. Colonisers denied the rights of Indigenous peoples, and their ancestral lands reverted to the Crown. Not only was this a grave injustice, but it also produced a unique

³² Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 125.

³³ Northern Territory, *Opening of the First Session of the Twelfth Assembly*, Legislative Assembly, 23 October 2012 (Francis Xavier Maralampuwu Kurrupuwu, Member for Arafura).

dynamic in terms of the tripartite relationship between secular authorities, religious organisations, and First Nations peoples in Australia. Because it was the government, not Indigenous peoples, who legally owned the lands upon which missionaries established stations, religious organisations, without exception, had to negotiate with the state to secure access. Though missionaries elsewhere in the Pacific region often colluded with colonial governments, they were not strictly required to do so because their work was conducted on lands to which the local inhabitants had permitted access. *Terra nullius* meant that such independence was not possible in Australia and it compelled missionaries to work closely with secular powers. But rather than just capitulate to government programs by necessity, it is clear Gsell played an active role in determining policy agendas. While scholars note his positive relationships with heavyweights such as Spencer and Gilruth, few have analysed the ways in which Gsell's methods harmonised with and fundamentally supported their programs. Indeed, the two most authoritative works on Indigenous policy in the Northern Territory – Barbara Cummings' *Take This Child* (1990) and Austin's *Never Trust a Government Man* (1997) – barely mention Gsell.³⁴ This thesis makes a major contribution to such scholarship, demonstrating the ways in which Gsell helped shape government agendas for over four decades.

One important and much under-researched area over which Gsell held quite considerable sway was in respect to policies affecting so-called 'half-caste' people. Too often, researchers focus on Gsell's relatively positive interactions with the Tiwi, without critically assessing his contribution to, and complicity in, a traumatic form of colonialism which saw the forced removal of Indigenous children of mixed-descent from their biological families, a group now known as the Stolen Generations. Scholars such as Sue Stanton, Franklin and Hearn are unique in discussing his involvement in the foundation of the Garden Point mission, which housed such children from 1942 onwards. Stanton criticises the racist paternalism which informed Gsell's thinking on mixed-descent children, whereas Franklin – an apologist for assimilation – uses Garden Point as a positive case study.³⁵ Examined in much less detail is the presence of Stolen Generations children at the Darwin convent from as early as 1910 when the policy of removing children first came into effect in the Northern Territory. This thesis is distinctive in that it includes the history of Gsell's involvement with mixed-descent people alongside the

³⁴ Barbara Cummings, *Take This Child: From Kahlin Compound to the Retta Dixon Children's Home*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1990), 19; Austin, *Never Trust a Government Man*, 47.

³⁵ Sue Stanton, *Coloureds and Catholics: A Colonial Subject's Narrative of the Factors and Processes that Led to the Colonisation and Conversion of Coloureds at Garden Point Mission, 1941-1967*, PhD thesis, Charles Darwin University, 2007; James Franklin, 'The Missionary with 150 Wives', *Quadrant* 56 (July/August 2012): 30-32; See also, Hearn, *Theology of Mission*, 38-58.

more familiar study of his interactions with the Tiwi. Doing so allows for a more comprehensive analysis of his racial attitudes as well as his role as advisor to, and partner with, the Commonwealth. It also contributes to a significant body of scholarship on race relations in northern Australia, among which Ganter, Henry Reynolds, and Julia Martínez provide important examples.³⁶ These works demonstrate the ways in which Commonwealth legislation sought to address anxiety over the growth of racially mixed communities in the country's north. As we shall see, Gsell played an important role in bringing many of these fears to the surface and demonstrates that his cultural reach extended much further than the shores of Bathurst Island.

Methodology

This thesis draws heavily upon microhistory research methodologies. Broadly speaking, microhistory involves the exhaustive investigation of a narrowly defined smaller object, such as a single event, community group or individual life. The approach was first pioneered by Italian historians such as Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni in the 1970s and originated in a frustration with the traditional forms of historical inquiry practiced within the social sciences. These involved large-scale quantitative studies which aimed to demonstrate broad social patterns and processes. Proponents of *microstoria* criticised these methods, believing they distorted reality at the level of the individual and fundamentally undermined the agency of historical subjects. In their quest to define average persons and average experiences, social scientists fell victim to generalisations which could not withstand the test of the small-scale realities they claimed to explain.³⁷

But rather than abandon social scientific approaches altogether, microhistory enhances its methodologies by gaining deeper insight into large-scale processes. As Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon argues:

Microhistorians try to show the historical actors' experiences and how they saw themselves and their lives and which meanings they attributed to things that had happened to them, while they also try to point to deep historical structures, long-lived

³⁶ Regina Ganter, *Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2006); Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of the People of Australia's North* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2003); Julia Martínez, *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labour and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

³⁷ See Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 101-11; see also Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szigárto, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013).

ways of thinking and global processes using a retrospective analysis – factors that were absent from the actors’ own horizons of interpretation. All this can only be brought together, without running the risk of over-simplifying the past, when historians investigate a narrowly defined subject.³⁸

A pivotal way in which microhistory achieves its objectives is through detailed attention to outliers: those overlooked persons or marginalised voices which were hitherto ignored in broad analyses of society. By concentrating their investigations on supposedly unusual persons, places, and happenings, historians establish the ways in which their subjects deviated from the norm, thus creating a point of entry for a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the past.

The most famous example of microhistory is Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976). The book examines the peculiar cosmology of a sixteenth-century miller named Domenico Scandella or Menocchio, whose heretical beliefs eventually resulted in his execution by the Roman Inquisition. Ginzburg reconstructs Menocchio’s unique worldview through a detailed exploration of inquisition records, arguing that, as a literate miller of the peasant class, he lived on the borderlands between elite and popular culture, on the cusp of a period marked ‘by an increasingly rigid distinction between the culture of the dominant classes and the artisan and peasant cultures, as well as by the indoctrination of the masses from above’.³⁹ Notwithstanding his individual originality, Menocchio can be seen as emblematic of the period in which he lived. As Jill Lepore aptly observes, ‘however singular a person’s life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual’s life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole’.⁴⁰ In this sense, Ginzburg’s microscopic investigation into the life of an exceptional individual allows for a much deeper appreciation of historical transformations than could be offered by the study of a supposedly average person. It also goes beyond the realms of mere biography or case study, transforming its subject into an observational lens with which to investigate the past.

This thesis proposes to examine Gsell’s career in much the same way. It explores key moments from his life in exacting detail in order to interrogate the development and implementation of Indigenous policy in the Northern Territory as well as the changing attitudes of the institutional

³⁸ Ibid., 7.

³⁹ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 126.

⁴⁰ Jill Lepore, ‘Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography’, *The Journal of American History* 1, 88 (June 2001): 133.

Catholic Church in respect to their missionary outreach among First Nations peoples. While, at first glance, the apocryphal ‘bishop with 150 wives’ may appear to be unique, this thesis demonstrates that Gsell’s story was also emblematic of, and derived from, these wider historical processes.

As a bishop, Gsell occupied a privileged position within Australian society and indeed the Catholic Church. It is also undeniable that he exercised significant influence over Commonwealth policy in northern Australia. However, when approached as *microstoria*, his contributions to history are less important than the insights which can be gained by a close analysis of his life story. Notwithstanding Gsell’s relatively high status, this thesis maintains that his position within mainstream Australian society and the overarching priorities of the Catholic Church therein was a marginal one. As a missionary priest from continental Europe working among First Nations peoples in the north, Gsell’s story contrasts sharply with those of his contemporaries ministering to the Irish diaspora in the southern states. Similarly, its geographical setting in the Northern Territory likewise lends itself to a microhistory approach. Though the Northern Territory has always occupied a peripheral position in the imaginary of people living in the south, the region provides compelling insights into racial attitudes and anxieties because it was within this polyglot community that the myth of White Australia was so strongly tested and fundamentally belied. This is the basic paradox of microhistory and one which has been used to full effect. From his obscure seat on Bathurst Island, Gsell sat at the forefront of race relations in Australia.

Sources

This thesis is grounded in close archival research. The National Archives of Australia house comprehensive collections pertaining to the Northern Territory missions. These include annual reports as well as correspondence between Commonwealth and Church officials relating to the establishment and maintenance of each enterprise. They also contain official papers created during the period of South Australian rule. Such documents demonstrate the relationship between government and religious authorities, showing their relatively close collaboration in the formation and implementation of policies relating to First Nations peoples. Alongside detailed summaries of mission finances and industry appear the candid observations – and very often impassioned declarations – of key administrators, providing insight into the racial beliefs which informed official legislation as well as demonstrating the powerful bureaucratic machinery which enforced it.

In tandem with the Australian bureaucracy was that of the Catholic Church. This thesis also draws heavily upon archival materials housed within the Propaganda Fide Historical Archives in Rome. Established in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV with the papal bull *Inscrutabili Divinae Providentiae*, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (in Latin, the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) was responsible for all missionary jurisdictions, including Australia, during the period under consideration. They provided the financial support upon which many missions were dependent, and had the final say on all major appointments within apostolic vicariates and relevant dioceses; though such decisions were made in consultation with senior authorities within the religious congregations concerned. For example, the Prefect of Propaganda appointed Gsell Vicar Apostolic of Victoria and Palmerston in 1906, following the recommendations of the MSC Superior General who had in turn discussed the appointment with the Provincial Superior of the Australian Province. Documents within this archive, therefore, demonstrate the complex decision-making processes which informed missionary organisation at the highest level of Church administration.

To these bureaucratic perspectives can be added more personal ones from collections contained within the Australian MSC Province in the Chevalier Resource Centre in Sydney and, to a lesser extent, the Diocesan Archives in Darwin. Particular attention has been paid to letters which detail a conflict between Gsell and the Australian Province over the fate of the Bathurst Island Mission. Given the previously noted tendency towards hagiography, this rather bitter discord, which lasted for the better part of a decade and nearly resulted in the transfer of the mission to a different religious congregation, has yet to be the subject of significant academic scholarship and forms the basis of Chapter Five.

More problematic has been archival information about the religious sisters who also worked at Bathurst Island. However, though permission to access the archives of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH) in Sydney could not be obtained, this thesis cites primary documents available to a limited extent in secondary literature. Mary Venard's privately circulated history of the Australian Province, for example, includes extensive extracts from the daily *annals* of the Darwin convent.⁴¹ This has ensured that the perspectives of these most elusive of historical subjects – who, by their rule, desired 'to be unknown and esteemed as nothing' – continue to feature in the historical narrative.

⁴¹ Mary Venard, *History of the Australian Province of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart* (Kensington, NSW: Clarendon Press, 1974).

Taken together, the various archival collections detail decisions and debates conducted behind closed doors and away from public scrutiny. They demonstrate quite striking differences of opinion between Gsell and many of his contemporaries and provide compelling insights into his character and worldview beyond that which was presented in his memoir.

While some controversies – secular and religious – raged behind the scenes, many took place in plain view. Historical newspapers and periodicals have also provided a major repository of information. Local perspectives have been gained by close attention to the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* and the *Northern Standard*, whereas stories of broader national interest have been identified in popular newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Argus*. Catholic newspapers such as the *Advocate*, *Catholic Press*, *Freeman's Journal*, and *Southern Cross* were also consulted, as were publications produced by the MSCs such as the *Australian Annals of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*, and the French language periodical *Annales de Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur*. These have proved a treasure trove of historical opinion, containing as they do descriptions of major and minor events, extensive verbatim transcripts of speeches delivered by key figures and detailed articles and opinion pieces, as well as lengthy missionary correspondence from the field itself. Such sources allow for an examination of societal norms which have helped locate Gsell within a broad spectrum of opinion on Indigenous Australia.

Given the time which has elapsed since the period under consideration, this thesis relies consciously on archival research methodologies rather than taking an oral history approach. Gsell first arrived in the Northern Territory 114 years ago and travelled to Bathurst Island 109 years ago. He ceased to live at Wurrumiyanga 82 years ago, left Darwin 71 years ago and died 60 years ago. Therefore, anyone who knew Gsell during his career in any meaningful way is no longer alive. During a recent trip to Wurrumiyanga, I asked my Tiwi cultural advisors to recommend potential interview participants, to which request they joked we could visit the local cemetery: ‘All them old people, all passed away. Only ancestors.’⁴² However, conscious of the importance of including Indigenous perspectives alongside those of the official archive, this thesis draws upon Tiwi source material wherever possible. Particular attention has been paid to books published by the Nguiu Nginingawila Literature Production Centre, a small publishing house based at Wurrumiyanga which produced written and illustrated material in both the Tiwi and English languages throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s. One such important work is by Gerardine Tungatalum, a Tiwi Elder whose marriage rights were purchased by Gsell

⁴² John Wilson and Walter Kerinaiaua. Interview with Michael Francis. 10 March 2020. Wurrumiyanga, Bathurst Island, Northern Territory.

in 1929.⁴³ Another crucial repository of Tiwi perspectives is the work produced by Jane Bathgate and Darrell Lewis in 1999 which documents sites of cultural contact between Tiwi and non-Tiwi peoples on the Islands and relies heavily on Tiwi oral history traditions and their own interviews conducted with Tiwi Elders in 1996.⁴⁴ Alongside records held within the *Patakijiyali Museum*, these sources ensure that Tiwi perspectives are given equal weight with those of government administrators and Church authorities.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One traces Gsell's early life and influences in continental Europe during the final decades of the nineteenth century. It locates these formative years within the context of bitter animosity between the simultaneously regional and supranational Catholic Church and the secular governments of nascent nation-states. The ultimately losing battle fought by Pope Pius IX for temporal power and moral authority in Europe compelled the Church to look outward with renewed vigour, concentrating its evangelism abroad to safeguard its global influence. Pervasive secular antipathy provided the impetus for missionary work in Oceania. It paved the way for pioneers such as Henri Stanislas Verjus MSC who in turn inspired the young Gsell to join the priesthood. Yet, completing his theology doctorate in Rome, Gsell found himself at the heart of the universal Church during the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII, whose attitude towards secular states was altogether more conciliatory than that of his predecessor. The chapter concludes by arguing that the example provided by Leo ensured that Gsell would likewise adopt a constructive approach, choosing to work with secular power to achieve his missionary objectives in Australia.

Chapter Two follows Gsell's arrival in Sydney, sojourn to New Guinea, and eventual appointment as Administrator Apostolic of the Northern Territory. It provides essential background on the British invasion and colonisation of northern Australia and the sporadic efforts of the Catholic Church throughout the nineteenth century to evangelise First Nations peoples therein. The chapter introduces key missionaries such as Louis-André Navarre MSC, Angelo Confalonieri, Rosendo Salvado OSB, Anton Strele SJ, and Donald McKillop SJ whose earlier trials and tribulations had a profound effect on Gsell's own approaches. It concludes by examining the ultimate failure of the Jesuit enterprises at Rapid Creek and the Daly River.

⁴³ Gerardine Tungatalum, *The Arrival of Father Gsell, June 8th 1911* (Nguiu, NT: Nguiu Nginingawila, Literature Production Centre, 1983).

⁴⁴ Jane Bathgate and Darrell Lewis, *Nginaki Ngirramini Ngini Tiwi Amintiya Mamurruntawi – This is a Story about Tiwi and non-Tiwi: Culture Contact Sites on the Tiwi Islands* (Darwin: Commonwealth of Australia, 1999).

Notwithstanding several extenuating circumstances, the collapse of the Jesuit missions was fundamentally attributed to the supposedly unsavoury influence of non-Indigenous interlopers. More so than any other, it was this belief which compelled Gsell to reject mainland Australia as a viable missionary field and turn instead to the relative isolation of the Tiwi Islands.

Chapter Three begins with Gsell's arrival in the Northern Territory. It follows his efforts to establish the institutional Catholic Church at Port Darwin, wherein he was duty bound to minister to the European and Asian Catholic communities, before turning to missionary pursuits. Believing that a mission could only succeed if it were cut off from mainstream society, Gsell chose Bathurst Island as the seat of his enterprise. The chapter traces the contact history of the Tiwi people, arguing that their relative isolation made them the perfect candidates for Gsell's evangelism. He lobbied the South Australian government to have the entirety of Bathurst Island declared an Aboriginal reserve, precluding all unauthorised non-Indigenous persons from visiting the area. His move to the Tiwi Islands also coincided with the Commonwealth take-over of the Northern Territory in 1911. The chapter concludes by examining the advent of Baldwin Spencer, demonstrating the ways in which Gsell's missionary isolation and gradualism harmonised perfectly with the new Chief Protector's own segregation and protection policies. Their natural affinity laid the foundation for a strategic alliance between the Church and state in the Northern Territory.

Chapter Four examines the foundation years of the Bathurst Island Mission. It details Gsell's gradualist approach and the ways in which he sought to work with Tiwi culture, rather than against it. In a conscious effort at mutual acculturation, Gsell adopted the outward appearance of a Tiwi senior man in order to win the trust and approbation of the people. Nuns were brought in to mirror the role of Tiwi wives and mixed-descent children from the mainland to form the nucleus of a school. This latter group are often overlooked in the scholarship and constitute the first Indigenous peoples to experience Gsell's evangelism. Their presence demonstrates Church complicity in the Commonwealth's forced removals policy from its earliest inception. They also helped to consolidate Gsell's status among the Tiwi. While maintaining a condescension towards traditional Indigenous culture, he nevertheless emulated traditional social structures and instructed his missionaries to uphold customary law. It was during these early years that he began to purchase young Tiwi. This was the cornerstone of Gsell's policy, and it was an approach which would take generations to succeed. In his commitment to tread lightly, Gsell once more earned the respect of secular authorities, who lauded his attempts to transform some traditional practices while upholding many ancient customs. We see that

Spencer's preference for 'protection' found expression in Gsell's missionary gradualism. Yet government support did not necessarily guarantee the continuation of the enterprise.

Chapter Five interrogates the conflict between Gsell and the MSC Australian Province which threatened the very existence of the Bathurst Island Mission and almost led to its transfer to a different religious congregation in the 1920s. The dispute is illustrative of the immense gulf in priorities between missionaries and the mainstream clergy in Australia. While Rome stressed the importance of evangelising the entire world, the Australian Church continued to neglect First Nations peoples and relegated missionaries to the margins. Here we see a Church deeply committed to external causes such as the plight of Ireland, stubbornly refusing to look inward. The chapter posits that this obstinance was fuelled by the persistent racism of white Australia in which many Catholic clergy shared. Yet Gsell was able to resist all attempts to abandon the mission, emerging from the episode more committed than ever to his vocation. The chapter concludes by arguing that Gsell was able to hold out because his deliverance occurred on the cusp of a gradual paradigm shift within Australian society which had begun to reevaluate its mistreatment and neglect of First Nations peoples. This context meant that Gsell was ideally suited to carry out advocacy work in the coming decades, particularly when circumstances compelled him to create a national scandal.

Chapter Six follows a rather dramatic moment in Northern Territory history in which Gsell attempted to restrict the so-called illicit relationships between Asian pearl shell fisherman and Tiwi women throughout the 1930s. The arrival of these outsiders violated the sanctity of Gsell's missionary isolation. It drew the Tiwi away from the influence of the Church and supposedly undermined Christianising efforts. The Commonwealth's inability to deal effectively with these apparent incursions placed Gsell's relationship with secular authority under some strain. While hitherto he had worked constructively with the government in the formation of policies which were mutually beneficial, he now turned to community outrage and media manipulation to achieve his goals. When Gsell went public with the story, he was thrust into the national spot-light and provided with his first opportunity to explain and justify his rather unorthodox conversion methods to a broad audience. He did so to practically universal acclaim and the controversy became central to understanding Gsell's public persona and self-conception. The chapter will also examine racial identity politics in Australia more generally. The national scandal and government responses demonstrated a growing anxiety over mixed populations in the north which undermined the myth of White Australia. It will conclude by showing that

Gsell exploited these anxieties for his own benefit without necessarily sharing in their overarching values.

Chapter Seven analyses Gsell's term as Bishop of Darwin throughout the 1940s. This was a period dominated by World War II, but which also saw a great expansion of Catholic activities throughout the Northern Territory. It begins by discussing Gsell's ascension to the rank of bishop and the ways in which this served as both a recognition of his decades of service as well as a signal that the Australian Church was finally willing to prioritise missionary outreach among First Nations peoples. This was reflective of similar shifts within the wider Australian community which precipitated the era of assimilation. A rejection of previous protection policies, these new approaches aimed to incorporate First Nations peoples into mainstream Australian society and relied heavily upon missions to implement. It was in this context that Gsell established the Garden Point Mission for children of mixed-descent. The chapter will analyse Gsell's attitudes toward the so-called 'half-caste problem', critically evaluating his complicity in the policies which resulted in the Stolen Generations.

Taken together, these chapters go beyond the legend of the 'bishop with 150 wives', examining Gsell's career in comprehensive detail in order to provide an accurate assessment of his influence over race relations in Australia. They reveal an individual with significant political reach, unshakable conviction, and a complex legacy who left a considerable mark upon the history of the Northern Territory.

CHAPTER I

Missionary Beginnings: Early Life and Influences in Continental Europe, 1872-1897

While I had been away, my father had been called to God, but I still had my old mother. How happy I was in the sweetness of her tears and kisses! And how sad I was to realise that I could no longer talk to her as in the old days: because she only knew the popular Alsatian dialect which I had completely forgotten. And so I listened to her speaking in the local dialect which I could understand, replying to her in French which she, in turn, could understand. Yet in spite of this, my heart was wrung with the knowledge that I could not speak the language of my mother. God demands heavy sacrifices from us missionaries.¹

The details of Francis Xavier Gsell's early life, indeed of his life prior to his arrival in Australia in 1897, are minimal and fragmentary at best. Gsell himself makes scant mention of his childhood, secondary schooling, or seminary training in his memoir, and no journal survives from his youth. Many clues are, however, scattered throughout the documentary record, alongside allusions made by Gsell in various interviews. The purpose of this chapter is to go beyond the mere facts of Gsell's early life and to elucidate the contemporary political, cultural, and theological climate in Europe which helped to shape the young Alsatian and ultimately led him on a path to the Northern Territory.

Francis Xavier Gsell was born on 30 October 1872 at Benfeld in the Diocese of Strasbourg.² He was the sixth of nine children born to Laurent Gsell and Josephine née Jehl. Laurent was a spinner who worked in a cotton factory in the nearby township of Hüttenheim, but the family relocated to Sainte-Croix-aux-Mines after the factory burned down in 1881.³ Gsell was baptised on 3 November 1872. The family was devout, described as living in 'modest but deeply Christian conditions'.⁴ Hempel notes Josephine's piety, in particular, and claims that it was 'she who first nourished him in his faith'.⁵ Gsell would honour this bond in 1900 when he baptised an infant at Rabual – 'my first black baby' – with the Christian name Josephine.⁶ At

¹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 165.

² Caroline Linget, 'Benfeld Parish Baptismal Register (1872)', *email correspondence*, 28 August 2019; see also 'Benfeld - Etat civil - Registre de Naissances 1872 - 4 E 28/5', 23. Department Archives of Bas-Rhin, <http://archives.bas-rhin.fr/detail-document/ETAT-CIVIL-C28-P1-R11915#visio/page:ETAT-CIVIL-C28-P1-R11915-2847118>.

³ Ganter, 'Gsell', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>.

⁴ Emilio Constanzi, 'Terna per la Nomina del Vescovo', 18 January 1938. PFHA: NS 1442b.

⁵ Hempel, 'Gsell', 246.

⁶ Gsell, 'Fifty Years of Mission Life', 9.

the age of 14, Francis Xavier, like his father before him, became apprenticed to a cotton-spinner and began working at the local factory.⁷

Though often considered French, the nature of Gsell's national identity, or, perhaps more properly, his cultural identity, is a matter of some conjecture among scholars. Powell, for example, describes Gsell as a Frenchman, whereas Ganter includes him in her list of German missionaries in Australia.⁸ This is because Benfeld lies within one of the most hotly contested regions of Europe: Alsace. The village is currently located in the department of Bas-Rhin, France, but at the time of Gsell's birth this district was part of Elsaß-Lothringen (Alsace-Lorraine), an imperial state of the recently united German Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm (1871-1888), making Gsell, in fact, a subject of Germany. In order to examine better Gsell's origins and his cultural affiliations and influences, it is first necessary to elaborate upon the history of the region from which he came.

With the Vosges Mountains to the west and the Rhine River to the east, the plain of Alsace is among the most fertile and densely populated regions of central Europe.⁹ For many centuries it has been the contested boarder of France and Germany; experiencing alternating occupations which resulted in a complex regional identity.¹⁰ Indeed, from 1871 to 1945 Alsace changed hands between France and Germany no fewer than four times. In many respects, Alsatians shared cultural affinities with their neighbours in Baden across the Rhine. The Alsatian vernacular, Alemannic, is a German dialect, and many of the customs, food and dress are held in common. Yet, Alsatians identified strongly with French political traditions, and have belonged to the French nation-state for the majority of the modern era.

A de facto protectorate of France with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Alsace was fully incorporated into the French nation in 1789 during the French Revolution (1789-1799) and was administratively divided into the two *départments* of Haut-Rhin and Bas-Rhin. Up until 1870, Alsatians actively participated in French politics and nationhood, receiving universal male suffrage in 1848. During the 1860s, Emperor Napoleon III (1808-1873) launched an extensive French language campaign in the region, introducing compulsory French instruction in all

⁷ Donovan, 'Gsell', <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-6502>;

Ganter, 'Gsell', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>

⁸ Powell, *Far Country*, 119; Ganter, 'Gsell', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>

⁹ Stephen L. Harp, *Learning to be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation Building in Alsace and Lorraine, 1850-1940* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), 12.

¹⁰ Christopher J. Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians? Visions and Divisions of Alsatian Regionalism, 1870-1939* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 6.

primary schools.¹¹ This meant that, by the 1870s, though the Alsatian vernacular still predominated, the majority of Alsatisians were familiar with the French language.¹² However, French power in Alsace ceased temporarily with their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871).

Alsace, along with the eastern part of the neighbouring province of Lorraine, was annexed by the German Empire and renamed Elsaß-Lothringen (1871-1918) following the Treaty of Frankfurt in 1871 – the year before Gsell’s birth. Under German rule, Alsace-Lorraine was subject to the direct authority of the German Chancellor and denied self-government until 1902. This major geopolitical shift experienced a mixed reception in Alsace, producing a strong sense of cultural dissonance. As Rachel Chrastil argues, ‘many Alsatian speakers associated themselves firmly with the French revolutionary tradition but saw Germany as their spiritual and cultural homeland.’¹³ Nevertheless, under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) an extensive program of Germanisation was implemented in the region, which, for reasons which will be discussed in greater detail below, proved unpopular with both Alsatisians and Lorrainers alike, especially among those belonging to the Catholic faith. Following the Treaty of Versailles (1919-1920) at the conclusion of the First World War (1914-1918), Alsace was returned to French rule. However, Alsace was annexed by Germany for a second time in 1940 under the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) following the collapse of France during the Second World War (1939-1945). Alsace returned once more to the French nation in 1945 and has remained part of France ever since.

As an Alsatian, Gsell shared in the national and cultural ambiguity so often ascribed to the region of his birth. When Gsell became a naturalised Australian in January 1909, he declared on his application that he was, ‘by birth a German subject’.¹⁴ Yet, Gsell very clearly self-identifies as French in his memoir. Referring to his work as Apostolic Administrator, he states: ‘Happily I, a Frenchman, had sent to me by the Australian province of my community colleagues who could help me with this work’.¹⁵ In August 1951, he was granted the award of *Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur* in recognition of his ‘pro-French outlook which he is said to have expressed in many ways and in particular to his close association with the French

¹¹ Dan P. Silverman, *Reluctant Union: Alsace-Lorraine and Imperial Germany, 1871-1918* (London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), 75.

¹² See Harp, *Learning to be Loyal*.

¹³ Rachel Chrastil, *The Siege of Strasbourg* (London: Harvard University Press, 2014), 7.

¹⁴ Francis Xavier Gsell – *Naturalization Certificate*. NAA: A1, 1920/21513.

¹⁵ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 142.

community.¹⁶ The honour is normally reserved for French citizens, but can be awarded to foreigners who promote French interests abroad. As a naturalised British citizen – indeed, an Australian – Gsell fell into the latter category, though, by the time the honour was bestowed, his birthplace belonged once more to France. It is likely that receiving such an award served to reinforce Gsell's outward cultural association with France; and it appears that, with time, Gsell's mixed Franco-German origins were supplanted. Indeed, contrasting his emotional response to the receipt of this reward with that of the OBE, Gsell asserted that: 'on this latter occasion, my heart was perhaps touched more deeply since the reward came from my dear country of France, giving recognition, once again, to a few of her obscure children working in the furthest limits of civilisation'.¹⁷ So pervasive was the belief in Gsell's French beginnings that the brief history of the Darwin Diocese commissioned in 1988 to coincide with Australia's bicentennial celebrations simply described him as a Frenchman.¹⁸ This echoed an earlier declaration by Gsell's successor, Bishop John Patrick O'Loughlin MSC, in 1982 that the missionary bishop was 'very French, more French than the French themselves'.¹⁹ That this belief should prevail is partly a product of historical forces at play during Gsell's childhood as well as the conscious decisions made by the Alsatian at key impasses in his life.

Not only was Gsell born into a decade of geopolitical upheaval in Alsace, but one in which Alsatian attitudes and responses differed depending on social position and religious affiliation. The outcome of the Franco-Prussian War was viewed as a great tragedy by Alsatian elites, though was initially met with less despair by the labouring classes. Prior to the war, most upper-class Alsatians considered themselves unequivocally French. As Christopher J. Fischer notes, they 'spoke French, mimicked Parisian trends, and looked to Paris as their national capital', whereas lower-class Alsatians seem to have maintained a more ambiguous attitude to France.²⁰ As Fischer continues: 'For the vast majority of Alsatians, many of whom spoke Alsatian (a German dialect) and only a smattering of French, the question of national belonging was less pressing as a major political theme'.²¹ Following the French defeat, between 100,000 and 130,000 Alsatians – out of a total approximate population of 1.5 million people – decided to remain French citizens and emigrate to France rather than live under the German Empire.²²

¹⁶ *Decorations - French Awards – Chisholm, Professor; Gelle, Dr; Gsell, Monsignor*. NAA: A1838, 1535/5/4.

¹⁷ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 140.

¹⁸ Ann Thompson, *NT Dreaming: The Story of the Catholic Church in the Northern Territory* (Darwin: Catholic Education Office, 1988), 17.

¹⁹ O'Loughlin, *Catholic Church in the Northern Territory*, 6.

²⁰ Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians?* 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Harp, *Learning to be Loyal*, 50.

Stephen L. Harp argues that the bourgeoisie were ‘proportionately better represented among emigrants’, but cautions they were ‘also the group most financially and linguistically capable of pulling up stakes and moving to France’.²³ In contrast, scholars note that the majority of urban and rural labourers, without the economic means to remain loyal to France, and by virtue of their shared language, were better able to assimilate into German society. As Fischer argues: ‘While German administrative and religious policies may have rankled many Alsatians, they nonetheless adapted to life in Germany by attending German-run schools and serving in the German military.’²⁴ Gsell’s family appear to have belonged to the latter category of Alsatian, remaining in Alsace and adapting to life as German subjects.

Dupeyrat confidently declares that, regardless of the German annexation, ‘the family, like others, remained French’.²⁵ However it is not clear on what basis he makes this assertion, especially given that the Gsell family were German speakers and chose to remain in Alsace following the war. In a similar vein, Hempel claims that: ‘Although the family assumed the outward trappings of German culture and adopted the Alsatian dialect, his mother strove to preserve the French way of life in the home’.²⁶ Again, this claim is precarious because, given the epigraph which opened this chapter, it is obvious that Gsell’s mother-tongue was the German dialect, Alemannic. When Gsell returned to Alsace in 1921 after a 34 year absence, he found that he was unable to remember the vernacular language of own his mother: ‘And so I listened to her speaking in the local dialect which I could understand, replying to her in French which she, in turn could understand.’²⁷ It is apparent that Josephine had little confidence speaking French and had either retained some understanding of the language from her schooling prior to the German annexation or else picked it up in the few years since the region had returned to France after WWI.²⁸ As a child, Gsell attended the local public school where it was expected that he become fluent in High German as well as the vernacular dialect.²⁹ Indeed, he spent his entire childhood under the German system of instruction, submitting to, as Dupeyrat terms, ‘foreign discipline’.³⁰ It was only when Gsell decided at the age of fifteen to attend *La Petite Oeuvre du Sacré Coeur* in France, and ultimately to join a French-founded

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians?* 15.

²⁵ André Dupeyrat, ‘Epilogue’, 164.

²⁶ Hempel, ‘Gsell’, 246.

²⁷ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 165.

²⁸ Though Chrastil cautions, in the case of Alsace, ‘language did not [necessarily] determine identity’, it seems unlikely that Laurent and Josephine spoke French at home. *Siege of Strasbourg*, 7.

²⁹ See Harp, *Learning to be Loyal*.

³⁰ Dupeyrat, ‘Epilogue’, 164.

religious order, that a thorough knowledge of the French language would have become a necessity. By the time of his 1921 visit, Gsell had attended secondary schooling in France, studied for the priesthood in Italy – which included courses in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew – moved to Australia where he became fluent in English, before picking up Tok Pisin (Pidgin English) in Papua New Guinea, and finally some Tiwi on Bathurst Island. It is small wonder Gsell should be unable to recall his native tongue. But rather than mere language attrition, it seems that Gsell himself chose to dissociate himself from his German heritage.

Ganter reconciles the tension between French and German nationalist affiliations by arguing that Gsell's identification was fundamentally regional not national. She argues that, for Gsell, Alsace was 'the fountainhead of patriotism'.³¹ In his memoir, Gsell asserted: 'I am proud of my Alsace' and lauded the generosity of the Alsatian people in providing financial support to missionary organisations.³² In his draft manuscript, he likewise delights that 'wherever one travels through the mission lands, there the Alsatian missionaries are in the forefront'.³³ His pride lies specifically with his native region, rather than the French nation more broadly. Furthermore, Ganter makes the interesting observation that, whatever his later self-identification with France: 'Perhaps his native tongue was deeper in his heart than he himself understood, because in 1942, in the terror of death his prayers were German'.³⁴ She details the moment in Gsell's memoir where he recounts his survival of the Bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942. Huddled in a trench alongside equally frightened parishioners, Gsell remarked: 'It was the day after Ash Wednesday and I found myself repeating to myself: "Ash thou art, and to ash thou wilt return ... perhaps today"'.³⁵ Ganter notes that in both English and French translations of Genesis 3:19, the verse refers to dust (*poussière*) whereas German translations refer to ash (*ashe*).³⁶ For Ganter, this episode indicated that Gsell maintained a mixed cultural heritage, emblematic of the Alsatian identity; neither French nor German, but somewhere in-between. It is appropriate that a more nuanced appraisal of Gsell's background be offered by historians. Yet, notwithstanding this unconscious manifestation of a mixed cultural heritage, it is apparent that Gsell exhibited strong anti-German sentiments at various points in his life which had the cumulative effect of consolidating his commonly accepted status as French.

³¹ Ganter, 'Gsell', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>

³² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 159.

³³ Gsell, 'Fifty Years of Mission Life', 262.

³⁴ Ganter, 'Gsell', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* The full verse reads: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth, out of which thou wast taken: for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return.' Genesis 3:19.

That Gsell did not necessarily identify as German is indicated by an event during WWI. At a farewell dinner held in the Darwin Town Hall on 22 April 1915 in honour of the Northern Territory Contingent for the Front, Gsell spoke to an audience about the perils of German victory. One of many notable Darwin community leaders to speak that evening, Gsell addressed the assemblage after a rendition of *La Marseillaise* and was quoted as having, ‘touched briefly upon the deplorable effect of German rule upon the French inhabitants of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, and gave those present an idea of the rule of the whip and boot which would follow if it should so happen that Germany came out on top’.³⁷ It is hardly surprising that Gsell should distance himself from the nation with which his adopted country was currently at war. This is especially so as German nationals and even naturalised British subjects with German ancestry were routinely rounded up and sent to internment camps. Indeed, during the course of the war 7,000 people were classified as ‘enemy aliens’, of whom 4,500 were naturalised Australians.³⁸ Gsell would have been quite conscious of his vulnerability given that in November 1914 the Visitor General of the MSCs in Australia, Rev Hubert Linckens, had been falsely denounced to the Ministry of Defence as a German spy. Linckens was Dutch but held a German passport. He was detained and questioned but ultimately avoided internment. The incident sent shockwaves through the Australian Province, not least of all because the deeply unpopular Linckens firmly believed the anonymous accusation had been made by one of his own priests.³⁹ Coming, as Gsell did, from contested French/German territory and fluent, as he was, in the French language, it would have been easier for the priest to avoid harassment from the overzealous authorities by obfuscating his German heritage. Nevertheless, Gsell’s attitudes had deeper roots.

The inculcation of Gsell’s anti-German sentiments can be best explained by Catholic opposition to Bismarck’s implementation of the *Kulturkampf*. As Stephen J. Harp observes, the political upheaval ‘pitted progressive, anticlerical, and often Protestant state authorities against ... a simultaneously regional and supranational Catholic Church.’⁴⁰ Denominationally, Alsace was overwhelmingly Catholic, with 79 percent of the population of Haut-Rhin and 89 percent of the population of Bas-Rhin adhering to that faith.⁴¹ Scholars agree that the power of

³⁷ ‘Farwell to Contingent’, *NTTG*, 29 April 1915. 16.

³⁸ Gerhard Fischer, *Enemy Aliens: Internment and the Homefront Experience in Australia, 1914-1920* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1989). See also, Nadine Helmi, *The Enemy at Home: German Internees in World War I Australia* (Kensington, NSW: UNSW Press, 2011).

³⁹ See Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 116-136.

⁴⁰ Harp, *Learning to be Loyal*, 65.

⁴¹ See also Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians?* 14.

the Catholic Church was considered to be a major stumbling block to the success of German unification. As Dan P. Silverman contends: 'In Bismarck's mind "Germanisation" included the destruction of Roman Catholic political and "cultural" opposition, whether it be in Prussia, the Reich, or Alsace-Lorraine.'⁴² Throughout the 1870s, the German Chancellor cut diplomatic relations with the Vatican, expelled the Jesuits, instituted civil marriage, legalised divorce, gaoled resisting clergy, and ended the independence of private schools, curtailing religious and catechism instruction therein. Sex segregation in Alsatian primary schools was also prohibited, forcing Catholic nuns, who were forbidden by their rule from working in mixed-sex schools, to abandon teaching altogether.⁴³ Such anti-Catholic measures, particularly in the contentious realm of education, provoked a strong reaction from Alsatian Catholics. In this context, not only were Germans cast as imperial occupiers but also the harbingers of a malignant secularism. As Viki Caron contends, the *Kulturkampf* caused Catholics to become the major force behind the protest movement, demanding a revocation of the German annexation, and a return of the region to France.⁴⁴

This sentiment was particularly evident in the attitudes of the lower clergy. Silverman argues that, while the hierarchy in Alsace-Lorraine eventually resigned themselves to German rule, the priests maintained their opposition: 'Priestly obedience to the authority of the pope and bishops in areas of faith and morals found no counterpart in political matters, where the lower clergy acted with great independence.'⁴⁵ Indeed, the Bishop of Strasbourg, Andreas Raess (1794-1887), lost the support of his priests and greatly injured his popularity among the laity when, in an 1874 Reichstag speech, he declared the Catholics of Alsace-Lorraine accepted the Treaty of Frankfurt.⁴⁶ While Harp notes that the *Kulturkampf* effectively came to a close by 1879, he argues that the remnants of the legislation were not repealed until 1887 and that government attacks on Catholics persisted until the fall of the German empire.⁴⁷ Clerical resentment remained strong throughout. As pious Catholics, it is likely Gsell's family aligned with the political thinking of their co-religionists and local priests. It is not clear whether the family itself was actively involved in political movements, but, if Hempel is to be believed,

⁴² Silverman, *Reluctant Union*, 91.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁴ Viki Caron, *Between France and Germany: The Jews of Alsace-Lorraine, 1871-1918* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 122.

⁴⁵ Silverman, *Reluctant Union*, 115.

⁴⁶ Dan P. Silverman, 'Political Catholicism and Social Democracy in Alsace-Lorraine, 1871-1914', *The Catholic Historical Review* 52, 1 (1966): 47.

⁴⁷ Harp, *Learning to be Loyal*, 77.

Gsell's mother was sympathetic to France.⁴⁸ What is certain is that Gsell spent his childhood in an Alsatian-Catholic atmosphere which, at the very least, resented German occupation, desired reunification with France, and remained in strident opposition to anti-clerical and secular policies brought to bear by the new imperial government.

It is likely that the intervening years served to strengthen Gsell's alienation from his German heritage. By the time Gsell penned his memoir, the country of his birth was held solely responsible for two catastrophic global conflicts. When Gsell returned to Europe in 1948, he found Marseilles in ruins: 'The harbour was simply full of sunken boats, the wharves and warehouses were a mass of broken buildings and twisted steel. Many houses were gutted, and the lovely Basilica of *Notre Dame de la Garde* showed many deep wounds of furious battles.'⁴⁹ He was greeted by his youngest sister, widowed during WWI and now mourning her youngest son. He found Sainte-Croix-aux-Mines in a similar state of desolation: 'For three days the Germans tried to stop the American Army and the battle was fought fiercely in the middle of the village. The dear old house where I passed many happy years of my boyhood was raised to the ground.'⁵⁰ A sense of deep sorrow pervaded the community: 'There was hardly a family that had not lost one or two of its members and the saddest of them were those who had no news of the missing ones'.⁵¹ Germany had occupied Moselle – a *département* of Lorraine – as well as Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin following the armistice on 22 June 1940. Once more, authorities implemented policies of Germanisation, including pressure to participate in the Nazi movement. Approximately 130,000 men were conscripted – *malgré-nous* ('in spite of ourselves') – into the *Wehrmacht* or *Waffen-SS* and sent to perish on the Eastern Front, or else languish as Soviet prisoners of war.⁵² In Issoudun, Gsell would also encounter French MSC novices who had spent part of the conflict as German captives. It is doubtful whether Gsell now felt any affinity with Germany and he was probably glad to be acknowledged and honoured as French in 1951.

The ostensibly anti-German atmosphere of his youth may well have influenced Gsell in his choice of religious order. At the age of fifteen, while an apprentice cotton-spinner in Sainte-Croix-aux-Mines, Gsell encountered a priest belonging to the French order of the Missionaries

⁴⁸ Hempel, 'Gsell', 246.

⁴⁹ Gsell, 'Fifty Years a Missionary', 260-261.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See Nicole Thatcher, 'The *Malgré-nous*: Conflicting Memoires of a Second World War Drama', *Australian Journal of French Studies* 47, 3 (Sep-Dec 2010): 277-289.

of the Sacred Heart of Jesus – in Latin, *Missionarii Sacratissimi Cordis* (MSC) – who asked the teenager if he had ever considered a career in the priesthood. He offered Gsell a place in the order's apostolic school, *La Petite Oeuvre du Sacré Couer*, in the French town of Issoudun.⁵³ It had been founded in 1867 to assist boys who felt they possessed a vocation to the priesthood but who were unable to pay for the prerequisite secondary education. The school had taken the name of 'the small offering' because it was financed by collecting the tiny sum of one *sou* each from a large number of benefactors.⁵⁴ In time, *La Petite Oeuvre* had become the chief source of vocations for the MSCs, and Gsell proved to be no different. As a young labourer and devout Catholic, he was the perfect candidate for admittance and he departed soon after. Gsell would spend the following six years in France, preparing for his career as a missionary priest.

When Gsell arrived in Issoudun to commence his secondary schooling in 1887, he entered the orbit of Rev Jules Chevalier (1824-1907), MSC founder and source of the congregation's charism. In order to understand better Gsell's motivations, it is of course necessary to examine the character of the religious order to which he would commit his life, as well as that of the man who inspired it in the first place. Chevalier was born in the French town of Richelieu. Like Gsell, his family was of modest means. He left school at the age of twelve and was apprenticed to a cobbler because his father, Jean Charles, could not afford the cost of secondary schooling. In 1841, Jean Charles was appointed caretaker to a tract of forest and his employer, learning of Jules' desire to become a priest, decided to sponsor the youth. Chevalier subsequently attended the minor-seminary at Saint-Gauthier, before moving to the major-seminary at Bourges in 1846. He was ordained in 1851 and began his ministry in the archdiocese of Bourges. In 1854 he became a curate in the parish of Issoudun, founding the MSCs on 8 December that year. He served as Superior General until 1901.⁵⁵

The MSC ethos is intimately associated with the charism attributed to Chevalier. Catholics believe that a charism is a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit, given not merely for the benefit of an individual but for that of the whole world. In the context of religious orders, a charism denotes the spiritual characteristics unique to its founder, which are then shared with the entire

⁵³ Hempel writes that: 'The priest was captivated by Francis Xavier's engaging personality, his deep faith and the strength of his dream to become a missionary'. 'Gsell', 246; Dupeyrat similarly attests that the missionary 'noticed the fifteen-year old boy, so frank and pious. The priest asked the boy if he had ever thought of becoming a priest, even – who knows! – becoming a missionary.' 'Épilogue', 164.

⁵⁴ John Conlin, *The Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (Kensington, NSW: Annals Publication, 1945), 35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

congregation and all those faithful with whom they come into contact. This is normally associated with a particular understanding of Christ and a concomitant devotion to a certain divine attribute which becomes the central focus for an individual's religious life.⁵⁶ In many respects, Chevalier was both product and proponent of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century resurgence in Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. During his time in the seminary, he had maintained what was a conventional understanding of Christ as the perfect embodiment of religion; the obedient Son who had sacrificed himself in the service of God, the almighty Father. Chevalier had believed that the purpose of religion in general, and the priesthood in particular, was to worship, serve, and obey God. However, he gradually developed a more holistic understanding of Jesus as the ultimate embodiment of love; love for God the Father, but also, and perhaps more significantly, love for His fellow man for whom He laid down His life. For Chevalier, Christ's sacrifice at the Crucifixion was not only an act of total obedience to God's will, but a pure act of selflessness which won for all the possibility of eternal life. In the person of Jesus, Chevalier saw God's mercy, charity, and a deep desire for the salvation of humanity. He believed this idea was best expressed through, and epitomised by, the avowed tenderness of the Sacred Heart. Sharing his new found knowledge of the abundant love of Christ became the driving force of Chevalier's life.⁵⁷ Along with the companions of his seminary days, he believed such a devotion would prove an effective antidote to the pervasive climate of religious indifference afflicting Europe and the wider world.⁵⁸

Chevalier's vision was to establish a religious Congregation whose members, like the Apostles, would be sent to preach this truth of religion to humanity. With this aim in mind, he took for their motto: '*Ametur ubique terrarum Cor Jesu Sacratissimum*' ('May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere loved'). While the MSCs would later be known for their evangelisation in the so-called 'foreign' missions to 'pagan' peoples in Oceania and Australia, the immediate context of Chevalier's mission was the climate of irreligious apathy in Europe. He chose Issoudun as the first site for his work because the French town was infamous for its anti-clerical and atheist traditions.

⁵⁶ E.J. Cuskelly, *A New Heart and a New Spirit: Reflections on MSC Spirituality* (Rome: Casa Generalizia Missionari Del Sacro Cuore, 1978), 26.

⁵⁷ E.J. Cuskelly, *Jules Chevalier: A Man with a Mission, 1824-1907* (Rome: Casa Generalizia Missionari del Sacro Cuore, 1975).

⁵⁸ See Jules Chevalier (1862), *Constitutions of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus – Extract* (Rome: MSC General House, 1985), 10.

The new congregation would thrive under the pontificate of Pope Pius IX (1846-1878). Earning a reputation as a reactionary, Pius positioned himself in steadfast opposition to the growing ascendancy of both liberal and socialist ideology, which had gained indomitable momentum in Europe ever since the French Revolution.⁵⁹ He was elected during a period of ongoing and significant challenges to both the temporal and moral authority of the institutional Church, not least of which was the question of Italian unification and the Pope's sovereign power in the Papal States. As such, Pius spent much of his papacy in open conflict with the secular governments of Europe.⁶⁰ In 1864 he released the papal encyclical *Quanta Cura*, to which he attached the *Syllabus of Errors*, a list of 80 censured propositions.⁶¹ The document broadly condemned as heretical pantheism, naturalism, absolute rationalism, materialism and communism. Pius also denounced many elements of modern liberalism, decrying in particular the separation of Church and state, secular education, and civil marriage.⁶² Pius sought to enshrine his authority during the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), which, on 18 July 1870, released *Pastor Aeternus* – the First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ – defining the doctrine of papal infallibility. This effectively meant that the Pope, in the exercise of his office, was preserved from the possibility of error when defining a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the whole Church.⁶³ This assertion of papal primacy was not only a strong affirmation of Pius' authority, but also that of the Church as a whole.

Like Pius, Chevalier was preoccupied with 'the evils of our time', despising rationalism and Protestantism in particular. He held that the world was suffocating under a blanket of indifference, afflicted with moral ills. His remedy was devotion to the Sacred Heart which he asserted was the best means by which to preach the Gospel message of God's love for all humanity. Chevalier firmly believed this message would shake people from their apathy, sparking a fire in their hearts which could only result in their greater happiness and fulfilment as they turned away from evil and embraced the salvation of Christ.⁶⁴ He remained convinced that he could achieve this goal by assembling a band of likeminded missionary priests.

⁵⁹ Frank J. Coppa, *The Papacy in the Modern World: A Political History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 80-98.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Pius IX, *Quanta Cura*, 8 December 1864.

⁶² Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors*, 8 December 1864.

⁶³ First Vatican Council, *First Dogmatic Constitution of the Church of Christ*, 18 July 1870.

⁶⁴ Cuskelly, *Jules Chevalier*, 11.

Chevalier founded the society on 8 December 1854, the same day Pius proclaimed the infallible doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁶⁵ He had initially struggled to source funding and so decided to dedicate a novena to conclude on the date upon which the Pope defined the dogma. He promised that, if his prayers were answered, he would do everything in their power to ‘render to the Heart of Jesus, throne of wisdom, of love and mercy, a particular cult of adoration, homage and reparation; to spread this devotion everywhere ... also to make Mary known and honoured in a special way – by every possible means’.⁶⁶ While emblematic of the growth in Marian devotion in the Catholic Church at this time, this latter promise to promote Mary would ensure that the veneration of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart would become a key aspect of MSC spirituality. Chevalier wrote that: ‘In gratitude to Mary, they will regard her as their foundress, they will associate her with all their works; and make her loved in a special way.’⁶⁷ This also allowed the new congregation to prove it was in step with Pius’ papacy. At the conclusion of High Mass on 8 December, Chevalier was approached by a parishioner with an anonymous offer of 20,000 francs for a religious house. His work could begin.

Another key feature of the MSC ethos was ultramontanism. As John Conlin attests: ‘One outstanding characteristic of the spirit of the Society is the complete and absolute loyalty and obedience which it has always preserved towards the Holy See’.⁶⁸ During his days in the seminary, Chevalier is purported to have exhibited an ‘instinctive horror’ of Gallicanism, a theological trend in French seminaries which asserted that the power of civil authority over the Catholic Church was comparable to that of the Pope. The theory did not go so far as to deny papal primacy, but merely contested the Pope’s infallibility and supremacy.⁶⁹ Gallicanism was subsequently crushed with Pius’ definition of the doctrine of papal infallibility. In his 1907 *Spiritual Testament* Chevalier asserted that the MSCs must ‘always adhere to the teaching of Holy Church ... In disputes let them range themselves strongly and always on the side of the Pope. His word is that of Jesus Christ, Whom he represents on earth. He is our chief, our guide. We must obey him in everything and defend his authority towards and against all.’⁷⁰ The MSC endorsement of ultramontanism would later work in Gsell’s favour on numerous occasions,

⁶⁵ That Mary, unique among all humanity, was conceived without original sin. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 December 1854.

⁶⁶ Cuskelly, *Jules Chevalier*, 14.

⁶⁷ Chevalier (1855), cited in *Constitutions*, 12.

⁶⁸ Conlin, *Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, 68.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Jules Chevalier, ‘Spiritual Testament to the Members of the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart’, *Analecta* 2 (October, 1907). Cited in Conlin, *Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, 69.

firstly in his fight to retain control of the Bathurst Island mission throughout the 1920s and later in vindicating his decision to purchase Tiwi women from their promised husbands. In both cases, he appealed directly to the Pope in private audiences – Benedict XV (1914-1922) and Pius XII (1939-1958) respectively – and took papal support for his methods and endeavours as the final word on the matter.

Over the next few decades, the society made steady progress. Pius IX gave the MSCs his blessing in 1860. In 1864, the Church of the Sacred Heart was consecrated in Issoudun by the Archbishop of Tours. A statue of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart was likewise solemnly crowned by the Archbishop of Bourges on behalf of the Pope, and both the church and the statue become sites of pilgrimage. A universal archconfraternity, open to lay persons and dedicated to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart was also begun which boasted 100 thousand members within the first three months, and by 1905 enjoyed a membership of some 18 million. The first addition of the *Annales de Notre Dame du Sacré Coeur* was published in 1866, which acted as the organ of the archconfraternity and sought to spread devotion to the Sacred Heart. In 1867, they opened the apostolic school, *La Petite Oeuvre*, providing free secondary education to boys who wished to be prepared for the priesthood. A novitiate was later established at the neighbouring town of Chezal-Benoit. An additional church building was completed in 1879 and elevated to the rank of basilica in 1883 by Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903).

By 1880 the society numbered roughly 50 religious priests and brothers, and had expanded to seven houses; five in France, one in Rome and one in Canada.⁷¹ In November that year, however, the Society came under extreme strain when all ‘unauthorised’ religious houses were disbanded and their members expelled from France as part of the anti-clerical reforms of Jules Ferry (1832-1893), President and Minister for Public Instruction of the French Third Republic. The Republic had come into being with the defeat of Napoleon III and the collapse of the Second French Empire during the Franco-Prussian War. In order to prevent any possibility of a monarchist resurgence, the Republicans sought to erode the power of the Catholic Church, whose clergy were often accurately associated with reactionary politics.⁷² In this respect, Ferry’s reforms were similar in substance to Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf*. In addition to the suppression of religious orders, Ferry later implemented a policy of free, mandatory and public education with secular instruction. These reforms ended the dual system of public and private

⁷¹ Conlin, *Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, 41.

⁷² See Ann Margaret Doyle, ‘Catholic Church and State Relations in French Education in the Nineteenth Century: The Struggle Between Laïcité and Religion’, *International Studies in Catholic Education* 9, 1 (2017): 108-122.

schools and ensured that religious teachers were replaced with lay ones.⁷³ Notwithstanding the benefits of universal education, the Ferry Laws were considered a calamity to the MSCs.

Chevalier saw his priests evicted from their houses by police, and a seal placed over the doors to the basilica. Because Chevalier had been appointed archpriest of Issoudun in 1872, he remained in France along with members of his order whom he reclassified as ‘assistant priests’, but the majority of the society was transferred to new houses in Holland, Spain, Germany, and Austria.⁷⁴ The boys in the *Le Petite Oeuvre* were divided into small groups and housed in dormitories prepared for them by lay parishioners in town, while scholastics training for the priesthood were sent to Rome.⁷⁵ Such persecution at the hands of a secular government must have proved somewhat affirming for a religious order which felt it had been sent to save the world from the malicious forces of indifference. Indeed, given Gsell’s own experiences of the *Kulturkampf*, it is possible he felt some affinity with the order in this respect – Conlin notes that Alsace was ‘very fruitful in vocations to the Society’ – though of course the MSCs were not the only religious congregation to be affected by the expulsions.⁷⁶

Though an initial shock, this event allowed the order to expand. As James Waldersee contends: ‘From such scattered beginnings were to develop the new provinces of the future, and in retrospect the dispersal may even be looked on as a blessing in disguise, spreading the order into other lands and attracting increasing numbers of non-French into its ranks’.⁷⁷ Soon after, the Prefect of Propaganda, Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni (1816-1892), approached Rev Victor Jouët (1839-1912), MSC representative in Rome, and offered the order the Vicariate Apostolic of Melanesia and Micronesia, comprising New Guinea, New Britain, and the surrounding Islands.⁷⁸ The Vicariate had been erected in 1842 and entrusted to the French Society of Mary. The Marists had, however, abandoned the region in 1848 after a series of catastrophes and it had laid dormant ever since.⁷⁹ Catholic interest was renewed in the area following the inroads made by Protestant missionaries throughout the 1870s in New Guinea in particular.⁸⁰ Despite

⁷³ See Barnet B. Singer, ‘Jules Ferry and the Laic Revolution in French Primary Education’, *Paedagogica Historica* 16, 2 (1975): 406-425.

⁷⁴ Cuskelly, *Jules Chevalier*, 81-83.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Conlin, *Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, 42.

⁷⁷ James Waldersee, *Neither Eagles Nor Saints’: MSC Missions in Oceania, 1881-1975* (Sydney: Chevalier Press, 1995), 37.

⁷⁸ Conlin, *Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, 42.

⁷⁹ John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1982), 181-183.

⁸⁰ See Geoffrey Lindsay Lockley, *From Darkness to Light: The London Missionary Society in Papua, 1872-1972* (Port Moresby: The United Church in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, 1972).

some reservations, Chevalier accepted the offer and thereafter the MSCs assumed responsibility for all Catholic missions in Oceania.⁸¹

Accepting this endeavour realised one of the principal works of the order. In *Constitutions* (1869) Chevalier wrote: ‘Our little Society also intends to spread the faith among the Infidels. May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere loved!’⁸² Five missionaries departed Barcelona, on 1 September 1881, arriving in Rabaul, New Britain, thirteen months later after a series of misadventures which greatly prolonged their journey.⁸³ In October 1884, another MSC contingent established a mission in the Torres Strait on Thursday Island (Waibene), and in January 1885 a mission Procure was founded in Sydney in order to support their efforts. By July 1885, Yule Island (see Map 5), off the mainland coast of Papua New Guinea, was also incorporated into the growing MSC network. It became their headquarters and a springboard into the mainland.⁸⁴ In 1889, the vicariate was divided into three. Louis-André Navarre MSC (1836-1912) became Bishop – and later Archbishop – of New Guinea, Louis Couppé MSC (1850-1926) became Bishop of New Britain, and Micronesia was left in the care of Rev Edouard Bontemps MSC.⁸⁵ By this time, there were 47 MSC missionaries operating in the region and their evangelisation efforts were showing signs of success.

Ultimately, it was Chevalier’s decision to accept the Vicariate Apostolic of Melanesia and Micronesia, committing his resources to missionary evangelisation in the region, which most likely influenced Gsell to join the MSCs in Issoudun a mere six years later. Those who feel a vocational calling to Christian missionary work normally draw biblical inspiration and justification from two particular moments in the Gospel. The first comes at the conclusion of *Matthew*: ‘And Jesus coming, spoke to them, saying: All power is given to me in heaven and in earth. Going therefore, **teach ye all nations**, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.’⁸⁶ Known as the ‘Great Commission’, Jesus commanded his followers and their successors to work resolutely towards the salvation of all humanity. Gsell quotes this

⁸¹ Waldersee, *Neither Eagles Nor Saints*, 37.

⁸² Jules Chevalier, Chapter 2, Article 2, *Constitutions* (1869). Cited in Conlin, *Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, 42.

⁸³ See Regina Ganter, ‘Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC)’, *German Missionaries in Australia*, <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/missionaries-sacred-heart-msc>.

⁸⁴ See Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 237-244;

⁸⁵ See J. F. McMahon, ‘Introduction’, in Andre Navarre, *Handbook for Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Working Among the Natives of Papua New Guinea* (1896), 1-9, translated by Sheila Larkin (Sydney: Chevalier Press, 1987); and Hugh Laracy, ‘Couppé, Louis (1850-1926)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/coupe-louis-5790>.

⁸⁶ Matthew 28:18-20. My emphasis.

passage in his memoir, before remarking: ‘The issue then remains perfectly simple. The work before the one to whom He speaks is to carry the divine message to those who have not seen, or felt, its light.’⁸⁷ The second key moment which validates missionary activity is taken from the *Acts of the Apostles*: ‘But you shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you, and you shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth.’⁸⁸ Jesus delivered these words of reassurance to the Apostles before His ascension, and it has since become both a mandate and edict to undertake Christian missionary activity on a global scale. The responsibility to take the Gospel message to the very ‘ends of the earth’ has motivated countless Christians to leave their homes and travel to distant lands, often never to return. With Saint Francis Xavier SJ (1505-1552), the great Jesuit missionary, as his namesake, perhaps Gsell always felt it was his destiny to join in this endeavour. But while religious fervour certainly underpinned Gsell’s commitment to a missionary career, the call of adventure was, no doubt, another equally potent motive.

During an interview in 1938, Gsell reportedly remarked that, ‘in early youth he was inspired to mission work by the writings of Bishop Verjus of Papua, and set out to share it’.⁸⁹ The Venerable Henri Stanislas Verjus MSC (1860-1892) was born in the Italian town of Oleggio, Piedmont, on 26 May 1860.⁹⁰ He likewise attended *Le Petit Oeuvre*, taking his first vows in 1876. Following the expulsion of the society from France, he was exiled to Barcelona and finally ordained in Rome in 1883. He joined Navarre at Thursday Island on 24 February 1885. Despite obstruction from the British authorities who had already earmarked the territory for the London Missionary Society, Verjus founded a mission station at Yule Island on 30 June 1885. He was the first Catholic priest to establish a presence in New Guinea. Thereafter, Yule Island became somewhat of a Catholic stronghold and, with the assistance of Filipino catechists who married into local families, the entirety of the island – 250 people – had converted to Catholicism by Christmas 1891.⁹¹ In utilising the assistance of Filipino Catholics, the MSCs were copying an earlier precedent set by the London Missionary Society in Papua and the Torres Strait who were aided in their missionary efforts by indigenous converts from the Pacific Islands. As Ganter notes: ‘With their marriage bonds and mixed families, they formed an

⁸⁷ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 21.

⁸⁸ Acts 1:8.

⁸⁹ Ernestine Hill, ‘A Shepherd of “Black Sheep” – Monsignor Gsell – Island Kingdom’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 April 1938. 11.

⁹⁰ James Griffin, ‘Verjus, Henri Stanislas (1860-1892)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/verjus-henri-stanislas-4777>.

⁹¹ *Ibid*.

intermediate social stratum between the foreign missionaries and the local population'.⁹² As will be discussed in Chapter Four, this strategy was integral to the establishment of Gsell's own mission on Bathurst Island.

Along with Couppé, Verjus explored the hinterlands of Central Papua throughout 1886 and 1887, becoming fluent in both Mekeo and the Roro dialect of the Waima language. Eight mission stations were subsequently established on the mainland by 1891. Verjus was consecrated Bishop in 1889 and became coadjutor – to Navarre – of British New Guinea in 1890.⁹³ Ill health, a consequence of the extremes to which he had pushed his body working in the tropics, caused him to return to Europe in April 1892. In October, he visited Rome and presented Pope Leo with the spectacular gift of a triple tiara made from bird-of-paradise feather head-dresses (Figure 12) – donated by the converted chieftains of Yule Island – along with a translated catechism and dictionary in Roro.⁹⁴ He also presented a letter from three Papuan children, addressed: 'To Leo XIII, Pope and Grand Chief'. The Pope was reportedly so moved that he sanctioned 30 additional missionaries to New Guinea.⁹⁵ Verjus was unable to accompany them, however, as he died suddenly of pneumonia on 13 November 1892, at the young age of 32, while visiting his hometown. His death prompted an outpouring of grief within the MSC community who lauded his achievements and proclaimed him 'Apostle of New Guinea'.

As indicated above, Gsell first came into contact with Verjus, by reading of his exploits in the *Annales de Notre Dame du Sacré Coeur*. First published in 1866, the *Annals* had a very wide circulation in Europe, being the principle organ of the MSCs and their lay confraternity. After 1881, each monthly addition of the *Annals* devoted a section to publishing letters from missionaries in Oceania. Verjus, Navarre and Couppé were frequent correspondents, and their missionary endeavours were always presented in a very heroic light; tales of daring feats, countless trials and tribulations, all for the greater glory of God. In their letters we see vivid

⁹² Ganter, *Contest for Aboriginal Souls*, 140.

⁹³ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 242.

⁹⁴ The *Annales* reported: 'Ces dons comprennent d'abord trois couronnes formées de plumes d'oiseaux appelés upi-upi. Ces couronnes reliées ensemble en forme de tiare ont été offertes par les principaux chefs convertis, lesquels, tout émerveillés d'apprendre par Mgr Vérius qu'il avait au-dessus de lui l'Évêque des évêques, le Pape de Rome, ont voulu se dessaisir de leurs couronnes et les faire déposer à ses pieds comme un hommage à sa royauté universelle.' Translation: 'These gifts first include three crowns made of bird feathers called *upi-upi*. These wreaths tied together in the shape of a tiara were donated by the principal converted chiefs, who, amazed to learn from Bishop Verjus that he had above him the Bishop's Bishop, the Pope of Rome, wanted to divest their crowns and have them laid at his feet as a tribute to his universal kingship.' 'Monseigneur Vérius: Aux Pieds du Soverain-Pontife', *Annales de Notre Dame du Sacré Coeur* (January 1893): 665.

⁹⁵ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 242.

descriptions of exotic encounters with ‘wild savages’, untamed lands, and sublime weather; beauty and danger abound in equal measure. Importantly, we see myriad souls snatched from darkness and brought into the light of Christian faith. While celebrating success, these articles always stressed the need for further funds and manpower, and it is evident their intention was to inspire both.⁹⁶

In an article published in October 1885, Verjus provided readers of the *Annals* with a highly evocative description of his first trip to Yule Island, ‘besieging the devil in his last fortress’.⁹⁷ Initially unable to find a pilot to captain the boat which was meant to take him to the island, he placed a bronze statue of Our Lady at the helm, declaring that: ‘She herself will lead us’.⁹⁸ A willing pilot materialised shortly thereafter, and their journey could begin. It was not an easy one, as they ran into a powerful storm at sea which threatened to capsize the boat.⁹⁹ Verjus asserted that by the grace of God and with the aid of Mary, the storm abated and they eventually arrived at Yule Island, making successful first contact with the local people.¹⁰⁰ One can easily imagine a twelve year old Gsell in quiet, rural Alsace – his young mind ablaze with a child’s lively imagination – poring over this account with avid interest.

According to an article published in 1948, Gsell met Verjus during his novitiate in 1891. The article claimed: ‘The meeting had enkindled a flame of missionary zeal in the heart of the young priest and 1897 found him on the high seas to Australia and Papua’.¹⁰¹ At this stage, Gsell had spent close to five years at the apostolic school completing his secondary studies. Still eager to become a priest, he had entered the novitiate at Chezal-Benoit and undergone a period of intensive spiritual formation. A meeting with his hero could not have come at a better time, and it is possible that Verjus’ untimely death further reinforced Gsell’s conviction to pursue a career as a missionary priest. He took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience on 17 October 1892 at the age of 20, and departed for Rome to begin the next stage of his studies.

⁹⁶ See for example, Henri Stanislas Verjus, ‘Letter aux Novices de la Maison D’Anvers: Aimé Soit Partout le Sacré Coeur de Jésus!’, *Annales de Notre Dame du Sacré Coeur* (October, 1889): 510-511.

⁹⁷ ‘assiéger le diable dans sa dernière forteresse’. Henri Stanislas Verjus, ‘Nouvelle-Guinée’, *Annales de Notre Dame du Sacré Coeur* (October 1885): 317.

⁹⁸ ‘Mais bientôt Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur vint à notre secours. Elle-même nous conduira’. *Ibid.*, 319.

⁹⁹ ‘nous eûmes le mer la plus affreuse; les vagues étaient deux fois plus hautes que les mats de notre barque. Par trois fois nous faillîmes tous être balayés à la mer par de grosses vagues qui venaient comme de furies s’abattre sur nous. Comme l’on se sent petit dans ces terribles occasions!’ Translation: ‘we had the most frightful sea; the waves were twice as high as the masts of our boat. Three times we all had to be swept into the sea by big waves that came as furies fell on us. How small you feel in these terrible occasions!’ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 321-322. See also, Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 239-240.

¹⁰¹ ‘Life Story of Francis Xavier Gsell: Valiant Bishop of Australia’s Never-Never’, *Advocate*, 10 February, 1948. 21.

From the very beginning of his vocational training, it is apparent Gsell was considered a man of some intellectual capacity. When the MSCs were expelled from France, Chevalier turned down an offer for his seminarians to be trained in the French Seminary in Rome. Instead, they attended the Propaganda College to be better prepared for a career in foreign missions.¹⁰² When Gsell travelled to Rome, however, he began his studies at the more prestigious Pontifical University of St Apollinare, wherein he would earn a doctorate of sacred theology.¹⁰³ The university was established by Pope Pius IV (1559-1565) in 1565 and entrusted to the Jesuits.¹⁰⁴ In the decades prior to Gsell's arrival, the university had flourished under the patronage of Pius IX who had sought to ensure that the Roman seminaries produced an extremely well educated class of priest, especially in the areas of canon and civil law. Scholars argue that this was to ensure the clergy were ready to face the increasing threat of secular nation-states to the papal cause.¹⁰⁵ Aspirants to the priesthood followed a prescribed course of studies over a six year period; however, Gsell seems to have completed his in five. Gsell was ordained to the priesthood on 30 May 1896 in the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore.¹⁰⁶ He went to his birthplace, Benfeld, to celebrate his first mass on 22 June 1896, completing his doctoral studies in Rome within the following year.¹⁰⁷

Gsell was an exact contemporary of Eugene Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII (1939-1958). They attended St Apollinare at the same time, though it is unlikely that they were friends or even associates as Pius' biographers note that, as he was given the rather extraordinary dispensation to study for the priesthood as a day-student, 'he did not know – and some said did not care to know – his fellow seminarians'.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, as a fellow student, Gsell came into contact with the same teachers and potential influences as the young Pacelli. Biographers note that Pacelli received his training for the priesthood during the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII. As Robert A. Ventresca argues: 'Thanks in large part to Leo XIII's spirited engagement with the modern world, Pacelli's clerical preparation came during the most intellectually vibrant and turbulent era in Catholic thought since the Reformation'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² Cuskelly, *Jules Chevalier*, 93.

¹⁰³ Pye, *Tiwi Islands*, 29. See also, 'Story of Francis Xavier Gsell', 21; and Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 62.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Hugo Doyle, *The Life of Pope Pius XII* (Melbourne: Invincible Press, 1945), 27.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Ventresca, *Soldier of Christ: The Life of Pope Pius XII* (London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 30.

¹⁰⁶ Gsell, 'Fifty Years of Mission Life', 263.

¹⁰⁷ Ganter, 'Gsell', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>

¹⁰⁸ Frank J. Coppa, *The Life and Pontificate of Pope Pius XII: Between History and Controversy* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 38.

¹⁰⁹ Ventresca, *Soldier of Christ*, 31.

Notwithstanding his assertions of papal primacy, Pius IX ultimately lost the battle over papal rights to temporal power. In September 1860, Victor Emmanuel II (1820-1878) defeated the papal armies and seized control of the Papal States, depriving Pius of all his territory except for Lazio and Rome, which were protected by a French garrison. He finally captured the city on 20 September 1870 and made it the capital of a united Italy. Confined to the Vatican and refusing to recognise the Kingdom of Italy, Pius lost his status in international law as a sovereign head of state, the first pope in centuries to do so.¹¹⁰ Leo, therefore, became Pope during a period in which the pendulum had well and truly swung in favour of the state.

Yet he was more conciliatory and diplomatic than Pius. Whereas his predecessor was known for his intransigence and a tendency toward protest and condemnation, Leo sought working relationships with modern governments and embodied a more constructive approach in redressing what he believed were the moral evils of his time.¹¹¹ The best known example of this was the 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which detailed the struggles of working people under industrial capitalism.¹¹² Leo denounced the moral failure of laissez-faire economics on the one hand, while rejecting Marxism on the other. But rather than repeat the mere censures of *Quanta Cura*, Leo went further by proposing Catholic solutions to these modern problems. He emphasised Christianity's longstanding affinity with the poor and argued that the Church had a mandate to protect the vulnerable. In effect, this politically realigned the Church with the working classes with whom they had had a troubled relationship for the better part of a century. While he did not agree with combative labour groups, he recognised the needs of workers to organise and promoted mutual aid societies, charities, and welfare institutions.¹¹³ Leo based his arguments on Thomistic social theology, the revival of which he had encouraged with the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) and which maintained that public authority was responsible for promoting public good.¹¹⁴

One of the notable features of Gsell's career was his willingness to work in close partnership with government authorities in Australia. This could be considered remarkable given the facts of Gsell's early life in which he was born into a period of bitter conflict between the Catholic

¹¹⁰ Pius' successors continued to dispute their loss of temporal power until 1929 when Italy, under Benito Mussolini (1922-1945), recognised Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) as sovereign of a new independent state, Vatican City, with the signing of the Lateran Treaty. See Coppa, *The Papacy in the Modern World*.

¹¹¹ Ventresca asserts that: 'Leo XIII engaged with modernity by proposing instead of imposing Catholic principles. He was more interested in establishing working relationships with secular states than in fighting old battles from previous eras.' *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹² Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 15 May 1891.

¹¹³ Coppa, *Papacy in the Modern World*, 108.

¹¹⁴ Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, 4 August 1879.

Church and German imperial government brought about by the *Kulturkampf* of the 1870s, and joined a French Religious Order, known for its ultramontanism, which had suffered expulsion as a consequence of the anti-clerical policies of the 1880s. One may have reasonably expected Gsell's attitudes to be altogether more reactionary. However, this is less the case when we consider that he trained for the priesthood in Rome in the 1890s under the influence of Leo's pontificate. Like Leo, Gsell had adjusted to the new realities of the modern world and demonstrated a willingness to engage with it in order to meet his own goals, namely success in Christian missions.

It is worthwhile examining one further possible influence on Gsell prior to his departure from Europe. The only work Gsell explicitly mentions having read in his seminary days is that of the Venerable Cardinal Guglielmo Massaia (1809-1889).¹¹⁵ Massaia was an Italian missionary and Capuchin friar famous for his work in Ethiopia. When Leo elevated Massaia to the rank of cardinal in 1884, he requested that he write an account of his labours. The work, published in several volumes between 1883 and 1895, examines the political and economic conditions of Abyssinia, as well as missionary progress therein, placing emphasis on a need for missionaries to be intimately acquainted with the customs and mindset of the people they hope to convert. In one section, Massaia offers particularly pertinent advice to prospective missionaries:

Thus, if a Missionary, out of necessity, had to go and stop in those places, I would advise him not to throw himself, especially at the beginning, into the struggle with unconscious assaults on error, customs, habits and people: but to wait for the public to know and appreciate his mission, to love and esteem him as a man of upright and benevolent intentions ... with the spirit of doing good to all. Meanwhile, without exposing yourself to untimely hatefulness, you will be able to hear and learn many things, to get a good knowledge of the country and of the people, and to set yourself a more active and fruitful apostolate.¹¹⁶

It seems that such advice stuck with Gsell who, as we shall see, adopted a policy of missionary gradualism in his evangelisation of the Tiwi people.

¹¹⁵ Gsell, 'Fifty Years of Mission Life', 3.

¹¹⁶ 'Accadendo adunque che un Missionario per necessità debba recarsi e fermarsi in quei luoghi, io lo consiglierei di non gettarsi, massime in principio, nella lotta con inconsulti assalti all'errore, agli usi, ai costumi ed alle persone: ma di aspettare che il pubblico conosca ed apprezzi la sua missione, lo prenda ad amare e stimare quale uomo di rette e benevoli intenzioni ... con animo di fare del bene a tutti. In questo tempo intanto, senza esporsi ad intempestive odiosità, avrà agio di sentire ed imparare molte cose, di prendere larga conoscenza del paese e delle persone, e di apparecchiarsi ad un apostolato più operoso e più fecondo.' Guglielmo Massaia, *I Miei Trentacinque Anni di Missione Nell'alta Etiopia: Memorie Storiche* (Rome: Società Tipografica A. Manuzio, 1925), 161-162.

When Gsell left Europe on 7 September 1897 he was not yet 25 years old. From modest beginnings in a rural province of Imperial Germany, he had attended secondary school in France and university in Italy, studying for the priesthood at the very centre of the Roman Catholic world. He departed for Australia, therefore, as a young, highly educated and cosmopolitan priest of the universal Church. Inspired to a religious life by the animated writings of MSC bishops in far-away New Guinea, he also left his homeland with a sincere belief in the efficacy of missionary endeavour and an eagerness to share in its work. The faith he aimed to spread was a beleaguered one, buffeted in Europe by successive waves of anti-clericalism prosecuted by the inexorable ascendance of secular governments. In his lifetime, the temporal power of the papacy had been extinguished, and its moral power called into question. Yet, despite his personal experiences of rampant secularism in Germany and France, Gsell was formed to the priesthood during a time of great resilience in the Church. The papacy of Leo XIII sought to maintain its relevance in the modern world by working constructively with secular states and by emphasising the important role of the Church in advocating for the poor and vulnerable. Gsell seems to have carried these last two elements with him especially. As we shall see, Gsell established firm working relationships with secular authorities in order better to realise his mission of Christian evangelisation in Australia.

CHAPTER II

The Century of False Starts: Catholic Missions on the Northern Frontier, 1824-1906

Eventually, the disciples of St Ignatius Loyola thrust deep into the south, planting their flag one hundred miles away on the banks of the Daly River. There a church was built surrounded by houses, a school and workshops. The land was ploughed, fences were built and horses and cattle introduced: so that, gradually, the natives saw the advantages of farming and civilising influence good husbandry brings. Alas, the Daly itself, always temperamental ... swelled angrily in a succession of unusually high floods and washed away this good land wrested from the bush. These blows might have been met; but when the establishment of a copper mine in the neighbourhood of the Mission brought Whites pouring in like a cloud of locusts, the Army of the Lord packed its baggage and withdrew, the kind of strategic retreat that never dishonoured anybody.¹

When Gsell arrived in Sydney on 20 October 1897, it was nearly nine years before he would take up his post in the Northern Territory. He, as yet, had no idea that Bathurst Island would constitute his ultimate destination. Gsell was accompanied on the ship by two priests who had been his classmates at *Petit-Ouevre*, Rev Matthäs Rascher MSC (1868-1904) and Rev Hendrick Rutten MSC (1873-1904), both of whom were destined for missionary work in New Pomerania (New Britain) under Couppé. Gsell believed he would go with them, but was bitterly disappointed to learn that instead he would be assigned to teach dogma and scripture to seminarians. It was, perhaps, fortunate for Gsell that he was thus delayed, as both Rascher and Rutten were massacred in the Baining Mountains on 13 August 1904.² When he did finally arrive in Port Darwin, it would be after three years in Sydney and a further six in British New Guinea. He would find a land in which Catholicism had only made halting and unsatisfactory progress. This chapter tracks the development of the Catholic Church in the Northern Territory, alongside the British colonisation of the region. After providing a brief outline of Gsell's early career, it supplies essential background information on the history of the region, as well as the sporadic attempts of Catholics to evangelise First Nations peoples therein. It is a story characterised by intermittent zeal, limited achievement and overall frustration which, nevertheless, laid the foundation for Gsell's own missionary work. Ultimately, early failures made possible Gsell's eventual success. Crucially, they informed the policy of missionary isolation wholeheartedly embraced in 1911.

¹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 15.

² *Neither Eagles Nor Saints*, 504-511.

The MSCs had decided in 1884 that it would be prudent to establish a base in Australia if they hoped to have any success in Oceania. Cuskelly asserts that Couppé became friendly with the cardinal Archbishop of Sydney, Patrick Francis Moran (1830-1911), who shared his interest in Pacific missions and sought to promote MSC endeavour in New Guinea.³ Moran authorised the establishment of a mission procure in his archdiocese and the first MSCs arrived in January 1885. They were tasked with the parishes of Randwick and Botany, which provided a steady source of revenue, and they opened a monastery and missionary college at Kensington in September 1897. The Australian community developed under the guidance of Rev Pierre-Marie Tréand MSC (1856-1926) and eventually became its own province in 1905 with Tréand as Provincial Superior.⁴ The MSCs attracted vocations, and in 1897 they welcomed their first six novices to the mission college. Fresh off the boat in October, Gsell was appointed to assist in educating these aspiring priests.

Reflecting on his arrival, Gsell recalled: 'In due course, all my companions left for their respective goals. I, alone, to my great regret, was kept in Sydney. My heart bled as I watched them sail away to their islands: because I continued to hope until the end that I might also go. Through the intermediary of my superiors, Providence willed otherwise.'⁵ Indeed, Gsell's thwarted career ambitions seem to have been the victim of an ongoing feud between Tréand and Couppé over the allocation of missionary resources and personnel. On the one hand Tréand was trying to grow what would soon become the Australian Province, while Couppé sought to consolidate and expand his own diocese. Funds and manpower were ever a vexed issue, and both men wanted Gsell for their own projects.⁶ Caruana notes that Couppé went so far as to appeal to Moran to intervene on his behalf. But Tréand was determined to make his college a success, and he reminded the cardinal that Gsell fell within his own jurisdiction.⁷ Gsell had recently graduated with a doctorate from a Roman pontifical university after all, and this made him an important asset to the budding scholasticate. The delay in Sydney would also afford Gsell the opportunity to learn English, a skill which would, of course, prove invaluable when dealing with authorities in both New Guinea and the Northern Territory.

³ Cuskelly, *Man with a Mission*, 97.

⁴ Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 1-31.

⁵ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 166.

⁶ Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*

In December 1898, Gsell was also appointed mission procurator, tasked with the complex job of supplying the various missions in New Guinea.⁸ He had to purchase food, medicine, clothing, teaching and building materials, and a great many other essential goods, organising their timely dispatch and balancing the financial accounts. He also arranged the travel itineraries of visiting missionaries, constantly in and out of Sydney on periods of convalescence. It was a daunting task. Not only was Gsell then acquiring the use of the English language, he was also coming to terms with English figures. As Dupeyrat notes: ‘more tedious, solving the maddening complications of British systems of weights, measures and money’, bewildering to anyone raised on the metric system.⁹ This role was a dispiriting one to Gsell, but proved useful preparation for his future work, providing valuable practical administrative and financial experience.¹⁰

Fundamentally, Gsell would characterise his brief period in Sydney as one of preparation. Teaching the scholastics helped to consolidate his theological knowledge and working as procurator gave a first taste of the complexities of missionary management. Furthermore, he mastered English and began to familiarise himself with Australia. While he initially felt that his delay in Sydney ‘could destroy the ideal then controlling my life’ he eventually came to consider it ‘invaluable experience’. As it turned out, he did not have to wait too long before an opportunity arose to resume his primary vocation.

A request for reinforcements came in 1900, this time from Navarre’s diocese of New Guinea. Bishop Alain de Boismenu MSC (1870-1953) had been appointed coadjutor to the ailing Navarre in 1899 and he quickly set about reinvigorating a diocese which had languished somewhat in the aftermath of Verjus’ untimely death.¹¹ This time Gsell was allowed to answer the call. He would join a staff of 67 personnel – 18 priests, 19 brothers, 28 sisters and two catechists ministering to some 4,000 Papuan Catholic converts spread across 26 mission stations.¹² Gsell left Sydney on 20 April 1900. After a brief detour in Rabaul – where Gsell was ‘asked to give [his] first Baptism to a little black baby’ whom he christened Josephine after his own mother – he arrived at Yule Island on 9 May.¹³ This was the island first evangelised between 1885 and 1891 by his hero, Verjus: ‘With my heart overflowing with joy, I set foot on

⁸ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 167.

⁹ Dupeyrat, ‘Epilogue’, 167.

¹⁰ Gsell, ‘Fifty Years a Missionary’, 4.

¹¹ James Griffin, ‘Boismenu, Alain Marie Guynot de (1870–1953)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/boismenu-alain-marie-guynot-de-5281>

¹² Waldersee, *Neither Eagles Nor Saints*, 240-241.

¹³ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 168-169.

this promised land. I really thought then that I had reached the field where I should work for the rest of my life.’¹⁴ And so, following in the footsteps of the man he held in ‘saintly memory’, and in the company of many of his European colleagues, he fulfilled his boyhood dream. Gsell remained in New Guinea for the next six years.

His first posting was the small village of Tsiria on Yule Island where he ministered to approximately 300 people, all of whom had converted to Catholicism in the preceding decades. His ministry was like that of any parish priest in any Catholic community in any agricultural setting in the world. He tended to the sacraments and gave instruction on faith and morals. His work there required no fresh evangelism. Later, he was moved to Moou station on mainland New Guinea, and later still to Inawi further inland in the Mekeo District. He familiarised himself with Papuan culture and wrote favourably about the people and their customs:

Suffice it to say that Papuans have a rather intricate social life. They are ruled by chiefs who enjoy real authority; they have a kind of religion that keeps them constantly in touch with ancestral spirits; they believe in an afterlife and in some sort of place of reward for the good and punishment for the bad; their family life is almost regular and polygamy rather scarce. They are settlers and agriculturalists. Their villages are clean and their gardens a marvel of ingenuity.¹⁵

All these elements made the task of Christian conversion easier for missionaries because, notwithstanding the vastly different linguistic and cultural contexts of the European peasantry and the agrarian peoples of Papua, there were many points of identification for Catholic priests.

In addition to his work with indigenous peoples, and owing to his skills with the English language, he was also tasked with ministering to the European population. Aboard the mission sailing boat he made regular visits along the New Guinea coastline (see Map 6) to the various Catholic officials, miners, and plantation owners. His final responsibility was management of the mission shop, which was greatly helped by his previous experience as procurator in Sydney.

These were formative years for Gsell, offering his first practical experience with missionary work among foreign peoples. These would invariably shape the attitudes and approaches he eventually brought to the Northern Territory. When Gsell arrived at Yule Island, he was issued with a copy of Navarre’s *Manuel des Missionnaires du Sacre-Couer parmi les Sauvages*. Begun in 1882, and first printed on Yule Island in 1896, the handbook was required reading

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Gsell, ‘Fifty Years a Missionary’, 16.

for all missionary priests working within Navarre's diocese.¹⁶ Though Gsell makes no mention of this document in his memoir, there are significant parallels between Navarre's policy and Gsell's methods. Most significant is the second chapter, which clearly articulates a gradualist program. Navarre understood that his missionaries were but one group among the many foreigners visiting themselves upon the Papuans. As J.F. McMahon notes: 'What stands out is his insistence on the attitude of the native people on the part of the missionary who is a foreigner to them in *their* country'.¹⁷ Consequently, Navarre instructed his missionaries to tread lightly – respecting local culture – never seeking to challenge indigenous customs until such time as they were accepted by the community:

The moment you arrive in a station, you must not assert your authority as master, indicating that you wish to be obeyed to the letter and that you are anxious to change the life-style and customs of the people. You must remember that they are not Christians and, as a consequence, you will meet with certain irregularities, such as polygamy, the evil spells of the witchdoctors and others which are quite repugnant to us. To destroy them we need to wait until the people are sufficiently instructed and your influence sufficiently strong. To act precipitately would be to compromise the stations.¹⁸

Missionaries must be patient, using their time to earn the trust and respect of would-be converts by performing acts of kindness and charity. He furthermore stressed that they should familiarise themselves with the local language in order to understand and integrate themselves into indigenous society: 'While the missionary is working to gain the confidence of his people, he must make serious efforts to study the language, which will be helped by his frequent conversation with the people.'¹⁹ Not only would this allow the missionary to build fruitful relationships with local people, it would also make easier the task of conversion as Christian concepts would be understood better when communicated in one's mother tongue. Though, as we will see, Gsell's success with the Tiwi language left much to be desired, his policy of missionary gradualism and mutual acculturation was clearly reinforced during his formative years in Navarre's diocese. It is possible that he understood and favoured such approaches prior to his arrival in New Guinea, but any previously held convictions were affirmed by reading Navarre's handbook. Gsell's attitude to policing is illustrative of this point.

¹⁶ McMahon, 'Introduction', 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

¹⁸ Andre Navarre, *Handbook for Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Working Among the Natives of Papua New Guinea* (1896), translated by Sheila Larkin (Sydney: Chevalier Press, 1987), 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

Navarre was anxious that missionaries distinguish themselves from other Europeans, believing it was vitally important that: ‘These people [Papuan] must not see us as policemen nor distrust us as they do the government soldiers, otherwise we will never gain the influence to bring them to God.’²⁰ Navarre argued that it would be impossible to attract converts to the Catholic faith without their trust, and declared: ‘we would do great harm if they supposed us to be in collusion with the government soldiers’.²¹ Queensland had attempted to annex the southern half of eastern New Guinea in 1883, but the British government did not approve. Instead, the area was declared a protectorate in 1884 and annexed outright in 1888. Colonial violence was a feature of life in British New Guinea – just as it continued to be in Australia – and tensions often existed between the small colonial administration based in Port Moresby and the Papuan people. Peter Maiden, for example, argues that the governor, Sir William MacGregor (1846-1919), was heavy-handed in his treatment of Papuans and a keen practitioner of ‘gunboat diplomacy’.²² Throughout his appointment (1888-1894 and 1895-1898), he frequently used coercion to assert his authority and was no stranger to punitive expeditions and arbitrary arrests.²³ It is no surprise Navarre should wish to distance missionaries from association with such behaviour. Another very practical and upsetting example of the risks associated with too strong an identification with colonial authorities would present itself to Gsell in 1904.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Gsell was accompanied to Australia by missionary priests, Rascher and Rutten. They travelled to New Pomerania in German New Guinea and took up posts in the Baining Mountains. German control of New Pomerania was always tenuous and the relationship between the colonial government and the Papuan tribes was characterised by excessive violence, frequently arousing fierce opposition to Europeans. According to Waldersee, Rascher’s station marked the farthest limit of colonial control on the Gazelle Peninsula. A personal friend of the Governor, Dr Albert Hahl, the priest was appointed an official government representative: ‘Unfortunately, this caused him to be identified as an agent of the state as well as a missionary; as an administrator responsible for enforcing compulsory labour on road-building, he was bound to be unpopular at times.’²⁴ Matters were not helped when Rascher earned the enmity of Papuan man, To Maria. Already married, To Maria had sought divorce so that he could wed another married woman, Sa Vanut. The couple

²⁰ Ibid., 23.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Peter Maiden, *Missionaries, Headhunters & Colonial Officers* (Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press, 2003), 99-101.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Waldersee, *Neither Eagles Nor Saints*, 507.

had absconded from the station on multiple occasions, but were always brought back and beaten, Rascher having been granted permission to use corporal punishment by Hahl. To Maria decided to rid himself of the priest, along with all other Europeans and their sympathisers living in the area. He found no support within the mission station itself but managed to assemble a group from the surrounding mountains with the prospect of liberating the entire island from German rule. On 13 August 1904, To Maria met Rascher in his house and asked to borrow a hunting rifle. He turned the gun on Rascher, shooting him at point-blank range. The shot signalled the others, who entered the village and murdered the remaining missionaries and a handful of their converts with clubs and machetes.

There would be no revolution. The culprits were eventually caught and executed. Hahl had To Maria shot and decapitated, his head mounted on a pole as grim warning to others.²⁵ Understandably dismayed by the massacre, Couppé sent a lengthy report to Berlin in which he blamed Hahl for the crimes. He accused Hahl of using missionaries as unpaid civil officers and claimed that Rascher had in previous years requested his administrative powers be transferred to a secular agent, but Hahl had refused.²⁶ Couppé clearly felt that Rascher's identification with secular authority had been his undoing, notwithstanding his personal feud with To Maria. Ganter asserts that this incident, 'cannot have failed to leave a strong impression on Gsell, who mentions [Rascher and Rutten] in his autobiography'.²⁷ Indeed, as we shall see, Gsell repeatedly rejected the efforts of the Northern Territory Administration and Chief Protector to appoint his missionaries Protectors of Aborigines in the 1920s and 1930s – stressing that it was out of the question for missionaries to be granted police powers – most likely with Navarre's handbook and the Baining murders in mind.

Gsell's career in New Guinea was diverted in 1906 when he was appointed Administrator Apostolic to the dormant Diocese of Palmerston and Victoria in the Northern Territory. The facts of this appointment will be discussed below, but it is first necessary to provide a detailed history of the region in which Gsell would spend the remainder of his career.

The British colonisation of northern Australia was motivated primarily by strategic and security concerns. Between 1788 and 1824 the border of New South Wales extended to a longitude of 135°E, embracing part of what was to become the Northern Territory but leaving the rest

²⁵ Ibid., 504-511.

²⁶ Ibid., 510.

²⁷ Ganter, 'Gsell', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>. Gsell describes them both as 'martyrs of the Faith.' *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 169.

officially unattached.²⁸ In June 1800 Napoleon's government applied for safe-conduct to allow the French Captain Nicolas Baudin (1754-1803) to engage in scientific explorations of the Australian coast.²⁹ English explorer Matthew Flinders (1774-1814) capitalised on anxiety that the French were interested in making territorial claims to the continent's north in order to secure the patronage of Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) for a similar expedition. He sailed for Australia in July 1801.³⁰ Over the next two years, he circumnavigated the continent, making detailed charts of the southern coastline. By the time he arrived in what became the Northern Territory, his ship was in a state of disrepair and he was advised to return to Sydney, sprinkling the eastern coastline with the names of British noblemen and officials – Sir Edward Pellew's Islands, Capes Barrow, Shield and Grey, Caledon and Melville Bays – as he went.³¹ In 1803, Baudin passed along the western coast of the Northern Territory, leaving behind a string of French names – Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, Peron Islands, Cape Fourcroy – before likewise departing the region for good.³² Another fourteen years would elapse before Europeans renewed their interest in the northern coast.

In 1817, Phillip Parker King (1791-1856), the Australian-born son of Governor Philip Gidley King (1758-1808), was commissioned to finish what Flinders had started. Over the next five years he surveyed the northern coast of Arnhem Land and the Cobourg Peninsula. He traversed the Apsley Strait between Bathurst and Melville Islands, and charted the Vernon Islands, and the Liverpool, East, South and West Alligator Rivers. He noted the entrance to Darwin harbour in 1819 – but did not enter – and mapped the western coastline down to the Cambridge Gulf. He concluded his explorations in 1822.³³ The final European maps of the region were completed between 1837 and 1839 when the *Beagle*, under the command of Captain John Wickham (1798-1864) and senior surveyor Lieutenant John Lort Stokes (1812-1885), charted the Adelaide, Victoria, Fitzmaurice, Flinders and Albert Rivers.³⁴ On 9 September 1839, they landed at Port Darwin and Stokes named the waterway after naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882), a former shipmate and friend whom he recalled had an interest in geology and of whom

²⁸ Deborah Wade-Marshall, *The Northern Territory: Settlement History, Administration and Infrastructure* (Canberra: The Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1988). 1.

²⁹ See Nicole Starbuck, *Baudin, Napoleon and the Exploration of Australia* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013).

³⁰ See Kenneth Morgan, *Matthew Flinders: Maritime Explorer of Australia* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

³¹ Powell, *Far Country*, 41.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 41-44. See also Brian Douglas Abbott, *Philip Parker King, 1791-1856: A Most Admirable Australian* (Armistale, NSW: Glenburgh, 2012).

³⁴ See Marsden Hordern, *Mariners are Warned!: John Lort Stokes and H.M.S. Beagle in Australia, 1837-1843* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

he was reminded when they saw unusual rock formations at Talc Head.³⁵ The harbour and subsequent city was thus given its then rather obscure namesake twenty years before the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859).

Two British settlements in the north had already failed by the time Stokes sailed into Port Darwin (see Maps 2 and 9). In 1825 the NSW border was extended to 129°E, encompassing the entirety of the Northern Territory, thus making way for two settlements. The first was Fort Dundas (1824-1829) on Melville Island near present-day Pirlangimpi, and the second was Fort Wellington (1827-29) in Raffles Bay on the Cobourg Peninsula. The British believed these garrisons would serve the twin purpose of consolidating Britain's territorial claims to the entirety of the Australian continent, thus fending off the potential for similar claims by the French or Dutch, while also attracting trade with south-east Asia.³⁶ It was hoped that the pre-existing trade between the First Nations people of northern Australia and Macassan trepangers would form the basis of a fruitful one with the British. They were mistaken. Powell aptly describes Captain Gordon Bremer (1786-1850), the man charged with establishing a northern settlement, as 'the first in a long line of optimists who have graced the Northern Territory with their temporary presence'.³⁷ Plagued by disease and misfortune, both Fort Dundas and Fort Wellington were deemed commercial failures and summarily deserted in 1829.

The colony of New South Wales made one final attempt at a northern settlement in 1838 when Bremer established Fort Victoria (1838-1849) in Port Essington on the Cobourg Peninsula. Bremer departed in 1839, leaving Captain John McArthur (1791-1862) in charge.³⁸ Fort Victoria suffered the same difficulties as Fort Dundas and Fort Wellington. Trade was sluggish, and, while Maccassans frequently visited the settlement they could not be induced to trade in British goods owing to their economic commitments to the Dutch who controlled the Indonesian archipelago. Western-style agriculture also failed to make much headway in the harsh tropical climate, and few settlers could be enticed north.³⁹ By the 1840s, the fear of

³⁵ De La Reu, *Ruled By Remote Control: The Commonwealth's Role in the History of Darwin, 1911-1978*, PhD thesis, Charles Darwin University, 2014, 21; See also R.D. Keynes, *Fossils, Finches, and Fuegians: Darwin's Adventures and Discoveries on the Beagle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁶ See Derek Pugh, *The British in Northern Australia, 1824-29: Fort Dundas* (Rapid Creek: Derek Pugh, 2017); Graham Calley, *The Pumpkin Settlements: Agriculture and Animals in Australia's First Northern Colonies* (Darwin: Historical Society of the Northern Territory, 1998); and Alan Powell, *'World's End': British Military Outposts in the 'Ring Fence' Around Australia 1824-1849* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2016).

³⁷ Powell, *Far Country*, 49.

³⁸ See Peter Spillett, *Forsaken Settlement: An Illustrated history of the settlement of Victoria, Port Essington, North Australia, 1838-1849* (Sydney: Lansdowne, 1972).

³⁹ Powell, *Far Country*, 54-61.

foreign encroachment had greatly diminished and the British were less concerned about the need to reinforce their claims to the continent with a northern settlement.⁴⁰ Victoria was abandoned, like the others, in November 1849. Nevertheless, it was at Port Essington that the Catholic story in northern Australia first began.

The history of the Catholic Church in the Northern Territory, prior to Gsell's arrival, roughly parallels that of colonial settlement: one of sporadic enthusiasm, failure, and overall neglect. In 1843, Archbishop John Bede Polding (1794-1877) of Sydney sent Rev John Brady (1800-1871) to Perth as his Vicar General. He ministered to the European population and soon became convinced of the necessity of missionary work among the First Nations peoples of the area.⁴¹ Brady travelled to Rome and managed to convince Pope Gregory XVI (1826-1846) to make Western Australia a separate diocese. A former Prefect of Propaganda, Gregory was a stalwart supporter of missionary work. He had used his papacy to promote a number of missionary organisations, not least of which was the Society for the Propagation of the Faith which became the principle source of charitable funds to 'foreign missions'.⁴² In addition to an alleged 5,000 European children, Brady claimed there were approximately two million First Nations people in need of Catholic conversion in Western Australia, and such great numbers – almost certainly inflated – proved very tempting to Propaganda Fide.⁴³

Brady was consecrated Bishop of Perth in May 1845. He toured Europe on a recruitment drive, assembling a multi-national team of 27 willing missionaries, before returning to Australia. These men and women were inspired by Brady's emotional descriptions of First Nations peoples, whom he lamented were scorned and neglected by the colonial government. As the Mercy Sisters recalled of his visit to their house in Dublin: 'The zeal of the Community on hearing this miserable state of so many fellow human beings made each member consider it a favour to be chosen to take part in a work so pleasing to our Divine Lord.'⁴⁴ The little army of missionaries would be shocked upon arrival in Perth to discover very few potential converts among the small settler community. Nevertheless, they were drawn by the prospect of ministering to Indigenous people and many would make this their life's vocation. Among the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁴¹ Stefano Girola, 'Catholic Missions Among Indigenous Australians in the 19th Century', in *Nagoyo: The Life of don Angelo Confalonieri among the Aborigines of Australia, 1846-1848*, Stefano Girola and Rolando Pizzini eds (Trento, Italy: Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, 2013), 96.

⁴² Gregory XVI, *Probe Nostis*, 18 September 1840.

⁴³ Girola, 'Catholic Missions', 96; See also, Catherine Kovesi, *Ursula Frayne: A Biography* (Fremantle: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 121.

⁴⁴ F Goold and A Kelly, 'A Short Record of the Sisters of Mercy of Western Australia from 1846', MS and typescript in Mercy Archives, Perth. Cited in Kovesi, *Ursula Frayne*, 92.

number were Mother Ursula Frayne (1816-1885), the Irish founder of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia, the Spanish Benedictines Dom José Benedict Serra OSB (1810-1886) and Dom Rosendo Salvado OSB (1814-1900) who established the abbey at New Norcia among the Yued people of the Noongar language group in the Victoria Plains district in 1846, and the Italian priest Don Angelo Confalonieri (1813-1848) destined to become the first Catholic priest to step foot in the Northern Territory. Born in Trento, Confalonieri was ordained in 1839 and attended the Propaganda College in Rome in 1844. A talented linguist with an abiding missionary vocation, he had jumped at the opportunity to join Brady in this new endeavour.

Shortly after he arrived in Perth, Brady decided that Confalonieri, along with two Irish catechists, James Fagan and Nicholas Hogan, would begin their missionary work in the extreme north of the diocese, which included the Cobourg Peninsula. He was appointed Pro-Vicar Apostolic of Port Essington and departed for Sydney on 1 March 1846.⁴⁵ Having secured passage on the *Heroine* on 9 April, the missionaries ran into disaster on 24 April when their ship collided with a coral reef in the Torres Strait and rapidly sank.⁴⁶ Both Fagan and Hogan drowned, and Confalonieri was left with nothing but the shirt on his back and a small crucifix around his neck. He and the other survivors, who found shelter on a nearby reef, were rescued the next day.

Confalonieri arrived at Fort Victoria, completely destitute, on 13 May 1846. Fortunately, McArthur was sympathetic to his plight. He organised provisions and instructed his marines to build a hut for the priest at Black Point on the opposite side of harbour, roughly 23 kilometres away from the military outpost. Though severely compromised, he began his work in earnest.⁴⁷

Confalonieri made contact with the Majurnbalmi people, upon whose land his hut was built and whom he referred to as the 'Limbakaregio tribe' after the Makassarese name for Port Essington.⁴⁸ He put his language skills to good use, learning a mixture of Garig and Iwaidja which he compiled into a fairly accurate English phrasebook.⁴⁹ He was the first European in northern Australia to become proficient in an Indigenous language, as the nations of the

⁴⁵ Rolando Pizzini, 'Angelo Confalonieri in Australia', in *Nagoyo: The Life of don Angelo Confalonieri among the Aborigines of Australia, 1846-1848*, Stefano Girola and Rolando Pizzini eds (Trento, Italy: Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, 2013), 44.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 54-55.

⁴⁸ Bruce Birch, 'Confalonieri's Manuscripts', in *Nagoyo: The Life of don Angelo Confalonieri among the Aborigines of Australia, 1846-1848*, Stefano Girola and Rolando Pizzini eds (Trento, Italy: Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, 2013), 108.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Cobourg Peninsula generally preferred to speak to the British garrison at Victoria in either Malay or Pidgin English. In stark contrast to the monastic approach employed by Salvado and Serra at New Norcia, Confalonieri became an itinerant preacher. From 1846 to 1848, he travelled extensively throughout the Peninsula with Indigenous people, adopting their lifestyle, learning their culture, and mapping their territory. Confalonieri seems to have incorporated himself quite successfully into their society, earning the respect and trust of those with whom he lived, and who called him *Nagoyo*, meaning ‘father’. Indeed, anthropologist Elena Franchi argues that:

His missionary activities, aimed at establishing a relationship with the Aborigines, were grounded on integration; on the knowledge of their language; on the study of religious beliefs and on his role – achieved through hardships – as a catechist, educator, physician, and arbitrator of disputes. All of this reveals considerable communication skills and a great deal of liberalness, which themselves served as the basis for a refined missionary practice and as prerequisites for active mutual acculturation: the Aborigines were ‘missionised’, while the missionary himself was ‘indigenised’.⁵⁰

To some extent, this approach would be echoed by Gsell in the years to come. While scholars acknowledge Confalonieri’s success in forming a working understanding of First Nations language and culture, his legacy of Christian conversion is certainly more limited. Much like Gsell, Confalonieri believed traditional culture and religion was too deeply ingrained to effect sincere Christian conversion, particularly in adults. He struggled with both understanding Aboriginal religion and conveying Catholic concepts. During his brief ministry, therefore, he focused his evangelising efforts on children, but regretted that he was as yet unable to establish a permanent school and boarding house in which to educate young people away from the influence of their parents.⁵¹ In any event, his work was cut short. Confalonieri contracted malaria and died on 9 June 1848. He was 35 years old. McArthur wrote to Polding: ‘We buried him with all honours. The entire settlement attended his funeral.’⁵² To this day, Confalonieri remains where he was buried, in a small cemetery amid the ruins of Victoria. In his monumental history of the Catholic Church in Australia, Cardinal Moran claimed that: ‘During the two years

⁵⁰ Elena Franchi, ‘Creative Misunderstandings: Identity and Otherness in Angelo Confalonieri’s Experience as an Anthropologist on a Mission among the “Savages”,’ in *Nagoyo: The Life of don Angelo Confalonieri among the Aborigines of Australia, 1846-1848*, Stefano Girola and Rolando Pizzini eds (Trento, Italy: Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, 2013), 156.

⁵¹ Spillett, *Forsaken Settlement*, 156; G. Pryer, ‘Confalonieri, Angelo Bernardo (1813-1848)’, *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2008), 105; Powell, *Far Country*, 60.

⁵² Flynn, *Northern Gateway*, 48.

that he laboured among [the First Nations people of the Cobourg Peninsula] he gained about four hundred of them to Christ'.⁵³ It is unclear upon what basis Moran made this assertion. Confalonieri certainly made no such claims, and the figure has since been discredited by scholars, even if it is often repeated uncritically in Church histories.⁵⁴ Harris, for example, argues that: 'Moran tended to exaggerate such claims of success and, if his figures had any basis in reality at all, it may have represented simply the number of Aboriginal people in the region with whom Confalonieri was in some kind of contact'.⁵⁵

Shortly after Confalonieri's death, Serra was consecrated Bishop of Victoria in a ceremony in Rome. His first and only act as bishop of this new diocese was successfully to petition Pius IX to place the territory and its faithful under the special patronage and invocation of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception.⁵⁶ However, before he could depart Perth, his appointment was changed and he became instead coadjutor to Brady.⁵⁷ Salvado was chosen to go instead, and consecrated bishop while in Naples on 15 August 1849. However, as we have seen, Fort Victoria was abandoned, so Salvado remained at New Norcia and was eventually appointed Lord Abbot in 1867.⁵⁸

While his progress initially slow, the mission received significant stimulus when Pius IX granted New Norcia autonomy from the Perth Diocese in 1859 and allowed around 50 monks to join the staff.⁵⁹ As Harris observes: 'This provided a band of loyal tradesmen and labourers whose contribution was essential to the realisation of Salvado's vision'.⁶⁰ Over the next few decades, he built a flourishing monastic community. By 1871, the mission complex consisted of a large monastery, chapel, two schools, and seven cottages, as well as a multitude of granaries, stables, storehouses and workshops. The monks had cleared 300 acres of land, 200 of which were under cultivation. These produced 3000 bushels of wheat and barley, and 15 tons of hay. The community boasted a large enclosed garden in which fruit, vegetables, and

⁵³ Patrick Francis Moran, *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia: From Authentic Sources* (Sydney: The Oceanic Publishing Company, 1896), 560.

⁵⁴ Edmund Campion, for example, observes: 'At the end of the century, Cardinal Moran would write that the priest had made some 400 converts, an improbable figure'. 'Preface', in *Nagoyo: The Life of don Angelo Confalonieri among the Aborigines of Australia, 1846-1848*, Stefano Girola and Rolando Pizzini eds (Trento, Italy: Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, 2013), 10. The 400 figure is repeated in Thompson, for example, *NT Dreaming*, 6. In any event, Moran's knowledge of Confalonieri seems sketchy at best. See *Catholic Church in Australasia*, 560.

⁵⁵ Harris, *One Blood*, 458.

⁵⁶ Moran, *Catholic Church in Australasia*, 586.

⁵⁷ Harris, *One Blood*, 50.

⁵⁸ Dom William, 'Salvado, Rosendo (1814-1900)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/salvado-rosendo-2627>.

⁵⁹ See O'Farrell, *Catholic Church and Community*, 75-78.

⁶⁰ Harris, *One Blood*, 294.

tobacco were cultivated. There was also a collection of beehives, and three acres of planted wines yielding 200 gallons of wine.⁶¹ In addition to all this, Salvado controlled a vast pastoral empire: one million acres of land at its height, stocked with thousands of sheep, and hundreds of horses and cattle. As an economic enterprise, New Norcia was extremely prosperous. According to Harris: 'It was one of the few missions which truly achieved a self-supporting status for any length of time.'⁶² This was only made possible by the large number of skilled Benedictines under his direction: 'Although to Salvado it was important that Aboriginal people learn Western skills, the mission was run for them, not dependent upon their labour.'⁶³

Salvado's method of Christian evangelism focused on a twofold approach to the education of Indigenous children. While in residence at New Norcia, they received a western style education alongside religious instruction. They also received technical skills training, mainly in agricultural occupations, so that they could find gainful employment both on and off the settlement.⁶⁴ An accomplished musician, Salvado also made certain that the mission was furnished with a capable choir and band. When Cardinal Moran visited New Norcia in 1887, he declared the Benedictines triumphant in their efforts to impart 'the blessings of religion and civilisation to the Aboriginals'.⁶⁵ He stated that Salvado had proved beyond doubt 'that there is no instruction, no mental development, no virtue, no moral improvement of which the white race is capable, which the Aboriginals also are not capable of receiving'.⁶⁶ Moran's monumental history likewise upheld New Norcia as the model Catholic mission.⁶⁷ As we shall see, Salvado's monastic approach set an effective precedent, emulated by the Jesuits and indeed by Gsell.

Catholic progress in the Northern Territory was far less satisfactory. Despite the establishment of a permanent settlement at Port Darwin in 1869, the diocese remained effectively neglected by the Church; Confalonieri's alleged 400 converts in the north were left forevermore without a pastor.

⁶¹ Moran, *Catholic Church in Australasia*, 577.

⁶² Harris, *One Blood*, 295.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁶⁴ See Rosendo Salvado, *Report of Rosendo Salvado to Propaganda Fide in 1900*, translated and edited by Stefano Girola (Northcote, Victoria: Abbey Press, 2016), 98.

⁶⁵ Cited in *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Moran, *Catholic Church in Australasia*, 548.

Colonial interest in northern Australia stirred once more in the 1860s. At this time, most of the Australian interior was still unknown to Europeans.⁶⁸ Both the South Australian and Victorian colonies competed to unlock the economic potential of the north, offering generous rewards for inland exploration. Following the spectacular failure of Victoria's Burke and Wills expedition in 1860, South Australia funded two attempts to cross the interior by Scottish explorer John McDouall Stuart (1815-1866).⁶⁹ Forced into a strategic retreat in July 1861, having made it as far as 560 kilometres south of the northern coastline, Stuart's party left Adelaide on their final attempt in October 1861. They reached the centre in March 1862, and eventually the Indian Ocean at Chambers Bay on 24 July, having traversed over 3,000 kilometres of desert and bushland. Stuart returned to Adelaide in December to a hero's welcome.⁷⁰ Buoyed by the success of this expedition, the South Australian government annexed the entirety of the Northern Territory in 1863.

Lieutenant-Colonel Boyle Travers Finniss (1807-1893) was appointed Government Resident and sent north to establish the fourth and final failed settlement at Escape Cliffs (1864-1867) near the Adelaide River estuary. The entire history of the enterprise can best be summarised as a fiasco, and it quickly became apparent that the site was unsuitable.⁷¹ In December 1868, the South Australian Government commissioned Surveyor-General, George Woodroffe Goyder (1826-1898), to establish the capital. He chose the site of Port Darwin – on the custodial lands of the Larrakia Nation, known to them as *Garramilla* – and began surveying what would become the township of Palmerston in February 1869. It was named after Henry John Temple (1784-1865), 3rd Viscount Palmerston, who was British Prime Minister when South Australia annexed the territory.⁷² Ultimately, the survival of Palmerston was ensured in 1870 when South Australia committed to build an overland telegraph line connecting Adelaide and Palmerston. Melbourne and Adelaide were already connected by telegraph, and the proposal to build 3,200 kilometres of line within a mere two years would connect Australia to the rest of the world via

⁶⁸ Notwithstanding Ludwig Leichhardt's (1813-1848) overland expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington (August 1844 to December 1845), and Augustus Gregory's (1819-1905) explorations of the northern interior (1855-56).

⁶⁹ See *The Aboriginal Story of Burke and Wills: Forgotten Narratives*, Ian D. Clark and Fred Cahir eds. (Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing, 2013).

⁷⁰ See John McDouall Stuart, *Explorations in Australia: The Journals of John McDouall Stuart During the Years 1858, 1858, 1860, 1861 & 1862, When He Fixed the Centre of the Continent and Successfully Crossed It from Sea to Sea*, W. Hardman ed. (Australia: Lulu, 2006).

⁷¹ See Leith F. Barter, 'No Place for a City: Boyle Travers Finniss and the Establishment of the Escape Cliffs Settlement', *Northern Perspectives* 11, 2 (1988): 1-11; and Derek Pugh, *Escape Cliffs: The First Northern Territory Expedition, 1864-66* (Rapid Creek: Derek Pugh, 2018).

⁷² P.F. Donovan, *A Land Full of Possibilities: A History of South Australia's Northern Territory* (London: University of Queensland Press, 1981), 70-76.

an undersea cable from Java, brought ashore at Port Darwin.⁷³ The massive infrastructure project, completed in 1872 under the direction of Charles Todd (1826-1910), led to the discovery of gold near Pine Creek, about 200 kilometres south of Palmerston, which in turn resulted in a mining boom.⁷⁴ European and Chinese miners flocked to the Territory, while Queensland pastoralists moved cattle across. Nevertheless, economic development was slow and the non-Indigenous population was highly transient. Throughout the entire period of South Australian rule, the population never exceeded 7,533 persons, the majority of whom were Chinese.⁷⁵ Indeed, it would be a notable feature of South Australian rule that the Asian population of the Northern Territory more often than not exceeded that of the European. During this decade of development the Catholic Church continued to remain aloof.

It was not until the sustained lobbying of Rev Duncan McNab (1820-1896) that missionary activity would be revived in the Northern Territory. Cousin to Saint Mary McKillop, the Scottish priest had arrived in Australia in 1867 and began personal missionary work among the Jinbara, Biri and Gubbi Gubbi peoples of south-eastern Queensland in 1875.⁷⁶ Frequently at odds with both the colonial government and the institutional Church, McNab disapproved of the system of mission reserves. Under this policy, multiple groups were gathered in – often by force – from their traditional Country and concentrated in one place, thus leaving vacated land to European pastoralists.⁷⁷ McNab advocated instead for a policy whereby individual Indigenous families would be granted freehold and encouraged to establish homesteads. He stressed that the freehold should be on their custodial lands, which he acknowledged they had occupied since time immemorial. The scheme would naturally provide legal protections which safeguarded against further dispossession. In other words, an early expression of Land Rights. McNab's freeholders would also form the locus of a rural Christian parish which would in turn support missionary priests, though it must be said that McNab, unlike many of his contemporaries, saw the solution to Indigenous disadvantage in politics rather than religion.⁷⁸ He received only lukewarm support from Bishop James O'Quinn (1819-1881) of Brisbane and his proposals were rejected by the Queensland government. McNab eventually established a

⁷³ See Denis Cryle, *Behind the Legend: The Many Worlds of Charles Todd* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017); and Ann Moyal, *Clear Across Australia: A History of Telecommunications* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1984).

⁷⁴ Donovan, *Land Full of Possibilities*, 80-111.

⁷⁵ Powell, *Far Country*, 97.

⁷⁶ H.J. Gibbney, 'McNab, Duncan (1820-1896)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcnab-duncan-4131>

⁷⁷ Brigida Nailon, *The Writing on the Wall: Father Duncan McNab 1820-1896* (Burwood: Brigidine Sisters, 2004), 31-32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

mission station on the Durundur Reserve (1877-1905) in March 1877, beginning gradualist evangelisation among First Nations peoples.⁷⁹ Frustrated by what he saw as a lack of enthusiasm and assistance from the Australian bishops, McNab travelled to Rome in 1880 and met with Cardinal Simeoni and Pope Leo XIII.⁸⁰ His timing was impeccable, as Leo was then working on the encyclical *Sancta dei Civitas* which called on Catholics to renew their support for mission societies.⁸¹ McNab requested further funds for his own work and also declared it imperative that the northern diocese of Victoria be entrusted to a religious order, loyal to the pope and committed to the missionary evangelisation of First Nations peoples.⁸² Leo agreed. It seemed like a job for the Jesuits.

On 11 July 1882, Navarre, passing through Palmerston *en route* to Rabaul, baptised three European infants in the home of the Director of the Overland Telegraph Line, becoming the first MSC priest to administer the sacraments on Australian soil.⁸³ Reporting on the event, the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* opined: 'It is very likely that before long a Catholic Mission Station will be established here'.⁸⁴ They had only to wait a few months. On 24 September 1882, four Jesuit missionaries sailed into Darwin Harbour, led by Rev Anton Strele SJ (1825-1897). They belonged to an Austrian branch of the Society of Jesus which had arrived in Adelaide in 1848 and established its headquarters a hundred kilometres north at Sevenhill in the Clare Valley in 1850. Born in Nassereith, Austria, Strele arrived in Australia in 1867 and taken on various responsibilities, including two stints as Mission Superior in 1870-73 and 1880-82.⁸⁵ Following McNab's visit to Rome, Simeoni had written to the Jesuit Superior General, Rev Peter Jan Beckx SJ (1795-1887), urging him to accept the northern mission. Beckx had previously rejected repeated requests by the Sevenhill Jesuits to undertake work among Aboriginal people in South Australia because he believed this should only occur when local religious had been trained for the purpose.⁸⁶ By 1883, ten Australians had successfully become Jesuits at the Austrian mission – seven priests and three brothers – while a further six had failed to complete their novitiate, showing at least some promise in terms of local

⁷⁹ Campion, *Australian Catholics*, 99.

⁸⁰ Nailon, *Writing on the Wall*, 118.

⁸¹ Leo XIII, *Sancta dei Civitas*, 3 December 1880.

⁸² Nailon, *Writing on the Wall*, 118.

⁸³ 'Letter to The Bishop Regarding Baptisms Conducted by Fr Navarre', Series 071, Folder 008, MSC Files, Darwin Diocesan Archives; see also McMahan, 'Introduction', 6.

⁸⁴ 'Palmerston', *NTTG*, 15 July 1882, 2.

⁸⁵ G.J. O'Kelly, 'Strele, Anton (1825-1897)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/strele-anton-4653>.

⁸⁶ Regina Ganter, 'Jesuits in the Northern Territory (1882-1902)', *German Missionaries in Australia*, <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/missionary-training/jesuits-northern-territory-1882-1902#sdendnote3sym>.

recruitment.⁸⁷ While Beckx was still reluctant to acquiesce to Simeoni's request, he eventually agreed and it was decided that the Sevenhill Jesuits would take on this responsibility. Having ascertained that the new mission would not interfere with his work at New Norcia, Salvado, who was still bishop, gave the Jesuits his blessing. Strele was appointed Vicar-General and Superior of the northern mission. Salvado maintained no oversight in the diocese, and he was glad when his title was changed instead to Titular Bishop of Adriana in 1889.⁸⁸ Strele then became Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Victoria and Palmerston, confirming in title what was already reality in practice.

The Jesuit mission in northern Australia lasted until 1899 and consisted of four stations: one near Palmerston and the other three on the Daly River. Strele and his confrères sought to model their own missions on the famous Jesuit Reductions in South America. Named from the Latin *reducere* meaning 'to draw in', this approach was used most successfully by the Jesuits in the Río del la Plata region of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina to defend the Guaraní peoples from the violence of Spanish slavers and to segregate indigenous populations from the influence of colonists.⁸⁹ These involved the voluntary relocation of indigenous peoples into designated townships which functioned as self-sufficient theocratic socialist states and achieved a high level of autonomy from the colonial empire.⁹⁰ The Reductions operated from 1609 until 1767, when the Jesuits were expelled from Spanish lands prior to the suppression of the order by Pope Clement XIV (1769-1774) in 1773.⁹¹ At their peak in 1732, there were 30 Reductions in Río del la Plata, with a total population of 140,000 persons and an average population of 4,500 persons per mission.⁹² These consisted of planned towns with their own public buildings, factories, workers guilds, pastoral runs, police, and militia forces. Local languages were retained and all property held in common under the authority of at least two supervising priests in collaboration with indigenous chiefs.⁹³ G. J. O'Kelly asserts: 'The accomplishments of the Australian Jesuits in the Northern Territory pall into utter insignificance when compared to

⁸⁷ Michael Head, et al. *The Vine and the Branches: The Fruits of the Sevenhill Mission* (Hindmarsh: ATF Publishing Group, 2016), 74-75.

⁸⁸ See Salvado, *Report*, 93.

⁸⁹ O'Kelly, 'The Jesuit Mission Stations', ii.

⁹⁰ See Julia J. S. Sarreal, *The Guaraní and Their Missions: A Socioeconomic History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 1.

⁹¹ See Maurice Whitehead, 'On the Road to Suppression: Jesuits and Their Expulsion from the Reductions of Paraguay', in *The Jesuit Suppression in Global Context: Causes, Events, and Consequences*, 83-99 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁹² Sarreal, *The Guaraní and Their Missions*, 1-16.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

these, of course, but they continued to propose the Reductions as their ideal, calling their own Stations by the same title'.⁹⁴

Much like Confalonieri before them, the Jesuits focused the majority of their efforts on the First Nations peoples rather than the European or Asian population of the northern settlements. They were allocated land at Rapid Creek, roughly ten kilometres to the north of Palmerston, and established St Joseph's Mission (1882-1891). The station, like Palmerston, was located on the land of the Larrakia people, though the Woolner (Djerimanga) people, whose traditional country was further to the east, also lived nearby. Both nations visited the Jesuits in August 1883 and became the primary residents of the mission.⁹⁵ Aboriginal people assisted in constructing mission buildings and planting gardens. When Rev Joseph Conrath SJ (1853-1932) arrived in 1884, he devoted his energy to learning the Larrakia language. Strele thought it prudent that neophytes be introduced to Christian concepts in their mother tongue rather than in English, a language with which the Austrian Jesuits, in any event, struggled.⁹⁶ By the end of the year, they were able to pray and deliver religious instruction in the Larrakia language, which was also understood by the Woolner people.⁹⁷ A primary school was opened in March 1885 attended by a dozen or so local children. They were to learn the rudiments of reading, writing, counting, and biblical history, all with the aid of schoolbooks written in Larrakia using a printing press which Strele had brought to the mission earlier that year. Following the common Catholic approach to missionary conversion in Australia, the Jesuits focused their evangelisation efforts on children. It appears school attendance was, however, sporadic as the Jesuits were unable to persuade parents to leave their children at the station permanently.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, fourteen children were baptised in August. In May 1886, the Jesuits printed the first ever Larrakia language texts, including a collection of hymns translated from Latin and set to simple liturgical tunes.⁹⁹

By 1887, there were between 30 and 40 Aboriginal residents at Rapid Creek. These were supplemented by a group from the Alligator Rivers region, who periodically visited the station

⁹⁴ Kelly, 'Jesuit Mission Stations', ii. See also, Donald McKillop, 'Blacks V. Coolies: Hope for the Aboriginal', *South Australian Register*, 30 June 1893. 6

⁹⁵ Ganter, 'Rapid Creek (1882-1891)', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/Rapid-Creek-1882-1891>.

⁹⁶ Ganter, 'Jesuits in the Northern Territory', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/missionary-training/jesuits-northern-territory-1882-1902#sdendnote3sym>.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Rhonda Jolly, 'A Failed Venture: The Jesuit Mission at Rapid Creek 1882-1891' *Journal of Northern Territory History* 11 (2000): 87-100.

⁹⁹ Ganter, 'Jesuits in the Northern Territory', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/missionary-training/jesuits-northern-territory-1882-1902#sdendnote3sym>.

and were welcomed by the Jesuits. This generated considerable tension with the Larrakia and Woolner who resented the provision of food and other resources to these outsiders. Tensions escalated into violence. In May, the men painted themselves and marched to a nearby beach. Five were badly injured in the battle and one Alligator Rivers man was mortally wounded. The outsiders returned to their own Country soon after. Enraged, the Jesuits ordered the offending Larrakia, including an influential Elder, off the station. The entire nation left and never returned.¹⁰⁰ It was a killing blow to the mission which never recovered from the drastic population decline. The Jesuits, and later Church historians, would blame proximity to Palmerston as the ultimate failure of their mission at Rapid Creek. Rev Donald McKillop SJ (1853-1925), for example, who arrived in November 1886, complained that:

It is hard to struggle against the evil influence of the white man's presence. Teaching, as we must, the restraints of Christianity, the fight is an uphill one against lust, drink and opium. I see little hope of success for our work ... unless some little pressure is put on the natives by the civil authorities and I mean, particularly, measures to secure the presence of the children at the mission for regular periods. If this could be done the loafing, which now disgraces the streets of Palmerston would, I believe, in great measure be curtailed.¹⁰¹

The corrupting influence of European vice was universally accepted as the reason for a lack of missionary success at Rapid Creek. Cardinal Moran lamented: 'That once happy people had become utterly degraded by contact with the whites and Chinese, and never could be brought under the influence of the missionaries'.¹⁰² Indeed, this belief compelled the Jesuits to take their mission further inland and likewise informed Gsell's isolation policy on Bathurst Island. However, it is worth noting that there were significant push, as well as pull, factors which caused the Larrakia and Woolner peoples to abandon the mission. As Ganter argues: 'The 1887 trouble is generally described as a tribal fight, but more significantly the incident revealed a gulf between the missionaries, who felt that they were in charge, and the Larrakia/Woolner leaders, who had tolerated the use of their land' and felt they had legitimate claim to mission stores and supplies.¹⁰³ More so than the supposed lure of frontier depravity, the breakdown in

¹⁰⁰ Kelly, 'Jesuit Mission Stations', 18.

¹⁰¹ Cited in Flynn, *Northern Gateway*, 61.

¹⁰² Moran, *Catholic Church in Australasia*, 551.

¹⁰³ Ganter, 'Rapid Creek', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/Rapid-Creek-1882-1891>.

mutual friendship, occasioned by the insult of Elders and betrayal of their expectations, crippled the Jesuit endeavour at Rapid Creek. The station was finally closed in 1891.

The failure of Rapid Creek compelled the Jesuits to focus their attentions on the Daly River, some 160 kilometres south of Palmerston. As early as October 1886, they established the Queen of the Holy Rosary Station (1886-1891) – later known as Old Uniya – on the country of the Malak-Malak people. Given his preference for missionary isolation, it is curious that Strele approved a site in the Daly district, as the area was certainly not free from European or Chinese influence. In 1881 the region had been thrown open to pastoralists who quickly established huge cattle runs. Rich deposits of copper were also found near Mount Haywood in 1882 and a mining settlement established along the river.¹⁰⁴ Miners flocked to the area and market-gardeners kept them supplied with fresh fruit and vegetables. The region was also notorious for frontier violence.

In September 1884, Woolwonga men were implicated in the murder of four European miners.¹⁰⁵ The Government Resident, John Langdon Parsons (1837-1903), approved the dispatch of four private punitive parties, supplied with government ammunition, and a separate police party under Corporal George Montagu (1843-1904). It is estimated that at least 200 Woolwonga men, women, and children were indiscriminately murdered in the ensuing carnage.¹⁰⁶ Montagu remarked in his report: ‘I believe that the natives have received such a lesson this time as will exercise a salutary effect over the survivors in the time to come. ... One result of this expedition has been to convince me of the superiority of the Martini-Henry rifle, both for accuracy of aim and quickness of action.’¹⁰⁷ Tony Roberts locates these massacres within the context of extreme frontier violence throughout the region. He argues that under South Australian rule: ‘At least six hundred men, women, children and babies ... were killed in the Gulf Country. The death toll could easily be as high as seven or eight hundred. Yet no one was charged with these murders. By contrast, there were twenty white deaths, and not a single white woman or child was harmed in any way.’¹⁰⁸

Part of the reason First Nations people may have been interested in hosting the Jesuit mission was the defence it afforded. As Ganter asserts: ‘When the Jesuits came to the Daly River in

¹⁰⁴ Tony Roberts, ‘The Brutal Truth: What Happened in the Gulf Country’, *The Monthly* (Nov, 2009): 42-51.

¹⁰⁵ Gordon Reid, *A Picnic with the Natives: Aboriginal-European Relations in the Northern Territory to 1910* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1990), 99-112; Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Signs of Life on a Barbarous Frontier: Intercultural Encounters in Northern Australia’, *Humanities Research* 2 (1998): 19.

¹⁰⁶ Roberts, ‘Brutal Truth’, 49.

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Reid, *Picnic with the Natives*, 104.

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, ‘Brutal Truth’, 42.

1886, the local Woolwonga, Woolner, Malak-Malak, Maranunngu, Djerait, Ponga-Ponga and Dilk people were under extreme pressure from settler violence, dispossession and degradation of their land. They were interested in the material and security advantages of the mission, and several groups invited the missionaries to form a station on their country.¹⁰⁹ Many Woolwonga sought sanctuary at Old Uniya. In September 1889, the Jesuits also established the Sacred Heart Station (1889-1891) at Serpentine Lagoon upon the invitation of Woolner elder, Barramundi Taruak. Both stations were, however, closed in 1891 alongside the Rapid Creek station, and collapsed into a single mission, 30 kilometres downstream from Old Uniya and on the opposite bank. Named St Joseph's, but commonly referred to as New Uniya (1891-1899), the mission was located within Malak-Malak country. Ganter notes that the residents of Sacred Heart 'clearly felt betrayed. A mission on the other side of the river, outside their country, was no good to them.'¹¹⁰ They destroyed the remaining mission buildings.

O'Kelly asserts that 30 families from different nations – Malak-Malak, Maranunngu, Djerait, Woolwonga, and Ponga-Ponga – answered the invitation to join New Uniya: 'They were told the regulations of the reduction for colonists, which amounted to promises to till their own fields, abstain from fights, send their children to the school, ask permission whenever they wished to leave the station for a short while, and live in their own small houses'.¹¹¹ This ended the policy of catering to different nations on their separate country. Over the next few years they constructed a church, presbytery, school, dormitories, houses, stables, granary, and printing house. They installed a steam engine for the irrigation system, as well as pipelines, wells, sawmill, sheds, stores, and forges. In 1899, the mission had a herd of 2,000 goats, 150 cattle, 130 pigs, and 33 horses.¹¹² Roughly 500 people had passed through the mission, and about 50 children were on the school roll, though attendance was always irregular. Of all their missions, New Uniya best realised the vision of a Reduction. Here Indigenous people were entreated to abandon their traditional cultures in favour of the 'civilising' influence of agricultural labour, monogamous marriage and Christian salvation. While the Rapid Creek mission could only claim one adult baptism in 11 years of operation, the Daly could boast 51.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Ganter, *Contest for Aboriginal Souls*, 116.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ O'Kelly, 'Jesuit Mission Stations', 38.

¹¹² Rose, 'Signs of Life on a Barbarous Frontier', 26.

¹¹³ Paddy J. Dalton, *History of the Jesuits in South Australia, 1848-1948*. Unpublished manuscript. Jesuit Archives, Hawthorn. 57-58.

The Jesuits initially maintained their commitment to Indigenous languages. They had learned the Malak-Malak language during their time at Old Uniya and it became the *lingua franca* at New Uniya. Conrath translated prayers – such as the *Ave Maria* and the *Pater Noster* – and Rev Adolf Kristen SJ (1866-1907) presented a paper on the language to the 1895 Plenary Council in Sydney. Harris notes that twenty editions of a Malak-Malak catechism were printed before the Jesuits were satisfied the document did justice to the grammatical complexities of the language.¹¹⁴ Conrath praised Malak-Malak as more sophisticated than any classical language.¹¹⁵ They nevertheless decided to abandon instruction in Malak-Malak in 1895 as other First Nations groups aligned themselves with the mission: ‘They chose, therefore, ... to conduct school in English, but to continue with Malak-Malak as the general language of the station. This choice accorded with the general Aboriginal convention of speaking the language of the land in which they happened to be.’¹¹⁶

While Conrath’s assessment of Indigenous language was certainly enlightened, the Jesuit appraisal of Indigenous culture and religion was far less complementary. Rhonda Jolly argues that the missionaries ‘were not blatantly racist, but they were too dismissive of the richness of Aboriginal culture’.¹¹⁷ She states further: ‘They were enlightened in their assessments of the intelligence and potential of their charges, but they were convinced that the single solution was Christian salvation. In their assessment they were typical nineteenth century men convinced that redemption could only be achieved by ensuring replacement of most tribal ways.’¹¹⁸

While the Jesuits had adopted a gradualist policy up until 1891, tolerating many traditional practices which they believed were at odds with orthodox Christianity, their approach changed once concentrated at New Uniya. Here they began to attract adult baptisms, and converts were expected to live by Catholic standards while resident at the mission. Deborah Bird Rose asserts that: ‘People were punished for participation in ceremony and were not allowed to observe taboos or other markers of ritual status at the mission. The diaries are full of references to punishment’.¹¹⁹ They made frequent attempts to suppress initiation ceremonies, intervened in mortuary rites and modified marriage negotiations.¹²⁰ This was inherently destabilising.

¹¹⁴ Harris, *One Blood*, 471.

¹¹⁵ Dalton, *Jesuits in South Australia*, 42.

¹¹⁶ Harris, *One Blood*, 472.

¹¹⁷ Jolly, ‘A Failed Venture’, 97.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Rose, ‘Signs of Life on a Barbarous Frontier’, 24.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

Like Gsell, the Jesuits were opposed to the practice of polygamy and sought to modify marriage laws in order to promote and impose monogamy. Ganter notes that in June 1888 they declared parents could no longer promise schoolgirls in marriage without the express permission of the Mission Superior. Over the next decade, the Jesuits interfered in traditional arranged marriages and contracted their own, often in opposition to the wishes of the Elders. While Gsell would work within traditional structures, the Jesuits seemed to have ignored the skin system and organised inappropriate matches among their converts in deliberate attempts to erode the authority of senior men and women.¹²¹ It is also apparent that the Jesuits were the first Catholic missionaries in the Northern Territory to purchase marriage rights from the men who traditionally held them. For example, in August 1888, the missionaries presented Nabba Bayi with cloth and tobacco in order to release his daughter, Helena, from her promised husband, a much older man with several other wives. Helena was later baptised in June 1889, and, in January 1891, the Jesuits betrothed her to a young man of her choosing named Edward, who would, in turn, be baptised in May 1891. Again, the missionaries paid gifts to Bayi in order to ensure his consent to the match.

Ganter argues that: ‘Gsell consistently portrayed himself as the progenitor of the idea of purchasing the marriage rights of the mission girls to free them from traditional obligations. However, the Jesuits at Daly River had already pioneered this practice.’¹²² It is doubtful that Gsell was aware of the precedent set by the Jesuits, as this method of providing dowries to the fathers of young women was not public knowledge outside the mission. As we shall see, Gsell’s approach also demonstrated a deeper sensitivity to Tiwi law than that shown by the Jesuits. In June 1891, for example, Elders raised strong objections to Bayi’s decision to accept Helena’s betrothal to Edward.¹²³ They claimed the Jesuits had violated the skin system in sanctioning the match and, in order to avoid a dangerous controversy, the missionaries were compelled to cancel the engagement. Instead, Helena was married hurriedly to Matthew Neddagone on 28 February 1892 in the first Christian wedding ever celebrated at New Uniya.¹²⁴ Their marriage, like many at the Catholic mission, was sadly afflicted by infidelity and domestic violence. The latter eventually proved fatal to Helena, who was beaten to death in November 1897.

¹²¹ See *Ibid.*, 21 and 26.

¹²² Ganter, ‘Bathurst Island Mission’, <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/Bathurst-Island-Mission-1911-1938-1978>.

¹²³ Ganter, ‘Daly River’, <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/Daly-River-1886-1899#dalyriverstories>.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

In March and April 1899, the mission was hit by a devastating series of floods. At their peak on 27 March, floodwaters rose as high as 12 metres above the riverbank. Priests and residents fled to higher ground and watched helplessly as buildings were submerged and washed away. Permission was sought to relocate to a better site, and the question deferred to Rome. It was decided to abandon missionary work altogether. The land reverted to the government, and livestock and supplies were sold to surrounding pastoralists.¹²⁵ Despite modest gains, it was felt that twenty years had produced little by way of tangible results. Periodic famine, disease, and now flooding had seriously hindered any economic successes and a gradual withdrawal of manpower and funding in the preceding half-decade had made it impossible to continue. All these material limitations were compounded by a perceived lack of spiritual progress with the Aboriginal people. The reasons put forth for abandoning Rapid Creek were likewise advanced at the Daly River, the encroachment of settlers principal among them.

By this time the Jesuits had already lost the diocese. As we have seen, Strele was appointed Administrator Apostolic in 1889. He established himself in the township, tending to the European population. He purchased land on Smith Street and built Our Lady Star of the Sea church (see Figures 13 and 14). Yet by 1891 his health was poor, and he departed the diocese in October 1892. McKillop became Mission Superior of New Uniya and John O'Brien SJ (1850-1925) became Superior of the Palmerston residence. Despite his permanent absence, Strele did not relinquish his title. He died in 1897, and the diocese was devolved to the Bishop of Geraldton, William Bernard Kelly (1854-1921), on 14 February 1898. Kelly lived over 2,500 kilometres away in Western Australia, but it was felt that the Jesuit focus on missions rendered them incapable of devoting adequate attention to the township. Ill health had already compelled McKillop to leave in October 1897, but O'Brien endured in the Territory until September 1902. Palmerston would be without a resident priest for another four years.

Despite the multiplicity of contributing factors, contemporaries linked the demise of the Jesuits with proximity to non-Indigenous people. This was the principal reason Gsell chose an island for his missionary work. However, it is worth noting that Indigenous inconstancy or, more appropriately, mobility was necessitated by the inability of the Jesuits to guarantee even basic permanent subsistence at the mission. They periodically ran out of food – including bush foods which they overtaxed – compelling Aboriginal people to depart the mission and seek material support elsewhere, either through traditional social networks or with the range of alternative

¹²⁵ Rose, 'Signs of Life on a Barbarous Frontier', 26.

settlement sites such as farms, mines, Chinese gardens, and townships.¹²⁶ Rose argues convincingly that: 'From an Aboriginal perspective it would have been completely self-defeating to make a comprehensive social and subsistence commitment to the missionaries. Given that most Aboriginal people could not survive throughout the year with the missionaries, they had to sustain their relationships to other Aboriginal people and to other settlers.'¹²⁷ Fundamentally, the problem for the mission was not proximity to colonisers but rather the ever vexed issue of funding.

Ganter notes that the Jesuit mission in the Northern Territory cost over £15,000. Only £1,330 of this had been paid for by the South Australian government. By 1899, Austrian support (amounting to £5,000) ceased, while Australian Catholic financing was modest (about £7,000).¹²⁸ The lack of funding had compelled both Strele and McKillop to depart the Territory on a series of begging tours around Australia and overseas. These were often fraught. Brother to Saint Mary of the Cross and cousin to McNab, Donald McKillop was among the first novitiates at Sevenhill in 1877 and was ordained in 1885. As we have seen, he joined the northern mission in November 1886 and his biographer describes him as its 'most forthright exponent'.¹²⁹ From October 1893 to May 1894, he toured the southern states in the company of two Aboriginal boys, Charlie and Johnny, as convincing proofs of his evangelism. He addressed the Royal Society of South Australia and made frequent appearances in the press, explaining his work and appealing for funds. He managed to raise £800, but it was not enough to sustain the mission in the long term.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, McKillop remained a staunch advocate for Indigenous people for the rest of his life. Notwithstanding his paternalism and lack of respect for traditional culture, he frequently challenged assumptions of racial inferiority and championed the capacity of Indigenous people to achieve the highest attainments of European 'civilisation'. In 1888, for example, he wrote: '[T]hose who revile the blacks are for the most part the men who degrade them, or who lord it over them in the style of the eastern despot. Such men of course have not seen, and never will see, the nobler traits of the native character.'¹³¹ He was a vocal critic of frontier violence and

¹²⁶ See Rose, 'Signs of Life on a Barbarous Frontier', 24.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹²⁸ Regina Ganter, 'Daly River (1886-1899)', http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/daly-river-1886-1899#Retreat_from_the_north.

¹²⁹ G.J. O'Kelly, 'McKillop, Donald (1853-1925)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mckillop-donald-4111>.

¹³⁰ Harris, *One Blood*, 470.

¹³¹ Donald McKillop, 'The Aborigines of the Northern Territory – To the Editor', *South Australian Advertiser*, 3 August 1888. 3.

the pervasive indifference of the Australian public to the sufferings of First Nations peoples: ‘The fact is, our glorious colonising system is working here as it works, and has worked, elsewhere in Australia. We are not merely looking on; we are murdering the native tribes more cruelly than if we yarded them and shot them.’¹³² In evaluating the legacy and attitudes of the missionaries, O’Kelly argues that Jesuit knowledge of dispossession and racism ‘explains their frequent assertions of native intelligence, of ability to work and settle, of dignified nature, and it also explains their absolute insistence on segregation from white contact. But the missionaries were themselves products of their time and found it impossible to avoid all the approaches and opinions born of those times.’¹³³

Whatever the success or failings of the Jesuit missionaries, Paddy Dalton asserts that, during their time in northern Australia, 326 Aboriginal people were baptised into the Catholic faith: 129 adults (78 in danger of death and 51 otherwise) and 197 infants.¹³⁴ During this period, 117 converts died. This left an Indigenous Catholic population of 209 persons: 29 living at New Uniya with the remainder camping around the district.¹³⁵ Much like Confalonieri’s supposed converts on the Cobourg Peninsula, the Jesuit converts were left to their own devices, without any further spiritual direction. As we shall see, when Gsell arrived in 1906, he believed the Daly mission to be an abject failure and decided to look elsewhere for his evangelism; over 200 parishioners notwithstanding. Passing through the district in 1926, Rev J. Long MSC came across an old man named Paul who still retained ‘a small crucifix and the remains of a rosary. I gave him a new set of rosary beads, to the poor old fellow’s delight.’¹³⁶ Similarly, Rev Frank Flynn MSC (1906-2000), claimed that during WWII he met an elderly man named Wagon: ‘He spoke of the mission days and could recite the Mass responses in Latin well’.¹³⁷ Later he met a Malak-Malak man named Charlie who had likewise grown up at the Jesuit mission: ‘I took my Rosary beads from my pocket. Immediately, Charlie dived into the folds of his loincloth and produced his treasured set of beads. As I successively touched the different beads Charlie promptly recited the appropriate prayers – the Creed, the “Our Father”, and the “Hail

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ O’Kelly, ‘Jesuit Mission Stations’, 10.

¹³⁴ Dalton, *History of the Jesuits in South Australia*, 57-58.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ J. Long, ‘From Our Missions: Experiences in the Northern Territory’, *Australian Annals of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart* (January 1926): 27.

¹³⁷ Flynn, *Northern Gateway*, 70.

Marys".¹³⁸ Flynn saw this as convincing proof of the enduring nature of the Jesuit mission. Catholic interest in the Daly would not be renewed until the 1950s.

As early as January 1900, Moran noted the failure of the Jesuits and wrote to Propaganda recommending that the MSCs be offered administration of the northern diocese.¹³⁹ Wheels were set in motion, and in December 1904 the Prefect of Propaganda, Cardinal Girolamo Maria Gotti (1834-1916), wrote to the new MSC Superior General, Arthur Lanctin – who had succeeded Chevalier in 1901 – with a proposal.¹⁴⁰ This was accepted on 19 October 1905 by Eugène Meyer MSC, who had succeeded Lanctin. On 24 November, apparently in consultation with Tréand, Myer nominated Gsell for the position of Superior to the northern mission.¹⁴¹ On 23 April 1906, Propaganda removed the diocese from Kelly's jurisdiction and Gsell was appointed Administrator Apostolic of the entire Northern Territory.¹⁴² The diocese fell within the Australian Province of the MSCs. Gsell returned to Sydney for five months of convalescence and preparation. According to Pye, he used his time wisely, undertaking a course in First Aid and simple medicines before his departure.¹⁴³ Gsell arrived at Port Darwin on 15 August 1906, on the day of the Feast of the Assumption. He was 33 years old.

When Gsell first examined the legacy of Catholic evangelism in the Northern Territory, he would conclude that all efforts had been seriously hindered by proximity of missions to undesirable Europeans. Fundamentally, the Jesuit failures led him to look beyond the Australian mainland. Eventually, his eye was drawn to Bathurst Island and the Tiwi people.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹³⁹ Moran to Propaganda, January 1900. PFHA: NS 414, 184-187.

¹⁴⁰ Gotti to Lanctin, 2 December 1904. Diocesan Archives, Darwin.

¹⁴¹ Meyer to Propaganda, 28 April 1906. Diocesan Archives, Darwin.

¹⁴² Meyer to Propaganda, 25 May 1906. NS 414, 209-213. See also, Gotti to Gsell, 23 April 1906. Diocesan Archives, Darwin.

¹⁴³ Pye, *Tiwi Islands*, 33.

CHAPTER III

Island Mission: Isolation Policy, 1906-1912

I had to decide whether to make my base on the mainland or to establish a bridgehead on one of the numerous islands which lie off the north coast. Once more, if indirectly this time, the Jesuits were my guides. I recalled that they had tried the mainland, only to suffer a setback through flooding and the proximity to white men. I decided to choose an island.¹

When Gsell arrived at Port Darwin on 15 August 1906 he assumed the post of Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Victoria and Palmerston, responsible for the Catholic population of the entire Northern Territory, a region over twice the size of Metropolitan France. He was 33 years old and had lived within the British Empire for nine years, mastering the English language and gaining valuable experience as missionary and administrator. As the only Catholic priest in the region, he had a responsibility to minister to the European and Asian Catholic community of the diocese. However, operating in parallel as Mission Superior, his primary objective was to renew the work of evangelisation among First Nations peoples. This chapter will begin by tracing Gsell's efforts to re-establish the institutional Church in Palmerston, before examining the move to Bathurst Island. It will also provide contextual history of the Tiwi Islands in order to explain why the Country of the Tiwi people was best suited to Gsell's isolation policy. Following the example of the Jesuits, Gsell believed a mission could only be successful if it were to be cut off from mainstream European society. He lobbied the government to have the entirety of Bathurst Island declared a reserve for Aboriginal people, prohibiting access to all unauthorised non-Indigenous persons. While Gsell would initially complain of obstruction on the part of the South Australian Government, his objectives aligned perfectly with those of Commonwealth officials such as Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929) and John Anderson Gilruth (1871-1937) who implemented policies of segregation once the Northern Territory transferred to federal jurisdiction in 1911. Throughout, Gsell proved himself a shrewd political operator and his relationship with secular authority was one of cooperation and mutual benefit. Indeed, it is often difficult to distinguish between the schemes of Gsell and Spencer, and the pair proved natural allies.

Little fanfare awaited the Territory's latest missionary priest when he arrived in Port Darwin. Gsell was greeted at the wharf by a small contingent of Catholic laymen: Robert Pickford, Francesco Chavez, and Tom Caine. He established himself in the bungalow built by the Jesuits

¹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 40.

on Smith Street and enjoyed the charity of the little Catholic community of the township.² When he did not eat at the local hotels, a woman called Helen Ryan prepared his meals, while a Filipino family washed his clothes.³ Chavez also served at daily Mass and ensured Gsell's house was kept tidy.⁴

Gsell spent the first few months of his appointment conducting a census of the diocese. The MSCs always knew the region would be a considerable undertaking. In March 1905, Rev Joseph Geiss MSC, then based on Thursday Island, had written to Tréand bemoaning the transfer of the territory to their Society: 'I knew that this affair was already simmering for some time in the official pot, but I hoped that it would not be us who would have to swallow the broth. This is what Rome offers us, the Society accepts it with thanks and transmits it to us.'⁵ Since the Jesuit departure, Geiss made occasional pastoral visits to Palmerston, performing weddings and funerals when required. He characterised the township as underdeveloped and the Catholic population scant, declaring that the absence of a priest had been a disaster.⁶ 'In short', he concluded, 'very little to do, much to spend'.⁷ Gsell's findings were no more encouraging. In addition to the township of Palmerston, he travelled along the telegraph line as far as Pine Creek – 225 kilometres south – seeking out Catholics wherever he went.⁸ He made a rather bleak assessment of his flock. He noted that in Palmerston there were approximately 53 European Catholics and a hundred Filipino pearl-ers. Among the white Catholics, he lamented that 'about thirty have entirely lost faith and have either become freemasons or protestants or nothing at all. The others can be evenly split between good and mediocre'.⁹ His appraisal of the material wealth of his parishioners was no less promising: 'Their financial situation is rather precarious, two or three well-off families, the others live from their wages. Not one rich family.'¹⁰ It was evident that Gsell could not rely on the faithful

² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 17.

³ Gsell to Meyer, 12 November 1906. MSC Archives, Kensington. 'Jusqu'ici j'ai me repas a l'hotel et une famille manilloise me lave mon linge.' Translation: 'So far I have lunch at the hotel and a Manila family washing my laundry.'

⁴ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 17.

⁵ Geiss to Tréand, 24 March 1905. MSC Archives, Kensington. 'Je savais que cette affaire mijotait déjà depuis quelque temps dans la marmite official, mais j'espérais que ce ne serait pas nous qui aurions à avaler le bouillon. Voilà qui Rome nous offre la taise, la Societe l'accepte *with thanks* et nous la transmet.' Original English.

⁶ Ibid., 'l'absence d'un prêtre a été un désastre. Beaucoup ne distinguent plus eglise catholique et eglise protestante.'

⁷ Ibid., 'En somme, pour le moment, très peu à faire, beaucoup à dépenser'.

⁸ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 18.

⁹ Gsell to Meyer, 12 November 1906. 'Parmi les blancs, une trentaine environ ont complètement perdu la foi & sont devenus ou franc-massons [sic], ou protestants ou rien du tout. Les autres ont peut les diviser à partie égale en bons & médiocres.'

¹⁰ Ibid., 'Leur situation financière est assez précaire, deux ou trois familles aisées les autres vivent de leur salaire, pas une famille riche.'

for any substantial funding of his works. Nevertheless, he remained hopeful that, with the support of his religious order, he would be able to make a good start. However, in what would go on to characterise much of his working relationship with Sydney, help would not be as swift nor as obliging as he would have liked.

Despite being Mission Superior, Gsell remained the only MSC in the Northern Territory for almost a year. In January 1907 he complained: 'I do suffer a little from this solitude, but far more from the indifference of Sydney.'¹¹ Without further personnel, Gsell knew it would be difficult to expand his influence within the vast diocese. Help finally arrived from Sydney in the form of Rev John O'Connell MSC and Br Lambert Fehrmann MSC in June 1907.¹² In October, they were joined by Br Philippe van Ewen MSC, on loan from New Guinea.¹³ Gsell and O'Connell turned schoolmasters, transforming the parish church into a makeshift classroom and began the Christian education of the small number of Catholic children whom, Gsell regretted, were hitherto compelled to attend the local state school. Meanwhile, Fehrmann and van Ewen began construction work on a school and convent in anticipation of religious sisters who would take over educative responsibilities from the priests.¹⁴ This was a vital priority, as without suitable accommodation and facilities, it would be impossible for nuns to take up residence in Palmerston, thus leaving the parish incomplete and – as will readily become apparent in Chapter Four – seriously hindering Gsell's ambitions of missionary evangelism. He would have to wait another year.

In the meantime, he applied to become a naturalised Australian citizen. This process required Gsell to renounce his German nationality and prove his English literacy. Becoming 'naturalised' would allow Gsell to attain the rights and privileges of a British subject, which would in turn make it easier for him to negotiate with Australian officials on an equal footing. His application was signed on 8 January 1908.¹⁵ He appeared before the magistrate to make a statutory declaration and to swear the Oath of Allegiance.¹⁶ His application was approved

¹¹ Gsell to Gerard, 26 January 1907. MSC Archives, Kensington. 'Je souffre bien un peu de cette solitude, mais encore bien plus en voyant l'indifférence de Sydney pour cette œuvre comme si c'était moi qui l'avais provoquée. Je devrais trouver dans mon supérieur un cœur de père pour me guider et me soutenir dans cette œuvre pénible et ingrate, c'est à peine s'il se souvient que j'existe.'

¹² 'Shipping – Port Darwin – Arrivals', *NTTG*, 21 June 1907. 2.

¹³ 'Shipping – Port Darwin – Arrivals', *NTTG*, 18 October 1907. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Gsell, *Naturalisation Certificate*, NAA: A1, 1920/21513.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

shortly thereafter. Committed now more than ever to his adopted country, he awaited the arrival of the religious sisters.

The first ever nuns to grace the Northern Territory finally arrived on 14 July 1908. They belonged to the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH), the MSC companion order. The OLSH congregation had been formed on 30 August 1874 in Issoudun. Chevalier believed it was prudent to establish a society of religious sisters dedicated to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart who would work alongside the MSCs in their endeavours.¹⁷ The OLSH nuns had the same charism and missionary spirit as the MSCs, but were entirely independent of them, having separate governance and constitutions. According to Mary Venard, Chevalier 'founded the Congregation on the principle that the bond between it and the Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart would be patterned on that between the male and female branches of the Dominican and Franciscan orders'.¹⁸ This entailed a gendered and complementary division of labour, with priests and brothers undertaking work considered appropriate to their gender, and the nuns doing likewise. The OLSH also placed special emphasis on Marian devotion, seeking to emulate Mary as the first apostle of Christ.¹⁹ In 1882, Mother Marie Louise Hartzler (1837-1908) became the first Superior General of the congregation. A native of Alsace, Hartzler was 45 when she joined the congregation as a widow with two adult sons, both of whom were training to become MSC priests. Under her guidance, and with the support of Chevalier, the Congregation flourished and in 1884 OLSH sisters were sent to join their MSC brethren in Oceania.²⁰

On 31 January 1885, OLSH sisters arrived in Sydney and began work in Botany, teaching Catholic children within the parish primary school. Over the next few years they expanded their works, taking on local novices while also replenishing their ranks with Europeans. When the MSCs opened their monastery in Kensington in 1897, the OLSH sisters opened a convent next door.²¹ The first Superior and Directress of Novices was Mother Teresa Jean, who had made her novitiate under Hartzler in Issoudun. When Jean was made Superior of Thursday Island in 1900, she was replaced by the Irish-born Mother Chanel Bergin in January 1902.²² Bergin had been trained by Jean and this ensured that the steady stream of Australian novices

¹⁷ Conlin, *Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, 43-44.

¹⁸ Venard, *History of the Australian Province*, 3.

¹⁹ Cuskelly, *Man with a Mission*, 149.

²⁰ See Mary Venard, *The Designs of His Heart: Marie Louise Hartzler and the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart* (Cork, Ireland: The Mercier Press, 1966).

²¹ Venard, *History of the Australian Province*, 1-27.

²² *Ibid.*

and postulants – many of whom were destined for the Northern Territory – were imbued with the spirit of the congregation imbibed directly from Hartzler and Chevalier.²³ Much like the Australian MSCs, the majority of OLSH missionary effort was focused on the ‘foreign missions’ in Oceania but a firm contingent would remain committed to ministry in the Northern Territory.

There were five among the Port Darwin foundation group: Sisters Eustelle Sayers, Dominica O’Sullivan, Bertrand McSweeney, Kieran Doyle and Hyacinth Lenehan. Both Sayers and McSweeney were, however, recalled to Sydney in May 1909 and Lenehan died from an internal complaint later in November.²⁴ Given that OLSH rule required nuns to desire to be ‘unknown and esteemed as nothing’, it is often difficult to track their origins and sometimes even their movements. Nevertheless, we know that Doyle, for example, was born in Newcastle and made her first vows in Sydney in 1906.²⁵ It is probable the other nuns were either Irish or Australians with an Irish background. Indeed, Gsell described O’Sullivan as ‘a plucky Irishwoman’.²⁶ All were native English speakers.

On 9 August 1909, Mother Liguori Debroux, arrived to take on the position of Superior.²⁷ Born into an affluent Belgian family in 1862 with the Christian name Natalie, Debroux had assisted her father in his thriving grocery and drapery business. She was engaged to be married but broke it off in order to join the OLSH congregation in 1885, receiving the habit from the hands of Chevalier himself.²⁸ She travelled to Thursday Island in January 1887 and was among the first OLSH to arrive in New Guinea in August that year when she went to Yule Island and became Mission Superior. Thereafter, she operated in numerous locations within Navarre’s diocese, including the village of Inawi on mainland New Guinea where Gsell would later be stationed as parish priest. A protégé of Hartzler and a confidant to Verjus, Debroux had formed generations of nuns on the mission field itself.²⁹ In 1908 she attended the First General Chapter of the OLSH Congregation in France, and, at its conclusion, she was selected to lead the new community in Palmerston. As a veteran of New Guinea, Gsell held Debroux in high esteem

²³ See also Judith Lamb, ‘Memories of Mission Stories from the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart’, *Australian Catholic Record* 90, 3 (2013): 345; and Anne O’Brien, *God’s Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005), 164.

²⁴ ‘Sad Death’, *NTTG*, 19 November 1909. 2; Venard, *History of the Australian Province*, 137.

²⁵ Anne Gardiner, *Wiser For Their Words*, 19-20.

²⁶ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 63.

²⁷ ‘Shipping: Arrivals’, *NTTG*, 13 August 1909. 2.

²⁸ Diane Langmore, *European Missionaries in Papua, 1874-1914: A Group Portrait*. Doctoral Thesis, Australian National University, 1981. 14, 68-69, 449.

²⁹ Venard, *Designs of the Heart*, 195-207.

and it appears the two enjoyed a good working relationship. Debroux's arrival also seemed to resolve tensions between Gsell and Bergin who disagreed about administrative arrangements in the diocese. In a letter to Tréand in March 1908, he despaired that Bergin had agreed to send nuns but only on the condition that the Palmerston community remain within the direct jurisdiction of a Superior based in Sydney and that surplus revenue would be sent south rather than used to enrich the diocese: 'I prefer to have no sisters than to have such conditions'.³⁰ He rejected the proposal and Bergin seemed to acquiesce to his expectations, at least respecting a Superior stationed at Palmerston. The convent and adjoining school were officially blessed and opened on 19 July 1909.³¹

With the religious community now satisfactorily established, Gsell could turn his full attention to his *raison d'être*: the evangelisation of First Nations peoples. He had initially given Tréand reason to believe that he would resume the abandoned Jesuit mission on the Daly. In August 1907, he wrote urgently to Kensington alleging he had learned of a Protestant plot to commandeer New Uniya for their own purposes. He informed Tréand that there were around 150 baptised Aboriginal people in the vicinity and that the Jesuits had left behind 340 acres of land with a house in good condition: 'It goes without saying I could not stop the protestants without giving formal promise [to the government] that we would soon take over the mission ourselves'.³² He requested permission to resume the mission and asked for funding to help achieve this. Tréand replied in November, granting Gsell permission to continue the mission, but stressing he would have to take out a loan to fund the enterprise as the congregation could not afford the expense. In any event, the Provincial believed the land was already well provisioned with a plantation and suitable accommodation. Gsell's stormy response came in March 1908: 'I do not ask who could have given you this information which is at the opposite pole of the truth'.³³ He explained that the 'famous plantation' had been resigned to the bush and that 'the savages and white ants have been fighting' over the school for the past ten years.³⁴ Gsell resented that he had already incurred debts to pay for the convent and he refused to do so

³⁰ Gsell to Tréand, 9 March 1908. MSC Archives, Kensington. 'Dans les conditions qu'elle m'impose elle exige que la communauté de Port Darwin dépende de la Supérieure de Kensington et qu'elles envoient à Kensington le surplus de leurs revenus. Je lui ai répondu que je refusais net de pareilles conditions. ... et je préfère n'avoir pas de soeurs que d'en avoir à ces conditions. ... N'ya-ti-il rien de plus stupide et de plus ridicule qu'une committee de Soeurs à Port Darwin gouvernée par une Supérieure à Kensington?'

³¹ 'Opening of the R.C. Convent School', *NTTG*, 24 July 1908. 2.

³² Gsell to Tréand, 6 August 1907. MSC Archives, Kensington. 'Cela va sans dire je n'ai pas pu arrêter les protestants sans donner une promesse formelle que nous reprendrions la mission nous-même sous peu'.

³³ Gsell to Tréand, 9 March 1908. 'Je ne demande qui a pu vous donner ces renseignements qui sont a pole opposé de la vérité'.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 'les Jésuites y ont laissé l'école que les sauvages et les fourmis blanches se disputant depuis dix ans et qui pourra nous servir d'abri provisoire en attendant de bâtir mieux'.

again to resurrect a failed mission station. The Protestant threat, if there ever was one, had clearly dissipated. The Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) did establish a mission in 1908, but it was at Ngukurr on the banks of the Roper River in south-eastern Arnhem Land, some 600 kilometres away in a region which had never maintained a Catholic presence.³⁵ Clearly cognisant of the shifting sands of local politics, Gsell also noted: 'It is likely that the Commonwealth of Australia will be transferring the administration of the Northern Territory shortly and then they will certainly make special provisions for the Aborigines'.³⁶ He looked on this as a unique opportunity for an alternate source of future funding and recommended they prepare for the eventuality.

The dilapidated condition of any infrastructure yet remaining at New Uniya notwithstanding, the main reason Gsell was reluctant to resume efforts on the Daly was his preference for work among a people who had little previous contact with outsiders. In his memoir, Gsell notes: 'Bitter experience has proved ... [that missionaries] must work as far as possible from the centres of the white population. There are good white people in such centres, but the influence of the less worthy can be corrupting.'³⁷ As Rose argues of the Jesuits: 'Central to their thinking was the view that "savages" were open either to corruption or salvation, and that once corrupted they were no longer suitable for civilisation. They were thus in search of a particular type: the pristine savage.'³⁸ Gsell knew the Jesuits had baptised upwards of 200 people and that their surviving numbers exceeded both European and Filipino Catholic populations. Yet he chose to ignore these recent converts because he believed that their alleged inconstancy and indolence, a consequence of their proximity to white people, had rendered any further missionary activity among them a futile exercise. The Daly River nations, corrupted by European evils like the Larrakia and Woolner before them, were deemed beyond redemption and thus unworthy of salvation. As Mackillop had declared, missionary work required 'virgin soil – the free savage with all his vices but with his only'.³⁹ The Daly simply would not do. This was Gsell's first major appointment, and he was determined it should be a success. He decided to start from scratch.

³⁵ See Peter Berthon, et al., *We are Aboriginal: Our 100 Years: from Arnhem Land's First Mission to Ngukurr Today* (Ngukurr, NT: St Matthew's Anglican Church, 2008); and Murray Wilfred Seiffert, *Refuge on the Roper: The Origins of Roper River Mission Ngukurr* (Brunswick East, Victoria: Acorn Press, 2008).

³⁶ Gsell to Tréand, 9 March 1908, 'Il est probable que le Commonwealth d'Australie se fera transférer l'administration du Northern Territory sous peu et alors ils feront certainement des provisions spéciales pour les Aborigines'.

³⁷ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 15.

³⁸ Rose, 'Signs of Life on a Barbarous Frontier', 18.

³⁹ Cited in Jolly, 'A Failed Venture', 94

While Gsell was busy discounting the prospect of the Daly, he simultaneously preoccupied himself with exploring other possibilities. As early as November 1906 he identified the Kimberley region of Western Australia as a potential mission field.⁴⁰ He claimed the ‘province is very rich but sparsely populated by whites, [while] the blacks ... are very numerous’.⁴¹ Unlike the Daly, the Kimberley had the advantage of being isolated from Europeans while sustaining a large First Nations population. Gsell noted that the institutional Church was confined to the south-west of the region, with parish priests based in Broome and a mission staffed by the Pious Society of Missions (Pallottines) at Beagle Bay. This latter mission was established by Bishop Matthew Gibney (1835-1925) of Perth in 1890 on the lands of the Nyul Nyul people, entrusted to the Trappist Order, but transferred to the Pallottines in January 1901.⁴² Gsell argued the situation deprived the sacraments to hundreds of European Catholics living within the vicinity of Wyndham, 400 kilometres south of Palmerston, just over the Northern Territory border, ‘many of whom are very good and very rich’.⁴³ He alleged that one such Catholic had visited him and asked if the diocese might occasionally spare some priests. Gsell thought it impossible for Kelly – well over 2,000 kilometres away in Geraldton – to object to his scheme, and confidently asserted that expanding his ministry to the Kimberley would give him ‘a little more work and a little more resources’.⁴⁴

Unfortunately for Gsell, Kelly already had plans for the eastern Kimberley (see Maps 10 and 15). In May 1906, Rev Nicholas Emo (1849-1915) and Abbot Fulgentius Torres (1861-1914) began searching for a potential site for a Benedictine mission, eventually choosing a spot on the Drysdale River in 1908 which later became known as Kalumburu.⁴⁵ This foundation was closer to Wyndham than was Port Darwin. In May 1910 Torres was consecrated Administrator Apostolic of the Kimberley and Titular Bishop of Dorilea, thus extinguishing Gsell’s hopes for a westward expansion.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in August 1909 he conducted a four month tour of the Kimberley, travelling by steamer to Wyndham and thereafter covering some 1,300 kilometres

⁴⁰ Gsell to Meyer, 12 November 1906. ‘Il se trouve a l'ouest du Northern Territory une grande et belle province appellé Kimberley’. Translation: ‘Located west of the Northern Territory is a large and beautiful province called Kimberley’.

⁴¹ Ibid., ‘Cette province est très riche mais peu peuplée de blancs, les noirs au contre y sont très nombreux’.

⁴² See Remi Balagai, *This is Your Place: Beagle Bay Mission, 1890-1990: Birthplace and Cradle of Catholic Presence in the Kimberley*, Brigida Nailon and Francis Huegel eds (Broome: Beagle Bay Community, 1990).

⁴³ Gsell to Meyer, 12 November 1906. ‘Dans la partie rapprochee du Territory se trouvent une centaine de catholiques dont plusieurs sort très bons et très riches’.

⁴⁴ Ibid., ‘celui de me fournir un peu plus de travail et un peu plus de ressources’.

⁴⁵ Clement Mulcahy, ‘Torres, Fulgentius (1861-1914)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/torres-fulgentius-13221>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

on horseback, performing baptisms and marriages whenever he was afforded the opportunity.⁴⁷ Rather than territorial expansion and general adventure, however, the main purpose of this trip was to visit the much celebrated wealthy Catholics of the district who lavished the priest with over 1,000 francs in donations for missions.⁴⁸ Indeed, Gsell had already turned his eyes away from the Kimberley, and instead looked north to the Tiwi Islands.

On 3 May 1909, Gsell wrote to the Government Resident in Palmerston, Charles Herbert (1860-1929), asking for permission to establish a station on Bathurst Island.⁴⁹ He noted that he had ‘come to the conclusion that to make it a success it must be carried on, on a suitable ground, not too far away from civilised country and yet sufficiently protected against unwholesome interference’.⁵⁰ Gsell’s preference was for an island. There were practical reasons for this decision. The distance from the mainland, for example, made it more difficult for interlopers to visit. Perhaps Gsell also recalled the success of Verjus on Yule Island and sought to emulate it. He believed that the Tiwi Islands, situated roughly 80km north of Palmerston, would make an ideal spot for mission work. He asked Herbert if it were possible to have both Bathurst and Melville Islands declared native reserves. This would prohibit all non-Indigenous persons not associated with mission work from visiting and therefore safeguard the faith and morals of Indigenous people.

The reserves policy had been pursued by the South Australian government from as early as 1842. The British Secretary of State, Earl Henry George Grey (1802-1894), instructed that small tracts of uncultivated land – roughly 2.5 kilometres in size – be set aside for the exclusive use of First Nations peoples.⁵¹ Reserves contained a school, alongside rations depots for the distribution of basic goods. Theoretically, First Nations peoples could also continue traditional hunting on these lands, though the relatively small size of the reserves made this impractical. Ideally, reserves were established on the custodial lands of the Indigenous group concerned.⁵² Invariably, however, people from other areas were forced onto foreign Country when their own land was thrown open to white settlement, often resulting in intertribal conflict compounding the trauma of displacement. Grey’s policy was adopted throughout the Australian colonies. Flood notes that 59 such reserves were established in South Australia by 1860, but the number

⁴⁷ Gsell to Tréand, 10 November 1909. MSC Archives, Kensington.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Gsell to Herbert, 3 May 1909. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Flood, *Original Australians*, 221.

⁵² Ibid.

fluctuated throughout the century.⁵³ The majority were government-run, but missionary groups could also apply to found and manage their own reserves and were consequently eligible for modest funding. The Jesuits did so at Rapid Creek in 1882, and the Lutherans had done so at Hermannsburg in 1877. By 1909 there were 10 reserves still extant in the Northern Territory, the majority of which occupied relatively small tracts of land, ranging in size from 32 kilometres to 1,500 square kilometres. Gsell made use of this precedent, but with one significant departure from pre-existing policy: his proposal insisted that the entirety of the Tiwi Islands – an area of approximately 7,700 square kilometres – be declared a reserve. Even if Gsell was only granted the use of Bathurst Island, he would still gain a territory of some 2,100 square kilometres. This was an unusually large request and, as we shall see, did not exactly inspire enthusiasm in the Government Resident.

Gsell does not explain why he choose the Tiwi Islands rather than any of the numerous other options further east. For example, the Methodist Overseas Mission established stations at Goulburn Island in 1916, Elcho Island in 1922, Milingimbi in 1925, and Croker Island in 1940; whereas the Church Mission Society (CMS) established themselves at Groote Eylandt in 1921. Indeed, while, as has been noted, Gsell's efforts were preceded by a number of mainland missions – the Lutherans at Hermannsburg, Jesuits at Rapid Creek and Daly River, and CMS at Roper River – he was the first in the Northern Territory to carry out this work on an island, and his example was to be imitated by others. Perhaps the islands' relative proximity to Port Darwin was their most attractive quality, or maybe the presence of Anglicans in eastern Arnhem Land repelled him from that locale. It is also possible that these islands were recommended to him by contemporaries in Palmerston.

In his memoir Gsell recalls that the Jesuits guided his thinking on the matter.⁵⁴ In August 1888, Mackillop wrote to the *South Australian Advertiser* complaining about the position of the Government Resident. He accused Parsons of neglect and mismanagement and argued that officials consistently favoured displacement policies to free land for European farmers. Mackillop despaired of this mercenary attitude and, towards the end of the letter, as a viciously ironic aside, declared:

To save at least one tribe, we begged some months ago ... for Melville and Bathurst [to be gazetted] as a native reserve. As these islands are said to be very barren and useless,

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 40.

and as the natives tend to kill and eat any stranger they can catch, perhaps our application, long contemplated, will be granted.⁵⁵

As we have seen, the Jesuits doubled down at New Uniya and eventually left the Territory before they had an opportunity to seriously entertain a move to the Tiwi Islands. Nevertheless, Dalton argues that Mackillop inspired the MSCs to look north and Ganter likewise asserts that Gsell paid ‘heed to the suggestion of his Jesuit predecessors’.⁵⁶ Perhaps his parishioners recalled Mackillop’s earlier proposal to Gsell. For his part, Gsell did not credit the Jesuits. He wrote: ‘I recalled that they had tried the mainland, only to suffer a setback through flooding and the proximity of white men. *I decided* to choose an island’.⁵⁷

The region which Gsell would eventually have declared a reserve was one with a distinctive history of First Nations occupation. The Tiwi are the traditional custodians of two large inhabited islands north of Darwin in the Arafura Sea (Map 3). They have maintained an unbroken history of occupation and ownership over these islands from time immemorial. Melville, the larger island, has an area of approximately 5,600 square kilometres, while Bathurst, separated from Melville by the Apsley Strait, covers 2,100 square kilometres. These were originally called *Ratuwati Yinjara*, meaning ‘two islands’. There are also nine smaller islands – *Yirripurlingayi* (Buchanan), *Pirripatiriyi* (Seagull), *Purrapinarli* (Karlsruhe), *Irritit*, *Yipinuwurra* (Clift), *Turiturina*, *Matingalia*, Harris, and Nondlaw – surrounding Bathurst and Melville, which are uninhabited. In addition to these, the Tiwi claim the Vernon Islands group – *Muma* (East Vernon), *Warabatj* (North West Vernon), *Kulangana* (South West Vernon), known collectively to them as *Potinga* Islands – in the Clarence Strait. This body of water separates Tiwi country from mainland Australia and has done so for the past 10,000 to 15,000 years, since the end of the last Ice Age.

The Tiwi are distinct from the inhabitants of mainland Australia and prefer not to consider themselves Aboriginal people.⁵⁸ As Morris argues: ‘The Tiwi were socially, culturally, linguistically, and, to some extent, historically distinct from the mainland Aboriginal society’.⁵⁹ Tiwi existence was one of isolation. They did not trade with their nearest neighbours – the

⁵⁵ Donald Mackillop, ‘The Aborigines of the Northern Territory’, *South Australian Advertiser*, 3 August 1888. 3. There is no record of anthropophagy ever having been practiced by the Tiwi, though they enjoyed a significant notoriety and enduring reputation for bloodlust among colonisers.

⁵⁶ Dalton, *Jesuits in South Australia*, 52; Ganter *Contest for Aboriginal Souls*, 63.

⁵⁷ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 40. My emphasis.

⁵⁸ See ‘The Tiwi Islands’, *Tiwi Land Council*,

<http://www.tiwilandcouncil.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&p=224&l=2&id=56&smid=139>.

⁵⁹ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 23.

Larrakia, Woolner and Iwaidja peoples – and unlike the Yolngu of Arnhem Land, they had little contact with seafarers from Southeast Asia. Indeed, ‘Tiwi’ roughly translates as ‘we, the people’. As Hart and Pilling attest, ‘the word “Tiwi” did not mean “people” in the sense of all human beings, but rather “we, the only people”, or the chosen people who live on and own the islands’.⁶⁰ Although the Tiwi are divided into eight tribal bands – Mantiyupwi, Munupi, Yimpinari, Malawu, Wulirankuwu, Wurankuwu, Mirrikawuyanga, and Tikalaru – associated with ownership of particular Country (see Map 4), they are all one nation: one language, one culture, and one sovereign territory. In picking the Tiwi Islands for his missionary endeavours, Gsell therefore avoided the pitfalls experienced by the Jesuits, first at Rapid Creek – where their favouring of Alligator Rivers people over the Larrakia in a dispute on Larrakia land led the former nation to abandon the mission, causing a catastrophic population decline – and then at New Uniya – where multiple First Nations groups took up residence on Malak-Malak country, causing linguistic difficulties which compelled the missionaries to cease teaching in the local language in favour of English; a move which invariably limited the penetration of Christian ideas, expressed, as they were, in a foreign tongue. In addition to this, the Tiwi were a good choice because they had experienced relatively little interaction with Europeans during the period of British invasion and colonisation.

Indeed, historical contact with the outside world had always been sporadic and brief, though it should be remembered that, despite fulfilling in large part Gsell’s preference for an isolated people, the Tiwi had contact with foreigners on many occasions for at least three centuries prior to the permanent arrival of Catholic missionaries in the early twentieth century.

In 1636 the Dutch Governor-General of Batavia, Anthony van Diemen, despatched Gerrit Tomez Pool to explore the coastline of Australia. When Pool died, Pieter Pieterszoon took control of the expedition.⁶¹ In June the Dutch sailed along the northern coastline of Melville Island, landing at several locations to explore the beaches. They saw no Tiwi people and thought the island uninhabited. Pieterszoon assumed the landmass represented the northern coastline of mainland Australia and named it ‘van Diemenslant’ after the Governor. In 1644, another Dutch explorer, Abel Tasman, spotted the Tiwi Islands. He entered the Dundas Strait, anchoring in Van Diemen Gulf, before sailing westward along the northern coast of Melville and Bathurst Islands. Like Pieterszoon, Tasman mistook these for the northernmost point of

⁶⁰ Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 10.

⁶¹ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 31.

the Australian continent, and he mistakenly named the Dundas Strait ‘Van Diemen’s Bay’.⁶² Unlike Pieterszoon, however, Tasman did not make landfall. The first documented contact between Tiwi people and Europeans occurred in 1705.

In April, Maarten van Delft arrived at Bathurst Island. Sailing into the northern mouth of the Apsley Strait, he witnessed several men, women, and children, but they fled before the Dutch had an opportunity to meet with them.⁶³ On 31 April, members of the expedition entered Shark Bay on Melville Island and were confronted by 15 Tiwi men. Mistaking the pale Europeans for *wakkurtapa* (ghosts), the men signalled for them to leave.⁶⁴ When yelling and gesticulating failed to make an impression, the Tiwi showered the seafarers with spears. Shots were fired in retaliation and a Tiwi leader was wounded. Both parties retreated, but, perhaps surprisingly, friendly relations were established soon after, and the ship’s surgeon treated the wounded man.⁶⁵ The Dutch remained for a few weeks. The Tiwi visited their ships, presenting gifts of crabs and fish to the sailors, and were given clothes and ornaments in return. The Dutch were permitted to explore the hinterland and collect freshwater. Having concluded there was little to trade, van Delft decided to move on. Shortly before his departure, two sailors were attacked by eight Tiwi who endeavoured to seize their clothing. The Dutch characterised this behaviour as ‘foul and treacherous’, but the Tiwi, conscious van Delft intended to leave permanently, were probably intent on claiming goods in remuneration for weeks of hospitality.⁶⁶ Regardless, the perceivably acrimonious display ended Dutch interest in the islands.

The next documented European visits to the Tiwi Islands came with the expeditions of Baudin and King in the early nineteenth centuries, discussed in Chapter Two. In the meantime, it is probable the Tiwi commenced ongoing encounters with Macassans which lasted until the late nineteenth-century. It is likely Macassan seafarers in search of trepang began visiting northern Australia in the 1700s, their seasonal sojourns having a profound influence on the language, culture, and ritual practice of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land. Scholars have documented extensive histories of cultural exchange between First Nations peoples and the Indo-Malays of Southeast Asia.⁶⁷ The extent of contact with the Tiwi, however, appears less intensive. Scholars note that the supply of trepang at Melville Island was not rich, so fishermen preferred to focus

⁶² *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁶³ Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 55.

⁶⁴ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 32.

⁶⁵ See Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 57.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁷ See for example, *Macassan History and Heritage: Journeys, Encounters and Influences*, edited by Marshall Clark and Sally K. May (Canberra: ANU Press, 2013).

their efforts on the Kimberley or Arnhem Land coasts.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Tiwi oral tradition holds that Macassans made landfall on Melville Island and customs officer, Alfred Searcy (1854-1925), claimed he found the remains of smokehouses and fireplaces dotted about the coastline during his visits in the 1890s.⁶⁹ Bathgate and Lewis assert that Macassans engaged in trade with the Tiwi, bartering for food and the sexual favours of women, and that children were born of these unions.⁷⁰ They cite a 1996 interview with Tiwi woman, Happy Cook, who recalled that her grandparents ‘used to work for them Makasan. They used to come round this side [Milikapiti, Snake Bay], pick up all them trepang; takem there and cut em open and like dry em in the sun. They used to light fire underneath. They used to cure it eh, like smoke it.’⁷¹ Similarly, Pye observes that Tiwi oral tradition holds that tobacco and dug-out canoes were first obtained from Macassans, though notes these were ‘spoil[s] of war’.⁷²

Indeed, most scholars maintain the Tiwi treated these outsiders with enduring hostility, which meant that fishermen avoided the islands whenever possible. Peter and Sheila Forrest, for example, argue ‘their landings were rare, and only in cases of shipwreck’.⁷³ They cite Tiwi man, Matthew Wonaeamirri who asserts: ‘Macassans were too frightened to come here, they knew what we would do to them if they landed on our islands’.⁷⁴ This supports Hart and Pilling’s hypothesis that: ‘Outsiders who landed on the islands were massacred or vigorously resisted’.⁷⁵

These different narratives, and the discrepancies between them, are probably the result of the fact that relationships between the two groups, as elsewhere in northern Australia, developed over time and were dependent on circumstance. In any event, the lack of abundant harvests, in addition to the dangerous tides, meant that Macassan visits to the Islands were infrequent. According to Bathgate and Lewis, Macassans stopped coming to the Tiwi Islands in 1890.⁷⁶ In 1906, the year that Gsell arrived in Port Darwin, the Australian government prohibited Macassan maritime trade in an unsuccessful bid to encourage growth in the local industry, thus ending centuries of contact.⁷⁷

⁶⁸ Goodale, *Tiwi Wives*, 7.

⁶⁹ Alfred Searcy, *In the Australian Tropics* (London: Robertson & Co., 1909), 46.

⁷⁰ Bathgate and Lewis, *Culture Contact Sites*, 14.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 63.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of North Australia*, 10.

⁷⁶ Bathgate and Lewis, *Culture Contact Sites*, 16.

⁷⁷ Ganter, *Contest for Aboriginal Souls*, 54.

One explanation for the hostility displayed towards outsiders is the fragmentary evidence Melville Island was raided by Portuguese slavers. The Portuguese presence in what was then termed the East Indies dates from their capture of Malacca in 1511. From there they expanded their empire, establishing trading ports, fortresses and missions in the Spice Islands – present day Maluku – exploiting a trade monopoly in the region. By the early seventeenth-century, however, the Portuguese were in decline, and they were eventually displaced by the Dutch; Portuguese colonial influence thereafter was confined to the eastern half of Timor.⁷⁸ This portion of the island – present day Timor-Leste – was officially declared a Portuguese colony in 1702 and remained as such until 1975.⁷⁹ This meant that from the eighteenth century onwards, the Portuguese were concentrated within a few days' sail of the Tiwi Islands. According to Douglas Kammen, Portuguese merchants obtained slaves from the Solor-Timor region for sale on the Batavia and Macao markets. He argues that slaves were second only to sandalwood as the most profitable commodity all throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸⁰

Reflecting on his visit to Dili in 1840, English author and navigator, George Windsor Earl (1813-1865), stated elderly Portuguese residents had told him that, prior to the nineteenth century: 'Melville Island was only less a source of slavery than New Guinea'.⁸¹ Similarly, Searcy claimed Macassans referred to Melville Islanders as *amba*, meaning 'slaves' in Malay.⁸² It is probable that Searcy bases this assertion on the reports of Major John Campbell, who succeeded Bremer as commander of Fort Dundas in 1827. In partial explanation for the commercial failings of the British settlement, Campbell stated that: 'Malay fishermen, from Maccassar [sic], are forbidden to go near Melville Island (which they call *Amba*), alleging that it is infested by pirates – probably slavers, as *amba*, in the Malay language, signifies a slave'.⁸³ It is worth noting that *amba* translates as 'big' in Malay, whereas *hamba* translates as 'servant' or 'slave'. The Macassans may well have associated Melville with slavery, as Campbell

⁷⁸ See Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400-1668* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁷⁹ See Douglas Kammen, *Three Centuries of Conflict in East Timor* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

⁸⁰ Douglas Kammen, 'Master-Slave, Traitor-Nationalist, Opportunist-Oppressed: Political Metaphors in East Timor', *Indonesia*, 76 (October 2003), 73.

⁸¹ George Windsor Earl, *The Native Tribes of the Indian Archipelago: Papuans* (London: Madden and Malcolm, 1856), 210.

⁸² Searcy, *Australian Tropics*, 46.

⁸³ John Campbell, 'Geographical Memoir of Melville Island and Port Essington on the Cobourg Peninsula, Northern Australia: With Some Observations on the Settlements which have been Established on the North Coast of New Holland', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* (1834): 155.

claimed, though it is also possible the fishermen were referring to Melville's considerable size, even merely in relation to Bathurst.

Further evidence of familiarity with Europeans was seen in King's interactions with the Tiwi. On 15 May 1818, King landed at Luxmore Head, unaware that a group of 30 Tiwi was concealed nearby. When King fired his shotgun at a lizard, the Tiwi thought he was firing at them and reacted strongly, suggesting experience with European weapons was more recent in the collective memory than the brief incident with the Dutch in 1705. They emerged from their hiding places, and rushed at the surprised Englishmen, who quickly retreated to their boat. Having retrieved their muskets, King's party returned to the beach and negotiated for freshwater. Once more the Tiwi demonstrated familiarity with European technology, imitating chopping motions to demonstrate their desire for steel axes. As Morris asserts, 'unless the Islanders had come into contact with Portuguese slave-raiders in the eighteenth century it is doubtful whether the generation of Tiwi confronting King had previously seen Europeans. They demonstrated no fear of the new-comers, while alternatively displaying hostility and requesting axes from King.'⁸⁴ Unimpressed with their overall conduct, King sailed down the Apsley Strait, and on 19 May satisfied European cartographers that the Tiwi homelands were indeed islands. Ignorant of Indigenous nomenclature – *Ratuwati Yinjara* – he named Melville Island after Robert Dundas (1771-1851), 2nd Viscount of Melville and the First Lord of the Admiralty, and Bathurst Island after Henry Bathurst (1762-1834), 3rd Earl of Bathurst and Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies.⁸⁵

At one point in his journey, he reported that an elderly woman waded into the sea and invited the explorers ashore – into an apparent ambush as King noticed a group of armed men camouflaged in nearby mangroves and so decided against landing – by calling out the Portuguese imperative *venha-ça* meaning 'come here!'⁸⁶ Similarly, a few years later, a Tiwi prisoner reportedly spoke to his English captors using words with Portuguese origins such as *piccaninny*. Often used in a derogatory context by European colonisers to describe indigenous infants, the word means 'children' in West Indian Creole and is derived from the Portuguese

⁸⁴ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 36-37.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸⁶ Campbell relates this story in 'Geographical Memoir of Melville Island', 155-156. See also Kenneth McIntyre, *The Secret Discovery of Australia: Portuguese Ventures 200 years Before Captain Cook* (London: Souvenir Press, 1977), 85.

pequeno, meaning ‘small’.⁸⁷ Finally, Campbell claimed that he once tried to befriend a group of Tiwi by offering a medal attached by a piece of scarlet tape to a young man:

[He] remained at a short distance (two or three paces), took hold of his wrists, and appeared as if struggling to escape from the grasp of an enemy; he then pointed his hand towards his neck, looked upwards to the branches of a tree, shook his head significantly (evidently in allusion to being hung), and avoided coming nigh enough to receive the proffered gift. This led me to imagine that the island had been visited by strangers, and the natives forced away by them as slaves.⁸⁸

Whatever the truth of Portuguese raids on the islands prior to the nineteenth century, it is certain that the Tiwi met the next European incursion on their homelands with relentless animosity. This legacy of fierce resistance to outsiders would endure well up until the arrival of Gsell some 80 years later.

Eager to assert their claim to the Australian continent, the British established Fort Dundas, at *Punata* (Point Barlow) near Pirlangimpi on the west coast of Melville Island in 1824. In addition to meeting the potential security threat of Dutch and French territorial expansion in the region, they also hoped to attract trade in trepang. Bremer was instructed to establish garrisons on the Cobourg Peninsula and the Apsley Strait. He claimed British possession of the northern coast of Australia on 26 September 1824 at Port Essington, but, having decided there was no reliable freshwater in the vicinity, sailed to Melville Island, claimed the Tiwi Islands and commenced construction of a stockade on 29 September.⁸⁹ There were 125 Europeans in all – including 22 soldiers, 26 marines, and 47 convicts – and the heavy timber fortress was equipped with two 9-pounder guns, four 18-pounder carronades, and a 12-pounder boat gun.⁹⁰ Tiwi oral tradition tells of their consternation upon discovering such a host: ‘That night all along the shores of Bathurst and Melville Islands many big fires were burning sending their message to all the tribes – some strangers have arrived here to stay – There are many of them

⁸⁷ Though Morris notes such words could have been given to the Tiwi by the Macassans, who often used a ‘Portuguese-Malay’ trade pidgin in the Timor region. *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 35.

⁸⁸ Campbell, ‘Geographical Memoir of Melville Island’, 155. While convicts were occasionally flogged, no one was executed at Fort Dundas, indicating that a knowledge of hanging did not come from the British.

⁸⁹ Powell, *Far Country*, 48.

⁹⁰ Powell, *World’s End*, 47; Pugh, *Fort Dundas*, 14-15. The stockade was 70 metres long and 45 metres wide. It was comprised of heavy logs standing at 1.8 metres tall and 1.5 metres thick, built on a foundation of stone. This structure topped a 3-metre-deep, 4.5-metre-wide, dry moat. Certainly, a foreboding edifice.

and they have three big ships and plenty of axes'.⁹¹ These were not seasonal visitors like the Macassans, or irregular interlopers like European explorers who came before. These intruders came with an air of permanence.

By Trafalgar Day 1824, one bastion of the fort had been completed. Bremer assembled his men, hoisted the Union Jack, and fired the Royal Salute.⁹² In November, he sailed away confident that the northern settlement would be a happy success. He was sorely mistaken. The life of the settlement was plagued with tropical disease, oppressive weather, sporadic famine and commercial failure. When Campbell assumed command in 1827 it was abundantly clear Macassans had no interest in visiting the British outpost.⁹³ Orders came from the Colonial Office to establish a settlement at Raffles Bay, and Fort Wellington, likewise doomed to fail, was summarily founded on 18 June. Within a year, the stores at Fort Dundas were transferred to Fort Wellington and the garrison was removed to Sydney.⁹⁴ The last European invaders departed in April 1829. Throughout its four-year history, relations between the British colony and the Tiwi were tense and characterised by mutual suspicion and intermittent violence. Neither Bremer nor Campbell respected Tiwi land rights and the Tiwi clearly resented the British incursion and concomitant appropriation of resources such as timber, stone, bushfoods, and freshwater. On 25 October 1824, they seized two convicts working outside the settlement, stealing their axes and retreating into the bush before nearby soldiers had a chance to respond. Shortly after this incident, Bremer went with a detachment of soldiers to parlay with the Islanders. He offered them gifts, but the Tiwi demanded axes instead. He gave them four, but the men refused to accompany him back to the settlement, and no Tiwi person ever went voluntarily into the fortress. Three further raids took place on 30 October, and a Tiwi man was shot.

Thereafter the Tiwi conducted guerrilla-style warfare, the focus of which was the acquisition of European tools. Scholars argue that the purpose of these attacks was compensation for their misappropriated land and resources, as well as to compel the intruders to depart their Country. Morris argues that hostilities intensified during the Dry Season of 1827: 'Hay-stacks were fired, pigs speared, fences demolished and washing stolen'.⁹⁵ Spears were launched into buildings,

⁹¹ 'Yingwampa kwampi papi pirimi api wuta awungarra yiloti wurumuwu. Yita wanga tayikuwapi, jajirrima maratinga amintiya tayikuwanga walimani. Waya warra naki ayiwaparrami ngini pakinya ngirramini.' Cited and translated in Lefort and Munkara, *Ngirramini Ngini*, vol 1, 11 and 17.

⁹² Pugh, *Fort Dundas*, 15.

⁹³ Powell, *Far Country*, 49.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 49-50

and parties were not permitted to leave the relative safety of the settlement without an armed guard. In September, Campbell intercepted a group of Tiwi on their way to collect freshwater and managed to capture a Tiwi leader, Tambu Tipungwuti, placing him in heavy chains and imprisoning him at the bottom of a dry well in Fort Dundas.⁹⁶ In reprisal, John Gold and John Green, the settlement's respective surgeon and storekeeper, were attacked while the pair were outside the stockade on an afternoon stroll. The murders were rather grizzly. Lieutenant William Hicks reported:

Mr Green had received in all 17 wounds from spears – three were in his throat, one through his arm, ten in front of his body, and one in his back; he also had two severe cuts on his head ... On the body [of Gold] 31 spear wounds, in seven of which the heads were still sticking ... from every circumstance I should fear he died very hard.⁹⁷

Tipungwuti escaped soon after. It is apparent the deaths of Green and Gold left an indelible stamp upon European imaginings of the Tiwi. Around 180 people lived at Fort Dundas, of which the Genealogical Society of the Northern Territory observes, 34 met an untimely death.⁹⁸ Of these, however, only four died at the hands of the Tiwi.⁹⁹ The most common cause of death was scurvy or malarial fever, not barbed spears, and Fort Dundas was abandoned owing to its economic failures rather than Tiwi troubles. Nevertheless, the Tiwi earned an enduring reputation for ferocity. The British departed in 1829, leaving the Tiwi once more to their relative isolation. As previously mentioned, this seclusion was only interrupted by occasional visits from Macassans. It was also interrupted in 1895 by the arrival of buffalo shooters, but this will be detailed in Chapter Four. Nevertheless, the relative isolation of the Tiwi eventually made them the perfect candidates for Gsell's missionary evangelisation. When Gsell set out for Bathurst Island in 1911, townspeople warned him they 'were of the wildest type of savage' and argued it was reckless 'to risk falling into the clutches of these cutthroats'.¹⁰⁰ As the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* later commented, echoing Gsell's sentiments:

Bathurst Island is a virgin field for missionary enterprise, and its isolated inhabitants being practically uncontaminated by contact with civilisation, this missionary

⁹⁶ Ibid, 51.

⁹⁷ Cited in Pugh, *Fort Dundas*, 47-48.

⁹⁸ See Ibid., 168-170.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 66-67.

¹⁰⁰ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 44.

enterprise has a fair chance of showing what can be done in the direction of gradually transforming the pure savage into an intelligent member of the human family.¹⁰¹

Gsell's 1909 proposals received lukewarm support from the South Australian administration in Palmerston. On 5 May, Herbert forwarded Gsell's letter to the Minister Controlling the Northern Territory, John Bice (1853-1923). He agreed that a mission could be established on Bathurst Island, but recommended against converting the entire island into a reserve: 'It is a matter for consideration whether an Island in such close proximity to Port Darwin and of which but little is known should be wholly formed into an Aboriginal Reserve'.¹⁰² Rather than the 2,100 square kilometres Gsell initially requested, Herbert recommended instead that 'say about 100 square miles [160 square kilometres]' be converted for the purpose. The South Australian Government's response was slow and somewhat contradictory.

On 14 July 1910, public notice was given that 50,000 acres were available for the cultivation of tropical products on Bathurst Island. Applications were to be made for blocks not exceeding 5,000 acres each. Four speculators successfully applied for leases, but no one made any effort to take up residence.¹⁰³ On 21 July, the new Government Resident, Samuel Mitchell (1852-1926) found a misplaced report examining the prospect of turning the Tiwi Islands into Aboriginal reserves.¹⁰⁴ Mitchell forwarded this report to the Minister for the Northern Territory, Bill Denny (1872-1946), lamenting: 'It is very desirable that something of this kind be done, and I feel some regret that in consequence of my absence the letter should have been overlooked – and that Bathurst Island should have been thrown open for leasing without consideration being given to this matter'.¹⁰⁵ On 25 July, Gsell sent a letter to Mitchell in which he once again raised the issue of the Aboriginal Reserve: 'one of the most urgent needs of this Northern Territory is a provision of some sort for the moral and social betterment of the aboriginal race, and every earnest effort in this way is entitled to the hearty support of all'.¹⁰⁶ Gsell envisioned an institution which would take the 'shape of an industrial and agricultural school, where the natives would receive together with moderate literacy and religious training, all the attainments that would make them useful members of society'.¹⁰⁷ Mitchell forwarded

¹⁰¹ 'News & Notes', *NTTG*, 14 April 1911. 3.

¹⁰² Herbert to Bice, 5 May 1909. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

¹⁰³ Department of External Affairs, Memo. No. 11/18105. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

¹⁰⁴ See O'Brien, V.T. 'Mitchell, Samuel James (1852-1926)', in *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2008), 405.

¹⁰⁵ Mitchell to Denny, 21 July 1910. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

¹⁰⁶ Gsell to Mitchell, 25 July 1910. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

the letter to Denny on 3 August, with the brisk observation: 'I have already written to you in regard to reserving Bathurst Island'.¹⁰⁸

Frustrated with the slow pace of proceedings, Gsell travelled to Adelaide in September to speak with Denny directly. In his memoir, Gsell recalled: 'My anxiety became so great, as I chafed at the bit while I waited, that, feeling myself blackballed by junior officials, I went over their heads to Mr Denny, then Minister for the Northern Territory, a man in whom I had great confidence.'¹⁰⁹ Formerly editor of Adelaide's *Southern Cross* Catholic newspaper, Denny was elected to the seat of West Adelaide in the South Australian House of Assembly in 1900.¹¹⁰ He joined the United Labor Party in 1905, and became Attorney-General and Minister for the Northern Territory in June 1910.¹¹¹ Gsell claimed that, with the assistance of Archbishop John O'Reily (1846-1915) of Adelaide, he 'was able to arrange the suspension of the sales of the land, and the Minister let me know that he awaited my visit to finally settle the question'.¹¹² On 26 September, Gsell had a private meeting with Denny, in which he articulated his hopes for Bathurst Island. In a follow up letter the next day, Gsell reiterated his request that 10,000 acres – 40 square kilometres – be set aside to accommodate a mission station.¹¹³ On 29 September 1910, Denny sent a telegram to Mitchell stating: 'I have decided [to] dedicate, about fifty thousand (50,000) acres [of the] Island for Aboriginal purposes and grant a Permit [of] ten thousand (10,000) acres [in] south east corner to Roman Catholic Mission'.¹¹⁴ This reserve, which did not include land already set aside for agricultural enterprises, was named Wongoak (see Maps 11 and 12).

At 200 square kilometres, it was only a portion of the territory for which Gsell initially hoped. But an opportunity to have the entirety of Bathurst Island declared a reserve would soon arise with the transfer of the Northern Territory to Commonwealth control in January 1911. By the turn of the century, the region was generally considered a white elephant to its South Australian administrators. As Donovan observes: 'For forty-eight years repeated efforts were made to realise the apparent economic potential of the Territory, efforts which met with little success'.¹¹⁵ Agriculture was a complete failure, rendering assertions that the Territory could be

¹⁰⁸ Mitchell to Denny, 3 August 1910. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

¹⁰⁹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 43.

¹¹⁰ Merrilyn Lincoln, 'Denny, William Joseph (Bill) (1872-1946)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/denny-william-joseph-bill-5958>.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 43.

¹¹³ Gsell to Denny, 27 September 1910. NAA: A1640, 1910/570.

¹¹⁴ Denny to Mitchell, 29 September 1910. NAA: A1640, 1910/570.

¹¹⁵ Donovan, *Land Full of Possibilities*, 224.

transformed into the ‘food bowl’ of Australia nothing more than a tantalising chimera. Pastoralism had fared somewhat better but could hardly be described as thriving. The only industry which had managed to turn a modest profit was mining, though this achievement was owed to the efforts of the Chinese, a fact which was disheartening in the era of the White Australia Policy.¹¹⁶ With mounting public debt and stagnating population growth, the troublesome Territory was deemed moribund and South Australians began to seek avenues for ditching their responsibilities.

In April 1901, they approached the Commonwealth with a proposal to transfer the region to federal jurisdiction. The transfer was contingent on the Commonwealth also absorbing the debt – some £4 million – incurred over decades of failure. In February 1907, Premier Thomas Price (1852-1909) and Prime Minister Alfred Deakin (1856-1919) signed a memorandum of understanding committing the Commonwealth to that end.¹¹⁷ Both Houses of Parliament ratified the agreement, but the issue was shelved. Deakin resumed the initiative in October 1909, passing the *Territory Transfer Agreement Bill* in the federal House of Representatives in October 1909. However, the Senate delayed action on this legislation until it lapsed. A second version of the Bill – the *Northern Territory Acceptance Act* – was reintroduced by Andrew Fisher’s (1862-1928) government in November 1910. With Deakin’s support, it cleared both Houses and 1 January 1911 was set for the official transfer.¹¹⁸ Administrative responsibility was relegated to the Department of External Affairs, whose permanent secretary was Atlee Hunt (1864-1935). The capital, Palmerston, was also renamed Darwin to better reflect local nomenclature, which referred to the town in reference to its port.

The Commonwealth was initially determined to reverse the fortunes of the Northern Territory. As Russell McGregor states: ‘Even in the face of recurrent failures, Australians continued to believe that the north could and must be densely settled and intensely developed’.¹¹⁹ Most believed that economic misfortunes were the result of mismanagement and neglect on the part of South Australians – rather than, for example, the unsuitability of the climate for European-style agriculture or indeed the mere isolation of Darwin from Australian markets and population centres, which invariably squeezed profits – and so a spirit of optimism permeated

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ De La Rue, *Ruled by Remote Control*, 86.

¹¹⁸ Powell, *Far Country*, 142.

¹¹⁹ Russell McGregor, ‘Northern Optimism: The Preliminary Scientific Expedition to the Northern Territory, 1911’, *Northern Territory Historical Studies*, 24 (2013): 40.

the Commonwealth takeover.¹²⁰ Upon the initiative of the University of Melbourne, the federal government sent scientists to investigate the supposedly untapped potential of the Northern Territory. The Preliminary Scientific Expedition, as it was called, toured the region throughout June and August 1911. Among the number were Baldwin Spencer and John Anderson Gilruth, professors of biology and veterinary science respectively. Impressed with their findings, the government appointed Gilruth Administrator and Spencer Special Commissioner and Chief Protector of Aborigines. Both men assumed these posts in 1912.

As we have seen, Gsell looked upon the advent of the Commonwealth as a unique opportunity to bolster his efforts at missionary evangelisation. This time, he was not disappointed. On 24 August 1911, Hunt wrote that: 'Professors Spencer and Gilruth called on the Minister today and urged that immediate steps be taken to proclaim the whole of Bathurst Island as a reserve for aborigines'.¹²¹ Spencer wrote again in January 1912 requesting action on Bathurst: 'I have been much impressed with the necessity of having some reserve such as this Island where natives can be kept free from any chance of contact with whites and asiatics'.¹²² In the intervening months, the Department had been engaged in negotiations with the Bathurst Island leaseholders. None of these resided on the Island, nor had they cultivated the land, meaning they had yet to finalise their lease applications. The Department offered equivalent land packages on the mainland and induced them to withdraw. Thus, by 30 October, Gilruth informed Hunt that all satisfactory arrangements had been made to declare Bathurst Island a reserve.¹²³ The official proclamation was made by the Governor-General on 24 December 1912.¹²⁴

By transforming Bathurst into a reserve in its entirety, Gsell ensured that no other pastoral or agricultural enterprise could operate on the island as it was now completely off limits. In pursuing this policy of missionary isolation, he found natural allies in both Gilruth and Spencer who were determined to implement segregation policies throughout the Northern Territory. Though their motivations for doing so were different, the missionary and public servants found plenty of common ground. In his memoir Gsell credits Gilruth, 'a solid fellow and a man of

¹²⁰ Donovan, *Land Full of Opportunities*, 225.

¹²¹ Hunt, Memo 24 August 1911. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

¹²² Spencer to Thomas, 19 January 1912. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

¹²³ Gilruth to Hunt, 30 October 1912. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

¹²⁴ Thomas Denman, 24 December 1912. NAA: A1, 1938/33126.

decision', with taking an effective interest in his efforts.¹²⁵ Yet, it was Spencer that should be credited with earning official approval.

An Oxford graduate, Spencer was appointed foundation Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne in 1887. Throughout his formative years training as a scientist, he had also taken a keen interest in ethnography and anthropology. In 1896, he joined ethnologist Francis James Gillen (1855-1912) on a fieldwork expedition around Alice Springs, resulting in the publication of *The Natives Tribes of Central Australia* (1899).¹²⁶ D.J. Mulvaney, describes this as among the most important anthropological books then published, influencing 'theories on social evolution and explanations for the origins of art and ritual, particularly those of Sir James Frazer, [and] Emile Durkheim'.¹²⁷ Throughout 1901 and 1902, Spencer and Gillen travelled around Central Australia making wax cylinder and film recordings of Arrernte ceremonies. Spencer held the view, shared by contemporaries, that Aboriginal people were a doomed race. Influenced by evolutionary assumptions in Darwinian biology – as well as Edward Burnett Tylor's (1832-1917) theories of scientific anthropology which maintained that societies universally and inexorably passed through three basic stages of development: from savagery, through barbarism to civilisation – Spencer believed that Aboriginal people were the most primitive on the planet, occupying the lowest rung on the ladder of human development.¹²⁸ In studying Indigenous culture, he hoped to understand humanity in its most primal setting. He likewise maintained that Indigenous people were ill equipped to survive in the modern world and predestined to extinction. While he had faith in British 'progress', he also saw the darker elements of modernity on the Australian frontier – rape, murder, disease, slavery, alcoholism, and drug abuse – had a crushing effect on First Nations peoples.¹²⁹ Much of his research was motivated by a perceived urgency to preserve as much of this culture as possible before it disappeared forever. As Stephen Gray asserts: 'Spencer felt humanitarian compassion for Aboriginal people', but this begot a breathtaking paternalism.¹³⁰ He sought to prolong their survival through sweeping administrative measures which prevented their contact with

¹²⁵ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 43.

¹²⁶ D.J. Mulvaney, 'Spencer, Sir Walter Baldwin (1860-1929)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/spencer-sir-walter-baldwin-8606>

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Mulvaney and Calaby, *Baldwin Spencer*, 126.

¹²⁹ Stephen Gray, *Brass Discs, Dog Tags, and Finger Scanners: The Apology and Aboriginal Protection in the Northern Territory, 1868-1972* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2011), 42.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

European and Asian peoples alike, and the advent of the Commonwealth resulted in a drastic transformation in race relations in Darwin.

For years, South Australia had entertained ideas of introducing legislation to limit interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples within the colonial settlements. Under their rule, however, a *laissez faire* attitude had predominated in polyglot Palmerston where Europeans, Asians and First Nations peoples intermingled freely. Unlike the Tiwi, the Larrakia people were rarely hostile toward European colonisers.¹³¹ They assisted Goyder in 1869, supplying his party with food and fresh water. According to Toni Bauman, cognisant of their inability to effectively meet the threat of European firearms and disease, the Larrakia ‘ultimately had little choice but to adapt and negotiate an alliance of mutual benefit if they were to remain on their country’.¹³² As with the Tiwi, the success of northern settlements could be significantly hindered by the animosity of First Nations peoples, so South Australia was determined to remain on good terms with the Larrakia.¹³³ Their subsequent understanding ‘found expression in the employment of Larrakia people in the township, as well as ensuring that the Larrakia had primary access to whatever goods the settlers distributed’.¹³⁴ Bauman notes that, while the Larrakia occupied a privileged position in the emerging economy of Port Darwin, these arrangements were by no means exclusive, and soon other First Nations groups travelled to Palmerston.¹³⁵ Throughout the period of South Australian governance, Indigenous peoples were at liberty to move around the township at will. The Larrakia had two camps roughly 400 metres from the township at Lameroo, one on the beach and one perched on the clifftop.¹³⁶ Other First Nations groups, often displaced from their own Country by pastoralism and frontier violence, established camps on the fringes. Many Indigenous people were employed by European and Chinese businesses who became reliant on the cheap labour to keep their enterprises afloat.¹³⁷ However, free movement was not without its assumed social problems. Chief among them was the supply of alcohol and opium to Indigenous people, unfair labour practices, and the sexual exploitation of Indigenous women by non-Indigenous men. Missionaries and welfare agencies, Jesuits among them, had raised concerns about this for

¹³¹ Harris, *One Blood*, 460.

¹³² Toni Bauman, *Aboriginal Darwin: A Guide to Exploring the Important Sites of the Past and Present* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006), xxi.

¹³³ See Francesca Merlan, *Dynamics of Difference in Australia: Indigenous Past and Present in a Settler Country* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 105.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Samantha Wells, ‘Negotiating Place in Colonial Darwin: Interactions Between Aborigines and Whites, 1869-1911’, Doctoral Thesis, University of Technology Sydney, 2003, 254.

¹³⁷ De La Rue, *Ruled by Remote Control*, 100.

decades. Though Europeans were guilty of offences, it was the Asian population who received most of the blame owing to the xenophobic attitudes of government officials prevalent in the era of the White Australia Policy.

Among the first pieces of legislation passed by the newly federated Commonwealth of Australia was the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*. This represented a concerted effort on the part of policy makers to ensure that their new nation would remain resolutely British. The blatantly racist legislation targeted Asian migrants, considered an insurmountable economic threat. As Deakin, then Attorney General to Prime Minister Edmund Barton (1849-1920), declared in September 1901: ‘It is not the bad qualities, but the good qualities of these alien races that make them so dangerous to us. It is their inexhaustible energy, their power of applying themselves to new tasks, their endurance and low standard of living that make them such competitors.’¹³⁸ Initial drafts of the bill explicitly banned all non-European migrants from residing in Australia, but objections from the British government ensured the final draft of the Act would instead require all prospective immigrants to pass a dictation test. Immigration officials had the power to reject anyone who failed the test, which could be given in any European language. It was impossible for anyone deemed undesirable to pass these tests, and the result was a precipitous decline in the Asian population of Australia. In the Northern Territory, for example, the Chinese population gradually decreased every year: from 2,254 persons in 1903 to 1,228 persons in 1911.¹³⁹ Immigrants who arrived prior to 1901 were exempt from the Act, but the possibility of chain-migration was entirely eliminated as officials pursued their utopia. Yet nowhere was the myth of White Australia more obviously belied than the Northern Territory, where the Asian population had always exceeded that of the European, even in 1911, and where both races were vastly outnumbered by their First Nations counterparts.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, McGregor argues that the most persistent theme in speeches in favour of the Commonwealth takeover of the Territory ‘was the need to safeguard white Australia’.¹⁴¹ Over the next few decades, officials made every effort to marginalise the Asian population, many of whom sought repatriation rather than suffer discriminatory legislation.

¹³⁸ Alfred Deakin, ‘The Commonwealth of Australia Shall Mean a “white Australia” (12 September 1901)’, in *Well May We Say: The Speeches that Made Australia*, Sally Warcraft ed (Melbourne: Text Publishing Australia, 2014), 230-240.

¹³⁹ G.H. Knibbs, *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1911 – Part VIII – Non-European Races* (Melbourne: Minister of State from Home Affairs, 1911).

¹⁴⁰ See Baldwin Spencer, ‘Preliminary Report on the Aboriginals of the Northern Territory’, *Report of the Administration for the Year of 1912* (20 May 1913).

¹⁴¹ McGregor, ‘Northern Optimism’, 40.

As Reynolds asserts: ‘The existing, dynamic, and successful multi-racial society in the northern towns – home and haunt to alien elements – was to be legislatively choked to death. Its very existence was a challenge, a threat, an affront to the new nation obsessed with ideas of blood, biology and racial purity.’¹⁴² When Spencer arrived in Darwin in January 1911, he did so armed with extraordinary powers conferred by the South Australian *Aboriginal Acts 1910* and the Commonwealth *Aboriginals Ordinance 1911*. As Chief Protector he was legal guardian of all Aboriginal people, adults and children alike, and had been given authority to take any person into custody should he deem it necessary. Spencer could declare any area prohibited to Indigenous peoples and create reserves which were strictly off limits to non-Indigenous people. Employers who wished to engage Aboriginal labourers were issued with an official licence and it was now illegal for Asians to do so. Finally, marriage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons was prohibited, except in exceptional circumstances determined at the discretion of the Chief Protector. As Mulvaney and Calaby assert: ‘The Chief Protector therefore possessed extreme powers, not only over his Aboriginal clients, but in relation to all sections of the community. ... civil liberties were widely infringed and under its stern paternalism, Aborigines lost all personal rights, while a premium was placed upon subjective value judgements.’¹⁴³

Spencer wasted no time in implementing the segregation policies enabled by his new powers. He declared Chinatown a prohibited area to Aboriginal people and cancelled employment licences held by Asians, even naturalised British subjects.¹⁴⁴ This decision also aimed at limiting the growing population of persons of mixed Asian/Aboriginal descent, whom officials likewise considered a threat to White Australia. Larrakia were removed from Lameroo Beach and given land roughly three kilometres away at a new reserve on Myilly Point overlooking Mindil Beach. The Kahlin Compound, as it was called, became the permanent and compulsory residence for all First Nations peoples in Darwin. The entire township was eventually declared a prohibited area to Aboriginal people, except those employed by Europeans, who were compelled to wear brass disks when there for work. Even then, the availability of Indigenous labourers was drastically reduced under the new regime which often refused licences. The new measures were deeply unpopular among locals.

¹⁴² Reynolds, *North of Capricorn*, xi.

¹⁴³ Mulvaney and Calaby, *Baldwin Spencer*, 282.

¹⁴⁴ See De La Rue, *Ruled By Remote Control*, 73, 81-82.

Yet the outlook was bright for those who aligned themselves with government interests. Spencer's arrival also involved a major overhaul of the reserve system. In his 1912 report, Spencer declared: 'In view of the settlement of the country for which provision is now being made, there is no other practicable policy but that of the establishment of large reserves, if the aboriginals are to be preserved, and if any serious effort is to be made for their betterment'.¹⁴⁵ He regarded the arrangements made by South Australia to be rather *ad hoc* and deemed the present reserves too small. He dissolved all ten created by the previous government, excepting Bathurst Island and Hermannsburg, and proposed new sites at Alligator River, Daly River, Roper River, Groote Eylandt, and Lake Woods. Spencer required each site be located so as to accommodate 'tribes that are allied in their customs' and 'of a nature as to provide sufficient water and abundant native food supplies and be suitable for agricultural or pastoral work'.¹⁴⁶ He recommended an annual government subsidy of £2,000 per station, per annum, be set aside to ensure their success, but the Commonwealth would whittle this down to a mere £250. By the time Spencer's report was published in May 1913, Gsell had been on Bathurst Island for almost two years, having commenced his mission on 1 June 1911. Throughout Spencer's report, Gsell's mission was lauded as an Aboriginal Reserve *par excellence*, a notable exemplar for others.

It is occasionally assumed that Spencer, an atheist, did not approve of Christian missions, citing his views on Hermannsburg as expressed in the *Horn Report* (1896):

To attempt as has been tried at Hermannsburg ... to teach them ideas absolutely foreign to their minds and which they are utterly incapable of grasping simply results in destroying their faith in the precepts which they have been taught by their elders and in giving them in return nothing which they can understand. In contact with the white man the aborigine is doomed to disappear: it is far better that as much as possible he should be left in his native state and that no attempt should be made either to cause him to lose faith in strict tribal rules, or to teach him abstract ideas which are utterly beyond the comprehension of an aborigine.¹⁴⁷

Yet Spencer's attitudes toward Gsell were always complimentary. Throughout his appointment as Chief Protector, Spencer visited the Tiwi Islands on two occasions and spent time with Gsell.

¹⁴⁵ Spencer, 'Preliminary Report', 49.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Baldwin Spencer, *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia – Part I – Introduction, Narrative, Summary of Results, Supplement of Zoological Report, Map* (Melbourne: Melville, Mullen, and Slade, 1896), 111.

On 25 March 1912, he wrote in his journal that he ‘had a very interesting talk ... about the languages and customs of the natives which they are studying before they begin anything but preliminary work amongst them’.¹⁴⁸ On 2 April he praised the Catholic missionaries, stating that ‘they are of great assistance to us in our work’.¹⁴⁹ In his final book, *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (1928), Spencer remarked: ‘I could not help wishing that other communities who are sincerely interested, as was his, in the aboriginal problem, had the opportunity of sending into these wild parts men of the practical capacity and wisdom, and also of the culture, of Father Gsell and his fellow-missioners, both men and women.’¹⁵⁰

Key to understanding Spencer’s respect for Gsell was the latter’s preference for missionary gradualism. Spencer’s distaste for Hermannsburg was not motivated by anti-religious sentiment, but rather what he perceived were attacks on traditional Aboriginal custom which he believed accelerated the rate of their ‘extinction’. Yet, as Mulvaney and Calaby argue: ‘Gsell’s elementary yet tentative anthropological approach towards first comprehending Aboriginal culture and language, in order to transform it, gained Spencer’s grudging approval’.¹⁵¹

The two men had vastly different motives for championing the policy of reserves. Spencer, influenced by theories of evolutionary biology and his own humanitarian interventionism, wished to ease the passing of a dying race. Gsell, for his part, was more concerned with salvation. In this respect, the missionary priest was certainly more influenced by Navarre’s polemic on the necessity of understanding indigenous culture and ritual for the purposes of successful Christian evangelisation, than he was by any form of Social Darwinism. Nevertheless, the two men found common ground in their, albeit paternalistic, desire to improve Indigenous welfare and formed a strategic alliance which had lasting consequences for First Nations peoples within the Northern Territory. By approving Gsell’s scheme, Spencer lent enduring support to the missionary’s policy of isolation and gave Gsell the space he needed to implement his long-term plan for missionary gradualism.

¹⁴⁸ Baldwin Spencer, ‘1912 Journal, 25 March’, cited in D.J. Mulvaney and J.H. Calaby, ‘*So Much That Is New*’: *Baldwin Spencer, 1860-1929 – A Biography* (Carlton: University of Melbourne Press, 1985), 458.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1928), 910.

¹⁵¹ Mulvaney and Calaby, *Baldwin Spencer*, 301.

CHAPTER IV

Polygamous Priest: Gradualist Conversions, 1911-1919

‘Come back with us.’

My mother said, ‘No, no, I don’t want to go back with you, I’ll stay here!’

Then Father Gsell took care of her.

Then the Sisters came.

Then our mothers, grandmothers followed Martina, my mother.¹

Gsell arrived on Bathurst Island in 1911, where his first task was to win the trust and confidence of the Tiwi. He achieved this by implementing a gradualist policy which encouraged a sense of mutual acculturation between Tiwi people and European missionaries. While Gsell endeavoured to introduce Catholicism, he was simultaneously incorporated into the traditional world view. Gsell began his life there a celibate priest of the Catholic Church. Yet he quickly adopted the outward appearance of a Tiwi senior man as he sought to grow in the people’s esteem by emulating their social structures. He studied Tiwi culture, directing his missionaries to uphold Tiwi law. When he introduced OLSH nuns, the Tiwi naturally assumed they were his wives and the mixed-descent youths who accompanied them their children. His emulation of Tiwi customs transitioned to integration when the opportunity arose to acquire a local ‘bride’. After Martina abandoned her promised husband to live at the mission, the aggrieved spouse responded in the same manner he would to challenges from any other Tiwi man, by attempting to subject Gsell to a ritualised duel. As we shall see, Gsell’s creative response to this situation was to modify traditional marriage structures by introducing Christian concepts into a Tiwi framework. The result was to extend Gsell’s household beyond that of his missionary staff to incorporate an ever-increasing number of Tiwi wives. In effect, Gsell – a European, Catholic priest – became a polygamist senior man, albeit within his own unique context.

Having secured permission to begin his mission during the trip to Adelaide in September 1910, Gsell prepared for a permanent move to Bathurst Island. In April 1911, he heard a sailor, H. Lee, intended to travel to Melville with supplies for buffalo-shooters encamped at Paru. Gsell arranged to accompany Lee so that he might explore the area and choose a suitable site for a future station. This was Gsell’s first physical encounter with the Tiwi Islands and brought him into the orbit of Robert Joel ‘Joe’ Cooper (1860-1936). Indeed, quite contrary to Gsell’s

¹ Elizabeth Kelantumama, *Prepared for Book: Story About My Mother, Martina* (Nguu Ngingawila Literature Production Centre, circa 1990), cited in Jane Bathgate and Darrell Lewis, *Culture Contact Sites*, 39.

preference for a site free from contact with the outside world, a small band of foreigners had occupied the region intermittently for roughly a decade.

When British soldiers left Pirlangimpi in 1829, they abandoned their stock of buffalo which had been imported from Timor in 1826. Without Europeans to manage them, the herd went feral and spread across Melville Island. By the 1890s, their numbers were so prolific that hunters from the mainland were tempted to risk the fearsome reputation of the Tiwi in lucrative pursuit of hides. In 1892, Edward Oswin Robinson (1847-1917) acquired a lease to shoot buffalo on Melville. His main assistant during this period was Cooper, a South Australian. In 1878 he and his brother, George Henry 'Harry' Cooper (1861-1907), drove a mob of horses overland from Adelaide to Palmerston. Thereafter, the brothers worked as buffalo-shooters and timber-getters throughout the Cobourg Peninsula. In 1890, Cooper met Alice Rose, an Iwaidja woman from Croker Island, whom he married according to customary law.²

After preliminary trips in 1893 and 1894, Robinson moved a team of buffalo-shooters to Melville Island in April 1895. The party consisted of Cooper and fellow hunter Barney Flynn, along with a small group of Iwaidja men from Port Essington.³ As in previous years, the Tiwi remained aloof and generally hostile towards these outsiders. In June, Flynn narrowly avoided being struck by a spear. Cooper was anxious to secure local collaborators and, later that month, armed and mounted on horseback, attempted to capture a Tiwi man named Porkilari who narrowly escaped capture by spearing the hunter in the shoulder.⁴ In 1896, Robinson decided to rest the buffalo population – 6,600 having been shot in little over a year – and evacuated to the mainland. As he departed, Cooper kidnapped half-a-dozen Tiwi, from whom he later learned the Tiwi language. It is not clear whether these abductions were achieved by coercion or trickery. It is probable Cooper used a tactic common in black-birding whereby victims were lured aboard boats with promises of food and tobacco, given to understand that their time away from home would be brief, only to find themselves stranded indefinitely in a foreign land. These Tiwi lived in exile for almost a decade.⁵

Robinson resumed operations in 1905, returning to Melville in the company of Samuel Ingeruintamirri, one of the men abducted in 1896, whom he sent ahead to advise of his arrival.

² See Anne Briggs, 'Cooper, Robert Joel (Joe, Jokupa) (1860-1936)', *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2008), 110-111.

³ Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 71.

⁴ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 82.

⁵ See Heather Dalton, *The Beche-de-Mer Trade in North Queensland: Settlement from a Pacific Perspective*. Honours thesis. The University of Melbourne, 2002.

Ingeruintamirri was gratefully received by his relations who had given him up for dead.⁶ Robinson informed the Tiwi that Cooper would also return with the remaining hostages, including five women who had married Iwaidja men during their captivity on the mainland. With the help of these intermediaries, Cooper established a base at Paru on the south-west corner of Melville near the mouth of the Apsley Strait. He was joined by his brother, wife, and son, Reuben (1898-1942), as well as a party of twenty Iwaidja men. The family remained for the next decade, operating sawmills as well as buffalo shooting, and many Tiwi came to work for them. This was the first time in their history that the Tiwi had so openly tolerated the permanent presence of outsiders on their land. Cooper also established a pattern of trade relations whereby Tiwi worked for the shooters in exchange for rations and other useful goods such as steel. Like Gsell, Cooper enjoyed the friendship and admiration of Gilruth and Spencer, and Paru became a popular destination for scientists and government officials alike, while the legend of 'King Joe' the 'White Chief of Melville' began to spread around Port Darwin.⁷

For his part, Gsell was not impressed by Cooper's celebrity. In his memoir, Gsell conflates Cooper with Robinson, referring to them as the amalgamated and anonymous entity of the 'white man' and 'buffalo hunter'.⁸ This underscored an apparent friction between Gsell and Cooper from their earliest association with one another. When Gsell decided to make the Tiwi Islands the seat of his mission in 1909, he was disheartened to learn Melville already supported a small foreign population. Nevertheless, he wrote to Cooper outlining his plans:

Legally, he could not oppose them; but this did not allow him to hide from me his personal opinion. After attempting to show me how very unsuitable Melville Island was for a mission, he admitted that his own business would prosper much better without one. He made his position perfectly clear. Knowing what I was up against, I withdrew.⁹

This was the main reason Gsell decided to reside on Bathurst Island rather than Melville. Arriving at Paru with Lee in April 1911, Gsell explored the Apsley Strait. Denny had allocated the Church a grant of 40 square kilometres in the south-east corner of the island, as far away as possible from the four unoccupied land packages granted to speculators in the island's north, so it was here that Gsell began his search for a suitable site: 'I saw a pretty beach framed in foliage, apparently charming and seductive; and the next day I landed there. As it turned out,

⁶ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 83-84.

⁷ See Mulvaney and Calaby, *Baldwin Spencer*, 269-273, 293-295, and 301-302.

⁸ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

the distant promise was fulfilled: my beach was more than pretty; indeed it was splendid.’¹⁰ The beach was roughly 800 metres opposite the strait from Paru, free from mangroves and with a nearby freshwater spring. Gsell decided it was the ideal spot. The Tiwi called it *Wurrumiyanga*, meaning ‘the place where the cycads grow’, though Gsell mistakenly believed the local name was *Ngouyou*. Walter Kerinaiaua explains that, in the very early days, a group of Tiwi men travelled to the mission and were greeted by Gsell calling out in a thick French accent: ‘How are you?’ The men, not understanding the priest, responded by mimicking his English pronunciation to the best of their ability: ‘*Ngouyou*’, they replied. Gsell assumed they were trying to communicate local nomenclature and ‘*Nguiu*’ became the settlement’s common name thereafter.¹¹ In addition to its natural advantages, *Wurrumiyanga* also boasted a key cultural advantage. Though the land traditionally belonged to the Mantiyupwi, who likewise held territory on Melville Island, it was then seldom visited by them; so much so that Gsell believed the site ‘No-Man’s-Land’.¹² According to Hart and Pilling, it was quite common for members of different Tiwi bands to visit the territories of their neighbours. Indeed, they state that: ‘People, especially women, changed their band residence frequently in the course of their lives, and being born into a band did not at all require permanent residence with that band, either for males or females’.¹³ Nevertheless, the status of *Wurrumiyanga* as somewhat of a neutral territory made it easier for different Tiwi groups to frequent the mission station once it was established. A good strategic choice, if a lucky one. Scholars often assert the decision to reside at *Wurrumiyanga* was indicative of Gsell’s sensitivity to Tiwi culture, though this is difficult to substantiate because he had no opportunity to study Tiwi customs beforehand. As Morris observes: ‘This was his first trip to the islands and there is no indication that he had had more than passing communication with Joe Cooper, so unless Cooper, or somebody else at Paru, told Gsell of the political status of *Nguiu*, his choice of the site was, as he said, just a fortunate one’.¹⁴

Having selected a suitable site, Gsell returned to Darwin and made final preparations. He ordered a prefabricated house and was finally ready to depart on 1 June in a hired boat. The

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹ Kerinaiaua: ‘First thing he said, when they all came out of the bush, he said: “How are you?” That’s the first thing he said, and they said: “*Ngouyou*”, and this place was named *Nguiu* after. It was called *Wurrumiyanga* before. So, after that, they all came: “How are you?” And they say “*Ngouyou*”, so he named this place *Nguiu*.’ Francis: ‘So, *Nguiu* doesn’t mean anything in Tiwi?’ Kerinaiaua: ‘No. “How are you?” [laughter]’. Interview, 10 March 2020.

¹² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 45.

¹³ Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of North Australia*, 12.

¹⁴ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 110.

vessel was crewed by four Filipinos: ‘good sailors used to pearl-fishing in this area ... they offered their services for love of God, in addition to food, clothing, tobacco and a little pocket money.’¹⁵ These men were crucial in ensuring the early success of Gsell’s mission. In 1906, Gsell estimated there were around a hundred Filipino people living in the Northern Territory.¹⁶ Filipino migration to Australia begun in the 1860s with ‘Manila Men’ filling labour shortages in the pearling industry. The largest concentration of Filipino migrants was initially on Thursday Island.¹⁷ These people formed the nucleus of an emergent Catholic community under the spiritual direction of the MSCs who arrived in 1884. By the turn of the century, Filipino migrants had moved to other pearling centres such as Broome and Port Darwin. Gsell was anxious that a Spanish-speaking priest be engaged to minister to them, whom he described as ‘the most important and interesting part of the flock’.¹⁸ In 1908, Rev Louis Cros MSC visited the diocese. Born in 1871 in Aveyron, the French priest arrived in Papua in 1902 and was stationed on Yule and Thursday Islands.¹⁹ Though his English was unrefined, he spoke excellent Spanish, and Gsell decided to have him replace O’Connell.²⁰ Cros moved to Port Darwin in 1910, conducting ministry in the township as well as at Pine Creek, while O’Connell went to Leonora in Western Australia.²¹

As previously noted, Filipino catechists were instrumental in ensuring the success of Verjus on Yule Island, and mixed Filipino/Indigenous families became a prominent characteristic of Catholic communities in New Guinea and the Torres Strait. Both Gsell and Cros had spent their formative missionary years in these locales and, as Ganter argues, were ‘very aware of the importance of Filipino lay helpers in grafting on to an Indigenous society’.²² By April 1910, both Fehrmann and van Ewan had returned to New Guinea. Gsell initially hoped Filipinos might be imported to assist instead with the foundation of the mission but lamented: ‘... the Government refuses to introduce *Manillois*, so that my position will be difficult’.²³ The White Australia Policy disallowed Asian immigration, and Gsell’s attitudes towards Asians were

¹⁵ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 47.

¹⁶ Gsell to Meyer, 12 November 1906.

¹⁷ Kristine Aquino, *Racism and Resistance Among the Filipino Diaspora: Everyday Anti-Racism in Australia* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 22. See also Renato Perdon, *Connecting Two cultures: Australia and the Philippines* (Darlinghurst, NSW: Manila Prints, 2014), 60.

¹⁸ Gsell to Tréand, 5 May 1909. MSC Archives, Kensington. ‘qui forment la portion la plus importante et la plus intéressante du troupeau’.

¹⁹ Diane Langmore, *Missionary Lives: Papua, 1874-1914* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 303.

²⁰ See Gsell to Tréand, 5 February 1909. MSC Archives, Kensington.

²¹ Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 75.

²² Ganter, *Contest for Aboriginal Souls*, 138.

²³ Gsell to Meyer, 12 April 1910. MSC Archives, Kensington. ‘... le Gouvernement refus s’introduire des Manillois, en sorte que ma position sera difficile’.

increasingly at odds with those of the government. In the same letter, for example, Gsell mentions that he admitted Chinese children to the convent school. At first, he segregated them from European students but was swiftly compelled to reverse this decision: ‘Chinese parents do not want their children to be treated differently to the whites, and want to give them only if they are admitted to the White School; that’s what I did. They pay well, by the way, and we can find conversions among them.’²⁴ Never one to pass up an opportunity to win further funds or souls, Gsell proved far more accommodating than the Government, who continually sought to marginalise the Asian community.

In 1912, Indigenous children were removed from mainstream public schools and placed at the new school in the Kahlin Compound. Asian students remained in public schools but were put in separate classrooms from their white counterparts.²⁵ This took place against the backdrop of increased segregation and discrimination in Darwin. The *Naturalisation Act No. 11 1903* had prohibited Asians, Africans, and Pacific Islanders from applying for Naturalisation, reinforcing their position as second-class citizens and enabling further intolerance. The Darwin Hospital housed an Asiatic Ward, and persons of Asian descent were prohibited from becoming members of the public service and trade unions.²⁶ In 1913, the Commonwealth declared Darwin’s Chinatown – home to Chinese, Japanese, Malay, and Filipino residents alike – a health and safety hazard, directing that buildings be demolished.²⁷ Following a public outcry, including a protest by the Acting Consul General for China, Gilruth repatriated 43 elderly Chinese and the remaining evictees were offered small plots of land, roughly three kilometres away, at Police Paddock, encompassed by the present-day suburb of Stuart Park. By 1915, 190 buildings were demolished and the Asian community resettled on the margins of town.²⁸

²⁴ Ibid. ‘Je voulais ouvrir une école pour les enfants chinois à part, mais les parents chinois n’entendent pas à ce que leurs enfants serait traités autrement que les blancs, et ne veulent les donner que si on les admet à l’école des blancs; c’est ce que j’ai fait. Ils payer bien d’ailleurs, et on pourra trouver des conversions parmi eux.’

²⁵ See J. Leonard Rossiter, ‘Report of the Inspector of Education’, *Northern Territory of Australia: Report of the Administrator for the Year 1913* (Melbourne: Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1914), 93-96; and Victor Leslie Lampe, ‘Education Report’, *Northern Territory of Australia: Report of the Administrator for the Year 1914-15* (Melbourne: Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1915), 76-77.

²⁶ Glenice Yee, *Through Chinese Eyes: The Chinese experience in the Northern Territory, 1874-2004* (Parap, Northern Territory: Glenice Yee, 2006), 26; See also Mickey Dewar, ‘The Orient in the Outback: Europeans and Chinese in the Northern Territory’, in *Sweet and Sour: Experiences of Chinese Families in the Northern Territory* (Darwin: Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 1997), 8-21.

²⁷ De La Rue, *Ruled by Remote Control*, 115.

²⁸ Ibid., 116.

Despite the government precedent, Gsell never again insisted on segregation at the convent, where students of all races continued to be educated side by side.²⁹

Gsell was clearly frustrated with white attitudes toward Asians, particularly where they hindered his own plans, but he did not protest government policy. Rather, he decided to make the best of his situation. He could not import Filipino catechists, so instead he turned to the local population. The identities of the four Filipino sailors who accompanied Gsell to Bathurst Island are a matter of some speculation because the only man Gsell identified was Martien Mateo ‘Mathew’ Ga (1891-1916).³⁰ Born on Thursday Island on 2 July 1889, Mathew was the third child and eldest son of Carlos Ga (1854-1931) and Mary Anne Bunyan (1864-1909).³¹ Carlos was a pearl fisherman from the Dinagat Islands near Mindanao in the Philippines. He arrived at Thursday Island in 1870 and eventually married Mary Anne in Cooktown, Queensland, in 1883, before becoming naturalised in 1887. Mary Anne was born in Llanelly, Wales and worked as a domestic servant prior to her marriage. The pair raised eleven children, alternating between Thursday Island and Port Darwin.³² Tragically, Mary Anne drowned near Fort Hill Bath House in February 1909.³³ Carlos remained a widower, residing at Police Paddock until his death in 1931.³⁴ Mathew lived at Nguiu for the next five years, working as a labourer.

Based on interviews conducted with clergy in 1964, Morris also identifies Pio Serano, as well as ‘Pedro and Romola, whose surnames are not known’ as members of Gsell’s foundation group.³⁵ Serano was born in Manila in 1868, arriving at Thursday Island in 1883 where he was employed in the pearling industry, eventually moving to Port Darwin around 1900.³⁶ The Filipino men assisted Gsell in clearing land at Wurrumiyanga and in assembling a small house. The building contained two rooms: one which was used as a makeshift chapel and sheltered

²⁹ See for example, ‘Catholic Missions in the Northern Territory: Daily Life and Conditions in Darwin’, *Catholic Press*, 6 October 1927. 19. The correspondent noted that at the convent school: ‘Some of the children are of European, and others of Filipino, Chinese and aboriginal parentage.’

³⁰ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 122. The Ga family also spelled their surname variously as ‘Gah, Gar, and Garr’.

³¹ NAA: B2455, GARR M. See also, Paul A. Rosenzweig, ‘Commemorating the Filipinos’, *The Territory at War: A collection of stories honouring our wartime history* (Darwin: Northern Territory Government, 2017), 119-134.

³² See Paul A. Rosenzweig ‘Filipino AIF Volunteers from the Northern Territory: Part 1 – The Garr Family’, *Sabretache: The Journal and Proceedings of the Military Historical Society of Australia* 54, 4 (December, 2013): 40-53; and Paul A. Rosenzweig, ‘Darwin’s Filipino Volunteers for the Australian Imperial Force: In the Tradition of José Rizal’, *Northern Territory Historical Studies* 26 (2015): 1-24.

³³ ‘A Tragic Death’, *NTTG*, 12 February 1909. 2.

³⁴ ‘Round About’, *Northern Standard*, 17 February 1931. 2.

³⁵ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 111. Morris cites an interview with Rev William Henschke in Darwin on 2 September 1964.

³⁶ NAA: A435, 1944/4/991.

the Blessed Sacrament, while the other served as Gsell's bedroom. The men were still with Gsell at his first Eucharistic Celebration: 'It took us seven days, as in Genesis, to give our Lord a roof and, on 8th June 1911, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, I celebrated Mass on Bathurst Island'.³⁷ Filipinos remained integral to the Catholic mission. In 1914, Alfonso Albolero – who was married to Ga's eldest sister, Mary Elizabeth, and then living in Darwin – was engaged as the skipper of the mission lugger, *St Francis*. Albolero arrived at Thursday Island in 1897, and, prior to this appointment, was employed in the pearling industry.³⁸ The Alboleros moved to Nguuu soon after and remained for the next twenty years.

As far as planting Christ's banner on Bathurst Island was concerned, Gsell made a very satisfactory start within the first week. But in terms of missionary evangelism, there was a slight problem. When Gsell and his men arrived on the beach there was not a single Tiwi person in sight. Gsell was not expecting a red-carpet reception, but he was disturbed nonetheless that no one had turned up even for curiosity's sake. The reason for the conspicuous absence of Tiwi people owed much to the timing of Gsell's arrival. Indeed, he began his efforts amid a bitter and unequal conflict between the Tiwi and the Iwaidja buffalo-shooters, whose presence on the islands had proved increasingly disruptive. Armed with hunting rifles and mounted on horseback, the Iwaidja ran riot all over the islands. They raided camps and abducted women, inevitably causing injury and death. This period is remembered as particularly traumatic in Tiwi oral histories and Cooper, as leader of the buffalo-shooters, is often held responsible for the violence of his workers:

Joe Cooper was here, bring a lot of people from the mainland ... Iwaidja people ... Yes! Shoot em all, take em all a girl. A lot of girl they didn't want to give. Yes! They shoot Tiwi people. Tiwi people, they shoot Tiwi people. First Bishop Gsell wasn't here, he wasn't here, still in Darwin. This Joe Cooper – he's mad. Joe Cooper shoot all the people, Tiwi people.³⁹

Gsell, therefore, arrived at a critical moment in Tiwi history in which they found themselves under immense pressure from outsiders. In their long history of resistance to foreign interference, the Tiwi had always been able to see off unwanted intruders. But the advent of the buffalo-shooters had severely limited their autonomy. In the weeks before Gsell landed at

³⁷ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 50.

³⁸ NAA: MT2691/1, NT/AMERICA/COLOUREDS/ALBOLERO ALFONSO; and NAA: MT2691/1, NT/AMERICA/COLOUREDS/ALBOLERO MARY.

³⁹ Greg Ullungurra, interview with Maria McMahon, 1995. Cited in Bathgate and Lewis, *Culture Contact Sites*, 30.

Wurrumiyanga, violence on Melville spilled over to Bathurst. Two Iwaidja men, led by Tiwi guides, travelled to Wurankuwu in pursuit of a woman. Shortly after they made camp, they were assaulted by local Tiwi who took their rifles and ammunition before allowing the bruised and bloodied men to escape back to Paru.⁴⁰ The stolen weapons were eventually reclaimed but not before the Iwaidja launched retributive raids resulting in the deaths of two elderly women and one man, as well as the abduction of four young women.⁴¹ Gsell observes: 'It was into the midst of this tribal feud that I landed; and it was not at all surprising that the beach was deserted. The sight of one policeman's cap in those days would disperse a whole tribe'.⁴² Though the Tiwi had not suffered punitive police expeditions like those inflicted upon mainland First Nations peoples, it is likely they had learned something of the indiscriminate horror of white man's justice in conversation with the Iwaidja. Prudently, perhaps they avoided Gsell while there was still a risk that Darwin authorities might send police to reclaim property belonging to Cooper and Robinson.

The tense political situation appears to have ultimately worked in Gsell's favour, giving the priest an almost immediate opportunity to put into practice one of Navarre's central pieces of advice: namely that the 'missionary must be distinguished from other Europeans'.⁴³ While Cooper never left camp without a gun and a retinue of bodyguards, Gsell discarded his revolver after a day on Bathurst, later remarking he 'trusted more in my Mission Cross and Rosary'.⁴⁴ Similarly, while the Filipino men retired to the boat each evening, Gsell slept alone and unarmed in the house. These subtle displays demonstrated to the Tiwi that Gsell was different from his counterparts across the strait. Spencer believed that the presence of the buffalo camp provided the mission with security and stability in its early days. However, it could be argued that the missionaries' radically different temperament endeared them to the Tiwi.⁴⁵ Indeed, Tiwi oral histories maintain a dichotomy between the figure of Cooper and the figure of Gsell. As Bathgate and Lewis observe: 'In the same way that Joe Cooper is often cast in a negative light in Tiwi stories, Father Gsell is invariably described as a good man who looks after and protects the Tiwi'.⁴⁶ Beatrice Kerinaiaua, for example, recalled that Gsell made strong representations to Cooper on their behalf: 'one day Bishop Gsell went across and had a talk

⁴⁰ Ibid, 87-88.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 48.

⁴³ Navarre, *Handbook for Missionaries*, 17.

⁴⁴ Gsell, 'Fifty Years a Missionary', 76-77.

⁴⁵ See Spencer to External Affairs, November 1914. NAA: A3, NT1916/245.

⁴⁶ Bathgate and Lewis, *Culture Contact Sites*, 37.

with him and bishop said they're not animals. You shoot a wallaby, you shoot a buffalo but these people are people like us, don't shoot.'⁴⁷

Drawing on oral histories, Bathgate and Lewis argue that Gsell was ultimately responsible for having Cooper and the Iwaidja removed from Melville Island in 1916.⁴⁸ A closer inspection of the archival record, however, reveals that Cooper was discredited by a fellow timber-getter. Samuel Green arrived on Melville in 1909, operating his own mobile sawmill.⁴⁹ In October 1914, Green accused Cooper of cruelty toward the Tiwi and of failing to prevent the outrages committed by his employees. Though he enjoyed the support of Gilruth and Spencer, who maintained Green made the accusations out of professional jealousy rather than concern for Indigenous welfare, Cooper was subjected to an inquiry. William George Stretton (1847-1919), who had succeeded Spencer as Chief Protector in March 1913, investigated the accusations. He largely exonerated Cooper, concluding that any crimes committed by the Iwaidja occurred while Cooper was absent from the Island.⁵⁰ He decided the Iwaidja should leave Melville during the Wet Season, when it was impossible to hunt buffalo. In December 1915, Gsell wrote to Gilruth reporting that this had been done.⁵¹ Nevertheless, it appeared Cooper's time on Melville was ending. By 1915, over 18,000 buffalo hides had been taken by the shooters. The herds depleted, and profits declining, Cooper decided to leave. Early in 1916, Robinson's lease was transferred to Vestey Brothers. Cooper, along with Alice and Reuben, the Iwaidja buffalo hunters, some Tiwi women and their Tiwi/Iwaidja children – 60 in all – left for the mainland in a fleet of 17 canoes.⁵² As Vestey Brothers made no effort to commence operations, Catholic missionaries were free to pursue their endeavours in relative peace.

Although Gsell had a disappointing start to his mission as far as direct contact with Tiwi people was concerned, news of his arrival and purpose spread across the islands. Tiwi Elder, Gerardine Tungatalum recorded that the first person to meet with Gsell was a man named Mulankinya, who was working for Cooper at Paru.⁵³ Mulankinya canoed across to Wurrumiyanga and Gsell invited the man to join him for lunch. The two men spoke to one another in Pidgin English, which Gsell had acquired in New Guinea and Mulankinya had picked up from the buffalo-

⁴⁷ Beatrice Kerinaiaua, interview with Jane Bathgate, 1996. Cited in *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁹ Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 72. See also Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 95-96.

⁵⁰ See 'R.J. Cooper of Melville Is. Charges Made Against', NAA: A3, NT1916/245.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 73.

⁵³ Tungatalum, *Arrival of Father Gsell*, 4.

hunters.⁵⁴ At the conclusion of their meal, Gsell gave Mulankinya a bundle of tobacco sticks and said ‘I want you tomorrow to go and bring all the people in’.⁵⁵ Mulankinya accepted this commission and set out the next day with his wife, Marawunyarrawanga, and another man named Scissors. They travelled extensively throughout Bathurst Island, telling all those they met about Gsell and entreating them to travel to the station:

They found some people and they said,
 ‘A person is there. A white man. One white man with a big beard.’
 ‘Who is he?’ the others asked.
 ‘He said he is a missionary from heaven.’⁵⁶

Gsell noted the first Tiwi men employed by the mission were named Boolak and Tokoopa.⁵⁷ Morris, however, identifies them as Paula Puruntatameri and Kupollie Tipiloura, both Melville Islanders.⁵⁸ Within a month, a large contingent of men had travelled to the station and were assisting Gsell in his building projects in return for rations. Tungatalum recalls that three of her uncles came across Gsell clearing land near the mission site. He invited them to sit with him and gave them flour, ‘which at first they put on themselves as if it were white paint’.⁵⁹ Gsell corrected the mistake and showed the men how to make damper, before giving them axes and sending them to cut timber so that they could construct a fence: ‘They brought a lot of timber into the Mission. After that Father Gsell used to give them rations; flour, sugar, treacle, tea leaves, tobacco.’⁶⁰ Along with the Filipinos, Gsell and Tiwi men built a kitchen, mission store, school and finally a church using local timber (see Figures 16, 18, and 19). Collaboration between the two groups was overwhelmingly positive. Gsell notes in his memoir: ‘My workers showed no objection to hard work, and it was clear that they appreciated the station food and tobacco. As our relations developed from friendliness almost to the point of familiarity, I began to feel quite at home.’⁶¹ The Tiwi, accustomed to trade patterns established by Cooper, were content to accommodate Gsell and assist in his work. According to Raphael Apuatimi, Gsell became known as *Patakijiyali*: ‘The Elders explained that in 1911 with very little understanding of the English language they could not pronounce “Father Gsell”. The closest

⁵⁴ Gsell, ‘Fifty Years a Missionary’, 81.

⁵⁵ Tungatalum, *Arrival of Father Gsell*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁷ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 51.

⁵⁸ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 111.

⁵⁹ Tungatalum, *Arrival of Father Gsell*, 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶¹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 51.

they came was “Pata-kijiyali”.⁶² According to Morris, Gsell also became known as *Angawarringani*, meaning ‘our father’, and *Tirnima*, meaning ‘Whiskers’, in reference to his impressive square-cut beard (see Figure 15).⁶³

Having made satisfactory progress with the initial mission infrastructure, Tréand gave permission for Gsell to receive professional reinforcements. In September 1911, he was reunited with two former associates: Fehrmann and Rev François-Regis Courbon MSC (1877-1949).⁶⁴ On loan from New Guinea, Fehrmann was Gsell’s temporary assistant in Port Darwin, while Courbon had been one of his students in Sydney. Born in Saint-Just-Malmont in south-central France, Courbon attended *Petit-Oeuvre* at Issoudun. Like Gsell, Courbon imbibed the MSC charism directly from Chevalier and was inspired to his missionary vocation during a school visit by Verjus.⁶⁵ He arrived in Australia in 1896 and was among the first intake at the Missionary College. Courbon was ordained in December 1902 and immediately appointed to teach philosophy and theology to MSC scholastics, a post he held for six years. In 1908 he became parish priest in Kensington before volunteering to join Gsell in his northern diocese.⁶⁶ Courbon arrived in Darwin on 14 July 1911 and made his way to Bathurst soon after.⁶⁷

According to Gsell, Courbon’s arrival was eagerly awaited by the Tiwi. His name, he wrote, ‘appealed to them enormously because one of their Elders, a fellow with twenty-five wives and thirty-five children, was called Kerepon, both names harmonizing so closely in sound that the natives decided that the expected arrival must be a tribal relation’.⁶⁸ Apparently he did not disappoint, gaining instant popularity among the Tiwi. With the arrival of an assistant priest, Gsell began to plan and implement a serious mission policy. It appears this became a source of tension with Courbon, as the two men had quite different ideas about the best possible approach.

Both Gsell and Courbon had discovered their vocation through the heroic tales of Verjus in New Guinea. The Papuan peoples, among whom Verjus worked, occupied a diverse rural landscape in small hamlet communities. While many practiced hunting and fishing, they were essentially a sedentary people. Notwithstanding significant cultural, linguistic, and religious

⁶² Raphael Apuatimi, ‘Patakijiyali: A Tribute to Bishop F.X. Gsell MSC by the Tiwi People of Bathurst Island’. Record held in Patakijiyali Museum, Wurrumiyanga.

⁶³ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 115.

⁶⁴ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 56-57.

⁶⁵ Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ ‘Shipping: Arrived’, *NTTG*, 21 July 1911. 2.

⁶⁸ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 58.

differences, the material structure of an agrarian village was, at the very least, familiar to European missionaries. In New Guinea, therefore, missionaries had only to establish themselves within pre-existing settlements and begin almost immediate religious work among a significant number of people. This approach had borne much fruit, but such a model was not possible on the Tiwi Islands.

The Tiwi divided themselves into eight landowning groups which consisted of between 100 and 300 members. Hart and Pilling note the most important aspect of traditional Tiwi social organisation was not the territorial band, but rather the household: ‘A band was merely the temporary concentration in one district of semiautonomous households which were the food-collecting, living-together, and sleeping-together units of Tiwi life’.⁶⁹ Each household comprised a leading man, his wives and children, as well as a few bachelors. While households tended to remain within their own territories, the Tiwi were highly mobile. They had no fixed dwellings and preferred to travel across country, thereby implementing sustainable land management practices and meeting various kinship and other cultural obligations. As households tended to remain independent, the population across the islands was rather diffuse. Indeed, the Tiwi only congregated in relatively large numbers during major ceremonies, such as the *Pukumani* and *Kulama* (see Appendices 1, 2, and 3), where initiations and mortuary rituals were performed respectively, and the locations of such observances were never really fixed. Tiwi social organisation, therefore, presented certain challenges to European missionaries whose methods were predicated upon on a sedentary lifestyle.

There were two possible options for missionaries hoping to evangelise a disparate and highly mobile Indigenous population. They could either adopt an Indigenous lifestyle and live among the people, or they could establish a settlement in a convenient location and wait for would-be converts to come to them. While Courbon appears to have favoured the former approach, Gsell was a resolute advocate of the latter: ‘It is a vital principle which must be appreciated by those who would found a mission on a rock that they should never attempt to run after nomadic peoples’.⁷⁰ This belief was firmly within Catholic thinking at the time, in large part due to the successes of the Benedictines at New Norcia.

When Salvado and Serra began their missionary work in 1846, they concluded that an itinerant ministry was far too difficult: ‘It called for the sacrifice of health and life on the part of the

⁶⁹ Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 32.

⁷⁰ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 40.

missionaries, with little to show for it at the end of the day'.⁷¹ While none doubted the initial success of their contemporary Confalonieri in learning the Iwaidja and Garig languages and in earning the trust and confidence of the First Nations peoples of the Cobourg Peninsula, it was generally felt the Italian had worked himself to an early grave by emulating too closely a lifestyle for which he was entirely unsuited. Salvado felt that 'the method of stability – that is, the founding of a mission where hospitality could be given to all the natives who wanted to learn a trade or receive religious instruction – would yield good results, without exposing us to all the hardships of the nomadic life.'⁷² This was of course in keeping with the Benedictine ethos which required monks to take a vow of stability, necessitating a monastic lifestyle. But it was also the product of Salvado's initial and rather fraught experiments with an itinerant ministry in the Victoria Plains district. Consequently, the Spanish Benedictines built a flourishing monastic community surrounded by a vast pastoral empire, widely considered the most successful mission in Australia, and the Salvado model became virtually unassailable. Gsell's methods proceeded along similar lines.

Rather than jump immediately into religious work, Gsell thought it prudent to devote their energies into making the station self-sufficient. Alongside building projects, he instructed Fehrmann and Tiwi helpers to begin work on an extensive garden which would contain a rich variety of fruit, vegetable, and groundnut crops (Figure 17). The missionaries consumed what they needed and sold the excess in Darwin. Gsell imported fowl and livestock, including milking goats, to the island too. Eventually, the plan was to invite the Tiwi to settle at the mission where they would be given houses and plots of land to farm. Gsell and Courbon were at odds on this approach and the younger priest became frustrated with the slow rate of progress. While Gsell remained committed to advancing the material status of the mission, he permitted Courbon to live among the Tiwi and accompany them during their travels. A talented linguist, Courbon began to master the Tiwi language and unpick their law and culture.⁷³

The missionaries soon discovered the Tiwi social structure was a polygamous gerontocracy, in which authority was concentrated in the hands of male Elders or 'big men'. Here economic and cultural capital was predicated on having a large household with a correspondingly large number of wives. As women were responsible for gathering and preparing vegetable staples, it followed that a man was better off economically if he had more wives. With his material needs

⁷¹ Rosendo Salvado (1851), cited in Harris, *One Blood*, 284.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ 'Le Père François-Régis Courbon MSC', *Annales de Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur* (1949) :124-127.

met, he also had more time to devote to seminal cultural pursuits. Only senior men had sufficient leisure to compose the songs and dances performed at important ceremonies, or to create the elaborately carved and decorated *arawunkiri* ceremonial spears or the iconic *tutini* grave posts used in the *Pukumani* mortuary rituals. Significant prestige was therefore attached to men who had managed to accumulate many wives, whereas bachelors accounted for little. This posed some obvious problems for Gsell, a celibate Catholic priest. At 39 years of age, he was fast approaching the time when a Tiwi man could reasonably expect to begin his own household. As Hart and Pilling note, it would have been quite difficult for the Tiwi to place any trust or confidence in Gsell: 'they could not understand why a man who claimed to be as important as Father Gsell claimed to be did not have many wives'.⁷⁴ Indeed, Gsell had been on the island for six months and not a single woman or child had been permitted to visit the station. From their acrimonious dealings with the Iwaidja, the Tiwi had a healthy distrust of unmarried men. If Gsell hoped to grow in the esteem of these people, as well as allay any lingering concerns they might have about the priest and his retainer of single men, he would have to emulate their social structure. It became apparent Gsell was unable to advance his aims without the presence of women religious.

The appointment of OLSH nuns to Bathurst Island would not only put the minds of the Tiwi at ease, but also those of local officials. Authorities had long maintained that a dire shortage of white women in the Northern Territory had 'compelled' European men to cohabit with Aboriginal women. While they did acknowledge the consensual, even romantic, nature of some unions, they frequently characterised sexual relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, often with some justification, as prostitution, exploitation, and abuse.⁷⁵ In order to limit the potential for sexual violence or miscegenation under his regime, Spencer stated that the superintendent of a reserve must be a married man whose wife could act as matron and take a general oversight of the Aboriginal women and children.⁷⁶ Obviously, it was quite impossible for a Catholic mission to meet these requirements, owing to vows of celibacy required by professed religious. Yet Catholics could conform to government policy by appointing both priests and nuns to their mission stations. Though a simple solution, this had never been done before in the Northern Territory.

⁷⁴ Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 101.

⁷⁵ See Conor, *Skin Deep*, 291.

⁷⁶ Spencer, 'Preliminary Report (1912)', 50.

Donald McKillop had on numerous occasions attempted to bring Josephite nuns to the Northern Territory. By July 1894, three unmarried women at New Uniya were pregnant. McKillop believed it was vital that religious sisters be recruited to supervise mission girls and young women. This need became more pressing when one of the young women gave birth to a child of mixed-European descent belonging to a Jesuit brother. Deeply embarrassed, McKillop disbanded the girls' dormitory, placing inmates under the supervision of married couples within the settlement, and the Jesuits locked themselves in their quarters at night. Common wisdom held that such an incident would never have occurred in the presence of nuns. In May 1895, McKillop received a small government allowance and decided to dedicate the funds to a convent.⁷⁷ But before he could request sisters, the Jesuit Provincial at Sevenhill forbade their introduction because he was at that time discussing with the Superior General in Rome the possibility of closing the mission entirely. Permission to invite sisters was granted once more in April 1898 but withdrawn again almost immediately in June.⁷⁸ The Jesuits abandoned the northern mission before the question of women religious could be raised again.

Like McKillop and Spencer, Gsell thought it practical to have nuns at the mission. In January 1912 Debroux and O'Sullivan travelled to Nguiu to inspect the station. It was the first time since 1829 that European women had been on the Tiwi Islands. As Gsell reflected: 'The aborigines had indeed been told that white women existed; but up to then they had no proof, and a white woman remained to them something fabulous.'⁷⁹ News of their arrival clearly spread among the Tiwi, who, for the first time, permitted their children to enter the station during the visit. While Debroux examined the precinct and discussed material improvements with Gsell, O'Sullivan gathered the children together and 'in a confident tone of voice ... [gave] them a foretaste of the instruction they might receive'.⁸⁰ Satisfied that religious sisters could be accommodated at the station, Debroux and O'Sullivan returned to Darwin to begin negotiations with Sydney.

Debroux wrote to Bergin requesting an additional two nuns be sent north.⁸¹ There were then five sisters ministering within the Territory and Debroux felt it necessary to secure more if they were to maintain standards at the school. While they waited for a response, Spencer visited the sisters at the convent. Perhaps attributing their delay to reluctance rather than protocol, the

⁷⁷ Ganter, 'Daly River (1886-1899)', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/daly-river-1886-1899>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 63.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ See Venard, *History of the Australian Province*, 138.

Chief Protector applied further pressure on the nuns to support Gsell: 'Professor Spencer is very anxious for us to go to Bathurst Island'.⁸² Spencer had yet to visit Nguuu, but it is probable that he had been acquainted with the situation there by Cooper, with whom he spent several days at Paru during the Preliminary Scientific Expedition of 1911. On 3 March, Bergin's reply reached Debroux. She was not sending reinforcements. Debroux thought the matter would have to be postponed, but on 3 April she wrote in the diary with some trepidation: 'Father Gsell showed us a wire from [Bergin] ... allowing us to make a start at Bathurst Island but only with the number of Sisters we have here. God help us. How will all this go?'⁸³ The mission was far more important to Gsell than the diocese. By 20 April, Doyle and Sr Joseph Schaap were ready to depart for Nguuu. As previously mentioned, Doyle was born in Newcastle and was among the first five sisters to arrive in the Northern Territory. Schaap was born in Amsterdam in 1860 and was the first Dutch sister to join the OLSH congregation.⁸⁴ She was professed in June 1888 and arrived in Australia in August that year. Her first mission was to Thursday Island, before moving to Darwin and then Nguuu.⁸⁵

Once more, the arrival of these white women was eagerly anticipated and the OLSH received a warm reception at the beach. Diane Bell argues that these women religious made an excellent impression on the Tiwi women: 'The nuns presented a unique vision of womanhood. Like the Fathers they professed celibacy. Unlike some white women they undertook any task necessary to survival. They maintained an independence of spirit. Unlike missionaries' wives who passed on information to their husbands, the nuns could be trusted with women's secrets.'⁸⁶ Most importantly: 'They provided a cultural analogue to the Tiwi gender-based separation of tasks'.⁸⁷ It is probable this factor was the reason scholars assert that Spencer believed Catholics better suited than any other Christian denomination to carry out missionary work among Indigenous peoples.⁸⁸ Notwithstanding their vows of celibacy and separate living arrangements, mission social dynamics certainly resonated with the Tiwi's own household system. They naturally assumed the nuns were Gsell's wives, and the missionaries apparently did little to dissuade them of this idea. The subsequent popularity of the OLSH, furthermore,

⁸² OLSH Diary, 1 March 1912, Darwin. Cited in *ibid.*, 138.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Gardiner, *Wiser For Their Words*, 17-18.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Bell, 'Choose Your Mission Wisely', 341-342.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁸⁸ See Mulvaney and Calaby, *Baldwin Spencer*, 275; and Austin, *Never Trust a Government Man*, 47.

was a crucial factor in attracting women to the station and in ensuring that children stayed too (see Figure 20).

With the nuns established at Ngiuu, the Tiwi could finally trust Gsell. As Hart, Pilling and Goodale attest: ‘When the nuns arrived, the Tiwi were more ready to accept the priest as “a big man” and began to bring their women around’.⁸⁹ His position was helped even more by the fact OLSH nuns were accompanied to the island by half a dozen Aboriginal children of mixed-descent. Not only did it appear that Gsell possessed two wives and a handful of loyal male attendants, but it was also apparent he had children. To the Tiwi, Gsell looked every bit the head of a respectable household, and this safeguarded his acceptance among them.

Despite the fact they were integral to Gsell’s initial plans, the presence of mixed-descent children in the early days of the Bathurst Island mission has received little scholarly attention. As discussed in Chapter Three, South Australia adopted a *laissez faire* attitude to the unrestricted intermingling of European, Asian and First Nations populations in the Northern Territory. This engendered considerable anxiety about the supposedly deleterious effects of contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples which eventually justified the segregation policies implemented by the Commonwealth at the insistence of Spencer. Underlying this paternalistic concern, however, was disquiet about the growth of mixed-race communities, and authorities became fixated on the so-called ‘half-caste’ population whom they looked on as a new and undesirable race.⁹⁰ The fundamental goal of British colonisers was always to heavily populate the Northern Territory with Europeans in order to uphold the racist utopia of White Australia. While they dispassionately accepted the ‘inevitable extinction’ of full-descent Indigenous peoples and celebrated the precipitous decline of the Asian population, they viewed the increasing number of Aboriginal ‘half-castes’ with alarm.

Both the *Aboriginals Act 1910* and *Aboriginals Ordinance 1911* contained specific measures designed to halt the growth of mixed-race communities in the region. Marriages between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people were expressly forbidden, unless special permission was obtained from the Chief Protector.⁹¹ As we have seen, Spencer arrived in Darwin determined to enforce these new laws. He readily accepted that: ‘In years past there have been a considerable number of cases in which Asiatics and Europeans have lived with Aboriginal

⁸⁹ Hart, Pilling, and Goodale, *Tiwi of North Australia*, 109.

⁹⁰ See W.G. Stretton, ‘Aborigines’ in *Government Resident’s Report on the Northern Territory 1910* (Melbourne: Commonwealth of Australia, 1911), 42-43; and Spencer, ‘Preliminary Report’, 46-47.

⁹¹ See *Aboriginals Act 1910* (SA), s22.

wives and though not legally married have treated them as such and recognised their children.’⁹² But under the new regime, such families would no longer be tolerated. He classified unions which had been formed prior to the advent of the Commonwealth as ‘exceptional’, authorising some marriages, but made it clear this would not be the case in future: ‘in such exceptional cases permission to marry was given but, when proper provision for aboriginals is made, such inter-racial marriage should not be permitted.’⁹³

Mixed-descent children then living under the guardianship of their legitimate fathers were exempt from the Ordinance, though this exemption could be withdrawn at the Chief Protector’s discretion. Authorities hoped these people, living in the manner of ‘civilised’ Europeans in urban centres, would eventually marry into the white population. However, children whose parents were not legally married enjoyed no such safeguards against the rampant paternalism of the state. Spencer declared that: ‘No half-caste child should be allowed to remain in any native camp, but they should all be withdrawn and placed on stations’.⁹⁴ The policy applied equally to infants as well as older children: ‘In some cases, when the child is very young, it must of necessity be accompanied by its mother, but in other cases, even though it may seem cruel to separate the mother and child, it is better to do so, when the mother is living, as is usually the case, in a native camp.’⁹⁵ Spencer’s recommendations formed the basis of the Commonwealth’s child removal policy: ‘I have ... come to the conclusion that, except in individual and exceptional cases, the best and kindest thing is to place them on reserves along with the natives, train them in the same schools and encourage them to marry among themselves.’⁹⁶ In this way, authorities would contain the so-called ‘half-caste problem’ through segregation. Isolated from major centres, living at settlements on missions and reserves, mixed-descent people would cease to be a policy concern as the projected increase in the white population rendered their numbers insignificant. Police empowered as ‘protectors’ were given absolute legal authority to remove mixed-descent children from their Aboriginal families and place them in formal institutions such as the Kahlin Compound in Darwin and the Bungalow in Alice Springs.⁹⁷ The policy of adoption into white families was not encouraged in the

⁹² Spencer, ‘Preliminary Report’, 43.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ See *Aboriginals Ordinance 1911 (Cth)*, s5.

Northern Territory, as it was elsewhere. Missionaries, including Gsell, also played a key role in realising Commonwealth objectives.

At the opening of the Convent School in 1908, Gsell took the opportunity to indicate his willingness to assist the government in dealing ‘most efficaciously with the poor class of half-caste children, so abandoned to themselves, but so worthy of our compassion and help’.⁹⁸ He asserted that OLSH nuns on Thursday Island had ‘opened a special school for this interesting class, which is proving a harbour of refuge for many a poor child’ and expressed hope that ‘what they have done elsewhere they will be able to do here’.⁹⁹ Gsell made provision for boarding facilities at the convent, anticipating the arrival of mixed-descent children. Throughout his career, he maintained that the Christianisation of Indigenous peoples was always easier when directed at children separated from the influence of their parents. On Bathurst Island, this was a gradual process achieved voluntarily through negotiation with Tiwi parents and indeed the young people themselves. But it is often a neglected aspect of Gsell’s story that his first work with First Nations peoples in the Northern Territory was with mixed-descent children in Darwin forced to his door by the police. Perhaps the opportunities provided by a Christian education and the prospect of winning souls to God hardened his heart against the trauma invariably inflicted by the involuntary removal of children from their biological families. While his motives were different from those of government counterparts, he nevertheless helped facilitate removal policies from their earliest inception.

By April 1910, OLSH nuns were prepared to receive half a dozen children, with Gsell reporting: ‘The orphanage will open shortly, everything is ready to receive them, we will start with some mixed-race children’.¹⁰⁰ While contemporary readers may understand the word ‘orphanage’ to mean a residential institution for children whose parents are deceased, the term was more generally applied to institutions which housed children permanently separated from their biological guardians, living or dead. While it is possible that some Indigenous children under Gsell’s authority were without living parents, it is more likely they were children of ‘irregular’ relationships not recognised as legitimate by the Aboriginal Department. This is especially the case as mixed-descent children began living at the convent in 1910, the same

⁹⁸ ‘Opening of the R.C. Convent School’, 2.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Gsell, 12 April 1910. ‘L’orphelinat va s’ouvrir incessamment, tout est prêt pour les recevoir, on commence par quelques enfants métis’.

year the *Aboriginals Act* empowered the Chief Protector to effect removals. In July 1910, the OLSH advertised the opening of an ‘Orphanage for Half-caste Girls’ in the local newspaper:

The children will be taught the first elements of reading, writing and arithmetic; and besides they will be trained to be good housekeepers, and become efficient in cooking, sewing, washing, ironing, etc. The Sisters are ready to adopt the children for good, free of charge, and act as their legal tutors for life.¹⁰¹

Stretton reported in December that: ‘Several half-caste girls had been taken in hand by the Sisters of the Port Darwin Convent, and appear to be happy and contented’.¹⁰² By 1912, Venard notes that Spencer made frequent visits to the convent in order to arrange the board of individual children.¹⁰³ The OLSH diary in Darwin stated on 20 April 1912 that seven children accompanied Schaap and Doyle to Bathurst Island, while two girls remained to assist the sisters in their work. These mixed-descent children formed the nucleus of the mission school under the authority of the OLSH. By 1915, the number of children had risen to 18: 13 boys and five girls.¹⁰⁴ In October, Gsell reported that: ‘The half-caste children make good Christians; the work is slower with the pure natives, but they too show great signs of improvement.’¹⁰⁵

Alongside Filipino labourers, mixed-descent people also provided Gsell with an opportunity to demonstrate to the Tiwi, in a very practical manner, what a settled Christian community might look like. On 6 August 1913 Mathew Ga married Fanny Devlin.¹⁰⁶ An Indigenous person of mixed-descent, Fanny was born at Willeroo Station, about 100 kilometres south of Katherine, in 1896.¹⁰⁷ She was removed from her family and educated by OLSH nuns in Darwin and Nguiu.¹⁰⁸ Gsell provided the married couple with a cottage, and Fanny gave birth to their only child, Mary, in 1914.¹⁰⁹ The union must have increased Gsell’s prestige in the eyes of the Tiwi, emulating as it did traditional custom whereby a father arranged and sanctioned the marriages of his daughters to appropriate friends and allies. Gsell also seems to have been implementing

¹⁰¹ ‘Half-Caste Orphanage’, *NTTG*, 1 July 1910. 2.

¹⁰² Stretton, ‘Aborigines’, 42.

¹⁰³ Venard, *History of the Australian Province*, 137.

¹⁰⁴ Gsell to Meyer, 10 March 1913. MSC Archive, Rome.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Helping the Aboriginals: A Letter from the Administrator Apostolic at Port Darwin’, *Catholic Press*, 4 November 1915. 21.

¹⁰⁶ Entry No. 1, Nguiu Marriage Register, Bathurst Island.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Round About’, *Northern Standard*, 1 March 1932. 2.

¹⁰⁸ T.J. Beckett, NAA: A3, NT1916/2359, 7-9.

¹⁰⁹ Rosenzweig ‘Filipino AIF Volunteers’, 46.

a broader strategy which proved successful for MSCs in New Guinea and the Torres Strait. It also mirrored the approach taken by Emo in the Kimberley.

Emo was born in Castellón, Spain, in 1849. He spent twenty years as a missionary priest in the Patagonia region of South America, before joining the Cistercians at the Sept-Fons Abbey in France.¹¹⁰ Emo felt an abiding vocation to evangelise the First Nations peoples of Australia and became interested in joining the French monastic community at Beagle Bay. Emo arrived in 1895 and was sent to nearby Broome to minister to Filipino Catholics who quickly embraced the Spanish monk.¹¹¹ He spent the remaining twenty years of his life in the Kimberley and was responsible for founding no less than five missionary enterprises: a boarding school and Indigenous settlement in Broome, as well as stations at Cygnet Bay (1905-1910), Drysdale River (1908-1937), and Lombadina (1911-1975).¹¹² He studied Yawuru and Nyul-Nyul – Nyulnyulan languages spoken in the south-western Kimberley and which were mutually intelligible to many other associated languages such as Bardi, Jawi, and Nyigina – compiling vocabularies of both.¹¹³

While Emo suffered fraught dealings with his colleagues, he enjoyed immense popularity among his parishioners. These were a polyglot array of European, Asian and Indigenous peoples, and many were involved in de-facto relationships which had produced mixed-descent children. In marked contrast to the racist attitudes of the Western Australian government, which looked on miscegenation as a moral evil, Emo legitimised marriages and baptised children.¹¹⁴ He earned a loyal following, such as Filipino catechist Thomas Puertollano and his Irish/Indigenous wife Agnes, who assisted in missionary evangelism directed towards Indigenous peoples.¹¹⁵ Even after the advent of the White Australia Policy, Emo continued to sanction interracial marriages. His actions eventually provoked the ire of the government who informed missionaries that: ‘no application from or on behalf of Asians to marry Aboriginal women will be entertained’.¹¹⁶ Ganter argues that the experiences of missionaries in the Kimberley demonstrated ‘how at odds the racialized policy of the state government was with the Catholic Church, with the two institutions looking through the very different lenses of

¹¹⁰ Harris, *One Blood*, 438.

¹¹¹ See Bridida Nailon, *Emo and San Salvador* (Echuca, Victoria: Brigidine Sisters, 2005).

¹¹² Regina Ganter, ‘Emo, Nicholas Maria Fr. (1849-1915)’, *German Missionaries in Australia*, <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/emo-nicholas-maria-fr-1849-1915#sdendnote59sym>.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Harris, *One Blood*, 442-443.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Ganter, ‘Emo’, <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/emo-nicholas-maria-fr-1849-1915#sdendnote59sym>.

religion and race. An Aboriginal-Filipino Catholic family was just what the church needed to extend its mission, and about the last thing the state government wanted to support.¹¹⁷ Emo remained a polarising figure until his death in 1915.

Gsell's scheme was less controversial as he only intended to marry mixed-descent couples to one another – Mathew Ga being European/Filipino and Fanny being European/Indigenous – and was in keeping with Spencer's own policy intentions for 'half-caste' population to intermarry. This could indicate that Gsell's tolerance for miscegenation only went so far, but it is also possible, given Gsell's evident familiarity with the Commonwealth, that he knew better than to push his luck. In any event, Gsell had little difficulty securing permission for the marriage.

Yet these plans to facilitate a mixed-descent settlement at Nguiu only achieved very modest gains and eventually became unstuck with the outbreak of WWI. Australia's contribution to the war effort was significant. From a population of just five million people, the nation voluntarily enlisted 416,809 men, of whom more than 60,000 were killed and a further 156,000 wounded. Among this number were 319 Territorians, 52 of whom were destined for violent death. Even the Catholic mission was not spared.¹¹⁸

As mentioned, Gsell eagerly supported the British war effort against Germany. In addition to the farewell function he attended on 22 April 1915, in which he prophesied 'the rule of the whip and the boot' should Germany be victorious, he also participated in a recruitment meeting in Darwin on 20 September 1915.¹¹⁹ On this occasion, Gsell proclaimed that he was 'satisfied that most Australians have made up their minds to enlist sooner or later'.¹²⁰ He asserted furthermore that: 'There is a great danger in delay. By speedy enlistment we will shorten the war and save many lives', before warning that, 'Germany wants colonies and Australia would be just the thing for her. We must show the resolve to sacrifice everything rather than submit to German slavery.'¹²¹

Given Gsell's enthusiasm, it is not surprising Mathew Ga enlisted in October that year (see Figure 21). Three of his brothers – William, Guillermo (Glamor) and Paulincho Nulinimko

¹¹⁷ Ganter, *Contest for Aboriginal Souls*, 136.

¹¹⁸ Rosenzweig, 'Commemorating the Filipinos', 120. See also Norman Cramp, *From the Frontier to the Frontline: Northern Territorians in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Kent Town, South Australia: Avonmore Books, 2015).

¹¹⁹ 'Farwell to Contingent', 16.

¹²⁰ 'Darwin Recruiting Meeting', *NTTG*, 23 September 1915. 18.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

(Palencio) – also enlisted.¹²² Only Glamor would survive the war. Palencio was discharged in May 1916, dying, whether by illness or misadventure, in Queensland before he could return home.¹²³ The remaining three brothers did, however, make it to the Western Front. William was killed by shellfire on 30 November 1916, and Mathew was killed in action near Zoonebeke in Belgium on 29 September 1917.¹²⁴ Glamor returned to Australia in July 1919. He was awarded the Military Medal for exceptional bravery during operations south of Villers-Bretonneux on 17 July 1918.¹²⁵ Both William and Mathew were posthumously awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.¹²⁶

Before Mathew departed for the Front, he instructed that, the sum of four shillings per day – two thirds of his salary – was to be paid to Gsell.¹²⁷ The priest held the funds in trust and earned the enmity of Fanny when he refused to give her unrestricted access to the money. In April 1916 the Chief Inspector of Aboriginals, T.J. Beckett, arrived on Bathurst Island for a routine inspection.¹²⁸ He found the mission under extreme strain. Aggravated by Gsell's intransigence, Fanny became increasingly defiant. She had taken Louis, a young Tiwi man, as a lover and allegedly encouraged the other mission girls to do likewise. Initially unbeknown to the missionaries, the mixed-descent women waited for an opportune moment to sneak away with Tiwi men, who were apparently 'hanging about the women's quarters day and night throwing stones and signalling to the girls'.¹²⁹ The missionaries were outraged when they discovered the extent of extramarital affairs. Holding such behaviour to be sinful, they took immediate steps to remedy the situation. Attributing the scandal to Fanny, they banished her to Darwin. They also increased surveillance to make certain the remaining young women could no longer carry out dalliances with local men.

But this was not the end of trouble. Just before Beckett arrived, a little boy reported to the nuns that he overheard 'the men in the camp say they intended to kill all the Missionaries and take away all the Girls into the bush. The Rev. Sisters and the Fathers were to be killed at a certain time and the coloured men on the lugger were to be killed on the return of the boat from Darwin.'¹³⁰ This must have been very alarming news to MSC and OLSH missionaries whose

¹²² Rosenzweig, 'Commemorating the Filipinos', 120.

¹²³ Rosenzweig 'Filipino AIF Volunteers', 46-47.

¹²⁴ NAA: B2455, GARR M.

¹²⁵ NAA: B2455, GARR G.

¹²⁶ Cramp, *Frontier to the Frontline*, 82-83.

¹²⁷ NAA: B2455, GARR M.

¹²⁸ Beckett, 'Report', 7-9.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

memories of the Baining Mountains massacre were still relatively fresh. Upon being taxed with the knowledge, several young women admitted they were aware of the intended slaughter. Their failure to warn the missionaries, if nothing else, shows how desperately unhappy they had become. Torn from their families by government officials and forced to live on a remote island, they had found comfort in romantic intrigue only to have that too taken away by the missionaries. Their apathy or resentment was probably exacerbated by the penalties endured once their transgressions were discovered, which, if they did not involve corporal punishment, almost certainly necessitated being locked up at night and watched closely during the day. Leonardo Illin's speculation in February 1912 that the mission 'must be something like a prison for the unhappy half-castes' may well have seemed prophetic to those affected by the scandal in 1916.¹³¹ Though Gsell made no comment on the incident, neither at the time nor in his memoir, he later offered this reflection on mixed-descent youth: 'There is the necessity to take them in hand before they can develop vicious habits. The schools for these little half-castes should in every sense be centres of education, never reformatories.'¹³² Perhaps his fraught experience with some of the young women in his custody helped consolidate this view.

Beckett immediately investigated the plot. He discovered, once more, that Fanny was the mastermind, having induced Louis before she left to urge his confrères to enact the killings: 'She had told him that the Government did not want the Mission there and that nothing would be done to them if they did what she told them.'¹³³ Louis brought the matter before the Elders, but they had refused to make an immediate decision. When Beckett confronted the older men, they replied they had no intention of harming the missionaries, 'who had been good to them' and furthermore declared they 'could not understand why any of the Mission girls had urged them to do so.'¹³⁴ They reassured the Chief Inspector the mission was safe and he departed Bathurst Island satisfied the danger had passed. Beckett took with him Louis and Kitty, another young woman implicated in the strife.

As mentioned, Gsell neglected to record this episode and it is often forgotten in Church histories. Fanny did not return to Bathurst Island. She remained a widow in Darwin and it

¹³¹ Illin, alongside Konstantin Vladimiroff, toured the Northern Territory in 1912 to examine the prospect of founding a Russian expatriate community in the Daly River district. He did not travel to Bathurst Island, but mentions the mission in passing in his report. Leonardo Illin, 'Report of the Northern Territory', 89-90, NAA: A3, ROLL 4. See also Elena Gover, *My Dark Brother: The Story of the Illins, A Russian-Aboriginal Family* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000), 130.

¹³² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 154.

¹³³ Beckett, 'Report', 7-9.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

seems the final years of her life were rather unhappy. Her obituary reported her death in February 1932 at the Channel Island Leprosarium, stating she had been ‘an inmate of the isolation ward at the Darwin Hospital for a couple of years’.¹³⁵ Mary Ga remained at the mission in the care of her aunt and uncle, Mary Elizabeth and Alfonso Albolero.¹³⁶ She eventually married Estiphan ‘Stephen’ Cigobia, a Filipino labourer, in January 1930 and moved to Darwin.¹³⁷ The pair had six children.¹³⁸ When Mary died in 1939, the Alboleros, by then living in Darwin too, adopted the children.¹³⁹

Gsell later remarked: ‘In my mind I had a scheme to give these children a higher sort of education so as to make use of them later on as teachers of the blacks. ... It was an experiment of course, but it failed.’¹⁴⁰ With the death of Mathew Ga and the controversy surrounding unmarried women, Gsell was compelled to give up his program for a Christian settlement of mixed-descent families living at Bathurst Island. While he continued to accept mixed-descent children from the mainland, they were always sent back to Darwin to work as domestic and manual labourers upon completing their schooling. At no time did Gsell entertain the prospect of marrying mixed-descent people to full-descent Tiwi; particularly during the period when the Tiwi had yet to adopt Christian lifestyles. Such a scheme would not have met with the approval of the government in any event as Spencer and his successors were intent on removing mixed-descent people from the influence of traditional Aboriginal culture and the risk that mission residents might abscond to the bush was far too high. Instead, Gsell committed all his energies to realising the ideal of a Christian village solely among the Tiwi themselves.

As most missionaries before him had done, he concluded that Tiwi adults were too entrenched within their traditional belief systems and social structures to embrace Catholicism wholeheartedly. As such, he made very little effort to proselytise adults, though Tiwi oral histories do recall early attempts at Christian instruction. Gsell permitted access to the church and allowed the Tiwi to witness the celebration of Holy Mass: ‘They joined hands imitating him, and copied him in making the sign of the cross’.¹⁴¹ Tungatalum recalls that Gsell told the

¹³⁵ ‘Round About’, 2.

¹³⁶ See NAA: B2455 GARR M.

¹³⁷ Entry No. 9, Nguiu Marriage Registry, Bathurst Island.

¹³⁸ ‘Obituary’, *Northern Standard*, 11 April 1939. 6.

¹³⁹ Rosenzweig ‘Filipino AIF Volunteers’, 46.

¹⁴⁰ Gsell, ‘Fifty Years a Missionary’, 102.

¹⁴¹ Tungatalum, *Arrival of Father Gsell*, 13.

Tiwi about God and the Trinity with the aid of a stick sprouting three leaves.¹⁴² Even so, there would not be a single adult baptism during his time on the islands.

Hearn observes that Gsell maintained it was impossible for a First Nations person to follow both the Christian religion and the traditional ways of the initiated. A person was expected to choose one or the other.¹⁴³ Syncretism was not an option: 'I am certain that it would be better for them to remain faithful to their ancestral faith than to exchange it for that Christianity. Sincere paganism is better than false Christianity.'¹⁴⁴ In line with Spencer, Gsell believed that to attempt to break the confidence of older people in their traditions would cause far more harm than good. Instead, he resolved 'to learn gradually their habits and customs so as to penetrate into their minds and hearts without hurt or shock'.¹⁴⁵ He decided the Catholic missionaries would defer to Tiwi law and he made no immediate effort to challenge traditional practices or interfere in sacred ceremonies.

Like generations of missionaries before him, Gsell focused his efforts almost exclusively upon children. With the arrival of the OLSH and the mixed-descent children, the Tiwi permitted their own children to join the Catholic school. Attendance was irregular, but occasionally parents entrusted their youth to the missionaries while they themselves departed the station. Classes were divided by gender; the boys taught by the MSCs while the girls were taught by the OLSH. Scholars received the rudiments of an elementary education in basic reading, writing and arithmetic.¹⁴⁶ Following methods commonly used by missionaries in New Guinea, catechism and biblical history were imparted through the visual medium of picture cards and children were encouraged to sing Latin hymns at Mass. Students also received gender specific employment training; agricultural skills for boys and domestic training for girls. All classes were conducted in English.

Gsell remarked:

The Government insisted, and rightly so, that English should be taught by the mission. The children were going to be future citizens of the north, and it was only right that they should be educated in such a way as to be able to deal as equals with everybody. It was decided, therefore, that their education should be carried on in English, that at

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Hearn, *Theology of Mission*, 34.

¹⁴⁴ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 61.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 174.

¹⁴⁶ Gsell, 'Fifty Years a Missionary', 147.

school and in the Church the English language must be the official one. This was not very difficult as the children were most of them very intelligent, had a good memory, and were very quick in learning anything they were taught.¹⁴⁷

While it conformed to Commonwealth wishes, the decision to teach and preach in English was a significant departure from MSC policy. As we have seen, Navarre believed it was imperative missionaries be able to express themselves fluently in the language of their potential converts.¹⁴⁸ While Courbon made every effort to master Tiwi, Gsell struggled with the language and preferred instead to converse first in Pidgin and later in English. It was common practice for missionaries elsewhere in Australia to compile vocabularies in the local vernacular, as the Jesuits had done at Rapid Creek and New Uniya. But Courbon was not called upon to do likewise, and much of his linguistic knowledge went with him when he left in 1916. Another decade would pass before the arrival of Rev John McGrath MSC (1893-1982) heralded a renewed attempt by Catholic missionaries to study the Tiwi language. While Gsell readily acknowledged it would be useful to understand the local tongue, he did not think it was an immediate priority: 'the natives learn to speak English much more quickly than we can hope to learn their language'.¹⁴⁹ As will be discussed in Chapter Seven, this reluctance to engage with the language hampered Christianising efforts.

While essential in safeguarding his continued acceptance on Tiwi country, Gsell's deference to Tiwi traditions also undermined his early progress with young people. While it was easy enough to entice children to stay at the station, the missionaries found they were powerless to keep adolescents under their influence once they reached puberty and began initiation. The initiation of young men was a long and elaborate process, lasting over a decade. At the age of 14, adolescents were removed from their families and taken into the bush by fully initiated men.¹⁵⁰ They lived in isolation and under conditions of strict austerity while simultaneously learning all matters of ritual importance. Punctuating these years of seclusion were periodic *Kulama* ceremonies at which initiates advanced from one stage of initiation to the next. This finally culminated in their achieving the status of *Mikingula*, a fully initiated man, at the age of 24 or 26.¹⁵¹ Naturally, the intensive program interfered with Gsell's attempts at Christian education. He approached the Elders and asked they consider allowing all those who wished it

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Navarre, *Handbook for Missionaries*, 25.

¹⁴⁹ 'Priests and Nuns Among the Blacks', 19.

¹⁵⁰ See Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 93-95.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

to forego the initiation process: 'There are amongst them some who want to be Christians, but this they cannot be because they are faced, by you, with the necessity of initiation. They cannot be pagans and Christians at the same time. Will you not let them be free to choose?'¹⁵² Following significant internal debate, the Elders agreed, and young men were permitted to continue their Christian education and eventually be baptised, rather than undergo initiation.¹⁵³ Matters were less straightforward for young women owing to the nature of the Tiwi marriage system.

Under Tiwi law, women were promised in marriage before their birth. As a young woman approached puberty, she left her parents and joined her promised husband. On the occasion of her first menses, she underwent a series of ceremonies known as *Murinaleta* during which she transitioned from girlhood to womanhood and at which her husband allocated her a son-in-law.¹⁵⁴ Any daughters born to this woman became the automatic wives of the pre-allocated son-in-law. Power to bestow such betrothals resided with the young woman's husband, and only fully initiated men were awarded marriage contracts. Consequently, men normally waited until their thirties or even forties before they could claim their teenage brides.¹⁵⁵ Upon the death of their husbands, women immediately remarried. At no point could a woman be considered single, or even widowed, as she always existed in the married state.

Gsell found this system thoroughly repellent. Polygamy was bad enough, but the way young women were deprived, before even their own conception, of any choice in their marriage partner, amounted, in his mind, to a grave injustice. Indeed, Gsell considered women to be entirely oppressed within Tiwi society, subject to the tyranny of their husbands: 'The women are his chattels, his slaves, and merely part of his movable possessions, items of property amongst other items'.¹⁵⁶ Because Gsell focused on the status of young women and girls, he tended to ignore the fact that older women enjoyed considerable influence. As household managers and midwives, older women were highly respected. While it was true that young women had absolutely no choice in the matter of their first husband, they certainly had more autonomy in their choice of subsequent ones. Given age differences, Tiwi women were frequently widowed. While remarriage was negotiated by male relatives, a forthright widow held much sway. As Hart and Pilling note: 'Not as independent operators, but as behind the

¹⁵² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 76.

¹⁵³ Pye observes that this permission from Elders was first given in 1916. *Tiwi Islands*, 35.

¹⁵⁴ Goodale, *Tiwi Wives*, 47-53.

¹⁵⁵ Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 16; Babui, *Bathurst Island People*, 11.

¹⁵⁶ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*,

scenes allies of their sons and brothers, Tiwi mothers and sisters enjoyed much more essential freedom in their own careers as often-remarried widows than would appear at first sight'.¹⁵⁷ They argue that: 'No matter how males, both old and young, might connive, they were constantly aware that no remarriage of a widow could ever be arranged and made to stick unless the widow herself was agreeable'.¹⁵⁸ Given the nature of Gsell's missionary policy, he was not aware of these subtleties. Nor would he have been sympathetic to them, as the demands of *Murinaleta* invariably took adolescent women away from the mission, just as initiation took away adolescent men.

Though opposed to Catholic doctrine, Gsell stayed true to his gradualism and never challenged these customs until circumstances allowed him to do so. Around 1916, a young woman living at the mission named Ungaraminingamo, whom the Europeans called Topsy and later Martina, came to Gsell for assistance. She was very attached to the nuns and desired to become a Christian. Unfortunately for Martina, her promised husband had travelled from Malawu country in the north of Bathurst Island to collect her. The man's name was Merapanui Tipaumantumirri, and Martina was his thirteenth wife.¹⁵⁹ The situation was a familiar one for Gsell, who had seen many promising neophytes removed from the mission in this way in the early years. Martina asked Gsell to interfere, but he refused, telling her she must obey the law. She left with her husband but returned within five days and sought sanctuary once more.

Tipaumantumirri was understandably vexed. As far as he was concerned, Gsell, the head of a large household, had stolen his bride and rendered him a cuckold. Tiwi law condemned such behaviour and had developed unique measures for dealing with adultery: a ritualised duel. Under this system, the offended party, painted in white ochre, gathered his friends and family and confronted the guilty party.¹⁶⁰ Surrounded by appropriate witnesses, the two men stood thirty metres apart. After berating the guilty party for their crimes, the offended party proceeded to fling spears at him. The guilty man was permitted to dodge them but eventually allowed himself to be struck in order to spare the offended man's pride. Sufficiently punished for his transgressions, the matter would be laid to rest and the woman obliged to return to her lawful husband.¹⁶¹ Shortly after Martina arrived, Tipaumantumirri came to reclaim his wife and to punish Gsell. He came armed and accompanied by a large group of male associates. Alarmed

¹⁵⁷ Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 53.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 119.

¹⁶⁰ See Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 79-82.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

by this rapidly escalating situation, Gsell gave the men some tobacco and invited the assembly to rest for the evening, saying he would speak about Martina in the morning.

While the men rested, Gsell prayed. Early next day, he positioned a table nearby and loaded it with trade goods: a blanket, sack of flour, knife, hatchet, mirror, teapot, coloured beads, pipe, tobacco, a few yards of brightly coloured calico, tins of meat and pots of treacle. Gsell estimated the value of the goods to be worth around £2, no mean sum. When the men awoke, Gsell presented his terms. He would exchange Martina for the trade goods. This proposal was completely without precedent, but, after a very long discussion with his confrères, Tipaumantumirri accepted. Martina became Gsell's wife according to customary law on the condition that Gsell did not pass her to anyone else.¹⁶² This last stipulation was apparently forgotten in early 1918 when Gsell blessed the union between Martina and Argau Portaminni (see Figure 22). In the years following, she lived at the mission and continued her education under the direction of the nuns, before being permitted to marry a young man of her choosing.¹⁶³ In awarding her hand to Portaminni, Gsell's only condition was that he take no other wife. Their marriage was not a sacramental one, as the two were not yet Christians, but it was expected that their children would be baptised and attend school at the mission. Years later and to his annoyance, Gsell discovered that Tipaumantumirri had allocated Martina a son-in-law. When this man arrived to claim her daughter, Elizabeth, who was already baptised and a practicing Christian, Gsell intervened once more. The promised husband reacted in much the same way as his father-in-law but died suddenly before he could accost Gsell. Thereafter the priest ensured that, whenever he purchased marriage rights, the promised husband and any potential sons-in-law were both compensated.¹⁶⁴ As Ganter notes: 'In effect, Fr Gsell made claims over children not yet born, similar to those by which girls were promised to men before they were even conceived'.¹⁶⁵

Gsell's interventions into the Tiwi marriage system formed the basis of his mission policy, and they would prove quite successful. Word of Gsell's exchange with Tipaumantumirri spread, and soon other men travelled to the mission to sell their wives to the polygamous priest. Morris notes that Gsell did not actively seek brides, but rather waited for senior men to approach him: 'Gsell was careful with such approaches and not all "wives" offered to him were accepted and

¹⁶² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 80-87.

¹⁶³ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 119.

¹⁶⁴ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 88-90.

¹⁶⁵ Ganter, 'Bathurst Island Mission', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/bathurst-island-mission-1911-1938-1978#sdendnote62sym>.

purchased'.¹⁶⁶ By 1920, he had acquired 21 wives.¹⁶⁷ The majority were girls and young women, but he also accepted elderly widows who were not interested in remarriage. He kept meticulous records of each purchase – using an index card register – arming himself with all the essential information should anyone challenge his claims at a later date.¹⁶⁸ Like Martina, girls and young women lived at the mission, attended school with the nuns and were later permitted to marry men closer to their own age who accepted monogamy. Gsell's scheme was quite appealing to young men because it meant that they no longer had to wait until their thirties or forties to marry. During this foundation stage, unions took the form of natural marriages, as Gsell had not yet undertaken to prepare neophytes to receive the sacraments, thus adhering to his mantra of hastening slowly.¹⁶⁹ Couples were invited to settle around the mission, though most continued to live on their own countries, visiting the station on a seasonal basis. In this way, Tiwi Christians continued to maintain many elements of their traditional culture.

Indeed, while Gsell looked on the actions of Martina and her contemporaries as revolutionary, it is worth noting that acceptance of monogamy and unions between partners of approximate age represented a modification of traditional marriage systems, rather than a fundamental break. Anthropologists have gone to great lengths to demonstrate that, whatever Gsell may have thought about the free choice of marriage partners, matches were still made within the bounds of traditional law. In addition to the patrilineal membership of a landowning band, all Tiwi people belong to a matrilineal skin group or *yiminga*. There are four *yiminga*: *Wantarringuwi* (sun), *Miyartiwi* (pandanus), *Marntimapila* (stone), and *Takaringuwi* (mullet). These determine whom a Tiwi person may or may not marry. For example, a person in the *Marntimapila* group may marry someone within the *Takaringuwi* or *Miyartiwi* groups, but never someone from the *Wantarringuwi* group, nor from their own.¹⁷⁰ These customs were upheld by the growing population of Tiwi Catholics and continue to be observed to this day. Indeed, Hart, Pilling, and Goodale, assert that each young woman married a young man to whom she was already tentatively promised under Tiwi custom, the man being further down the line of potential husbands.¹⁷¹ This ensured a continuity between traditional Tiwi culture and the new Christian culture developing at the mission. While Gsell certainly eroded the

¹⁶⁶ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 121.

¹⁶⁷ Record held in Patakijiyali Museum, Wurrumiyanga.

¹⁶⁸ The index contained the girl's name, band group, parents, traditional husband, year of birth, and date of purchase. Gsell's index card system is housed within the MSC Archives in Kensington.

¹⁶⁹ Hart and Pilling, *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 102.

¹⁷⁰ 'Skin Groups', *Tiwi Land Council*,

<https://www.tiwilandcouncil.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&p=246&l=2&id=60&smid=117>.

¹⁷¹ Hart, Pilling, and Goodale, *Tiwi of Northern Australia* (1988), 116.

authority of the senior men, he did so without damaging beyond recognition fundamental elements of tribal law. As Gsell himself notes: ‘we saw to it that the usual canonical impediments were respected, but we agreed with our charges that totem law should be upheld. We saw no reason to object to the latter.’¹⁷² This stood in contrast to the Jesuits who, as we have seen, disregarded the skin system and contracted inappropriate marriages at New Uniya.

Reflecting on Gsell’s approach, Conor recalls Ganter’s observations about the Moravian missionary Nicholas Hey (1862-1951) who worked at Mapoon in Queensland from 1891 to 1919, suggesting that Gsell likewise ‘successfully appropriated the role of the male elders in allocating material resources and regulating sexual relations: he had restructured social relations from polygamous gerontocracy to monogamous patriarchy.’¹⁷³ The key element in Gsell’s success was his apparent willingness to graft onto Tiwi society, upholding their laws, tolerating their traditions and emulating their social structures. Only when he occupied an important enough space within this world-order did he attempt to effect a gradual transition to modest Christianity. In a practical sense, he worked with Tiwi culture rather than against it. Importantly, he did so at the insistence of some Tiwi people themselves. Incidentally, this mutual collaboration was not experienced in his relationships with the mixed-descent people, coerced into his care by the Commonwealth, which may help to explain limited achievements with that demographic.

Once Gsell was accustomed to ‘marrying’ young brides, he was anxious to avoid any controversy that might arise should rumours that a Catholic priest was effectively buying First Nations girls from their husbands. He went to Darwin and spoke to Gilruth directly. He need not have worried. Once more, Gsell enjoyed the full confidence of the Commonwealth. When Gsell debriefed the Administrator, he apparently replied: ‘Go ahead, Father, you are doing the right thing and the Government will stand behind you’.¹⁷⁴ Though Gsell’s behaviour, ripe for misunderstanding, was certainly not broadcast by the Administration, it received official sanction, doubtless because the gradualist approach represented an innovative continuity with Spencer’s protection policies. Yet, though Gsell was confident in the support of the state, he would soon face a dangerous challenge from the Church in the form of his own missionary companions.

¹⁷² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 99.

¹⁷³ Conor, *Skin Deep*, 316.

¹⁷⁴ Gsell, ‘Fifty Years a Missionary’, 140-141.

CHAPTER V

‘This is not a mission at all, but a plantation’: Calls to Leave Bathurst Island, 1919-1928

I am strongly in favour of closing this mission. I cannot see any future before it. I think it will always be a burden on the Province. Whatever priests are sent here will only be wasting their life, for there is no spiritual work to be done, and there is so much to be done on other missions.¹

On 5 March 1919, Bathurst Island was devastated by a tropical cyclone.² Every mission building was destroyed, trees uprooted, and the gardens laid flat. Farm animals not killed in the deluge escaped into the bush and were not recovered until years later. Notwithstanding the ferocity of the winds, human casualties were low - a single child was tragically swept away in flood waters as his mother tried to escape to higher ground. In a letter soon after, Gsell lamented: ‘Ten years of work, suffering and sacrifices completely annihilated! Everything, absolutely everything needs to be rebuilt!’³ Yet Gsell was not discouraged: ‘Despite the harsh weather conditions and the lack of resources, this poor little mission has managed to survive the universal crisis ... when Divine Providence tried us with a hurricane and a tidal wave ... it is thanks to a miracle that the personnel escaped alive.’⁴ Gsell was determined to continue his work, regardless of such a set-back. Yet, in the following years, the climate was to be the least of his worries, as a storm of an entirely different nature broke upon his mission.

The first decade was difficult for Gsell, as he implemented his gradualist model for Christian conversion. In this endeavour he faced opposition from his own personnel, who grew frustrated with the slow rate of progress. The most vocal criticism came from newly appointed assistant priest, William Henschke (1889-1972), who convinced superiors in Sydney that Nguiu was a lost cause. This chapter interrogates the conflict between Gsell and the Australian Province which threatened the existence of the Bathurst Island Mission and almost led to its transfer to the Salesians of Don Bosco. This conflict reveals a great difference of priorities between Rome and Sydney and cuts to the core of Catholic identity in Australia. While the Vatican remained committed to the Christian conversion of all peoples, the Australian Church continued to neglect its responsibilities to the First Nations population. Throughout, we see a Church deeply

¹ Henschke to Tread, 21 November 1920. MSC Archives, Kensington.

² See Tropical Cyclone 191819_02,

http://www.australiasevereweather.com/tropical_cyclones/1918_1919/bom/tropical_cyclone_191819_02.htm.

³ Gsell to Œuvre de la Saint-Enfance, 1919 Report. MSC Archives, Kensington. ‘Voilà dont dix années de travail, de souffrances et de sacrifices humainement parlant anéantis! Tout, absolument tout est à recommencer!’

⁴ Ibid. ‘Malgré la difficulté du temps et la modicité des ressources, cette pauvre petite mission avait réussi à survivre à la crise universelle et déjà on se félicitait d’en avoir été quitte pour si peu quand il a plu à la Divine Providence de nous faire passer ainsi par le crible de l’épreuve un terrible ouragan accompagné d’un raz de marrée [qui] a détruit la station de fond en comble et ce n’est que par miracle que le personnel a échappé avec la vie.’

committed to work among the European, mainly Irish, diaspora or missions in the Pacific. It was a Church which, for the most part, refused to look inward and remained obstinate in ignoring the dismal state in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were compelled to live under the racist policies of the Commonwealth. Here Gsell, through his strength of conviction and bolstered by the ostensive support of Propaganda Fide, was able to resist all attempts to abandon the mission.

On 27 October 1920, Henschke wrote to Tread declaring: 'If you wish to know my opinion about Bathurst Island, I am in favour of abandoning it'.⁵ Henschke belonged to a large Catholic family from Port Pirie, South Australia. Five of his ten siblings were professed religious, most notably his brother, Francis Augustine (1892-1968), who would become the Bishop of Wagga Wagga in 1939. Henschke joined the MSCs in 1906 and completed his training at Kensington; some of which was conducted by Courbon.⁶ He was ordained in 1914 and arrived on Bathurst, his first posting, in March 1915.⁷ In November 1916, he permanently replaced Courbon who was disillusioned with the lack of spiritual work among adult Tiwi. According to Caruana, within two years of his arrival, Courbon requested a transfer 'to any other mission'.⁸ In his memoir, Gsell reflected with a touch of sadness: 'I have to admit that there was one thing which did not march nearly fast enough for him: and that was the conversion of the natives. I dare not try to imagine what he would have thought had he foreseen that even after thirty years of work we still could not claim one single adult convert.'⁹

Gsell put Henschke in charge of the boys' school and tasked him with the back-breaking work of supervising the sawmill. While the Commonwealth was content to allocate a modest yearly subsidy of £250, the government insisted that each station must be partly self-sufficient. Spencer also believed it was important First Nations peoples be given an opportunity to acquire technical skills in European industry, a belief Gsell shared. Both Bathurst and Melville enjoyed an abundance of cypress pine, for which there was high demand in Darwin owing to its termite-resistant qualities. Following the example of Cooper and Green, Gsell resolved to capitalise on the timber industry in order to make the mission more profitable. Tungutalum recalls: 'The Jikilawula and Wurankuwila went to Jipipina to cut timber. They made them into rafts and

⁵ Henschke to Tread, 27 October 1920. MSC Archives, Kensington.

⁶ Emilio Constanzi, 18 January 1938. PFHA: NS 1442b, 844-854.

⁷ 'Shipping: Arrived', *NTTG*, 18 March 1915, 8.

⁸ Anthony Caruana, 'Reflections on a Hundred Years of MSC Mission Work in the Northern Territory, 1904-2004'. Unpublished Manuscript, MSC Archives, Kensington. 15.

⁹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 59.

brought them in. Some Malawila went to Euro to cut timber and also tied them up as a raft between canoes. They brought a lot of timber into the Mission.’¹⁰ Initially, Gsell sent roughly dressed billets to Darwin in lots of twenty or thirty, but realised he could make more money if the timber was dressed into planks.¹¹ In July 1915, Gsell travelled to Sydney to purchase an engine and saw-milling plant. This sawmill served the mission for the next twenty-five years and proved of vital economic importance, keeping the mission afloat despite limited subsidies from Church and Commonwealth. Yet the mill and its management became a source of tension between Gsell and Henschke. As Ganter describes the situation: ‘Gsell put his new confrère to work in the sawmill six days a week. This gained him the approbation of the Tiwi men who worked with him, but kept him at arm’s length from any spiritual work’.¹²

Though he eventually became disenchanted, Henschke was initially optimistic about his missionary work and seemed willing to accept his superior’s policies. In a letter published in the *Australian Annals* in January 1916, he wrote: ‘The transfer from a monastery in a modern city to a shanty in the bush, surrounded only by blacks, is a strange sensation at first. But now, I am quite at home, and would not like to leave my little tin hut and bush church for the best modern presbytery and gothic cathedral.’¹³ He observed: ‘No doubt, I shall see practically no result for the little I am doing; yet, I must try to be patient, and rely on your good prayers to help these poor souls still wandering in darkness’.¹⁴ However, by late 1917 he seemed disheartened: ‘At times I am inclined to be optimistic, and imagine the spiritual work is beginning to bear good fruits, and some event takes place which blemishes my hopes.’¹⁵ Yet, even after two years of little progress, Henschke maintained a similar attitude to Gsell: ‘Nevertheless, I am sure all the labour here has not been in vain, for some of the young folk promise well. One cannot expect much from the old people. Some of the children are anxious to become Christians ... It is safe, however, to hasten slowly, as it is not the number of baptisms that counts, but the number of good and fervent Catholics.’¹⁶ But, by October 1919, Henschke was beginning to lose hope. In a letter to Rev Edward Nouyoux MSC, he confided that: ‘I must say I am not happy as there is no work for me as a priest. I always try to do my best, but find it

¹⁰ Tungutalum, *Arrival of Father Gsell*, 17.

¹¹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 124.

¹² Ganter, ‘Bathurst Island Mission’, <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/bathurst-island-mission-1911-1938-1978>.

¹³ William Henschke, ‘Work of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in the Northern Territory’, *Australian Annals* (Jan 1916): 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ William Henschke, ‘A Trip with the Blacks of Bathurst Island’, *Australian Annals* (Feb 1918): 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

difficult to spend my life at manual work with no prospects of any spiritual work'.¹⁷ He asked to be sent to Papua instead.

By 1920, Henschke was fed up. Indeed, he was bitterly disappointed with Gsell's gradualist approach, and sought to convince the Australian Province to abandon the mission. He began a letter campaign, addressing an initial complaint to Tréand, and followed up with subsequent correspondence with Rev Arthur Perkins MSC, the newly appointed Australian Provincial Superior, and Rev Vincent Tyler MSC, a friend and Prefect of the Sydney Scholasticate. Despite earlier optimism, he lamented: 'I have spent over five years at manual work, saw-mill, carpentry, etc. and have no chance to do any ministry ... so far here nothing has been done for the spiritual welfare of the natives'.¹⁸

Henschke believed the mission in Northern Australia was a catastrophic failure: 'I feel convinced very little can be done here with the natives, for they will not attempt to better themselves. The only idea they have of the mission is that it is a place where they can obtain flour and tobacco. They will not attempt to grow a thing for themselves, but expect to be fed. A priest is simply a slave.'¹⁹ Henschke saw the Tiwi as obstinate in retaining their traditional culture and believed Gsell's supposedly ineffective method of conversion was an insurmountable obstacle to any future success. Aware of the favourable reputation Bathurst Island and Gsell enjoyed among Commonwealth authorities, Henschke assured the Province that such good-standing was fundamentally misguided: 'They say this mission is the most successful in Australia because Father Gsell does not teach religion to the blacks, but leaves them to their pagan customs. I don't think this is any praise, for priests are sent to convert souls and not simply to give them food and tobacco.'²⁰ Henschke had evidently become very cynical about Gsell's approach, which he maintained was a waste of time and energy.

Perhaps more serious than a difference of opinion on policy was Henschke's accusations of fraud. Henschke accused Gsell of sending false reports to Propaganda: 'There are not four priests here, and there is no brother. There are only fourteen children at the convent and six here with me, making twenty in all, and not 150 as Father Gsell says.'²¹ He also raised serious doubts about Gsell's financial statements:

¹⁷ Henschke to Nouyoux, 28 October 1919. MSC Archives, Kensington.

¹⁸ Henschke to Vincent, 21 November 1920. MSC Archives, Kensington.

¹⁹ Henschke to Tréand, 27 October 1920. MSC Archives, Kensington.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

I do not know how much Father Gsell spent during the last twelve months. I know he received £550 from the Government. He received money from Propaganda and Holy Childhood. He also made a few hundred pounds with timber and trips to Wyndham and Adelaide River. ... I am certain he spent more than £1000. If you give him £3000 a year he would spend it all feeding niggers and giving them presents to no benefit as he does not attempt to Christianise them. If he wishes to carry on the work, he receives plenty of money from Europe and the Federal Government to do so, and the Province should not give him any, it is only wasted.²²

These claims are difficult to substantiate because Gsell did not mention exact numbers in his reports to Propaganda. Indeed, reports between 1916 and 1927 are sporadic at best. Gsell sent news of the mission in October 1915, November 1917, and March 1918. Each letter contained vague assertions about the trials and tribulations of mission life. If reports were attached to letters, they were subsequently lost and are not in any current archives.²³ When Gsell resumed reporting to Propaganda in June 1927, he attached comprehensive financial records as well as vital statistics on population and sacraments performed in a given year.²⁴ These were cross-checked by Henschke who had since become mission bursar. What is certain, however, is that Henschke was mistaken in his reporting on Commonwealth funding – which merely amounted to £250 not £550 – casting doubt upon his knowledge of the financial situation. Regardless, Gsell was accused of blatant dishonesty.

The Australian Province was always under financial strain and there was constant conflict between Sydney and the missions in Oceania.²⁵ The MSCs had undertaken significant building programs since their foundation in Sydney in 1885. The Province also provided accommodation for missionaries on sabbatical. Though they relied on donations from the faithful, they often had to supplement income by hosting retreats. The Province was ever in debt. MSCs received funds from Propaganda, but there was always disagreement over how this money was allocated. Mission authorities in Papua like Coupeé thought these funds should go to the missions, but authorities in Sydney insisted some of the money should go towards the

²² Henschke to Tread, 21 November 1920. MSC Archives, Kensington.

²³ See, Gsell to Propaganda, 6 October 1915. PFHA: NS 566, 700; Gsell to Propaganda, 3 November 1917. PFHA: NS 613, 521-522

²⁴ Gsell to Propaganda, 30 June 1927. PFHA: NS 940, 382-400.

²⁵ Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 51-56.

training and maintenance of missionaries recuperating in Sydney.²⁶ Coupeé's battles with the Australian Province were mirrored in Gsell's experiences.

Further financial difficulties arose when Archbishop Michael Kelly (1850-1940) of Sydney, who did not share his predecessor's fondness for MSCs, removed the Kensington parish from their responsibility, depriving them of an important source of revenue.²⁷ In July 1914, Nouyoux wrote to Gsell explaining the financial situation:

We cannot count on donations from the faithful, what we get from them is non-existent. The one regular source is the ministry, especially in the parish. But the Archbishop of Sydney, by taking Kensington away, is depriving us of recourse which would be hardly enough to compensate the sacrifices we have to make in the mission of Port Darwin. If our fathers must go to Port Darwin, they must have not only the basic necessities of life but also all the comforts that can be reasonably expected.²⁸

Given the climate of austerity, Nouyoux was unwilling to make sacrifices on behalf of Bathurst Island. Finances were obviously a sore point.

In late December 1919, Perkins wrote cautiously to Gsell, warning the *status quo* on Bathurst Island was increasingly untenable, both from the perspective of the Province and the Church hierarchy in Australia: 'Reviewing your work at Darwin and Bathurst Island, His Excellency [the Apostolic Delegate] considers it quite inadvisable to have two priests at Bathurst Island since, as he points out, the work there is for the most part material, while the spiritual needs of Darwin require the presences of two priests on the mainland'.²⁹ This statement foreshadowed subsequent plans to abandon the mission entirely, as it was also apparent from previous correspondence that no further mission staff would be sent to replace Henschke or Gsell if they removed to Darwin. Perkins likewise requested Gsell relinquish his assistant priest: 'Henschke, I understand, is very unwell and needs a change. I would be pleased if you would arrange for him to come to Sydney for treatment and for a rest.'³⁰ Gsell sent Henschke to Darwin to recuperate instead.

For his part, Gsell refused to entertain the idea of abandoning his mission. Aware that moves were being made against him, he wrote to the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Bartolomeo

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 109-112.

²⁸ Nouyoux to Gsell, 7 July 1914.

²⁹ Perkins to Gsell, 19 December 1919. MSC Archive, Kensington.

³⁰ Ibid.

Cattaneo (1866-1943), to argue his case with a detailed report in October 1920.³¹ Gsell conceded his rate of progress was slow, but stressed this was the nature of evangelisation among semi-sedentary peoples. While little could be done with adults, his priority was the children. He observed that inducing parents to leave children at the mission station would necessarily involve having enough permanent supplies to hold them there in comfort. Thus, while at present an assistant priest was not strictly necessary, 'all that is wanted to make the Mission self-supporting by breeding and agriculture, is a few lay brothers to guide and supervise the work, and sufficient financial assistance to procure implements and to cover initial expenses.'³² This scheme would relieve Henschke of his post and ensure personnel more suited to the material requirements of Gsell's vision be sent north.

By 1921, Gsell had spent 15 years in the Northern Territory, ten of which were at Nguuu. He took advantage of these milestones to make an *ad limina* visit to Rome to report personally to the Pope. Perkins tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Gsell from leaving Australia: '[The] Apostolic Delegate tells me that you are, as Administrator Apostolic, in no way obliged to go to Rome personally for the "ad limina" visit. ... I see, with deep regret, little hope of your taking your long looked for holiday.'³³ Gsell was unperturbed. It is apparent he had more than a mere vacation planned for his time in Europe.

In the same way he preferred to approach senior officials within South Australia and the Commonwealth when establishing Nguuu, Gsell decided to negate lesser authorities in Sydney and go straight to the very height of the Catholic hierarchy. In his memoir, Gsell wrote:

It was 1921; and I had not seen France and Alsace for twenty-four years ... I felt a great longing to freshen myself up in my native country. I needed a rest. Therefore, I set off at Easter and spent a few months in Alsace, pausing briefly in Paris, then in Issoudun and finally in Rome, where His Holiness listened to the story of my mission and blessed me.³⁴

Gsell mentions nothing of his conflict with Henschke and the Province, but his itinerary made clear he had an agenda. In Issoudun he had an opportunity to visit the MSC Superior General, and in Rome the Prefect of Propaganda, as well as Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922), though his audience with the latter was brief. In person, Gsell had a much better chance of articulating his

³¹ Gsell to Cattaneo, 30 October 1920. MSC Archive, Kensington.

³² Ibid.

³³ Perkins to Gsell, 19 December 1919. MSC Archive, Kensington.

³⁴ Gsell, *The Bishop with 150 Wives*, 133.

vision and gradualist methods, as well as answering any criticisms levelled against him. He arrived in Marseilles on 12 March 1921.

On 25 March he wrote to Perkins from Rome reporting that he had met with the Prefect of Propaganda, Cardinal Willem van Rossum (1854-1932), as well as the Pope: ‘they took a great interest in my account of the mission of Bathurst and were not astonished at the slowness of its progress, considering as they said, the work among nomadic natives is never fast. At any rate, they won’t listen to the idea of abandoning the mission.’³⁵ From Gsell’s perspective, the diplomatic mission may well have appeared a success, but getting papal support for a mission was a different matter entirely to ensuring that that mission also remained under the control of the MSCs, much less Gsell.

On 3 February 1921, Cattaneo wrote to van Rossum explaining the situation in Australia: ‘It was my intention to prepare a more detailed report on that territory and particularly on the Bathurst Island Aboriginal Mission, but not being able to make time ... I limit myself to the following confidential information, which I think is appropriate to send to your Eminence [before] receiving a visit from the abovementioned Father Gsell’.³⁶ Cattaneo represented both sides of the argument and informed Propaganda that it was likely the Province would abandon the mission – ‘I know that Father Perkins has already communicated his ideas to his General Father’ – but acknowledged this would not happen until Perkins conducted a pastoral visit.³⁷ Cattaneo seemed content for the MSCs to make their own decisions, but warned against abandoning their foothold in northern Australia: ‘I would not be so sure to leave that island; it would be an opening to the Protestants’.³⁸

This concern was justified from a Catholic perspective, as the 1920s saw a proliferation of Protestant missionary activity in the Northern Territory. As mentioned, the CMS opened missions at Roper River (1908), Groote Eylandt (1921) and Oenpelli (1924), while the Methodists began Goulburn Island (1915), Elcho Island (1921) and Milingimbi (1925). In contrast, the Catholic Church would not start a new mission in the region until 1935 when it

³⁵ Gsell to Perkins, 25 March 1921. MSC Archive, Kensington.

³⁶ Cattaneo to van Rossum, 3 February 1921. PFHA: NS 784, 5. ‘Era mia intenzione di preparare un rapporto piu dettagliato circa quel territorio e particolarmente sulla Missione Aborigena di Bathurst Island, ma non potendo fare in tempo per questa posta, mi limito alla seguente confidenziale informazione, che credo conveniente far pervenire a Vosta Eminenza per norma nel ricevere la visita del suddato P. Gsell.’

³⁷ Ibid. ‘So che il P.Perkins ha gia comunicato questo sue idee al suo P.Generale.’

³⁸ Ibid. ‘Per parte mia, da quanto mi consta, non sarei certo d’avviso di abbandonare quell isola; sarebbe un aprir la porta ai protestanti.’

did so at Wadeye. Cattaneo asserted that, if the MSCs were ‘no longer able to sustain it, it should be entrusted to some other Religious Congregation’.³⁹

Perkins visited Bathurst Island and met with Henschke in March 1921 while Gsell was abroad. He agreed with Henschke’s assessment and allowed the disaffected missionary to return to Darwin where he commenced what became his life’s work as parish priest to the township’s growing Catholic population. Gsell later complained bitterly about the circumstances under which this decision was made: ‘During my absence in Europe, Father Perkins visited the Mission which was in the care of Father Henschke. This Father was sick, discontented and, in the best of times, of a pessimistic state of mind.’⁴⁰ Henschke’s removal left Gsell without an assistant and it was apparent no new personnel were to be sent in replacement. In his memoir, he recalled charitably: ‘Upon my return to Bathurst, I found that except for the help of three Sisters and our captain Alphonso [Albolero], I should have to work alone. Father Henschke, for reasons of health, was forced to retire and become pastor of Darwin and Bursar of the Mission. This was indeed a hard period, a period not relieved until five years later’.⁴¹

Gsell entered a period of isolation, snubbed by the Australian Province, which set about trying to abandon the mission. Exasperated by repeated refusals to replenish his staff, Gsell addressed a complaint to Propaganda. On 30 November 1922, van Rossum wrote to Sydney commending Gsell’s work and asking they revive their material support.⁴² He stated that, if this were proving too difficult, they should let him know as soon as possible.⁴³ On 28 February 1923, the new Australian Provincial, Rev Michael J. Ryan MSC, wrote to van Rossum explaining the difficulties encountered in evangelising the First Nations peoples of the Northern Territory and expressing his desire to abandon the mission there. Ryan explained the ‘nomadic’ lifestyle of the Tiwi made it very difficult to exert ongoing influence. Despite never having been to the Northern Territory, much less Bathurst Island, and in keeping with racist assumptions about Indigenous peoples, he also claimed that they were, by their very nature, unreceptive to Christianity: ‘as far as intelligence and the knowledge of morals are concerned, in the judgment

³⁹ Ibid. ‘Che se i Missionarii del S.Cuore non fossero piu in grado di sostenerla, essa si porta affidare a qualche altra Congregazione Religiosa.’

⁴⁰ Gsell to Ryan, 28 May 1924. MSC Archives, Kensington.

⁴¹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 133.

⁴² Propaganda to Province, 30 November 1922. Diocesan Archive, Darwin. ‘Quapropter his meis litteris enixe commendo P.T. illam dioecesim atque rog out opportunis mediis studeas quibus res catholica novo impulse ibidem crescat atque propagetur.’

⁴³ Ibid. ‘Quod si hoc difficile appareat, curet P.T. hanc S.C. opportune de re certiore facendam.’

of experts, they occupy the lowest position'.⁴⁴ Ryan observed that in all his time there, Gsell had failed to make any progress with the Tiwi, 'though we sent suitable priests and large sums of money for the purpose'.⁴⁵ On 4 May, the MSC Procurator General, Emilio Kuntz, sent a telegram to Propaganda reiterating the wishes of Sydney. He stated the Province claimed it had no personnel, no means, and no missionary spirit. He indicated Issoudun was in favour of keeping the diocese, but that it would leave the decision to Sydney.⁴⁶ At a meeting on 11 May Propaganda decided it would leave this matter to the Australian Provincial, but that its preference was to retain the diocese. They thought it a great shame to lose such a vast territory and give up on its Indigenous inhabitants, stressing that the MSCs be allowed to withdraw only when another religious order was found to replace them.⁴⁷

Indeed, the timing of this request could not have been worse as far as Propaganda was concerned. The end of Benedict's and the beginning of Pius XI's (1922-1938) papacies were characterised by renewal in Catholic missionary vigour. In *Maximum Illud* (1919), Benedict deplored the fact that, 'there still remain in the world immense multitudes of people who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death'.⁴⁸ He called on bishops and apostolic administrators to prioritise missionary endeavours above all others and expressed a deep desire that all the faithful contribute accordingly to these efforts.⁴⁹ Pius XI took an equally strong stance, declaring that a priest: 'fails in his special duty if he does not strive by might and main to win over and to join to Christ all who are still without the Fold.'⁵⁰ In 1922, Pius transferred the headquarters of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith from Lyons to Rome. Founded in 1818 by Pauline-Marie Jaricot (1799-1862), the society raised funds for Catholic missions. In moving the body to Rome, Pius made it the central administrative body through which finances for missions were organised and signalled its importance to his papacy.

In 1925, Pius also hosted the Vatican Exposition, which brought together over 100,000 objects from missionary fields throughout the world. Housed in the Lateran Palace, the exhibition aimed to educate Europeans about the rich cultural, artistic and spiritual traditions of different indigenous peoples. Given the recent horrors of WWI, it was considered the human family

⁴⁴ Ryan to van Rossum, 28 February 1923. PFHA: NS 843, 856-861. 'Quod ad intelligentiam et morum notitiam attinet, iudicio peritorum, scalae gradu infimo merito constituuntur.'

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Emilio Kuntz, telegram 4 May 1923. PFHA: NS 843, 858-860.

⁴⁷ Propaganda Fide, Minutes of Meeting, 11 May 1923. PFHA: NS 843, 858-860.

⁴⁸ Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, 30 November 1919.

⁴⁹ See J. Derek Holmes, *The Papacy in the Modern World, 1914-1978* (London: Burns & Oats, 1981), 24.

⁵⁰ Pius XI, *Rerum Ecclesiae*, 28 February 1926.

needed a better template for civilisation than that which was offered by the West. The exhibition was curated by Catholicism's foremost ethnologist, Rev Wilhelm Schmidt SVD (1868-1954). Like many of his contemporaries, Schmidt believed modern European society was experiencing catastrophic spiritual decay. As Antonio Paolucci observes:

Schmidt's theory was indeed based on the idea that the original revelation of God to humanity, the primordial monotheism (*Urmonotheismus*), had been lost throughout the progress of human civilisation: material progress had corresponded with spiritual degeneration. The only remaining traces of that primordial divine message could be found within tribal groups which – far from being 'primitive' – had conserved the pure idea of a Supreme Being. The original spirituality of humanity could therefore only be found within these cultures, the true custodians of a message that the rest of humanity had lost.⁵¹

According to Schmidt, spiritual rejuvenation could be found in the study of the world's oldest surviving cultures. As Katherine Aigner attests, ethnologists like Schmidt 'believed Indigenous peoples around the world held the key to understanding the original message of God, expressed in art and material culture. Studying Indigenous societies became of paramount importance.'⁵² This represented a paradigm shift in the hitherto Social Darwinist thinking about non-European peoples. Whereas once it was seen in a negative light, their divergence from Western 'civilisation' was now considered an ontological advantage. Though Catholic ethnologists still maintained that animist and polytheistic beliefs were historical corruptions, indigenous culture was still privileged for its closeness to 'the original revelation of God to the original people'.⁵³

The 1925 exhibition, imbued as it was with its more positive view of indigenous cultures, was visited by over one million people, and later became a permanent display of 40,000 items. In 1923, Rome requested the Australian bishops contribute to this collection. They were initially reluctant, resolving at a meeting of the hierarchy in Adelaide in October that: 'it was decided to take no action, as missionary work in Australia has little or no distinctive features that would warrant the collections of exhibits for such purpose.'⁵⁴ Nevertheless, up to 300 items were

⁵¹ Antonio Paolucci, 'The Ethnological Museum: A Brief History', in *Ethnos: Vatican Museums Ethnological Collection*, Nicola Mapelli, Katherine Aigner, and Nadia Fieussello eds. (Vatican City: Edizioni Musei Vaticani, 2012), 22.

⁵² Katherine Aigner, 'Indigenous Collections', in *Ethnos: Vatican Museums Ethnological Collection*, Nicola Mapelli, Katherine Aigner, and Nadia Fieussello eds. (Vatican City: Edizioni Musei Vaticani, 2012), 47.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁴ 'Minutes of Meeting of Standard Committee of the Hierarchy Held in Adelaide, 18-20 October 1923', 4. Cited in Girola, *Rhetoric and Action*, 78.

eventually sent from Kalumburu, New Norcia, and Nguiu. Notable in this collection were ten elaborately decorated *tutini* burial poles (Figure 23), traditionally used in Tiwi funerary rituals. These carried immense spiritual importance to the Tiwi people, being one of the focal points of the *Pukumani* ceremony which ensured the *mapurtirruwi* (soul) of a deceased person transitioned safely to the spirit world. Oral testimonies indicate Gsell commissioned these *tutini* specifically for the Vatican Exposition, along with other objects associated with Tiwi ritual.⁵⁵

It is doubtful whether Gsell shared Schmidt's convictions about traditional Indigenous culture. As Hearn argues, 'Gsell's memoirs are filtered through an attitude of paternalism arising from a view of culture which imagined Western European Catholic culture to be true civilisation, and the measuring rod for all cultures.'⁵⁶ Gsell abhorred customs such as polygamy and child marriage, and he relegated Aboriginal spirituality and belief in reincarnation to the realms of magic and superstition rather than 'true religion'. His tolerance of Tiwi ritual at the *Pukumani* and *Kulama* ceremonies was an integral aspect of his gradualist strategy, not a celebration of Tiwi culture. Moreover, he characterised their semi-sedentary lifestyle and sustainable land management practices as little more than 'doomed nomadism', declaring: 'There is no monument, no trace of any kind, that can be found to show that these people have progressed in the slightest degree since they settled in Australia ... There is nothing but an automatic repetition of black, yellow or ochre streaks and figures within the magic circle on the bodies of participants and neophytes made during ceremonial rites.'⁵⁷

Nevertheless, these views represented a paternalistic ethnocentrism rather than the more blatant racism of his MSC confrères. While Gsell's writings are often very dismissive of non-Christians, they contain abundant testimony to the intelligence, practical capacity and deep religiosity of Christian converts. Indeed, Gsell goes to great lengths to refute the negative assumptions held by his contemporaries about First Nations peoples:

It has often been said that the aborigines of Australia come lowest in the human scale, so near to the animals, indeed, that some travellers and so-called scholars are willing to question their capacity for a spiritual life. But those of us who have lived amongst these people know that ... [they are] living beings to be numbered with those whom our Lord

⁵⁵ This is confirmed by Nicola Mapelli's recollections of a meeting with Tiwi people while conducting research for the *Rituals of Life* exhibition in the Vatican Museums: '[On the Tiwi Islands] we found a descendant of those who make the *pukamani* poles and that woman [told] me that when she was young she was there sitting near her father while he was carving these poles to be sent to Rome to the pope'. In Margaret Coffey, ed. 'Rituals of Life: Aboriginal spirituality at the Vatican Museums', *Encounter: Radio National*. Broadcast, 21 November 2010.

⁵⁶ Hearn, *Theology of Mission*, 33.

⁵⁷ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 34.

will judge ‘when He comes to judge the quick and the dead’. They, these Australian aborigines, possess a conscience; they are capable of mental, even intellectual and spiritual, processes, and, given the opportunity, they can reach as high a standard as the best.⁵⁸

All that was lacking was missionary zeal and guidance. And in this respect, Gsell stood firmly with Propaganda and the Pope. In *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926) Pius declared: ‘It is Our supreme desire that from now on it will be impossible to point to a cleric who is not literally burning with love for the missions’.⁵⁹ He reiterated many of Benedict’s points, placing particular emphasis on the importance of cultivating native clergy. Importantly, he also censured missionaries who maintained racialist views of European superiority:

Anyone who looks upon these natives as members of an inferior race or as men of low mentality makes a grievous mistake. Experience ... has proven that the inhabitants of those remote regions of the East and of the South frequently are not inferior to us at all, and are capable of holding their own with us, even in mental ability. ... Let all priests, missionaries and natives be united with one another in bonds of mutual respect and love.⁶⁰

It is tempting to think Pius had Perkins’ racist accusation, that Aboriginal people occupy the lowest rung on the ladder of civilisation and that this was by virtue of some innate mental and moral deficiency, in mind when composing his encyclical. It is doubtful he ever saw Perkins’ request to abandon the mission, but Pius certainly would have been exasperated by its contents and it is little surprise Propaganda was reluctant for the MSCs to abandon the entire Northern Territory without first securing another religious order to replace them. In January 1924, Ryan advised Gsell the MSCs were giving up the diocese, and by September entered negotiations with the Salesians to whom he wished to transfer responsibility for Bathurst Island.

This Italian order, founded by Saint John Bosco (1815-1888) in 1859, were relative newcomers to the Australian missionary scene. Torres’ unexpected death in October 1914 created a leadership crisis in the Kimberley. German Pallottines had replaced French Cistercians at Beagle Bay in 1901, but Archbishop Patrick Joseph Clune (1864-1935) of Perth realised that, given the war, he could not consider any of these men as replacements for the Spanish

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁹ Pius XI, *Rerum Ecclesiae*, 28 February 1926.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Benedictine.⁶¹ This was particularly the case given these German priests and brothers were under permanent police surveillance. After consultations with the Commonwealth and newly instituted Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Bonaventura Cerretti (1872-1933), Clune appointed Rev John Creagh (1870-1947), an Irish Redemptorist, Pro-Apostolic Vicar of the Kimberley in May 1916. In January 1917, the Commonwealth prohibited Germans, naturalised or otherwise, from undertaking maritime travel, effectively confining the Pallottines to mission stations. Police surveillance at Beagle Bay continued until 1925, when restrictions on Germans were finally lifted.⁶²

Given the mood of suspicion around the Pallottines, Propaganda decided to transfer the Kimberley to the Salesians. In December 1922, Ernest Coppo (1870-1948) was consecrated bishop and appointed Vicar Apostolic. He arrived in Broome in September 1923, accompanied by four priests and three brothers. Notwithstanding Propaganda's intentions, the Pallottines were determined to maintain their presence and made little effort to accommodate their new colleagues. It was soon realised that there was too little work to be shared between two congregations, so the Salesians began to explore other options. By May 1924, most departed for Melbourne to minister among Italian migrant communities.⁶³ Coppo remained until November 1927, and it is apparent he spent some time considering a move to the Northern Territory. In September 1924, Gsell wrote to Ryan: 'I won't be sorry to see the Salesians taking up this mission, most of their subjects are Italians who are well able to bear up with tropical conditions. They are a congregation especially founded for missions ... so they ought to be able to carry on this work successfully.'⁶⁴

Aside from disagreements about conversion methods, it is clear there were also differences of personality which exacerbated tensions on Bathurst Island. In October 1919 Henschke lamented: 'I have lost all confidence in myself ... I don't think Father Gsell has any confidence in me either. I never feel at home with him and find it impossible to go to him with any difficulties.'⁶⁵ One key reason given by Sydney for refusing to replenish Gsell's mission staff was that no one would agree to work with him, so formidable was his reputation within the Province. Indeed, Ryan criticised Gsell's administrative skills, blaming the Apostolic

⁶¹ Ganter, 'Beagle Bay (1890-2000)', *German Missionaries in Australia*, <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/beagle-bay-1890-2000>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Gsell to Ryan, 22 September 1924. MSC Archive, Kensington.

⁶⁵ Henschke to Nouyoux, 28 October 1919. MSC Archive, Kensington.

Administrator for the difficulty in holding down good staff in the diocese: ‘any priest we sent was scarcely able to live with him’.⁶⁶ While this could be read as mere character assassination, the observations of a somewhat disinterested outsider in Charles Priest corroborate with the claims of Gsell’s colleagues. An English migrant, Priest began a trapping enterprise on Melville Island in 1927, trading flour and tobacco with the Tiwi in exchange for possum skins.⁶⁷ Though somewhat anti-clerical, Priest’s memoir offers insights into Gsell’s relationship with his own staff. He described Gsell as ‘an autocrat as far as his subordinates were concerned and the junior priest and lay brother had to ask his permission even to smoke a cigarette.’⁶⁸ Priest visited Gsell once a month to receive his mail and have an occasional conversation: ‘He could not really relax with the rest of the Mission staff because, being an autocrat, he had to maintain his authority’.⁶⁹ It seems likely that Gsell’s relationships with his subordinates exacerbated the ill-feeling he engendered with the Province. Indeed, Propaganda took Gsell’s prickly personality for granted when trying to find a solution, noting that Gsell’s character made him difficult to work with because he did not appreciate input from other missionaries.⁷⁰

Gsell answered these accusations in a series of letters to Ryan in 1924: ‘I am sorry to hear you are at a loss to find me a suitable companion because I am dissatisfied with all those they gave me before. I know I am no angel, and twenty-five years of work in the tropics may have impaired my nerves to some extent’.⁷¹ Since its inception, the mission suffered a relatively high staff turnover. Courbon and Fehrmann had arrived in 1911, with Courbon remaining until 1916. Fehrmann remained until 1913, when he returned to New Guinea, but was recalled again from 1914 to 1917. Caruana notes the long-suffering brother ‘expressed the wish to return to Sydney as soon as possible’, and this was eventually granted.⁷² His initial replacement was Br Aubrey Kelly MSC, who was sent to Darwin in 1912 but retreated to Sydney in 1914, apparently owing to ill-health. Another brother would not arrive until Br Joseph Keeley MSC joined the staff in 1921. He contracted life-threatening gastroenteritis and eventually departed in 1923.⁷³ As mentioned, Henschke arrived in 1915 and departed in 1921. Rev Jerome Barry MSC briefly filled the gap between 1922 and 1923 but was recalled to Darwin to work alongside Henschke

⁶⁶ Ryan to van Rossum, 28 February 1923. PFHA: NS 843, 856-861. ‘Praeterea, ex sacerdotibus nostris ad R.P. Gsell missos, vix unus cum eo facile vivere potuit’.

⁶⁷ Charles Priest, *Northern Territory Recollections* (Benalla: Charles Priest, 1986).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁰ Propaganda Fide, minutes to meeting 11 May 1923.

⁷¹ Gsell to Ryan, 12 February 1924. MSC Archives, Kensington.

⁷² Caruana, ‘Reflections’, 14.

⁷³ Ganter, ‘Bathurst Island Mission’,

<http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/Bathurst-Island-Mission-1911-1938-1978#sdendnote46sym>.

following a directive from Ryan.⁷⁴ Gsell remained on his own until Br Denis McCarthy MSC joined him in 1924. While Gsell acknowledged he was not the easiest man to live with, he asserted he was not solely to blame for difficulties encountered:

Father Courbon had a complete nervous breakdown and in one of his fits he went as far as firing on the natives. I had to let B. Kelly go to avoid a scandal. Poor B. Lambert [Fehrmann] was starting to feel the onset of the disease that carried him to his grave. Several times he talked of cutting his throat. Brother Keeley was not only a physical wreck but the most helpless man I have met in my life. Father Barry can testify to that. I could have put up with his deficiencies, only for his habit of getting into rows and fights with almost every boy he had to deal with.⁷⁵

It was clear Gsell's mission staff left much to be desired. Gsell furthermore tried to justify his treatment of Henschke:

... the only thing I can say is that he was a good priest and a charming companion. He impaired his health by working too much himself and doing a lot of things which the natives could have done under his guidance. I told him many a time in a more friendly way ... He took it ill from me and left the Island with the idea that I was thoroughly dissatisfied with him, which is not true.⁷⁶

Yet despite his protests, Ryan remained committed to Perkins' decision to close the mission. In May 1924, Gsell resigned himself to giving up the Territory:

I have been accused of doing nothing. I was claimed to be infallible in my ways. Under the circumstances I did my best ... This is all I have to say for my defence. I regret nothing of what I have done; I only regret I could not do more, and I resign from my work with a broken heart and broken health, praying to Almighty God that those who succeed me, will be better able to deal with this difficult task.⁷⁷

As Gsell waited for negotiations with the Salesians to conclude, he continued to be ignored by the Australian Province. This was reflected in the coverage the mission received in the *Australian Annals of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*: a magazine which enjoyed a monthly

⁷⁴ See 'Farwell to Rev. Fr Barry, MSC', *NTTG*, 8 January 1924. 4.

⁷⁵ Gsell to Ryan, 12 February 1924. MSC Archives, Kensington.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Gsell to Ryan, 28 May 1924.

circulation of 20,000 copies.⁷⁸ Henschke published two letters about his experiences, one in 1916 and the other in 1918.⁷⁹ While articles on Papua and the Pacific missions were abundant throughout the 1920s, featured in every addition, another story about Bathurst Island was not included again until 1927.

While it is tempting to attribute this episode to financial hardships and conflicts of personality, the reluctance of MSC Provincials to persevere in the Northern Territory reflected the general attitude of the Australian Church and its inconsistent concern for the welfare of Aboriginal people.

Throughout the nineteenth-century, missionary concern for the white – predominately Irish – population always took precedence over the evangelisation of First Nations peoples. Initially, at least, the outlook had been more hopeful. Polding was a staunch advocate for Indigenous rights. He condemned frontier massacres perpetrated against them by European invaders, as well as the slanders against their humanity and intelligence, which he believed were employed to justify dispossession.⁸⁰ As compensation for such blatant injustice, Polding believed it was incumbent upon the Christian community ‘to protect, and teach, and make disciples of Christ those poor children of the soil, where they [the colonisers] have found new homes and worldly wealth’.⁸¹ To that end, he founded the first Catholic mission at Stradbroke Island in Queensland in 1843. Staffed by Italian Passionists, it was abandoned in 1848 owing internal disputes and the apparent inability of the missionaries to win the trust of the local Quandamooka people.⁸² Nevertheless, Polding continued to condemn European colonisation. As Girola asserts: ‘Under his leadership the bishops of the Second Provincial Council held in Melbourne in 1869 produced a Pastoral Letter that is still regarded as one of the strongest appeals ever issued by the Christian Churches in defence of Aboriginal rights’.⁸³ Yet, with Polding’s death in 1877, redressing the plight of First Nations peoples would cease as a priority for the Church.

While the Irish ministered to their own people in the south, where colonisation had banished First Nations peoples to the peripheries, religious orders with foundations in continental Europe were entrusted with missionary work among Indigenous peoples in the northern and western reaches of the Australian continent. Hence Italian Passionists went to Stradbroke Island,

⁷⁸ Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 104.

⁷⁹ See Henschke, ‘Work of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in the Northern Territory’ and ‘A Trip with the Blacks of Bathurst Island’.

⁸⁰ Girola, *Rhetoric and Action*, 15-16.

⁸¹ ‘The Pastoral Letter’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 22 May 1869. 12.

⁸² Stefano Girola, ‘The Passionist Mission on Stradbroke Island (1843-1847)’, *Fryer Folios* (July, 2012): 17-19.

⁸³ Girola, *Rhetoric and Action*, 16. See also, ‘Pastoral Letter’, 12.

Spanish Benedictines to the Victoria Plains, French Cistercians to the Kimberley, Austrian Jesuits to the Northern Territory, and French MSCs to the Torres Strait (see Map 7).⁸⁴ As we have seen, German Pallottines replaced French Cistercians and Austrian Jesuits were superseded by Gsell, an Alsatian (see Map 8). These congregations often felt the keen sting of neglect. As Girola argues, in the post-Polding era: ‘Neither the clergy nor the laity showed any interested in the evangelisation of Aborigines or were prepared to give financial support’.⁸⁵ Indeed, when Strele embarked on a southern fundraising tour in 1886, he was blocked from collecting in many dioceses.⁸⁶ At the Plenary Council of 1885, Moran declared it ‘a blot upon the colonial policy of Great Britain that too often, instead of the olive branch of peace being extended to the native races, a policy of extermination has been pursued in their regard’.⁸⁷ He then inaugurated a yearly collection to be taken up in each diocese for the purpose of funding local missions. But rather than increasing the pool of available funds, this policy greatly diminished it. The collection raised a mere £795 over the next ten years.⁸⁸ In contrast, Australian Catholics raised £5,500 between 1886 and 1887 for a memorial church in Cahersiveen, Ireland, to honour Irish nationalist hero Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847).⁸⁹ Strele was compelled to go begging in Europe and America instead.

When McKillop toured the colonies in 1893, he managed to raise £800 but he was often unwelcome in southern dioceses. O’Farrell explains that ‘bishops were not well-disposed to such itinerant collectors, whom they saw as diverting money from their own local purposes’.⁹⁰ Indeed, Nouyoux identified this tension between diocese and missionary needs in 1913 while appealing to Kelly to reverse his decision on the Kensington parish: ‘Considering that the generosity of the faithful in Australia was sufficiently taxed by constant calls in help of schools and churches, we have so far deliberately refrained from making even privately a well justified appeal to the charity of the Catholics in Australia’.⁹¹ Under such circumstances, it is small wonder that missionaries like Gsell devoted so much effort cultivating productive industries rather than spiritual enrichment; to have his enterprise become, as Henschke derided, ‘not a mission at all, but a plantation’.⁹² Reflecting on his career in 1900, Salvado remarked: ‘I well

⁸⁴ See Turner, *Catholics in Australia*, 116.

⁸⁵ Girola, *Rhetoric and Action*, 36.

⁸⁶ Ganter, ‘Jesuits in the Northern Territory’, http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/missionary-training/jesuits-northern-territory-1882-1902#Fr._McKillop-s_public_relations.

⁸⁷ Patrick Moran, ‘The Closing of the Plenary Council: Address’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 5 December 1885. 17-18.

⁸⁸ O’Farrell, *Catholic Church and Community*, 273.

⁸⁹ ‘The O’Connell Memorial Church’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 9 April 1887. 15.

⁹⁰ O’Farrell, *Catholic Church and Community*, 273.

⁹¹ Nouyoux to Kelly, 10 April 1913. Cited in Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 110.

⁹² Henschke to Tread, 21 November 1920.

know that some people have believed we were wasting too much time in this work and I have been harshly criticised as if I was doing nothing else at New Norcia but increasing the fields and the number of sheep ... and that as a matter of fact I was nothing but a shepherd'.⁹³ But Salvado had little choice: 'Neither Catholics nor the Protestants in the colony ever contributed a single penny in favour of the New Norcia mission; not even those who live near the Mission and enjoy the advantage and benefit of the church'.⁹⁴ Lacking material support, missionaries adapted just to survive.

Here the neglect of Australian Catholics was not merely a matter of competing priorities, but also one of prejudice. As O'Farrell argues: 'And all this time, despite protestations of moral indignation, many Catholics shared unspoken those negative attitudes towards Aboriginals and their culture which prevailed throughout the community: could they be civilised, Christianised? Were they not inferior, primitive, worthless?'⁹⁵ Between 1885 and 1905, the Australian Council of Bishops routinely printed unchanged the section on Indigenous evangelisation. Harris describes this as an 'almost cynical disregard for Aborigines ... the same token report had sufficed them for twenty years.'⁹⁶ Given the climate of total apathy, Gsell's lack of spiritual progress was a *fait accompli*.

Yet, with the election of Rev Paul Fleming to Provincial Superior in 1925, Gsell's fortunes improved considerably. Caruana observes that Fleming 'encouraged the work in the missions, and actually visited many of the mission fields. He was very active in spreading the influence of the MSCs in both the missions of Papua, and the Australian Aborigines.'⁹⁷ During his term in office from 1925 to 1931, the number of Australian missionaries grew from eleven to twenty-one.⁹⁸ He also oversaw the transfer of New Guinea from the jurisdiction of the French Province to that of the Australian in 1929.⁹⁹ Perhaps sensing the winds of change, Gsell wrote to Fleming in August 1925, congratulating him on his ascension and immediately addressed uncertainty surrounding Bathurst Island: 'Under the late provincial there was a question of abandoning this mission [and transferring it] to another Congregation. ... To my mind it would be a great

⁹³ Salvado, 'Report', 52.

⁹⁴ Salvado, 'Report', 96.

⁹⁵ O'Farrell, *Catholic Church and Community*, 273.

⁹⁶ Harris, *One Blood*, 476.

⁹⁷ Caruana, *Monastery on the Hill*, 185.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

pity.¹⁰⁰ He suggested Fleming see the place in person before making a final decision.¹⁰¹ Fleming accepted Gsell's invitation.

The Provincial arrived in Darwin on 15 April 1926, proceeded to Bathurst Island. At a reception at the Darwin Catholic Club on 5 May, Fleming remarked he was 'surprised to find that the people I have met have the same kindly faces and manners as their fellow Australians down south. The place is by no means what it is painted to be, and as far as my humble efforts can do so, I will take care that false impressions of this sort will be corrected.'¹⁰² He expressed his astonishment at the work being done at Bathurst Island and paid tribute to Gsell. Fleming departed Darwin on 10 May satisfied with the progress of the northern mission.

Commenting on this pastoral visit in his memoir, Priest remarked:

[Gsell told me] he was expecting a visit from a very important Church dignitary ... The expected visitor was a Father Fleming ... It seemed to me that Gsell was apprehensive but there was no reason why he should have been. A secular visitor might have found a few things to criticise but, from an ecclesiastical point of view, the Mission was doing all that could be expected.¹⁰³

Priest did not appreciate the delicacy of the situation which had enveloped the mission, but Gsell was clearly anxious to make a good impression. Fleming supported Gsell in his endeavour and committed to keeping Bathurst Island open. The *Australian Annals* revived its press coverage of the Northern Territory shortly thereafter, with feature articles appearing every few months. Reminiscent of the heroic narratives about Verjus, Navarre and Coupeé which first inspired Gsell in his youth, these articles detailed the exploits and achievements of northern missionaries, imploring the faithful to contribute much needed, and long neglected, funds:

And what of the poor mission of Bathurst Island! No one remembers it. No one puts out a helping hand for the sake of our poor benighted blacks. Surely our first duty as Australians is to assist the natives ... Did not Our Blessed Redeemer die to save all

¹⁰⁰ Gsell to Fleming, 27 August 1925. MSC Archives, Kensington.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² 'Very Rev. Father Fleming', *NTTG*, 7 May 1926. 4.

¹⁰³ Priest, *Northern Territory Recollections*, 36.

men? Have not our dusky brethren souls to save? Yet in our day how many think of this other than the struggling missionaries?¹⁰⁴

Australia, awake! Awake and see the heroism and generosity with which a mere half dozen missionaries and as many sisters are striving against all odds to raise the standard of the Cross throughout the vast diocese ... Awake to the disproportion of their numbers and the immensity of their task!¹⁰⁵

On 27 January 1927, Kuntz wrote to van Rossum requesting Gsell's term as Apostolic Administrator be renewed for ten years.¹⁰⁶ Propaganda did so on 2 February. Gsell had successfully weathered the storm.

Fleming further enforced his support with a renewed missionary staff. In 1927, Gsell and McCarthy were joined by McGrath, and in 1930 by Br Andrew Smith MSC as well as the lay missionary Patrick Ritchie. McGrath was born in Parkes, New South Wales, in 1893. He was ordained in 1926 and travelled to Bathurst Island the following year. He took control of the boys' school and proved very dedicated to the Tiwi people.¹⁰⁷ McGrath shared Gsell's commitment to gradualism, writing in 1929: 'Some might object that if results are so tardy in coming, or efforts produce little or no visible fruit at first – what is the good? What the use? But the missionary is taught to look at the immortal soul, and not regard so much the swarthy skin.'¹⁰⁸ Importantly, McGrath also renewed interest in the study of Tiwi language. As mentioned, Gsell was content to teach the children English and learn only a smattering of Tiwi himself. Courbon undertook serious studies of the language but this was subsequently neglected when he departed in 1916. McGrath, however, became fluent in Tiwi and was the first missionary to develop a deep understanding of traditional cosmology.¹⁰⁹ As we shall see, McGrath's willingness to teach and preach in Tiwi was instrumental in finally converting the entire Tiwi population to Catholicism.

The New Zealand-born Smith was educated by the Christian Brothers in Melbourne. He enlisted in the Royal Navy in 1918 and eventually in the Royal Australian Navy in 1920 where he served aboard the *HMAS Geranium* before joining the MSCs.¹¹⁰ Smith assisted Albolero on

¹⁰⁴ J. Long 'From Our Missions: The Northern Territory', *Australian Annals* (April 1927): 211-213.

¹⁰⁵ 'Australia – Awake!' *Australian Annals* (October 1929): 607-618.

¹⁰⁶ Kuntz to van Rossum, 27 January 1927. PFHA: NS 940, 373-381.

¹⁰⁷ Gardiner, *Wiser for their Words*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁸ John McGrath, cited in 'Australia – Awake!', 617.

¹⁰⁹ Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 115.

¹¹⁰ Pye, *Tiwi Islands*, 53.

the *St Francis*, eventually replacing him as captain. Under the tutelage of both skippers, Tiwi men and boys were taught to sail and often crewed the lugger on supply runs.¹¹¹ Ritchie was a young sharefarmer in Dubbo, New South Wales. In 1929, he read an appeal in the *Australian Annals* and, unable to donate money, resolved to offer his labour instead. Having gained approval from the Australian Province he travelled north and was soon busy building roads and reservoirs. Assisted by a Tiwi man named Foxy, Ritchie tamed wild brumbies left behind by the buffalo-hunters in 1916. Thereafter, he trained Tiwi men in the art of stockwork, recapturing the mission herd of dairy cattle which had run wild after the cyclone.¹¹² Ritchie remained at the mission until 1934, publishing an account of his adventures under the title: *North of the Never Never* (1934).¹¹³ That year, they were also joined from Queensland by Peter Hayr, an experienced builder. Hayr was 64 years old and he remained there, transforming the architecture of Nguiu, until his death in 1958. Assisted by a team of Tiwi men, he replaced by gradation all pre-existing mission buildings which had become old and run down. The most striking testament to his 24 years of industry is St Therese's Church (Figure 40) – a large timber frame building with weatherboard external cladding evocative of the classic Queenslander style of domestic architecture – completed in 1940.¹¹⁴ Supported, therefore, by a more committed staff, Gsell was able to continue his work.

For their part, the OLSH sisters never wavered. They remained faithful to Gsell throughout the crisis, ensuring a steady supply of two or three nuns were always present at the station (see Figure 24).¹¹⁵ Several – notably Gerardine Corrigan, Columbanus Baker, and Leonie Pitt – served the mission for over a decade. As Ganter muses: 'Perhaps they had less trouble in getting on with Fr Gsell'.¹¹⁶ Preoccupied as they were with vocational work in the school and the clinic, they certainly had less cause for complaint than did Courbon or Henschke. Born in Victoria in 1889, Corrigan joined the OLSH in 1916. She was sent to Darwin in 1919, and first travelled to Nguiu in 1921.¹¹⁷ In retirement, she recalled:

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 138.

¹¹³ Patrick Ritchie, *North of the Never Never* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1934): 1-30.

¹¹⁴ Pye, *Tiwi Islands*, 45-46.

¹¹⁵ Patakijiyali Museum records indicate that Sisters 'Ephrem Searle, Camille (French), Andre (French), Lucy (Australian), and Philip (Irish)' were at Nguiu between 1912 and 1920; and that Sisters 'Gerardine Corrigan, Edmund Lynberg, Rosario Desmond, Columbanus Baker, Demascene Callahan, Leonie Pitt, and Dionysius 'Eileen' Mullhall' arrived between 1920 and 1930. Unfortunately, these records do not include departure dates, but it is likely that sisters alternated between Nguiu and Darwin throughout these periods.

¹¹⁶ Ganter, 'Bathurst Island Mission', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/Bathurst-Island-Mission-1911-1938-1978>.

¹¹⁷ Gardiner, *Wiser For Their Words*, 20.

I went to take temporarily the place of Sister Camille who was sick. I hated the thought of possibly being left on Bathurst Island. What would I do if word came that I must stay on? Word did come for me to stay and, from the very start, I loved these people. I was the only sister in the school and had as an assistant, a Bathurst girl called Rosie. The mission was poor, being dependent for support solely on the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. ... All the same, I spent fifteen lovely years on Bathurst Island.¹¹⁸

Corrigan remained until 1936 (see Figure 25). Venard asserts ‘the story of Sister Gerardine is the story of all the Sisters who helped plant the faith there during the first thirty years of the mission’s history’.¹¹⁹ In their own quiet and unassuming way, OLSH sisters continued to play a vital role as steadfast supporters of the mission. Indeed, Corrigan features prominently in Tungatalum’s account of her own entrance into the Catholic faith as an infant in 1929:

My mother sent me. Sister Gerardine wanted me to stay in the convent. She gave me that name. I was born a Christian. I was promised to an old man. I didn’t see his face. He passed away before I was born. So my mother brought me along to the convent.¹²⁰

Indeed, while the institutional Church debated the future of the mission, it appears the Tiwi were happy for them to remain and Gsell’s marriage policy became more popular than ever. He eradicated polygamy among converts and ensured young people were able to marry partners closer to their own age. Gsell emphasised ‘free-choice’ in such unions, though anthropologists demonstrate that marriages still followed the edicts of traditional law. Hart, Pilling and Goodale use the marriage of Polly and Cabbagee, one of Gsell’s earliest unions, to illustrate this point.¹²¹ Polly’s mother was named Rita and she had been married to Turimpi. During this marriage, she gave birth to Polly, whom Turimpi promised to Kardu. Rita eventually abandoned her husband in favour of Puti, who then promised Polly, his newly adopted daughter, to Cabbagee upon the death of Kardu. But when Polly came of age, she was stolen from Kardu by an old canoe-maker named Timalarua. Unhappy with this development, Polly went to the OLSH and asked to become a Catholic. Gsell purchased Polly from Timalarua and asked her who she wanted to marry instead. She chose Cabbagee, the young bachelor to whom she was already

¹¹⁸ Cited in *NT Dreaming*, 39.

¹¹⁹ Venard, *History of the Australian Province*, 153.

¹²⁰ Tungatalum, *Arrival of Father Gsell*, 21.

¹²¹ See Hart, Pilling, and Goodale, *Tiwi of North Australia* (1988), 116-119.

tentatively promised, bypassing Kardu.¹²² She therefore married within Tiwi parameters but under Gsell's new model. Polly was baptised years later, taking the Christian name Carmel.

However, trouble arose when Cabbagee claimed a second wife, a young woman promised years earlier. Polly was distraught and protested to Gsell who decided to cut the bigamist off from his usual supply of mission food and tobacco. Cabbagee repented, sold his second wife to Gsell, and was welcomed back into the fold.¹²³ Tungatalum notes that Cabbagee and his family were always stalwart supporters of the mission.¹²⁴ While missionary manipulation and even coercion here is undeniable, the Tiwi continued to exercise significant agency behind the scenes. As Hart *et al* argue:

Younger men who were getting wives from among Father Gsell's convent girls thus found that they were unwise to accept a second wife. But such a young man, married under Catholic auspices, soon found that he could enhance his prestige without invoking criticism from the Mission if he gathered around him his own female relatives, the younger of whom he could give away later, one at a time, to men of his choice. A married man like Cabbagee, who gave another man his sister or sister's daughter [not to mention his own], was in a position to ask all sorts of favours from the recipient, especially gifts of food, tobacco, and trade goods, and support in politics.¹²⁵

Strategic alliance with Gsell, therefore, afforded young men an opportunity for swift social mobility and his scheme grew in popularity throughout the 1920s. Between 1922 and 1928, 44 women and girls were purchased from their husbands and went to live at the mission. This raised the total number of 'wives' belonging to Gsell from 21 to 65.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, the missionaries had yet to make any headway in terms of conversions among the adult Tiwi. Flynn notes that by 1926, the mission had registered 113 baptisms, mostly children and a few old people on the verge of death.¹²⁷ Gsell was not overly anxious about his inability to convert traditional Tiwi:

Even if they do happen to catch a glimpse of the light of Christianity, they cannot alter their ways, and it remains for the Missionary to wait for their last moments to give them a last instruction and renew them in the saving waters of baptism. God is good and

¹²² Ibid., 116.

¹²³ Ibid., 117.

¹²⁴ See Tungatalum, *Arrival of Father Gsell*, 18.

¹²⁵ Hart, Pilling and Goodale, *Tiwi of North Australia* (1988), 117.

¹²⁶ Patakijiyali Museum records.

¹²⁷ Flynn, *Northern Gateway*, 92.

merciful. He shall ask very little of those to whom little has been given, and very little indeed has been given to these unfortunate children of the Australian bush.¹²⁸

But while Gsell was willing to resign the old people to the grace of God, he was heartened by his success with the young: ‘Everything can be done with the children, who as a rule, are bright, intelligent, lively and most eager to abandon the horrible ways of their forebears for the light and happiness of Christianity’.¹²⁹ Hart *et al* assert that boys and girls who entered the orbit of the mission before the age of ten and who were sufficiently versed in the catechism were allowed to receive the sacraments of penance, Holy Communion and confirmation, and eventually to undertake the sacrament of matrimony. While Gsell had given his blessing to formalised monogamous unions early on, the first sacramental marriages did not take place until 1927.¹³⁰

Gsell recalled in his memoir that these first sacramental marriages were imbued with immense ceremonial and spiritual significance. Shortly after a young man named Noel Topumetemeri-Pungalaiamirri had concluded his studies at the mission school, he approached Gsell and asked the priest’s permission to marry Rosy Munkara, a young woman who had likewise concluded her schooling. This was necessary as Gsell was not only their spiritual director, but also Munkara’s traditional ‘husband’. Satisfied the couple were sincerely in love, he called a public meeting: ‘Although I knew that, since both were fresh from school, they knew the text of the Catechism and the sense underlying its teaching, I thought it wise, nevertheless, to set a precedent for all the Christian marriages which would follow theirs by bringing them face to face with the responsibilities of the married state.’¹³¹ Gsell stated that: ‘This public examination was designed to bring out the fundamental differences between marriage in native law and the marriage which they now proposed to contract according to Christian doctrine’.¹³² Alongside their friends and family, the couple were asked to affirm their belief in the Catholic sacrament

¹²⁸ Gsell, cited in ‘Australia – Awake!’ 615.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Hart, Pilling and Goodale, cite the year 1928, but this is inconsistent with the Nguuu Marriage Register which dates the first marriage as 8 August 1927. See *Tiwi of Northern Australia* (1988), 112.

¹³¹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 101.

¹³² Ibid. Matrimony was added to the list of Catholic sacraments at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274. Marriage in a sacramental sense goes further than the mere legal union of two people. The Catholic Church maintains matrimony is a consensual covenant between a man and a woman – both of whom are baptised – demonstrating their lasting commitment to a lifelong and exclusive partnership, established for the good of each other and for the procreation of children. The bonds of matrimony are indissoluble and can only be broken by death. Divorce is impossible. While Catholics recognise the possibility of ‘natural’ marriages outside the Church, these are not sacramental. Gsell had initially sanctioned monogamous unions among the Tiwi and given them his blessing, but these were not sacramental marriages in the strictest sense until the wedding in 1927, detailed here. See Gerard O’Collins, *Catholicism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 85-87.

of matrimony. Gsell called special attention to monogamy and lifelong partnership, before demanding that Topumetemeri-Pungalaiaimirri make a solemn promise to renounce to the mission any future daughters born to any of his traditional mothers-in-law. Having accepted these conditions, Gsell gave permission for the couple to wed. On 8 August 1927, they were married in an elaborate European style wedding, with full Roman rites:

And never was such a marriage! The church was crammed to bursting point. ... The solemn Catholic marriage ceremony unrolled in all its splendour and not a customary rite was omitted. ... Instead of the usual sermon, I gave a short explanatory address in order to emphasise the deep significance of the ceremony. ... After High Mass had been celebrated with great fervour and rejoicing, the happy couple trooped off to the sacristy to complete an inspiring and happy occasion by signing their names in the marriage register.¹³³

The wedding was followed by a great feast, with tables arranged under a poinciana tree, decorated with flowers and laden with food. Gsell provided the bride with a *trousseau*; a series of housewarming gifts which would furnish the new hut built by Topumetemeri-Pungalaiaimirri at Nguiu to begin their married life. Gsell regarded the occasion as an important milestone, the first of many successes. It was one which he was now eager to share with the rest of the world.

In September 1928, Gsell resolved to attend the 29th International Eucharistic Congress in Sydney. Inaugurated in 1881 in Lille, France, the congress was a weeklong celebration of the Catholic faith. It was the first time in its history that the festival had been held outside Europe and it provided the Australian Church with an opportunity to showcase all it had achieved since colonisation. It began with the consecration of the recently finished St Mary's Cathedral and concluded with the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament wherein the Sacred Host was marched through the streets of Sydney, a solemn parade viewed by roughly 500,000 people. The festival also featured lectures and public addresses on various religious topics. In the exhaustive list of Australian Catholic achievements, scant attention was paid to missionary work among First Nations peoples. Indeed, Campion asserts: 'If there were any Aborigines at the 1928 Eucharistic Congress, they were not noticed. By contrast, delighted attention was paid to a band of Maoris who attended in ceremonial dress. Even after 140 years of white settlement the Catholic Church's address to Aboriginal Australians was too fragmentary to make an

¹³³ Entry No. 7, Nguiu Marriage Register, Bathurst Island; Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 103.

impact on an event like the congress.’¹³⁴ Yet Gsell notes in his memoir that he was accompanied to the festival by Topumetemeri-Pungalaiaimirri whom he regarded as convincing proof of the efficacy of his own endeavours:

I took with me Noel, an excellent fellow married to one of the girls I had bought, a girl who answered to the name of Rose. I had Noel dressed in a new suit for the journey. The magnificent and imposing ceremonies of the Congress dazzled him: the boy, naturally enough, had never imagined such splendour. He, in his turn, attracted the attention of the notable personages present. They were impressed by Noel’s intelligence.¹³⁵

Few newspapers, Catholic or otherwise, noted Gsell’s attendance at the congress, and none whatsoever paid any attention to Topumetemeri-Pungalaiaimirri. Girola argues this episode was highly symbolic of the relationship between the Church and First Nations peoples: ‘It further illustrated that no major changes had occurred since 1885 ... Basically “invisible” to mainstream Catholicism, the Indigenous inhabitants of the continent were left to the pastoral care of foreign missionaries like Francis Xavier Gsell, working in the remote and “exotic” North’.¹³⁶ At the same time, ‘the paternalist “surprise” of Sydney Catholics at discovering that an Aboriginal man could be intelligent shows how low expectations they had of the capacities of Aborigines’.¹³⁷ Yet, by bringing Topumetemeri-Pungalaiaimirri south, Gsell demonstrated to sceptics that Indigenous people were more than capable of adopting the Catholic faith, as well as Western language and culture. Topumetemeri-Pungalaiaimirri proved that: ‘missionaries, with the support of the government and community, could turn a “savage boy” into a useful citizen’.¹³⁸ Regardless of media inattention, Gsell returned to the Northern Territory safe in the knowledge that Church colleagues accepted the effectiveness of his missionary work and no further challenges would be issued against his ongoing presence among the Tiwi. Yet another threat soon loomed on the horizon, as pearl shell fishermen weighed anchor along the coast of Melville Island.

¹³⁴ Champion, *Australian Catholics*, 96-97.

¹³⁵ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 138.

¹³⁶ Girola, *Rhetoric and Action*, 87.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER VI

Trouble with the Pearlers: Another Struggle for Bodies and Souls, 1928-1939

At this moment I cannot help but recall that time, a little while before the last war, when our lives at the Mission were darkened. In spite of the vigilance of coastal patrols, a Japanese pearling fleet landed their sailors on both Melville and Bathurst islands. Not a single little girl was 'sold' to the Mission at this time; the Japanese offered more than we could offer; and the only children to escape prostitution were those in our care.¹

1928 was a reasonably good year for Gsell. In his annual report to the Government Resident, Robert Hunter Weddell (1882-1951), he asserted that an 'all round improvement, both material and moral, has been steadily going on. The natives visiting the Station are getting more numerous and the children are attending school regularly.'² Gsell believed between 700 and 800 Tiwi visited the station throughout the year. The adult population continued to be highly transient and fluctuated between 100 and 300 people at any given time. Visiting Tiwi worked for rations in mission industries, which were turning a steady profit. Gsell also claimed about 80 children received Christian education at the school, while a further 40 infants were partially dependent on the mission for food and other necessities. There were approximately 1100 Tiwi living on the Islands, so virtually the entire population had contact with Nguui. For all practical purposes, Gsell was doing as well as could be expected.

In spite of this material success, he complained: 'There is, however, one evil that seems to be increasing every year, and threatens the very existence of the native race, and that is the wholesale prostitution carried on by the crews of the Pearling luggers. The Mission is helpless against this scourge which thwarts its most earnest efforts.'³ Gsell claimed Tiwi Elders were trading young wives to the pearlers in exchange for trade goods: 'The old natives, possessors of big harems will insist on passing some of their gins to those strangers in order to procure by this means some flour, tobacco and calico'.⁴ He lamented: 'Warnings and threatenings [sic] to both parties are of no avail', and finally implored that: 'Something should be done by the Government to protect the natives against their own greed and the lust of those foreign crews'.⁵ The relationship between pearlers and Tiwi people dominated mission reports for the next decade. Indeed, these years were vexed for Gsell by a new conflict over the bodies and souls

¹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 140.

² Gsell to Weddell, 31 December 1928. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

of Aboriginal women. He had engaged in similar battles with traditional culture vis-à-vis polygamy since his arrival on Bathurst Island. His policy of ‘purchasing’ women and girls from their customary husbands gradually consolidated the acceptance of monogamy and Christian marriage customs among many Tiwi. Yet, the pearlers now posed a new and powerful threat. They too desired to purchase women, and Gsell’s precedent evidently had a great many unintended consequences.

Pearlers began operations at Port Darwin in 1884, and the industry became among the most profitable in northern Australia. It was heavily dependent on Asian and Aboriginal labour, and epitomised racial hierarchies in the frontier town. European masters owned boats and equipment, Japanese were employed as specialist divers, tenders and engineers, Malays worked as crew, and First Nations people were relied upon casually for the labour-intensive task of processing shell. So integral was Asian, and particularly Japanese, labour to the perceived success of pearling, that the industry secured exemptions from the *Immigration Restriction Act* in 1902. This allowed white masters to import Asian labourers under contract of indenture. Workers were not allowed to settle in Australia, nor bring their families with them, and employers were financially responsible for importing and repatriating workers. Consequently, Japanese and other Asian peoples continued to be a significant presence in the Northern Territory in spite of the White Australia Policy.⁶ Yet this made them the subject of significant attention and anxiety.

Nevertheless, official responses to Gsell’s complaints was very slow. Weddell forwarded Gsell’s report to the Chief Protector, Dr Cecil Cook (1897-1985), and asked for an explanation. Cook arrived in the Northern Territory in March 1927 as Chief Medical Officer, charged by the Commonwealth with investigating the growing prevalence of leprosy. Born in Sussex, he migrated to Queensland in infancy and studied medicine at the University of Sydney. In 1923 he was awarded a research scholarship at the London School of Tropical Medicine where he specialised in the study of leprosy, granuloma and yaws, all common diseases in the Northern Territory.⁷ He joined the public service in 1925. Cummings argues that: ‘Seeing the Aboriginal situation as being closely integrated with matters pertaining to health, he combined the duties of Chief Protector with those of Medical Officer.’⁸ Cook became one of the most influential

⁶ See Regina Ganter, *The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait: Resource Use, Development and Decline 1860s-1960s* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), and Martinez, *The Pearl Frontier*.

⁷ Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 88.

⁸ Cummings, *Take This Child*, 12.

figures in Indigenous policy for the next decade.⁹ Despite an often critical and dismissive attitude towards missionaries, Cook took Gsell's complaints seriously, indicative of the respect Gsell still commanded among Commonwealth authorities. It was clear to Cook that any interaction between pearlers and the Tiwi of Bathurst Island constituted a clear violation of the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918*, as all unauthorised non-Indigenous persons were prohibited from entering the reserve. But punishing violations proved difficult.

Cook replied: 'The Aboriginal Branch is fully informed of the position but it is almost impossible effectively to deal with the evil. Father Gsell, who is on the spot, himself states that the Mission is powerless in the matter and recommends that the Government do something to prevent it. He was unable to make any practicable suggestion to me at the time of our interview.'¹⁰ Cook explained the ordinance prohibited the employment of Indigenous women aboard pearling luggers and, furthermore, empowered the Chief Protector to refuse licences to masters wanting to hire Indigenous men: 'Anticipating trouble of this nature ... applicants for licences to employ Aboriginals on these vessels have been refused by me, it being feared that Aboriginals so employed would be used as procurers'.¹¹ Laws were in place theoretically to prevent interactions, but practical problems came with policing. Cook suggested establishing a police presence on Melville Island to prevent the alleged traffic in that locality but cautioned this measure would be costly and ineffectual if pearlers decided to move operations elsewhere. He thought it practical to declare Melville a reserve, thus rendering the Tiwi Islands in their entirety a prohibited zone for unauthorised non-Indigenous people. But in order to do this, the Commonwealth had to purchase pastoral leases belonging to Vestey Brothers. While inquiries were made as to the scheme's feasibility, Cook recommended the missionaries be enlisted as police.

On 23 September 1930, Ritchie was appointed Protector of Aboriginals. The Commonwealth hoped that investing mission staff with police powers would make it possible to enforce the *Aboriginals Ordinance*. Yet Gsell disapproved of the scheme and asked that the appointment be cancelled shortly afterwards. In a letter to the Deputy Government Resident, L.H.A. Giles, in April 1931, Gsell remarked, 'it is impossible for the Mission to carry out police work. It is against our principles, and ecclesiastical authority would never approve'.¹² Gsell assured Giles

⁹ Tim Rowse, 'Cook, Cecil Evelyn Aufrere (Mick) (1897-1985)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cook-cecil-evelyn-aufrere-mick-12343>.

¹⁰ Cook to Weddell, 25 February 1929. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gsell to Giles, 15 April 1931. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

that: 'We are ready to assist civil authority in every way possible and keep it informed of all doings', but, 'as regards police work, we could never take it on ourselves'.¹³ Here Gsell affirmed his long-held conviction that missionaries should never work contemporaneously as police.

However, it was not without precedent for Catholic missionaries to be declared protectors. On 28 May 1915, Courbon became Honorary Sub-Protector of the Tiwi Islands.¹⁴ On 4 June, Gilruth informed External Affairs that: 'The appointment is a temporary one, and if such arrangements proves unsatisfactory, it can be altered at short notice.'¹⁵ Courbon's obituary stressed he did not seek this title, stating its bestowal was envied, though does not mention by whom.¹⁶ Ganter suggests the source of envy was Gsell, who succeeded Courbon as Honorary Sub-Protector on 4 November 1915.¹⁷ It is unclear how long Gsell held this position, though it had obviously lapsed by 1930. Given his apparent aversion to police work, it is also unclear why he accepted the position in the first place. Perhaps he believed the 'honorary' nature of the title merely affirmed his status as superintendent of Nguiu and did not require the use of coercive powers. Indeed, Beckett, as Chief Inspector, carried out this function until May 1917 when his position was made redundant. It is probable Gsell insisted his own appointment be cancelled when Beckett's departure necessitated an expansion of responsibilities with which he was uncomfortable. Regardless, missionaries had not acted as protectors for some time and Gsell was determined to keep it that way.

Exasperated, the Commonwealth recommended that a patrol boat be commissioned instead: 'The Chief Protector advises that, short of the provision ... of a high powered motor boat and a special protector for the duty of supervising Pearling grounds, nothing can be done to combat the evils to which Reverend Father Gsell calls attention'.¹⁸ However, when Giles made representations to the Department of the Interior, he was informed 'there are no prospects of funds being made available at present for the purchase'.¹⁹

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 'G.N. 102-15: Appointment as Protector of Aborigines', *NTTG*, 3 June 1915. 10.

¹⁵ Gilruth to External Affairs, 4 June 1915. NAA: A3, NT1916/245.

¹⁶ 'Le Père François-Régis Courbon', 125: 'Son dévouement extraordinaire à ces indigènes arriérés ne passa pas inaperçu auprès des autorités australiennes qui le choisirent comme protecteur officiel des Aborigènes australiens. Ce titre, qu'il n'avait pas cherché et qui lui fut quelque peu envié ...'.

¹⁷ Ganter, 'Bathurst Island Mission', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/Bathurst-Island-Mission-1911-1938-1978>; see also 'G.N. 1209.15 – Appointment as Protector of Aborigines – with Reference to G.N. 102', *NTTG*, 11 November 1915. 15.

¹⁸ Giles to Dean, 4 February 1931. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

¹⁹ Dean to Giles, 27 February 1931. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

There followed several years of administrative vacillation. In each report from 1928 to 1934, Gsell complained about ‘immoral traffic’, the Chief Protector and Administrator recommended the purchase of a patrol boat, and the Interior advised that funds were not available. And when the boat finally was commissioned, its primary impetus was not the ‘protection’ of Indigenous people, but rather to safeguard Australian financial interests in the face of Japanese commercial competition, the implications of which will be discussed in greater detail below.

At no point did Gsell entertain the notion that this problem, essentially an issue of conscience and sexual morality, might be remedied by the Christian conversion of the pearlers themselves. During this time, Rev J. Doyle MSC, parish priest at Thursday Island, wrote often to the *Australian Annals* about his own experiences among pearlers. While Gsell decried their deep corruption, Doyle lauded their Catholicity. In January 1929, for example, he reported: ‘The recent visit of the Japanese pearling fleet during what is called “their long spell” shows that these people are by no means a small or inconspicuous number in the Catholic population of Thursday Island’.²⁰ During their six week vacation, pearlers spent each afternoon at the presbytery, where Doyle conducted classes in English. The priest reported these lessons sparked an interest in the Catholic faith which developed into sincere Christian conversions: ‘Sunday mornings and evenings saw them at Mass and devotions and there was no week-day devotion at which they were not present. All were careful to receive the Sacraments and to kneel for the priest’s blessing before they boarded their boats for another year’s work.’²¹ These men were not ‘cradle-Catholics’, but rather recent converts: ‘Would not one think they were children of generations of Catholicity? Yet, they are but newly born into the Church.’²² The outlook was still favourable in May 1932, with Doyle reporting he had ‘baptised two Japanese young men, of devout and sturdy type, and [had] high hopes of many more being received into the Church’.²³

Given the fact Doyle’s successes were well publicised within MSC circles, one wonders at the outcome had Henschke been entrusted with a similar project among Darwin crews. Instead, the attitude of missionaries at Nguiu was one of hostility. A well-known Tiwi story recounted by Anita Mungitopi, recalls that McGrath, clearly annoyed by the increasing number of illegitimate children, confronted pearlers in their camp. In dramatic scenes reminiscent of the Cleansing of the Temple, the enraged priest overturned buckets of water and yelled at the

²⁰ J. Doyle, ‘Our Thursday Island Mission’, *Australian Annals* (January 1929): 27-31.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ ‘Japanese Converts at Thursday Island’, *Australian Annals* (May 1932): 291-292.

pearlers: 'You go away! You makem all the kids!'²⁴ Meanwhile, Gsell, wedded as ever to missionary isolation, continued to demand that the government remove these intruders from his domain.

On 20 September 1935, the *Argus* reported alleged sexual trafficking in the far north: 'The crews, which consist principally of Japanese, Malays, and Chinese, land on the islands and attract to their camps hundreds of blacks. The authorities know that the blacks sell their lubras and girls to Japanese and Malays for stores and gifts, but the officials in Darwin are powerless to prevent the practice.'²⁵ The article did not mention Gsell, but repeated many of his claims.²⁶ The story was picked up by a number of national newspapers but did not cause much of a stir. The Commonwealth response was dismissive and equivocal. Thomas Paterson (1882-1952), Minister for the Interior, described reports as 'greatly exaggerated', while his department falsely claimed 'no complaints of such a practice had ever reached them' and promised to launch an investigation.²⁷

Paterson's seemingly indifferent attitude clearly agitated Gsell. On 30 September he wrote to the Minister: 'I just read your statement in Parliament on sale of lubras to Japanese on Bathurst and Melville Island, and I thought you might [appreciate] a statement of facts from my part [in] this unfortunate business'.²⁸ What followed was a manifesto in which Gsell articulated his practical approach to missionary conversion, as well as his ongoing struggle with pearlers. The report consisted of sixteen typed pages and was organised into subheadings, much of which later formed the basis of his memoir. Gsell provided a brief history of the mission before presenting an ethnography of Tiwi material culture and spirituality. He included descriptions of weapons, utensils, ornaments and tattoos, as well as 'corroborees', burial rites, initiations, and ceremonial battles. Gsell also explained Tiwi beliefs, social organisation, family structures, marriage customs and the relative status of men, women and children. Furthermore, the document identified perceived problems within Tiwi society, chief of which was polygamy. Gsell believed it was his responsibility to combat this 'evil', not by mere Christian conversion,

²⁴ Anita Mungitopi, interview with Jane Bathgate, Pirlangimpi, 1996. Cited in Bathgate and Lewis, *Culture Contact Sites*, 18. See also John 2:15.

²⁵ 'Blacks Sell Womenfolk to Lugger Crews: Officials Unable to Stop Trafficking with Asiatics', *Argus*, 20 September, 1935. 8.

²⁶ See also Weddell to Carrodus, 4 October 1935. NAA, A659, 1939/1/7917.

²⁷ 'Reports of Sale of Lubras', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 September 1935, 10; 'Sale of Lubras to Lugger Crews: Report to be Investigated', *Argus*, 21 September 1935. 28.

²⁸ Gsell to Paterson, 30 September 1935. NAA: A431, 1951/1294. 'Lubra' is an offensive term for an Aboriginal woman.

but rather through the promotion of monogamy by the purchase of young women from their promised husbands.

Polygamy was one thing. Another problem, and one which now caught the attention of the Minister, were instances of prostitution. Gsell claimed that: 'Prostitution to whites and asiatics is very common, as a matter of fact, the mission girls are about the only ones immune. The consequence is very few children and widespread disease'.²⁹ Gsell blamed the pearlers for conducting the 'illicit traffic', but also observed Indigenous people were happily complicit: 'Governments enact severe laws against abusing native women ... But all these remedies are very and mostly ineffective. Blacks, whites and asiatics simply laugh at laws and police and connive together at breaking them.'³⁰ Despite's Gsell's long held confidence in isolation, he rejected the notion reserves were an intrinsically effective means of preventing illicit interactions: 'As for Reserves, they are extensive and unguarded; the whites will go in and the blacks will come out in spite of the laws and protectors'.³¹ Instead, Gsell argued the best solution was internal change through personal Christian conversion: 'The remedy must come from the natives themselves. To compel them by laws to abandon what they think is the right, is a sheer loss of time. They must be taught to abandon willingly on their own accord, those harmful practices – this can only be done by training their willpower through Christian morality.'³² Here he believed that monogamy was the best weapon: 'In Christian settlements where monogamy is the rule, the husband is not going to prostitute his only wife. Besides, earnest Christians avoid as much as possible evil occasions and temptations and if they cannot avoid them, they will struggle and resist, threatening the evildoers to report them at headquarters.'³³ Yet, in order to succeed in consolidating monogamous customs, Gsell needed the Commonwealth to eradicate the pearlers with whom he now competed for the attentions of the Tiwi. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in January 1937: 'Father Gsell considered the landings of the Japanese on Bathurst and Melville Islands will ruin his scheme, which, he believed, if given a fair trial would eventually change the marriage laws of the tribe and result in a flourishing aboriginal population on the islands'.³⁴

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ 'Native Women: Problem of Traffic by Japanese – Need for Protection – Police Outposts Urged', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 1937, 12.

Paterson replied on 11 October: 'I desire to state that the Government has ordered a fast boat for the purpose of assisting in the patrolling of the north coast of the Territory. It is expected that the vessel will arrive in Australia towards the end of this month. When placed in commission, every effort will be made to prevent the traffic in women at the Islands'.³⁵ Help was on its way. But progress was far too incremental for Gsell's liking.

Gsell was an obscure figure in the national consciousness prior to 1935. He was very vocal when he lobbied for the Bathurst Island Reserve in 1911, but effectively disappeared from public prominence until around 1929. Gsell felt his isolation and marginalisation very keenly. His years of struggle to keep the mission open and his growing exasperation with petty bureaucracy, meant he was now impatient when dealing with southern authorities. He was 64 years old after all, bruised and battered by a career of toil which had only recently borne fruit. While in the days of Gilruth and Spencer, he was content to influence Commonwealth policy through mutual accommodation, he now resorted to protest and media manipulation. Clearly frustrated with eight years of official procrastination, Gsell visited Darwin in September 1936 and released a media statement much like the manifesto supplied to the Interior. It caused a news sensation and propelled Gsell into the national spotlight.

Between 24 and 26 September, every major newspaper in the country, and a great many smaller ones, reported on the story with sensational headlines.³⁶ The reports were largely identical and quoted Gsell at length. They claimed that as many as 70 Japanese-owned boats were anchored along the northern coastline, enticing women aboard with gifts. Many, it was reported, were initially coerced by their husbands, but soon became accustomed to the trade and solicited independently. The reports condemned government inaction and demanded more be done to safeguard the welfare of Aboriginal women, who, they argued, were being shamefully exploited. They also featured sub-stories on Gsell's unorthodox evangelism. Whereas the public may have called into question the purchase of young girls, Gsell's work was applauded as a necessary panacea to the wanton lustfulness of both the Tiwi and the pearlers.

The one exception was a pamphlet eventually published in August 1939. The document in question was created by Tom Wright (1902-1981), a prominent trade-unionist and member of the Communist Party of Australia. Drawing upon the work of Sydney anthropologist, Donald

³⁵ Paterson to Gsell, 11 October 1935. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

³⁶ See for example: 'Blacks Demoralised by Pearlers: Missioner's Complaint', *Argus*, 25 September, 11; 'Sordid Traffic in Aboriginal Girls – Barter with Japanese Luggers – Serious Charges by Mission Leaders', *Canberra Times*, 25 September 1936, 5; 'Shocking State of Affairs: Gins Swarm like Mosquitoes on Jap Luggers', *Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser*, 29 September 1936, 4.

Thomson (1901-1970), who had conducted fieldwork in Arnhem Land, Wright offered a powerful critique of Commonwealth policy and particularly of the involvement of missionary organisations in the provision of welfare and training to First Nations peoples. Despite their best intentions, Wright asserted that missionaries invariably caused more harm than good, and at one point declared:

The fact must be stated that the despoiled natives everywhere, and especially where missions operate, suffer more and more the effects of cultural and moral degeneration, leading rapidly to racial extinction. As an example of mission activities deliberately destroying tribal organisation, Monsignor Gsell in the press and at public lectures has boasted of his ‘purchases’ of girls at Bathurst Island mission station – purchases made with a little flour or tobacco and other goods valued at £2 – the girls later are married to ‘Christian youths’ on the mission station.³⁷

The pamphlet was endorsed by the Labour Council of New South Wales and received favourable reviews in communist newspapers in Melbourne. Though Wright made only passing mention of Gsell, albeit in rather scathing fashion, the missionary recalled in his memoir:

Shortly afterwards, a communist paper in Prague took up the story, horrifying its gullible readers with a story of a high Catholic prelate in Australia making a very good thing out of buying, and selling, young native girls. The story was, of course, accompanied by the usual scarifying comments. From Prague, the ‘news’ found its way to Holland; but here my brethren in Christ championed my cause so effectively that the campaign of calumny came to an end.³⁸

Though communist criticism clearly irritated Gsell, it must be said that no such condemnation existed within the mainstream Australian media, who universally celebrated his apparent wisdom and creativity in dealing with the supposed ‘Japanese menace’. This sentiment is perhaps captured best in a 1938 article published in *American Weekly* and headlined: ‘Father Gsell’s Heroic War with the Jap Slavers’ (Figure 31).³⁹ The article featured an illustration of a terrified woman, naked from the waist up, being thrown from a lugger into shark-infested waters by a malevolent Japanese pearler. The author championed Gsell, claiming that: ‘For 23

³⁷ Tom Wright, ‘New Deal for Aborigines’, 1 August 1939.

³⁸ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 106.

³⁹ NAA: A659, 1939/1/7917.

years he has fought against the wicked traffic, buying the helpless native girls to protect them and sheltering them on his unique island sanctuary'.⁴⁰ That Gsell 'married' young girls to save them from sexual slavery was less problematic and controversial than a missionary strategy for the mere purpose of Christian conversion. Consequently, the saga became central to Gsell's conceptualisation and public persona, promoting and providing the moral justification for his work.

Indeed, the national scandal and government responses to it reveal a web of competing interests – moral, commercial, and racial – within Australian society. The cohabitation of Asian and First Nations people underscored the perceived threat to White Australia posed not only by foreign commercial interests but also the growth of racially mixed communities living in the country's north. Yet, before we examine administrative and media responses to Gsell's accusations, it is necessary critically to evaluate their veracity.

Asian pearlers had operated in northern waters for several decades. These developed longstanding relationships with the Tiwi people, as well as the Yolngu of Arnhem Land. Gsell claimed their interactions were best described as exploitation and prostitution, but it is more likely sexual relationships were an aspect of exchange rather than the cornerstone of trade relations. With a few minor exceptions, Indigenous people welcomed pearlers to their shores. While there was occasional conflict in Arnhem Land, no violence occurred on the Tiwi Islands. Indeed, the relationship was characterised by good will. As Peter and Sheila Forrest assert: 'visits were transient and the Pearlers were not perceived as threats to Tiwi sovereignty. In addition, the Tiwi and the Pearlers quickly developed a relationship of perceived mutual advantage.'⁴¹ Pearlers traded goods for water and firewood, as well as in payment for casual labour on the luggers. Gsell despaired that women were seduced by gifts of soap, perfume, makeup, silk and other trinkets. But rather than payment for sexual favours, these could be regarded as gifts from a lover; presents to a mistress or girlfriend. Boats visited the same places and people year in and year out. These were not strictly casual encounters.

Investigating claims in December 1936, Cook reported: 'it appears this offense is confined principally to a minority of crews. Captain Haultain reports that to date he has gained the impression that the crews of certain boats habitually consort with aboriginals whilst the majority of the idents remain aloof.'⁴² Cook furthermore asserted: 'This impression is

⁴⁰ See NAA: A659, 1939/1/7917.

⁴¹ Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 79.

⁴² Cook to Giles, 16 December 1936. NAA: F1, 1937/600.

confirmed by Mr Herbert, formerly Superintendent of the [Kahlin] Compound and an ex-officer of the Medical Service, who has the confidence of the Japanese community. He has ... assured me that the Japanese Society is bitterly opposed to the practice of cohabitation with aboriginals, and regards offenders somewhat in the light of renegades bringing disgrace on their fellow nationals.⁴³ No doubt conscious of their minority status, the Japanese business community was anxious to distance themselves from the controversy. Indeed, notwithstanding the racism inherent in these denials and denunciations, it appears cohabitation on the Islands was not as widespread or impersonal as Gsell believed.

Naturally, any instances of prostitution, or promiscuity, would have outraged Gsell. As a priest, he was concerned with preventing moral degradation, and sought to do everything within his power to safeguard the immortal souls of his charges. Yet his status as a missionary may have also led him to jump to false conclusions or exaggerate the extent of illicit liaisons. Commenting on the scandal, J.P.S. Bach remarks: 'The very sensationalism of widespread flagrant sexual immorality has titillated the imaginations of peoples ancient and modern, and the period under review is no exception'.⁴⁴ It is doubtful whether Gsell actually caught couples *in flagrante*, relying instead upon anecdotal evidence and his own summations. His disregard for traditional customs, and his tendency to fixate upon what he believed were sexually perverse behaviours, meant he ignored other aspects of relationships which, as we have seen, were multifaceted.

An article published in Perth's *Daily News* in June 1936 also gives some insight into the ongoing nature of relationships. It recounted the adventures of J. Conway, a Western Australian recently returned to Perth from Darwin.⁴⁵ Despite its chauvinistic tone, Conway's testimony was unique in affirming that connections between Tiwi and pearlers were longstanding: 'some of the old Japanese divers have the same one or two "wives" each season. In some instances, this is known to have spread over six or seven years. These fellows are very jealous of their lubras and woe betide anyone who would seek to win their affections'.⁴⁶ Viewing these relationships through the lens of prostitution and sexual exploitation is clearly inadequate and problematic. As Conor notes: 'It was never considered that Aboriginal women of their own

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ J.P.S. Bach, *The Pearling Industry of Australia: An Account of its Social and Economic Development, Prepared for the Department of Commerce and Agriculture* (Newcastle: NSW University Press, 1955), 247.

⁴⁵ 'Lubras Taken to Jap Boats', *Daily News* (Perth), 12 June 1936. 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

volition might form intimate relations with men of their choosing that were meaningful to them in terms of attraction, pleasure, or attachment'.⁴⁷

In any case, the Tiwi did not hold the same standards of chastity as the missionaries, and while extra-marital affairs were not encouraged in traditional law, as long as women did not leave their husbands for good, they were allowed certain freedoms. Following fieldwork on Melville Island during the 1950s and 1960s, Goodale concluded it was common practice for young women to engage in multiple romances: 'From the young wife's point of view they were often very desirable. For young unmarried men, certainly, they were something to achieve whenever possible'.⁴⁸ Goodale asserted that: 'According to my female informants, it was "proper Melville Island way" to have both a husband and a lover as contemporaneous sexual partners. Choice of a lover was made among those young men in the vicinity of the wife's residential group who could be sexual partners of the woman without violating incest taboos.'⁴⁹ Visits from pearlers gave young women greater choice in alternate sexual partners.

Even if interactions were best described as prostitution, Gsell himself had encouraged the trade in women for almost two decades. As Pye notes: 'All this was something of an opposition show to Bishop Gsell who was also buying the girls ... But he was doing it so that they could have their freedom to marry younger men within the proper tribal structures.'⁵⁰ Similarly, Priest contends: 'From their point of view, Father Gsell's practice of buying female infants to rear at the Mission was not fundamentally different from the practice of the Japanese buying the older women for sexual favours'.⁵¹ He argues furthermore: 'The situation was loaded in the favour of the Japanese, too, by the fact that they treated the Islanders as equals whereas the whites, missionaries included, treated them as inferior'.⁵² Indeed, writing about the Kimberly, Sarah Yu argues that: 'In traditional Aboriginal society such exchange is culturally acceptable if payment is negotiated and given, although these practices were considered abhorrent to the European population. From an Aboriginal point of view this trade was sanctioned and preferable to the more common experience of exploitation of Aboriginal women by white Pearlers and station workers.'⁵³ As Gsell himself noted in 1935: 'Trouble and murder arise only

⁴⁷ Liz Conor, 'Black Velvet' and 'Purple Indignation': Print Responses to Japanese 'Poaching' of Aboriginal Women, *Aboriginal History*, 37 (2013), 54.

⁴⁸ Goodale, *Tiwi Wives*, 131.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Pye, *Tiwi Islands*, 77.

⁵¹ Priest, *Northern Territory Recollections*, 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Sarah Yu, 'Broome Creole: Aboriginal and Asian Partnerships along the Kimberly Coast', in *Queensland Review* 6, 2 (November 1999): 62.

from the fact that some people abuse the women and do not pay for it, or carry them away from their country'.⁵⁴ While a massacre of Japanese fishermen by Djapu people did take place at Caledon Bay in 1932, no such acrimony was experienced on the Tiwi Islands.⁵⁵

That sexual relationships were not as common as were supposed is further evidenced by the low number of children of mixed-descent born during this period. In September 1935, Gsell asserted 'the mission girls are about the only ones immune' from prostitution.⁵⁶ In November 1936, Cook estimated there were approximately 1,000 Tiwi and 250 Asian pearlers living within the vicinity of Bathurst and Melville Islands. If the supposed traffic in Tiwi women were as widespread as Gsell claimed, it would be reasonable to expect a population boom. Yet, according to Gsell, over the course of ten years, no more than 25 children of mixed Tiwi-Asian descent were born on the Islands.⁵⁷ As Ganter observes, 'this seems a very low figure', and it is likely Gsell 'had indeed overstated the extent of Asian-Aboriginal mixing'.⁵⁸

Gsell's answer to this inconsistency was that infertility kept the number of newborns down. This, he argued, was the result of sexually transmitted infections introduced by pearlers and the young age at which girls first engaged in sexual activity.⁵⁹ The Commonwealth likewise assumed venereal disease was wreaking havoc on the Islands, however had very little medical evidence to substantiate these assumptions. In October 1935, Dr William Bruce Kirkland (1898-1952), then Acting-Chief Protector, speculated to Weddell: 'Doubtless promiscuous consorting, particularly in the case of young lubras, and the spread of Gonorrhoea, would tend towards sterility of the women and the gradual depletion of tribes', but admitted: 'There is no definite information available in respect of the decrease in the population of the island'.⁶⁰ Similarly, Cook ventured in November 1936: 'Venereal disease has a very considerable but undetermined prevalence amongst the Japanese'.⁶¹ In December 1936, Paterson was asked in Parliament if: 'It is a fact that members of these crews consorted with native women who contracted a disease in consequence?'⁶² In reply to the subsequent query from the Interior, Cook stated: 'There is no information in the possession of the Medical Service to suggest an

⁵⁴ Gsell to Paterson, 30 September 1936. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

⁵⁵ See Ted Egan, *Justice All Their Own: The Caledon Bay and Woodah Killings 1932-1933* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996).

⁵⁶ Gsell to Paterson, 30 September 1936. A431: 1951/1294.

⁵⁷ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 140.

⁵⁸ Ganter, 'Bathurst Island Mission', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/bathurst-island-mission-1911-1938-1978>.

⁵⁹ See for example, Gsell, Report of 1932. NAA: A431: 1951/1294.

⁶⁰ Kirkland to Weddell, 15 October 1935. NAA: A659, 1939/1/7917.

⁶¹ Cook to Weddell, 11 November 1936. NAA: F1, 1937/600.

⁶² Quoted in Carrodus to Weddell, 8 December 1936. NAA, F1, 1937/600.

undue prevalence of Venereal Disease amongst aboriginals on Bathurst and Melville Islands'.⁶³ Cook qualified this statement by reassuring that: 'When these [medical] officers eventually do proceed to Bathurst Island, their work will include investigation into the prevalence of Venereal and other diseases amongst aboriginals'.⁶⁴ Their search, however, produced little to support Gsell's accusations and Cook's assumptions.

On 23 February 1937, Cook informed Giles that a survey of Bathurst revealed no evidence venereal disease was endemic: 'Dr Kirkland reports that he detected no Venereal Disease amongst Aboriginal women ... except one case where the source of infection was the husband recently returned from Darwin.'⁶⁵ Alarming, Kirkland did however report a hundred percent infection rate of hookworm and recommended medical supplies be sent immediately to combat the infestation.⁶⁶ Caused by the intestinal parasite *Ancylostoma duodenale* and spread through poor sanitation, hookworm is common in tropical climates and results in rashes, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, fatigue and, in severe cases, anaemia and heart failure.⁶⁷ It is particularly dangerous in children, as chronic infection inhibits physical and intellectual growth. While authorities acted appropriately in sending medicine to Nguiu, it is significant that this very real medical problem received much less attention than the largely unsubstantiated claims of widespread venereal disease. As Yu notes in the case of similar responses to venereal disease in Western Australia: 'Concern by the colonists over other common diseases which were life-threatening to the un-resistant Aboriginal population, such as influenza, whooping cough and measles, were never so profound.'⁶⁸ Though Gsell always prioritised the good health of the Tiwi people, it can be said that improved sanitation, rather than curtailing promiscuity, should have been a greater urgency for mission and government authorities alike.

Not merely satisfied with an investigation of women on Bathurst Island, Cook reported that his medical officers had also conducted examinations of approximately 200 pearling indents, of which only five were infected with Gonorrhoea. He noted these men were Malay, not Japanese.⁶⁹ Cook followed up this report with more definitive numbers on 25 February 1937: '223 pearling indents have been examined and 2 have yet to be seen. Of those examined, 144

⁶³ Cook to Weddell, 16 December 1936. NAA, F1, 1937/600.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Cook to Giles, 23 February 1937. NAA, A1, 1937/3348.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Peter F. Weller and Karin Leder, 'Hookworm Infection', *UpToDate*, <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/hookworm-infection>.

⁶⁸ Yu, 'Broome Creole', 66.

⁶⁹ Cook to Giles, 23 February 1937. NAA: A1, 1937/3348.

were Japanese, amongst whom 5 cases of Gonorrhoea were discovered, and 79 were Malays, amongst whom there were 13 cases.⁷⁰ Despite the objections of pearling masters, Cook instructed that none of these men were to sail without his written consent, and all of them were put on a strict course of daily treatment.⁷¹ While these cases of Gonorrhoea certainly validated concerns, it can hardly be said that venereal disease was widespread among the pearling population, particularly the Japanese. Nevertheless, they continued to be embroiled in the racially charged moral scandal, firmly implicated as the main culprits.

The *Northern Standard*, for example, decried their ongoing presence in Darwin and their unrestricted association with Aboriginal people: ‘After having strutted the streets and swaggered out and in the public bars, they are at liberty to visit the homes of the half-castes without any hindrance by the police or any other authority.’⁷² Under such conditions, the newspaper concluded, disease was to be expected. They asserted furthermore that: ‘The police and customs officials have failed to adequately control the flotsam and jetsam of the Pacific who are overrunning the town, and the Aboriginal Department has also failed to protect the aboriginals and half-castes, for which job they draw such high salaries.’⁷³

Despite the total lack of evidence, it is significant the Commonwealth continued to operate under the assumption that sexually transmitted diseases were a characteristic outcome of interactions between pearlers and Tiwi people. For example, Cook recommended in June 1937 that a medical officer be stationed on Melville Island, ‘trained, or capable of training, in first-aid, the recognition of disease and the treatment of venereal disorders’.⁷⁴ When initially confronted with Gsell’s accusations in 1929, Cook sought to use the threat of infectious disease to curtail cohabitations: ‘I am endeavouring to solve the problem on the lines of the *Quarantine Act* with the aid of the *Endemic Diseases Ordinance*. By this means it will be legal for Japanese and other coloured crews to land, unless in distress, only on certain localities selected by conference with the Pearlers.’⁷⁵ The veracity of assumptions that pearling crews carried venereal diseases, and that these diseases had infected the Tiwi people, were never questioned at the time, nor really since. National newspapers faithfully reported Gsell’s assertions, as have subsequent historians. Pye, for example, argues: ‘this was not acceptable either to the

⁷⁰ Cook to Giles, 25 February 1937. NAA: A1, 1937/3348.

⁷¹ Cook to Giles, 2 March 1937. NAA: A1, 1937/3348.

⁷² J.A. McDonald, ‘V.D. Epidemic Scandal: Coloured Women Publicly Paraded – Enquiry Urged’, *Northern Standard*, 2 March 1937. 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Cook to Abbott, 21 June 1937. NAA: F1, 1937/600.

⁷⁵ Cook to Weddell, 25 February 1929. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

Government who were Protectors of Aboriginals or to Medical authorities who rightly feared the introduction of venereal disease and other Asiatic sicknesses'.⁷⁶ Similarly, Forrest asserts: 'On the mainland Dr Cecil Cook, the Darwin official responsible for general health as well as Aboriginal affairs, became concerned about the health threat posed by the venereal diseases which were rampant among the Pearling crews'.⁷⁷ As shown, the existence and extent of venereal disease among pearlers and Tiwi people was minor, though its rhetorical use in government reports and newspapers further demonstrates Ganter's assertion that: 'Like Aborigines, Asians were a problem population subject to a medical-moral policing rationale'.⁷⁸ Shared cultural stereotypes of lasciviousness enabled white Australians to cast aspersions upon Asian and Aboriginal relationships. Small wonder Gsell's framing of their relationships as mere sexual trafficking gained such traction in the 1930s.

While Gsell was scandalised by what he saw as licentious behaviour, fundamentally he was so infuriated because the pearlers drew the Tiwi away from Nguiu. This was most evident in his 1938 report:

The year – since the arrival of the Pearling fleet has been characterised by a marked falling off in numerical strength of the visiting natives to the Mission; a pronounced break in contact with 'bush' people; consequently a lack of control; increased instances of prostitution; [and] a notable decrease in the proportion of men visiting the Station; all indicative of a change of head and heart that does not auger favourably for their welfare in the future.⁷⁹

Gsell maintained the Tiwi preferred the company of the Japanese because the pearlers were better able than the mission to supply trade goods. In 1931, for example, he asserted bitterly that: 'The natives are greedy and lazy, and if they can get their food, clothes, and tobacco by an easy immoral traffic, they will not move a finger to procure it otherwise. On the Mission Station they have to submit to some sort of discipline and self-restraint, and nothing is given them without being earned.'⁸⁰ Similarly, in 1933 he claimed that: 'When reprov'd for their conduct, the natives will say: "You feed us, and we will keep our women." But, of course, their idea is to be fed without work, as it happens in the Pearlers' camps.'⁸¹

⁷⁶ Pye, *Tiwi Islands*, 77.

⁷⁷ Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 80.

⁷⁸ Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, 119.

⁷⁹ Gsell to Abbott, 30 December 1938. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

⁸⁰ Gsell to Weddell, 30 December 1931.

⁸¹ Gsell to Weddell, 30 December 1933. *Ibid.*

Reflecting on the years of conflict, Gsell later asserted: ‘Not a single little girl was ‘sold’ to the Mission at this time; the Japanese offered more than we could offer’.⁸² This assertion does, however, conflict with mission records. Between 1933 and 1936, 19 women and girls were purchased from their respective traditional husbands; though it does appear Gsell’s trade ceased after 1936.⁸³ Admittedly this was a marked decrease from the 46 who joined the mission in this manner between 1929 and 1933.⁸⁴ While this decrease could be attributed to competition with pearlers, it could also be a testament to the success of Gsell’s conversion policy which had lowered the pool of polygamous marriages from which to draw new wives. Nevertheless, Gsell seems to have been oblivious to the ways in which his own manipulation of Tiwi social customs had allowed this situation to arise. His purchasing of infant girls and young women set a precedent which was easily emulated by the pearlers, albeit for radically different purposes.

Though committed to preventing interactions between pearlers and Aboriginal people, both on the Tiwi Islands and in Arnhem Land, Cook made a very apt observation in this regard in March 1938. Clearly exasperated with frequent complaints from Arnhem Land, Cook stated:

Missions inculcate the aboriginal with new social and economic wants which the Japanese do more to gratify than do the missions. The Japanese merely exploits the existing social organisation of the aboriginal and does not destroy it. The mission, on the other hand, sets itself out utterly to destroy the native social organisation, and does not succeed in replacing it. Viewed from this aspect the, the Japanese is less a menace than is the mission. Natives along this coast have had contact with coloured aliens under precisely the same conditions as apply to-day for over six centuries.⁸⁵

While not strictly true in the Tiwi context, Cook was correct as far as Indigenous perspectives were concerned. The pearlers’ camp gave the Tiwi options. They had to get their trade goods from somewhere, and now they had the option of working for the mission or working for the pearlers. Both came at a cost, but pearlers did not challenge traditional culture. They were occasional visitors and trading partners, not colonisers or moralisers. In any event, the government sided with Gsell, Paterson proclaiming in September 1936: ‘Monsignor Gsell is a reliable and responsible authority, and his views are not to be disregarded’.⁸⁶

⁸² Gsell, *The Bishop with 150 Wives*, 140.

⁸³ Record held within Patakijiyali Museum, Wurrumiyanga, Bathurst Island.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Cook to Abbott, 30 March 1938. Originally cited in Bach, *The Pearling Industry of Australia*, 249.

⁸⁶ ‘Federal Government to Investigate’, *Courier Mail*, 25 September 1936. 16.

The official response to Gsell's complaints can be characterised by two competing interests. The first commercial, the second racial. I will deal with both in turn.

The fundamental impetus for the patrol boat was not Aboriginal protection, but rather fears of perceived Japanese encroachment on Australian industry. For decades, Japanese and other Asian men had worked as indents on Australian owned luggers. Indeed, the pearlers initially identified by Gsell as being in breach of the ordinance in 1928 were indents employed by Darwin companies. Gsell's primary concern was always sexual morality, but the paradigm soon shifted as Australia's pearling industry came under threat.

Bach observes that between 1931 and 1938, Japanese-owned pearling businesses significantly increased their activities along the Australian coastline. In 1931, only one boat operated south of New Guinea, but by 1935 there were 27 vessels, including a transport ship, working beds within the Timor and Arafura Seas. This number increased sharply to 80 vessels in 1936 when use of port facilities in Darwin was granted to foreign boats, and by 1938 there were 175 vessels, including ten transports and a mother-ship.⁸⁷ It is no coincidence the media scandal surrounding 'illicit traffic' in Aboriginal women broke in 1936, just as Japan so dramatically increased pearling operations along the northern coast. Indeed, their presence proved a significant commercial challenge to the Northern Territory economy.

The Darwin pearling industry was among the most profitable of the region's primary industries. In August 1936, Weddell estimated that sales of shell amounted to £76,000 under good conditions. He also observed that £14,400 were spent annually on the purchase of stores, victuals and oils from local businesses, and that materials for boat repairs were sourced from Australian producers. 244 men were employed in the industry and paid approximately £26,800 per annum in wages, though he estimated about 30 percent of earnings were sent overseas, presumably to indents' families. Nevertheless, pearling was evidently integral to the local economy.⁸⁸ In 1938, Charles Abbott, who replaced Weddell as Administrator in 1937, valued the pearling industry at £88,000. Pearling was rivalled only by the pastoral and mining sectors (valued at £483,000 and £128,000 respectively) and was considerably more profitable than the agricultural sector (£11,000) and other produce (£28,000). Indeed, during a time when the Commonwealth struggled with a stagnating pastoral industry in the face of poor markets,

⁸⁷ Bach, *The Pearling Industry of Australia*, 219, 229.

⁸⁸ Weddell to Interior, 5 September 1936. NAA: F1, 1937/600.

pearling assumed a vital importance.⁸⁹ The government was understandably anxious about increased competition from Japanese businesses.

These anxieties proved well-founded as pearling became the subject of a national rivalry. Bach notes that: ‘In 1934, Japan fished 0.023% of the shell lifted from Australian waters, and in 1937, 53%. In terms of world production, Japan’s percentage was negligible in 1932, yet by 1937, it represented almost exactly 50%.’⁹⁰ Indeed, Ganter asserts: ‘By 1938 the Japanese harvest of 3,495 tons of pearl shell from the Arafura Sea exceeded the Australian return of 2,543 tons, and Australia lost its position as the world’s major supplier of shell.’⁹¹ Japan clearly represented a catastrophic commercial threat, and subsequent efforts to restrict interactions between pearlers and First Nations women became entangled and confused with efforts to protect Australian economic interests.

Throughout the early 1930s the Interior received complaints that foreign vessels operating out of the Aru Islands were poaching within the three-mile territorial limit of the Australian coastline. Reports abounded that Japanese ‘sapan’s were fishing for trepang, pearl and trochus shell, and conducting illegal trades in alcohol and narcotics.⁹² In March 1934, the Commonwealth commissioned a patrol boat to police northern waters and to protect Australian commercial and territorial interests. It was these interests, rather than concern for Indigenous welfare, that provided the impetus for the northern patrol. The patrol boat, called *Larrakia* and captained by C.T.G. Haultain (1896-1976), began operations in May 1936. In his memoir, Haultain recalls the mission staff – Gsell, McGrath, and Smith – as well as reliable Tiwi, assisted the patrol crew during its operations around Bathurst and Melville Islands.⁹³ Smith recruited a Tiwi Catholic named Geoffrey, who previously worked aboard the *St Francis*, to join Haultain’s crew. The mission provided valuable intelligence and residents often acted as guides. The patrol frequently enjoyed their hospitality at Nguuu. While Gsell would not undertake police work himself, he was content to aid Haultain: ‘I expressed my gratitude for the help the mission had rendered us by persuading Geoffrey to join the Patrol, but Father Gsell brushed this off and replied “We all know you are here to help, call on us for any assistance you may need”.’⁹⁴

⁸⁹ See ‘Reports (and summaries of reports on the) on the Northern Territory’, NAA: CP859/6, 1, 17-20.

⁹⁰ Bach, *The Pearling Industry of Australia*, 219.

⁹¹ Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, 67.

⁹² See for example, ‘Pearl Fishing: Japanese Activities – “Fleet of 18 Vessels”’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 1934. 11.

⁹³ C.T.G. Haultain, *Watch Off Arnhem Land* (Canberra: Roebuck Society Publication, 1971), 22-34.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

The patrol could not have come a moment too soon for local authorities. On 21 April 1936, Weddell sent an urgent telegram to the Interior stating: 'I received confidential report last night to the effect that a Japanese Man of War probably a destroyer and several schooners were South East of Bathurst Island. ... Cannot vouch for truth of the report but would suggest that Qantas aeroplane now at Darwin be requested [to] fly over area today'.⁹⁵ Qantas conducted a survey of the locality and reported that there were 17 luggers to the north of Cape Fourcroy, but no sign of schooners, much less a destroyer.⁹⁶ On 5 June, Chief Pearling Inspector, K. Nylander, wrote to Weddell with apparently good news. Speaking to Darwin pearlers, he was informed that 'since a "flying ship" (as they named it) had been cruising above the shell beds, the Japanese vessels have refrained from landing on the Territory shores for the purposes of replenishing their supplies of water, and that these vessels are now making – for that purpose – the long journey to the Aroe [Aru] Island group'.⁹⁷ If the crews of Japanese-owned luggers had made illegal landfall on Bathurst Island, they were no longer willing to risk doing so. Weddell wrote to the Interior: 'It appears the presence of the low flying Qantas plane has had some effect on the situation'.⁹⁸ Though authorities were wrong if they thought the Japanese presence could be dealt with so easily.

On 5 July, *Dai Nippon Maru* arrived at Port Darwin. It carried on board H. Komatsu, a representative of the Mitsui Bussan Kaisha Company, based in Kobe. The lugger refuelled, took on fresh supplies and made minor repairs. Komatsu also made enquiries about the future call of other Japanese vessels. The *Northern Standard* reported that: 'Having obtained the necessary permission, Mr Komatsu departed to convey ... the good news'.⁹⁹ As Bach argues: 'In official quarters it had long been realised that such facilities could not be refused to properly qualified applicants, but the average pearler regarded the decision as tantamount to betrayal'.¹⁰⁰ Commenting on the expected numerical strength of the Japanese in a memorandum to the Secretary of the Interior, Joseph Carrodus (1885-1961), Weddell lamented: 'This is a formidable Pearling fleet in comparison with twenty-eight Darwin vessels. ... Darwin Pearlers are, naturally, perturbed'.¹⁰¹ On 28 October the Darwin Pearlers' Committee addressed a formal complaint to Weddell. They criticised the decision to grant port facilities to Japanese-

⁹⁵ Weddell to Interior, 21 April 1936. NAA: F1, 1937/600.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Nylander to Weddell, 5 June 1936. Ibid.

⁹⁸ Weddell to Interior, 6 June 1936. Ibid.

⁹⁹ 'Japanese Pearling Boats: May Make Regular Visit to Darwin', *Northern Standard*, 10 July 1936.

¹⁰⁰ Bach, *The Pearling Industry of Australia*, 229.

¹⁰¹ Weddell to Carrodus, 11 August 1936. NAA, F1, 1937/600.

owned boats and argued the exponential increase in foreign competition would destroy the local industry.¹⁰²

Anxiety over the increased presence of Japanese commercial interest in Darwin was evidently very high. It is little surprise then that Gsell's story gained such traction in September 1936, despite having been largely ignored for years. Here Gsell's moral complaints were conflated with the commercial complaints of the Australian pearling industry.

That the particular preoccupation with the Japanese underscored a trade anxiety, as much as a racial and moral one, is demonstrated further when we consider that many of the pearlers with whom the Tiwi worked were actually Malay. In 1996, Bathgate interviewed two former Tiwi pearlers, Justin Puruntatameri and Paddy Henry, both of whom were in their late sixties and seventies. Despite the passage of forty years, both could recall phrases in Malay, which they reported was the *lingua franca* aboard the luggers upon which they worked. Puruntatameri recounted a conversation he once had with a fellow sailor:

Puruntatameri: *Berapa bulan tinggal di laut?*

Sailor: *Tiga bulan. Tiga bulan tinggal di laut. Tidak tidur. Besar angin.*¹⁰³

Bathgate notes that: 'Interestingly, neither Justin nor Paddy ... recalled learning any Japanese although a wartime account attests to some Tiwi knowledge of the Japanese language'.¹⁰⁴ These nuances were ignored by Australian commentators.

An editorial published on 22 October 1936 in Brisbane's *Queenslander* newspaper demonstrated the popular confusion of the commercial and moral issues. It asserted: 'it is an established fact that these prohibited immigrants frequently anchor their sampans in the strait between Bathurst and Melville Islands, where they conduct an immoral trade in young girls'.¹⁰⁵ Here no distinction was drawn between foreign and local crews. All Japanese were seen as illegal poachers, violating Australian sovereignty. That most of the Darwin fleet was crewed by Japanese and Malay indents was not mentioned in this article. Nor did the author observe that foreign vessels fishing outside the three-mile territorial limit were well within their rights to do so. The editorial continued: 'For many years past the illegal operations of Japanese shell poachers on our northern coastline have been a source of worry to the Federal Parliament, but

¹⁰² Gregory to Weddell, 28 October 1936. NAA, F1, 1937/600.

¹⁰³ Puruntatameri: 'How many months did you live at sea?' Sailor: 'Three months. Three months living at sea. No sleep. Big wind.' Cited in Bathgate and Lewis, *Culture Contact Sites*, 17.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ 'Japanese Sampans: Scourge of the North', *Queenslander* (Brisbane), 22 October 1936, 4.

in recent years the activities of the poachers have increased to such an extent that even our politicians have realised that something must be done'.¹⁰⁶ In what was a typical 'two-birds-with-one-stone' response to Japanese commercial competition and supposed concern for Indigenous welfare, the author co-opted Gsell's complaints in order to promote more strict government regulation of foreign interests: 'Monsignor Gsell, that venerable and kindly principal of the Bathurst Island Roman Catholic Mission, a man whose word cannot be disregarded, has described the Japanese as "the scourge of the north", and despite repeated protests from this fine man, the trade of buying girls survives'.¹⁰⁷ The editorial advocated better patrolling of the northern coast and concluded by claiming that: 'A firm attitude by the Federal Government would make the Japanese crews realise that the Commonwealth has at last made up its mind to suppress their flagrant and defiant breeches of the law'.¹⁰⁸

This editorial epitomised the general sentiment of the Australian public and cut to the core of policy aims. Using the *Aboriginal Ordinance*, as well as the customs and quarantine acts, it was hoped the Japanese commercial presence could be driven from northern Australia, allowing the local sector to recover.

This strategy backfired, however, when it transpired that, for the most part, Japanese-owned boats all operated outside the three-mile territorial limit of the Australian coastline, and there was no tangible evidence these boats ever made landfall, instead relying on supply ships for essentials. Indeed, the only boats found to be violating reserves were those owned by white businessmen in Darwin. On 24 August 1936, two Japanese divers, Nishiqama of lugger *D3* and Nakamura of *DI*, were each fined £50 in default of six months imprisonment after pleading guilty to permitting Aboriginal women aboard their vessels.¹⁰⁹ Both men were indentured to R. M. Edwards, a Darwin pearling master.

Such strict government regulation proved unpopular in Darwin. White pearling masters complained that, not having supply ships as the Japanese did, they were disadvantaged further by being forced to return to Darwin for fuel and water. As an additional measure of regulation, and to address these concerns, Cook, in conjunction with Haultain, proposed in January 1937 to establish control stations to both police and supply the Darwin fleet. Cook believed: 'The question of the establishment of a base is closely bound up with the future of the Pearling

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ 'Lubras on Luggers: Japanese Fined £50', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 August 1936, 8; 'Exploiting of Lubras: £50 Penalties at Darwin', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 25 August 1936, 13.

industry in Australia'; maintaining that: 'If the Department considers that this industry is of real value to the Territory it should be borne in mind that local Pearlers are already working at a considerable disadvantage in competition with the efficient and more modern vessels from overseas. Any additional disability now imposed upon them must react adversely against this industry.'¹¹⁰ The appropriate location for such a station was now of primary concern: 'In personal communications from Monsignor Gsell ... he informs me that since the boats have been working the new bed in the vicinity of Elcho Island the traffic in lubras at Bathurst and Melville Islands has ceased and most of the aboriginals have returned to the mission'.¹¹¹ However: 'On the other hand, Reverend Theodore Webb of Millingimbi and Mr Sweeney of Goulburn Island have begun to be alarmed by the prospect of the Japanese interfering with aboriginals in their neighbourhood'.¹¹² Consequently in June 1937, the government established control stations at the King River and on Elcho Island. Pearlery could only make landfall at these stations, and the area was off limits to all First Nations people. A similar station was established at Pirlangimpi in 1939 when pearling resumed in that vicinity.

Yet the headaches would not stop for Darwin authorities. In March 1937, Haultain observed: 'As at present constituted the *Aboriginal Ordinance* cannot prevent local vessels anchoring in rivers or creeks, and in close proximity to the shores of such areas [Aboriginal Reserves], providing no member of crew is landed or found ashore'.¹¹³ Haultain argued this hindered policing as 'the approach of patrols from seaward will always give shore parties ample notice to return to their vessels and make the apprehension of offenders difficult'.¹¹⁴ By 14 May, the *Aboriginal Ordinance* was amended to solve this problem. Cook informed Darwin pearling masters: 'The effect of the new Ordinance is to render forfeit to the Crown any vessel found within three miles of the shore of an Aboriginal Reserve; unless the permission of the Administrator or a Protector has been first obtained.'¹¹⁵ He stated the ordinance essentially extended the parameters of a reserve from the coastal boarder to three-miles out to sea and included all waterways (rivers, creeks, tributaries, etc.) within. Despite persistent grumblings, Cook was committed to enforcing the legislation: 'Considerable indignation was expressed by

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Haultain to Cook, 8 March 1937. Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Cook to Abbott, 14 May 1937. NAA, F1, 1937/600.

certain members of the deputation, but I am of the opinion that unless the *Ordinance* is enforced as it stands, its purpose will be defeated'.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, local pearlers continued to operate as if the law applied only to Japanese-owned boats. This was partly due to ambiguity caused by miscommunication, not to mention preconceived notions about the spirit of the legislation. For example, in May 1937, the Crown Law Officer, Eric Thomas Asche (1894-1940), wrote to Abbott asserting that: 'In my opinion, the provisions of the Aboriginals Ordinance 1937 were intended to exclude foreign going Pearling vessels from territorial waters adjacent to Aboriginal Reserves'.¹¹⁷ Contrary to Cook, Asche recommended local crews be exempt from the new provisions of the ordinance and given permission to enter waterways within or adjacent to reserves.¹¹⁸ Yet Cook was intransigent. After discussions with Abbott, Cook met with the local Pearling Committee on 8 September 1937 and informed them that the Commonwealth would 'make no discrimination whatever between trespassers upon the Aboriginal Reserve. I stated that it was now definite and final that any vessel, whether overseas-owned or locally-owned, found within three miles of the shore of the Aboriginal Reserve, would be arrested and brought to Darwin with a view to confiscation'.¹¹⁹ Abbott forwarded this report to Carrodus with the observation: 'It is most probable that this interference by Japanese has been caused by the crews of Australian owned Pearling vessels'.¹²⁰ He proposed to dispatch the *Larrakia* immediately 'to proceed straight to the King River and in accordance with instruction given by me to the Chief Protector of Aboriginals and conveyed by him to the Master Pearlers it is proposed for the future to treat these vessels trespassing exactly as the Japanese-owned vessels are treated'.¹²¹

Passing through Sydney later that month, Gsell hinted at the tendency to malign unfairly foreign crews to the benefit of local ones. Interviewed by the local newspapers, he clarified his previous statements by proclaiming the Japanese were not to blame for the trouble, but rather 'our own blacks, who whenever they are in touch with civilisation, are degenerating rapidly'.¹²² Here rejection of Christianity and propensity to sin were more at fault than the apparent exploitation of pearlers; a statement which, at any rate, further reinforced Gsell's missionary

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Asche to Abbott, 20 May 1937. Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Cook to Abbott, 8 September 1937. Ibid.

¹²⁰ Abbott to Carrodus, 11 September 1937. Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² 'Owner of 121 "Wives": Monsignor Gsell in Sydney – Tells of His Work at Bathurst Island', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 September 1937. 17.

agenda. Commenting on the necessity of control stations for the use of both ‘overseas, as well as Australian Pearling fleets’, Gsell remarked, in more conciliatory terms than he had used hitherto: ‘The Japanese ... [are] not unpopular in the north. Most of them [are] good types, and they spend freely. For the most part, the big white Pearlers [are] the only people antagonistic towards them’.¹²³ Subsequent high-profile court cases involving Japanese-owned-luggers would make this point abundantly clear.

In May and June of 1938, Haultain conducted a patrol of the northern coastline. He arrested five Japanese-owned vessels – *New Guinea Maru*, No. 10 *Seichō Maru*, No. 3 *Takachiho Maru*, No. 5 *Dai Nippon Maru*, and No. 1 *Tokio Maru* – for being within the three-mile territorial limit of a reserve. The cases went before the Supreme Court in September and October 1938.¹²⁴ All were dismissed due to a lack of evidence and damages awarded to Japanese defendants. It was found, for example, that *Tokio Maru* had accidentally drifted into territorial waters when its captain, Hirai, experienced engine failure. Similarly, a lack of detailed record keeping at the time of arrest meant there was no evidence to prove *Takachiho Maru* was even within the three-mile limit.¹²⁵ The court hearings proved extremely embarrassing to the Commonwealth. During the trial of Okashima, captain of *New Guinea Maru*, counsel for the defence, G. J. O’Sullivan, claimed that Haultain unfairly discriminated against foreign luggers and asserted that the enforcement of the *Aboriginals Ordinance* in the Northern Territory was clearly corrupt.¹²⁶ Supreme Court Judge, Thomas Alexander Wells (1888-1954), overseeing the appeals, concurred with O’Sullivan and was likewise critical in his assessment of Darwin authorities:

The whole of the circumstances connected with the *New Guinea Maru* and the *Seichō Maru* reflect very little credit on the Australian officials. Captain Okashima, master of the *New Guinea Maru*, comes out of it much better than they do. ... He comes out of the affair much better than Captain Haultain ... and the officials in Darwin. Most of the damage appears to have been done to Australia’s reputation.¹²⁷

As the *Advocate* commented in November: ‘The conclusion to be drawn from the Darwin litigation is that the *Aboriginal Ordinance* was being administered by Darwin Officials, not only with inefficiency and tactlessness, but with a secret partnership in favour of Australian

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ See John Lamb, *Silent Pearls: Old Japanese Graves in Darwin and the History of Pearling* (Deakin, ACT: John Lamb, 2015), 166-170.

¹²⁵ Abbott to Carrodus, 13 December 1938. NAA: F1, 1937/600.

¹²⁶ ‘New Guinea Maru Case: Local Luggers in Prohibited Areas’, *Northern Standard*, 7 October 1938. 14.

¹²⁷ ‘Darwin Officials Criticised: Judge Wells’s Remarks – Japanese Captain Praised’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 1938. 11.

Pearlers. It was being used, not for the purpose of protecting aborigines, but in order to harass Japanese-owned luggers with official interference.’¹²⁸ Though this was probably a fair assessment of initial hopes for possible applications of the ordinance, the tide was already turning against local pearlers as both Cook and Abbott became increasingly frustrated with their disregard for the law.

In March 1938, mission authorities at Nguiu complained that local boats violated the three-mile limit of the reserve when they traversed the Apsley Strait *en route* to freshwater supplies at Pirlangimpi.¹²⁹ The site was yet to be declared either a control station or a reserve, so Darwin pearlers assumed it was within their rights to use the passage, even if it meant coming very close to Bathurst Island. Clearly exasperated, Abbott reported to Carrodus on 2 April: ‘I have endeavoured to give the Australian luggers every facility, but I have decided that I can do so no longer. I have therefore instructed the Chief Protector of Aborigines that all permits to proceed through Apsley Strait are to be cancelled’.¹³⁰ Local pearlers complained, but Abbott was dismissive. Besides, the writing had been on the wall for a number of months. As early as 10 December 1937, Cook and Abbott forecast the destruction of the local industry.¹³¹

The declaration of Melville as a reserve in 1939 constituted the final and most definitive measure in restricting pearlers’ access to the Tiwi Islands. It was clear the Commonwealth no longer sympathised with the local industry. Indeed, racial concerns now trumped financial ones. Ganter argues the Australian pearling industry’s reliance on foreign labour eventually brought about its undoing: ‘It had created a north Australia phenomenon, a paradigm of development that was the antithesis of a White Australia. Its poly-ethnicity was the success of the industry and also became the very reason it could be allowed to whither.’¹³² With the demise of the local industry, the government now pursued a policy of exclusion, which aimed to keep Asian and First Nations populations separate. This was always at the heart of the anxiety surrounding the ‘illicit-traffic’ with the Tiwi people. The remainder of this chapter will therefore elucidate the racial motivations which fuelled official responses to Gsell’s claims.

Ganter argues convincingly that ‘Aboriginal protection [was] the flipside of Asian exclusions’ in northern Australia: ‘If Asians could not be excluded from Pearling, then Aborigines had to

¹²⁸ ‘Bathurst Island Mission Faces Disaster: Australian Pearlers Violate Aboriginal Ordinance, But Darwin Government Officials Take No Action (*Catholic Advocate*, 10 Nov. 1938)’ reprinted in *Northern Standard*, 15 November 1938, 12.

¹²⁹ Henschke to Abbott, 18 March 1938. NAA: F1, 1937/600.

¹³⁰ Abbott to Carrodus, 2 April 1938. *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Cook to Abbott, 10 December 1937. *Ibid.*

¹³² Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, 70.

be excluded from the creeks, prevented from working on boats, barred from employment by Asians. If Asians dominated the Pearling ports, then Aborigines were evicted from the townships'.¹³³ Similarly, Yu contends that: 'Concern for the Indigenous population masked an entrenched xenophobia, in which the State sought to control not only the lives of Aboriginal women but of the Asian men and their children'.¹³⁴ The pearling industry in northern centres such as Broome, Darwin and Thursday Island had long facilitated the growth of mixed communities. This demographic phenomenon was particularly apparent in the Territory.

In 1922, for example, the total population of the Northern Territory counted in the census (approximately 20,000 Aboriginal people of full-descent were not counted) was 3,867 people.¹³⁵ This was broken into three segments: European (2,458 people, accounting for 64 percent of the population), Non-European (read Asian – 926 people, 24 percent) and 'Half-caste' (460, 12 percent).¹³⁶ By the census of 1933, the proportion of non-Europeans declined slightly, whereas the proportion of people of European and mixed-descent people increased. The total population increased to 4,850 people, with 3,306 Europeans (68 percent), 744 non-Europeans (15 percent), and 800 'Half-castes' (17 percent).¹³⁷ The *Immigration Restriction Act* was responsible for the decrease in the Non-European population. Yet the policy had failed to prevent the growth of mixed-descent communities. When you include the full-descent Aboriginal population in these figures, white Australia was hopelessly outnumbered in the Northern Territory, accounting for little more than 13 percent of the total population. Added to the observable increase in people with mixed heritage, population figures fundamentally belied the myth of White Australia. As had been the case under South Australian rule, the Commonwealth's inability drastically to increase the European population, not to mention the perpetually moribund economy, continued to represent one of their greatest policy failings. Competition from Japanese-owned business throughout the 1930s could only have exacerbated their sense of fear and shame. As Ganter asserts: 'Worried about Asians, and worried about

¹³³ Ibid., 118.

¹³⁴ Yu, 'Broome Creole', 66.

¹³⁵ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia – 4th April, 1921 – Census Bulletin No. 7: Northern Territory* (Melbourne: Albert J. Mullett, Government Printer, 1921), 13; For information on Aboriginal populations not counted in the census see John William Bleakley, *The Aborigines and Half-Castes of Central Australia and North Australia: Report* (Melbourne: Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1929), 5.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia – 30th June, 1933 – Census Bulletin No. 4: Summary for the Northern Territory* (Canberra: L.F. Johnston, Commonwealth Government Printer, 1933), 8.

Aborigines, and having its white hegemony challenged by the coloured population in the north, the anxious nation was struck at the heart by Asian-Aboriginal families'.¹³⁸

This was even more apparent given renewed Commonwealth interest in the so-called 'half-caste' problem. In May 1928, Queensland's Chief Protector of Aboriginals, John William Bleakley (1879-1957), was appointed to conduct an inquiry into First Nations peoples living within the Northern Territory. He paid particular attention to mixed-descent peoples and recommended that policy must 'check in every way possible the breeding of half-castes'.¹³⁹ Whereas Spencer advocated segregation as the best means of limiting the preponderance of mixed-descent persons in the Territory, Bleakley argued that biological absorption was the only way to halt their growth. In keeping with Queensland policy, he asserted 'half-castes' should be permitted to marry either 'civilised full-bloods' or white Australians, depending on preference, stipulating that 'quadroons' and 'octoroons' should always be integrated into the white population.¹⁴⁰ Cook was more hard-line, and he refused to sanction unions between full-descent and mixed-descent persons. Between 1930 and 1939, he increased the number of mixed-descent children in government institutions by over 70 percent.¹⁴¹ Imbued with the eugenicist thinking which characterised the progressivist movement, Cook pursued a policy of biological engineering intended to eliminate mixed-descent people as a factor in the Northern Territory.¹⁴² His aim was to 'breed out the colour' by arranging unions between European men and mixed-descent women. Between 1932 and 1938, Cook authorised the marriage of 55 mixed-descent women, 37 to Europeans and 18 to 'half-castes'.¹⁴³ Beyond the element of race, little thought was given to the suitability of matches, nor to the pleasantries of romance and courtship. According to Austin: 'In a number of instances, it seems, men simply turned up at the Darwin Home, selected a young woman keen to escape from the place, and arranged to go through the formalities'.¹⁴⁴ Under Cook's regime, there was little space for children of mixed European/Indigenous heritage, much less those of Asian/Indigenous parentage.

Gsell cut to the core of policy concerns in 1935 when he stated:

¹³⁸ Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, 119.

¹³⁹ Bleakley, *Report*, 40.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-29.

¹⁴¹ Austin, *Never Trust a Government Man*, 195.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 197. See also, Tony Austin, 'Cecil Cook, Scientific Thought and "Half-Castes" in the Northern Territory, 1927-1939', *Aboriginal History* 14, 1 (1990): 104-122.

¹⁴³ Austin, *Never Trust a Government Man*, 198.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Unfortunately, the legislation is partly responsible for this evil state of affairs between natives and asiatics. Australian law allows asiatics to enter Australia as indentured labourers; but to save the White Australia policy, these people are absolutely forbidden to bring with them their wives and families, or to marry any women here in Australia. Now as some of these people live here in Australia for many years, they are almost compelled by our laws to lead an irregular life. When reproved for their conduct, they answer invariably: 'let us bring our wives and families, or let us get married here, and everything will be alright.' Meanwhile the 'white Australia' policy is defeated by half-caste illegitimates and the native population is ruined by disease and corruption.¹⁴⁵

Gsell clearly knew what caused anxiety among officials in the Commonwealth. However, his personal attitudes toward people of mixed-descent were not as clear cut as this statement would indicate. By 'illegitimates' Gsell probably meant children born outside wedlock. Here the law was more to blame than errant sexual behaviour. The *Aboriginals Ordinance 1911* expressly prohibited marriage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons.¹⁴⁶ This made it very difficult for anyone, European or otherwise, to marry an Aboriginal woman. Indeed, even if a Japanese pearler had wanted to marry a Tiwi woman, it was impossible for him to do so because, as Gsell rightly observed, indents were not permitted to marry within Australia. In 1936, in another staggering display of government paternalism and in direct response to the national scandal brought to light by Gsell, it became illegal for a non-Indigenous person to have carnal knowledge of an Indigenous person with whom they were not married.¹⁴⁷ As Martinez observes: 'The increasing portrayal of sexual relations as both immoral and criminal in the 1930s did not allow for the development of long-term relationships'.¹⁴⁸

It would be inappropriate, however, to take Gsell's comments as indicative of support for the White Australia Policy. The Catholic community in the Northern Territory had always been a multicultural mixture of Asian, European and First Nations peoples. As we have seen, in the early days of Nguiu, Gsell married a mixed-descent couple in an attempt to model settled Christian life to the Tiwi. Though this scheme came undone, the Catholic Church in Darwin continued to support such unions, sanctioning good Catholic marriages whenever the opportunity arose. The Cubillo family are emblematic of this fact.

¹⁴⁵ Gsell to Paterson, 30 September 1935. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

¹⁴⁶ Cummings, *Take This Child*, 8.

¹⁴⁷ Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, 113.

¹⁴⁸ Julia Martinez, 'Ethnic Policy and Practice in Darwin', in Ganter *Mixed Relations*, 130.

Family patriarch, Antonio Pedro Cubillo, was born in the Philippines in 1875.¹⁴⁹ In 1890 he ran away from home and secured work on a Spanish galleon. Antonio travelled to ports all over Europe, including Norway where he acquired skills in pearl diving. After spending time in Singapore, he learned about the economic opportunities in northern Australia and resolved to travel to Palmerston in 1895. He was indentured to George McKeddie, a part owner in *Jolly & Co.*, and eventually became number one diver on their luggers. McKeddie was the third son of a Scottish migrant who arrived in Geelong in 1855. He moved to Palmerston in 1874 and married, according to customary law, Annie Duwan, a Larrakia woman. Their first daughter, Lily, was born in 1880. Antonio fell in love with Lily and the two began a *de facto* relationship. Their first child, Cristina, was born in 1899. Cros married the pair in September 1910 after Lily was baptised with the Christian name Magdalena. Their marriage produced ten children, all of whom were exempt from the *Aboriginals Ordinance* and ostensibly classified in the bureaucratic language of the day as ‘Asiatic half-castes’. The family initially lived in Chinatown but were forced to relocate to Police Paddock in 1913 when their home was demolished. Ines Cubillo-Carter argues that the ‘coloured families’ of Police Paddock were the backbone of the Darwin Catholic congregation. They educated their children at the OLSH convent and were unfailing attendees at Sunday Mass. She recalls Henschke rode his bicycle to Police Paddock each week for pastoral visits.¹⁵⁰ Despite Commonwealth policy which actively discouraged marriage between Asians and First Nations peoples, the Catholic Church in Darwin continued to lend its support to such unions.

The various nuptials of Antonio and Magdalena’s children are illustrative of this support. For example, Martina Cubillo married Harry Hazelbane, whose father was German and whose mother belonged to the Wadjiginy people, in 1925. Juan Cubillo married Louisa Agatha Lee in 1926. Louisa and her twin sister, Jean, were born near Pine Creek in 1906. Their mother was a Wardaman woman and their father was Chinese. Both girls were taken to Nguiu in 1912. A waterside worker, Juan first saw Louisa at the wharf in Darwin, boarding the *St Francis* on her way back to Nguiu after a brief stay in town. Quite taken with her beauty, he resolved to visit the mission and ask Gsell’s permission to marry. Following a meeting chaperoned by the nuns, Gsell approved the match and Louisa went to work at the OLSH convent in Darwin for the

¹⁴⁹ The following genealogy is taken from Ines Cubillo-Carter’s very comprehensive family history *Keeper of the Stories: Delfin Antonio Cubillo – The History of the Cubillo Family, 1788-1996* (Alice Springs: Cubillo-Carter Enterprises, 2000). See also the play written by Gary Lee entitled *Keep Him My Heart: A Larrakia-Filipino Love Story*, first performed at the Darwin High School Tank in August 1993.

¹⁵⁰ Cubillo-Carter, *Keeper of the Stories*, 94.

duration of their engagement. Eduardo Cubillo married Rosie Cheong in 1933. Rosie's father was a Chinese fisherman, and she and her sisters were taken from their Aboriginal mother and placed in the Kahlin Compound when they were young. Both Lorenzo and Delfin Cubillo were married in 1936. Lorenzo married Elizabeth Styles, who was born at Edith River near Katherine. Elizabeth's father was a European miner named Tom and her mother an Aboriginal/Chinese woman named Maudie. Like Rosie Cheong, she was taken from her mother as a child and placed in the Kahlin Compound. Delfin married Teresa Clarke. Her mother, Rose, was born in Derby, Western Australia, in 1900. Her father was Thomas Hansen, a Danish labourer, and her mother an Aboriginal woman named Nellie. Rose and her brother, Tom, were taken from their mother in infancy. Rose went to Beagle Bay and Tom ended up at New Norcia. She was baptised and renamed 'Susana Gentle' around 1908. She married John Moban, a Filipino/Aboriginal man in 1915, giving birth to Teresa in 1918. When John died soon after, Rose remarried William Joseph Clarke, a European/Aboriginal man, whom Teresa was raised to believe was her own father. The family moved to Darwin and resided at Police Paddock, becoming prominent Catholic parishioners. Delfin and Teresa's wedding was officiated by Henschke.¹⁵¹

It does not appear that the Darwin Church shared in the Commonwealth's racism against Asians, nor their fear about the 'coloured' community whose growing families undoubtedly added to the ranks of Northern Territory Catholics. Yet Gsell was willing to engage with these anxieties to further his own agenda. He wanted the pearlers gone and, after years of government inaction, obviously decrying sexual exploitation was not enough to galvanise authorities. Only racial concerns motivated Canberra. Gsell's complex stance on the so-called 'half-caste problem' will be analysed in greater detail in the following chapter.

In his Annual Report of 1939 Gsell declared: 'The improvement among the boys as regards regularity and numerical strength [at the mission school], can be traced to the salutary influence of the Control Station at Garden Point, in regulating the Pearling Fleet's employment of boys'.¹⁵² He likewise reported to Propaganda Fide: 'Thanks to the protection of the Government the infamous traffic of the Japanese pearl-divers with the natives has been almost completely stopped which will make our mission easier'.¹⁵³ It is clear that the presence of the

¹⁵¹ See Ibid.

¹⁵² Gsell to Abbott, 30 December 1939. NAA, A431, 1951/1294.

¹⁵³ 'Grâce à la protection du Gouvernement, le trafic infâme des pêcheurs de perles japonais avec les indigènes a été presque complètement arrêté et ainsi notre œuvre sera facilitée.' Gsell to Propaganda, 17 August 1939. MSC Archives, Kensington.

Control Station at Pirlangimpi and the declaration of Melville Island as a reserve in 1941 effectively limited interactions.¹⁵⁴ The Bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942 would end the relationship for good.

Though not the stimulus for his missionary work, this episode is integral to understanding Gsell's story and public persona. He had always seen himself as a missionary gradualist whose ultimate goal was cultural and religious conversion. Yet his very public struggle with the pearlers transformed him into a celebrity priest. To the wider Australian community, he became a hero struggling against sexual depravity and the perceived moral evil of miscegenation. Indeed, Commonwealth responses reflected dual anxiety over Japanese commercial competition and the growing prevalence of mixed communities in Northern Australia. Though Gsell did not strictly share in these anxieties, he was willing to play upon them to further his own goals. The consequence was moral outcries which reflected racism and a justification for policies designed to exclude and marginalise Asian, Aboriginal, and 'half-caste' people, whose interactions completely undermined the myth of White Australia.

¹⁵⁴ 'Melville Island is a Native Reserve', *Northern Standard*, 25 February 1941. 3.

CHAPTER VII

‘True and Only Apostle’: Bishop of Darwin and the ‘Half-Caste’ Problem, 1935-1950

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 worse than that of native children. It is an act of mercy to remove them as soon as possible from surroundings so insecure.¹

Gsell spent 43 years in the Northern Territory. He described the first two decades as ‘years passed in spade-work’.² Yet the remaining two decades were considered ones of consolidation. Notwithstanding the trouble with the pearlers, and interruptions caused by WWII, the 1930s and 40s saw a major expansion within Gsell’s diocese. While work continued apace at Darwin and Nguiu, new parishes and missions were established at Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Arltunga, and Port Keats. Torres Strait missions also came under his control. As the Catholic Church and wider Australian community finally began to address its neglect of First Nations peoples, Gsell was showered with accolades culminating in his elevation to the rank of bishop. This chapter traces the final years of his career. The period saw yet another development in Commonwealth Indigenous policy. The ‘New Deal for Aborigines’ inaugurated the era of assimilation, aiming to incorporate all First Nations’ peoples into mainstream Australian society. Missions played a vital role in realising policy objectives, which continued forced removals of mixed-descent children. It is within this context that the Garden Point Mission (1941-1962) came into being. A key repository for Stolen Generations, this new institution was Gsell’s most controversial legacy and is illustrative of his complicated attitude to his relationship with the Commonwealth. While the new bishop certainly colluded with secular authorities to accomplish a common goal, he did so on his own terms and occasionally in opposition to state aims.

The 1930s put an end to Gsell’s relative obscurity and propelled him into the national spotlight. The controversy with the pearlers earned him great celebrity in mainstream Australia, but even before 1935 small pockets of recognition began to form. As mentioned, Spencer paid special tribute to Gsell in his final book *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (1928), published shortly before

¹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 155.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

his death in 1929. Spencer outlined Gsell's basic approach and lamented there were not more men like him engaged in such efforts.³ In 1928, Charles William Merton Hart (1905-1976), an anthropologist from the University of Sydney, began fieldwork among the Tiwi.⁴ His findings, published in 1930, also helped renew interest in Gsell's mission. Though, at this stage, Hart paid little attention to the influence of Catholic missionaries on Tiwi culture, his observations were an indirect testament, not only to the resilience of the Tiwi people in the face of British colonisation, but also to the value of the missionary presence. He argued 'the absence of a permanent white settlement in their country with its consequent massacres and epidemics', a fact only guaranteed by the declaration of Bathurst Island as a native reserve and the concomitant presence of the Catholic mission, '[has] prevented their numbers being depleted and their social organisation being broken down'.⁵ This relatively favourable situation, assisted by Gsell's gradualism, made possible the study of traditional culture. As curiosity about the Tiwi gained traction, Gsell's story likewise featured in southern newspapers.⁶ Public admiration for the isolated missionary eventually resulted in official recognition.

In May 1935, Weddell was instructed by the office of the Governor General to ascertain Gsell's willingness to become an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE).⁷ Weddell made the appropriate inquiries and replied that Gsell was happy to accept. On 3 June 1935, he was among those recognised in the King's Birthday Honours, and the award was officially conferred by Weddell on 8 June 1936 in a ceremony at Government House, Darwin.⁸ The occasion marked 25 years to the date since Gsell's first Eucharistic Celebration at Nguuu. Gsell declared in his memoir that: 'This I knew, was really a tribute, through me, to all the staff of the Mission – Fathers, Brothers and Sisters: because all had given loyal and devoted service to their God and to their King'.⁹ The award was symbolic recognition of the close partnership between Church and State on the Tiwi Islands. As yet, this partnership was relatively untroubled, though the controversy with the pearlery soon placed it under mild strain. Nevertheless, the accolade reinforced Gsell's good standing in the Australian community.

³ Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 910.

⁴ Ronald Cohen, 'Charles William Merton Hart, 1905-1976', *American Anthropologist* 79 (1977): 111-112.

⁵ C.W.M. Hart, 'The Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Islands', *Oceania* 1, 2 (July 1930): 167-180.

⁶ See for example, 'Bathurst Island Brides', *Melbourne Herald*, 31 March 1934. 1; and 'Bathurst Island: Polygamous Aborigines', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 April 1934. 8.

⁷ 'Birthday Honours 1935 – Sounding Recipients', NAA: A2924, 1935/5.

⁸ 'Honoured by the King', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1935. 6; 'Rev Father Gsell: Presentation of OBE', *Northern Standard*, 9 June 1936. 7.

⁹ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 140.

The Australian Church finally started to take notice of Gsell too. As mentioned, Pius XI was determined to promote and prioritise Catholic missionary endeavour across the globe. It is apparent he became increasingly frustrated with Australian bishops, who continued to obfuscate their responsibilities. In March 1933, Archbishop Filippo Bernardini (1884-1954) replaced Catteneo as Apostolic Delegate. Before his departure, Pius issued Bernardini with a set of written instructions, the most pressing of which was an explicit order to ‘foster as much as possible the work of the Propagation of the Faith and, above all, the Aboriginal Mission’.¹⁰ Anxious to learn more about First Nations peoples, he acquired a copy of *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, wherein he stumbled across Spencer’s glowing testament to Nguuu. It was the first time Bernardini had ever heard of Gsell, and, in partial fulfilment of Pius’ instructions, he decided to bring the relatively obscure missionary to Sydney so that he could share his experiences with the mainstream Church. On 24 March 1934, Bernardini and Gsell addressed clergy and laity at Australia Hall. Gsell delivered a lecture about his decades among the Tiwi and his gradualist approach aimed at children, while Bernardini used the occasion to express his regret that he, a foreigner newly arrived in the country, should be called on to introduce Gsell, who had worked in Australia for 31 years, to the Catholics of Sydney. He paid homage to Gsell and reminded those assembled it was their sacred obligation to support his work.

Gsell’s audience was receptive. Indeed, Bernardini’s arrival coincided with a paradigm shift within the Church and the wider Australian community regarding its attitudes to First Nations peoples. By the 1930s, white Australia began to accept the fact that patiently waiting for an entire race to die out was as callous as it was stupid. In 1932, Adolphus Peter Elkin (1891-1979) was appointed Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, and became president of the Association for the Protection of Native Races the following year.¹¹ Elkin criticised segregation policies which relegated Indigenous people to the margins of society and lobbied state and federal governments to pursue instead a policy of assimilation whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be granted full citizenship and incorporated into the mainstream community.¹²

Indigenous activists, operating alongside non-Indigenous humanitarian and missionary organisations, also came to prominence in this period. In 1933, William Cooper (1861-1941) founded the Australian Aborigines’ League in Melbourne. Their first act was to circulate a

¹⁰ ‘Treatment of Aborigines: Bathurst Island Mission Methods’, *Catholic Press*, 31 May 1934, 19.

¹¹ Austin, *Never Trust a Government Man*, 156-159.

¹² *Ibid.*

petition seeking direct representation in the Australian Parliament and an overhaul of state and federal policies. On 26 January 1938, in partnership with the Aborigines Progressive Association, founded in 1937 by William Ferguson (1882-1950) and Jack Patten (1905-1957) in Dubbo, New South Wales, they observed the first 'Day of Mourning'.¹³ At their conference in Sydney, delegates presented an important counternarrative to the triumphalist vision inherent in official celebrations of 150 years of white colonisation and drew attention to the ongoing mistreatment of First Nations peoples.¹⁴

Due to this activism, perceptions gradually changed in the wider community, including within the Catholic Church. Girola argues many Australian-born clergy began to consider Indigenous issues in the 1930s for three main reasons: pressure from the Vatican, pressure from advocates, and because it also presented an opportunity to move away from the hitherto pervasive interest in Irish politics.¹⁵ He cautions that Catholics in this period did not question the underlying attitudes of colonialism: 'They did not seriously challenge the paternalism towards Aboriginal people that was characteristic of the time and they did not question the belief in the superiority of Western culture and the need to uplift Aborigines to its standards'.¹⁶ Nevertheless, 'they were also motivated by the conviction that the Catholic Church, especially outside the "traditional" mission areas in Northern Australia, needed to abandon a long established habit of neglect towards Aborigines'.¹⁷ The 1934 Eucharistic Congress in Melbourne devoted a full day to discussion on missionary outreach. It was a far cry from the 1928 congress where Indigenous people were ignored entirely.¹⁸

So, it is within this context of renewed Catholic interest in Aboriginal missions that a quiet campaign was begun to elevate Gsell to the rank of bishop. Responsibility for the Torres Strait was transferred from the French Province of the MSCs to that of Australia in 1929. Curiously, however, the Torres Strait remained within the jurisdiction of the Vicariate of Rabaul. On 31 December 1935, the MSC Procurator General in Rome, Rev Emilio Constanzi, wrote to the Prefect of Propaganda, Cardinal Pietro Fumasoni-Biondi (1872-1960), asking this discrepancy

¹³ See Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004).

¹⁴ 'Day of Mourning: Aboriginal Viewpoint', *Age*, 27 January 1938. 17.

¹⁵ Girola, *Rhetoric and Action*, 110.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

be resolved. Acting on advice from Bernardini, he suggested the Torres Strait be incorporated into the Diocese of Victoria and Palmerston, administered by Gsell since 1906.¹⁹

Gsell had been rather busy expanding and consolidating the diocese ever since his status at Nguuu was guaranteed. Each new parish and mission are deserving of their own detailed academic study, which unfortunately falls outside the scope of the present thesis. I limit myself here to a very brief description merely to demonstrate Gsell had proven capable of administering an ever-expanding diocese which could easily accommodate the proposal.

In 1929, Gsell sent Long to Alice Springs to minister to the European population. He was replaced by Rev Patrick Moloney MSC (1877-1961) in January 1935, who established the Little Flower Mission directed towards the Arrernte people who lived on the outskirts of town.²⁰ Meanwhile, Rev Wilfred Dew MSC was sent to Tennant Creek, a mining township located on the traditional lands of the Warumungu people, to access the spiritual needs of the growing population. He oversaw the construction of the Church of Christ the King, which was blessed and opened in October 1936.²¹ While the Catholic Church strengthened its position in Central Australia, Gsell also turned his attention to fields further north. On 20 June 1935, Rev Richard Docherty MSC established a mission at Werntek Nganyai on the traditional lands of the Kardu Diminin clan of the Murrinhpatha language group.²² The Commonwealth assumed the Church intended to renew their mission at New Uniya. Gsell, however, preferred Port Keats, roughly 180 kilometres south-west, because it was isolated from European settlements and supported a large Indigenous population maintaining a traditional lifestyle.²³ Progress at their chosen site was slow, and in 1938 they moved roughly 16 kilometres south to the present location at Wadeye.

Alongside the parish in Darwin, Gsell now coordinated many parishes and missions throughout the Northern Territory. He demonstrated that the diocese enjoyed a promising future and had shown himself a capable leader. Writing to Fumasoni-Biondi in December 1935, Constanzi relayed Bernardini's opinion that, if the proposal to incorporate the Torres Strait into the

¹⁹ Constanzi to Fumasoni-Biondi, 31 December 1935. PFHA: NS 1327, 1008-1015.

²⁰ James Littleton, 'Patrick Moloney MSC', *Leaders in Ministry: Some Remarkable MSC* (Dickson: Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, 2013), 3-19. See also, 'Sacred Heart Mission School, Alice Springs', NAA: A1, 1938/403.

²¹ Thompson, *NT Dreaming*, 66-68.

²² See John Pye, *The Port Keats Story* (Kensington: John Pye, 1973); Thompson, *NT Dreaming*, 59-61; and Deborah C. Gordon, *The Catholic Church and the Status of Aboriginal Women: Port Keats, 1935-58*. PhD thesis, Charles Darwin University, 2004.

²³ Gsell to Weddell, 20 September 1934. NAA: A452, 1955/98; See also, Bernardini to Paterson, 7 April 1934. Ibid.; and Carrodus to Interior, 28 May 1934. Ibid.

Diocese of Victoria and Palmerston were accepted, Gsell should receive a promotion: ‘In fact, after having administered the Diocese for more than 29 years with so much self-denial and many sacrifices, raising its prestige, to have given clear evidence of capacity, Fr Gsell is well worthy of the appointment as Bishop of the said Diocese.’²⁴ Propaganda paused to reflect, and in the meantime renewed Gsell’s position as Apostolic Administrator for a further ten years in December 1936.²⁵

In May 1937, the newly appointed Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Giovanni Panico (1895-1962), wrote to Fumasoni-Biondi asking that the Torres Strait be united with Victoria and Palmerston and that Gsell be consecrated bishop:

I end this respectful report by allowing myself to make a humble and subordinate suggestion. Father Xavier Gsell, current administrator of the Diocese of Port Victoria and Palmerston, should not only be confirmed in his place but should be given proof of confidence for the immense work that he, with unspeakable sacrifice, has done and does for the aborigine of Australia. For 23 years [sic] he has worked as an Apostolic Administrator with self-denial and has given clear evidence of his abilities. And a holy Missionary, considered here by all as the true and only apostle of the aborigine, of whom he deeply knows the mentality, the uses, the language, and has managed to acquire their full trust. The Australian Government, with close attention and with great interest knows the work of this missionary ... has always helped [the] mission and seriously wants it to succeed in the future.²⁶

On 18 January 1938, Constanzi sent a bishop nomination report to Fumasoni-Biondi. As was customary, Constanzi nominated three candidates for the position – Gsell, Henschke, and McGrath – but made no serious consideration of the latter two. His report detailed Gsell’s

²⁴ Constanzi to Fumasoni-Biondi, 31 December 1935. PFHA: NS 1327, 1008-1015. ‘In tale circostanza S.E. Mons. Bernardini aggiungeva che la S. Congregazione mettesse in atto questa proposta, il P. Saverio Gsell potrebbe essere designato per una meritata promozione. Infatti, dopo avere amministrato la Diocesi per più di 29 anni con tanta abnegazione e con tanti sacrifici, rialzandone il prestigio, ad aver dato prove evidenti di capacità, il P. Gsell è ben dengo della nomina a Vescovo della detta Diocesi, con il vantaggio immense del minister sue e dei confratelli.’

²⁵ Constanzi to Fumasoni-Biondi, 14 December 1936. PFHA: NS 1327, 1025-1027.

²⁶ Panico to Fumasoni-Biondi, 19 May 1937. PFHA: NS 1327, 1030-1034: ‘Finisco questo rispettoso Rapporto col permettermi di fare un umile e subordinato suggerimento. Il Padre Saverio Gsell, attuale amministratore della Diocesi di Port Victoria e Palmerston, non solo dovrebbe essere confermato nella suo posto ma gli si dovrebbe dare una prova di fiducia per l’immenso lavoro che egli, con indicibili sacrifici, ha fatto e fa per gli aborigine d’Australia. Da 23 anni lavora come Amministratore Apostolico con abnegazione ed ha dato prove evidenti capacita. E un santo Missionario, considerate qui da tutti come il vero e l’unico apostolo degli aborigine, dei quali conosce profondamente la mentalita, gli usi, la lingua, ed e riuscito ad acquistarsi la loro piena fiducia. Il Governo Australiano, she seque da vicino e con molto interesse l’opera di questo erico missionario, lo tiene in gran concetto, ha aiutato sempre la sua missione e da serio affidamento di volerla succorrere nell’avvenire.’

career, paying particular attention to the missionary's popularity with government authorities and his unfailing commitment to the conversion of First Nations peoples.²⁷ Constanzi addressed earlier criticisms of Gsell's management style, explaining he possessed 'a rather rough nature' which had eventually given way to a 'sweet and patient virtue' allowing Gsell to ask much of those with whom he worked.²⁸ Notwithstanding Gsell's recent attempts to invoke the help of the Commonwealth in 'protecting the rights' of the Tiwi and in 'defending them against the immorality of Japanese fishermen', he also affirmed Gsell 'never mixed with political matters or with secular affairs unrelated to his spiritual mission'.²⁹ This was intended to allay any concerns about partisan politics which could be deemed harmful to the reputation of the Church. While noting Henschke's 'good performance' as parish priest in Darwin and McGrath's 'great zeal and compassion for the aborigines', Constanzi concluded: 'It can be affirmed with certainty that the missionaries and the religious of the Diocese, the faithful and the civil authorities would be greatly surprised if in place of Fr Gsell another person was elected for the administration of the Diocese.'³⁰ Fumasoni-Biondi forwarded Constanzi's report to Bishop Alfredo Ottaviani (1890-1979), Councillor of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, and likewise declared his preference for the incumbent.

Gsell was appointed bishop on 29 March 1938 (see Figures 32 and 33). He was 65 years old. As the name 'Victoria and Palmerston' now carried negligible meaning, his vast territory was summarily renamed the Diocese of Darwin. Upon the shield of his personal coat of arms, he devised an image of the Sacred Heart above crossed spears and a boomerang (Figure 34). The barbed spears were highly suggestive of the *arawunkiri* ceremonial spears used by Tiwi senior men to denote status and wealth. Their presence in Gsell's ecclesiastical heraldry affirmed almost three decades lived among the Tiwi. As the Tiwi did not possess boomerang technology, the inclusion of this latter motif was clearly intended to symbolise Gsell's more general ministry to the First Nations peoples of mainland Australia. The Sacred Heart was, of course, the emblem of Gsell's religious order and evoked the boundless love of God for all humanity.

²⁷ Constanzi to Fumasoni-Biondi, 18 January 1938. PFHA: NS 1442b, 844-854. 'Il suo modo di trattare e civilizzare gli aborigeni fu costantemente encomiato dalle commissioni governative che di tempo in tempo ispezionano la riserva di Bathurst'.

²⁸ Ibid., 'Di natura piuttosto rude, è divenuto per virtù dolce e paziente; durissimo con se stesso, si può permettere di domandare molto a coloro che lavorano con lui'.

²⁹ Ibid., 'Pur non esitando in caso di bisogno a invocare l'aiuto del governo per proteggere i diritti dei suoi aborigeni e difenderli contro l'immortalità dei pescatori giapponesi, non si mescola mai in cose politiche né in affari secolari estranei alla sua missione spirituale'.

³⁰ Ibid., '[Henschke] Dedicò la sua vita sacerdotale, con molto zelo e buon rendimento, al ministero nella diocesi di Vittoria e Palmerston'; '[McGrath] Molto pio; nutre grande zelo e compassione per gli aborigeni'; 'Si può affermare con sicurezza che i missionari e le religiose della Diocesi, i fedeli e le Autorità civili sarebbero grandemente sorpresi se al posto del P. Gsell si elegesse un'altra persona per l'amministrazione della Diocesi.'

He took for his motto the Latin phrase *in hoc signo vinces*, meaning ‘In this sign, you will conquer’, which comes from Lactantius’ account of a vision of the *labarum* (Chi-Rho) by Constantine the Great (272-337) prior to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312). Popularly used in military insignia, Gsell’s motto demonstrated an unbreakable confidence in the ultimate triumph of Christian endeavour. He furthermore adopted the *Croix de Lorraine* as his processional cross.³¹ Like the Patriarchal Cross, it differs from Latin and Greek variants insofar as it has two crossbeams. The emblem was used by French Jesuit missionaries in South America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also served as a rallying sign for French patriots in Alsace-Lorraine throughout the period of German occupation (1871-1918). During WWII, the cross would become the symbol of the Free French Forces (Figure 35) under Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970). In choosing the *Croix de Lorraine* as his processional cross, Gsell once more rejected his German birth and reaffirmed his cultural identification with France. Taken together, these emblems made a very definitive statement about who Gsell believed he was as a priest and who he would be as a bishop: a French missionary of the Sacred Heart, fighting for Christ among the First Nations peoples of Australia.

Gsell was finally consecrated on Pentecost Sunday, 5 June 1938, at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church, Randwick. The ceremony was officiated by Panico, accompanied by Norman Gilroy (1896-1977), then Coadjutor Archbishop of Sydney, and Joseph Bach MSC (1872-1943), Vicar Apostolic of the Gilbert Islands, as co-consecrators.³² Among the other prominent clergy were the Archbishop of Wellington, Thomas O’Shea SM (1870-1954), Francis Augustine Henschke – William Henschke’s younger brother, then Auxiliary Bishop of Wagga Wagga – and the recently appointed MSC Provincial Superior, Joseph Mortimer Kerrins (1899-1978). Archbishop Kelly was an apology owing to ill-health. Among the notable laity were the French Consul-General, Jean Trémoulet, and Dr Kirkland, who had acted as Chief Protector in the Northern Territory throughout the 1930s and was appointed Chief Medical Officer in April 1939. Bishop Henschke delivered the main sermon. It was an eloquent tribute to the new Bishop of Darwin, firmly placing Gsell within the missionary tradition of Saints Paul, Patrick, and Francis Xavier. Henschke’s address also served to redress a measure of Australian racism, aiming to reverse the structural neglect which had hitherto afflicted the Church:

³¹ Stephen Hackett, ‘A Centenary Celebration: Father Francis Xavier Gsell’, *Cathedral Magazine* 9 (September 2006): 22-24.

³² ‘Veteran Missionary Becomes Bishop of Darwin: Right Rev F. X. Gsell, M.S.C, D.D., Consecrated at Randwick’, *Catholic Press*, 9 June 1938. 18.

Often alone, often forgotten and unaided, especially by Australia, in tropic heat, living on native foods, he has built up a thriving little Catholic community. Their skins may be black, but their souls, regenerated by Baptism are bright; they believe the same truths, receive the same Sacraments, lead the same – and often a better – Catholic life than we do: and they are united by the same Pope. ... Return, then, my Lord, to your life's work, to your beloved blacks, no longer a simple missionary but with all the powers of the Apostles themselves, whose successor you are.³³

Gsell's consecration affirmed that, rather than a lost cause, Indigenous people were more than capable of living sincere Christians lives. It served as rebuke to sceptics and confirmed the renewed commitment of the institutional Church to missionary outreach. Times were clearly changing. At last, Gsell received the recognition from his own Church that had long been the exclusive purview of the secular government of his adopted county.

The first few years of Gsell's episcopate were preoccupied with the growth of the parishes and missions at Port Keats, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, as well as Darwin. To these were added the longstanding Torres Strait parish at Thursday Island, as well as a mission at Hammond Island which was founded by Rev Owen McDermott MSC on the initiative of Doyle in 1929.³⁴ With Gsell as bishop, Henschke was promoted to vicar general, and McGrath became Mission Superior at Nguiu.

The mission to the Tiwi had come a long way since Gsell's arrival in 1911. By 1938, it boasted a church, convent, presbytery, workshop, saw-mill, store, stock-yards, milking shed, boat shed, kitchen, and dining house, as well as two schools and two dormitories, all surrounded by a host of small houses in which many Tiwi families resided on a seasonal basis. 150 acres of land was cleared, 50 acres of which was under cultivation. The mission produced crops of potato, peanuts, sugar cane, coconuts, citrus fruit, bananas, and mangos. There was also about 150 head of cattle, 150 goats, 28 pigs, and 15 horses. In his annual report, Gsell stated the entire population of Bathurst and Melville Islands, roughly 1,000 people, visited Nguiu throughout the year, though the population remained highly transient.³⁵

³³ 'Veteran Missionary', 18.

³⁴ See Tyrone C. Deere ed. *Stone on Stone: Story of Hammond Island Mission* (Thursday Island: Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church, 1994); See also Anne Gardiner, *The Flame in the North: Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, 1908-2008* (Darwin: Anne Gardiner, 2008).

³⁵ Gsell to Abbott, 31 December 1938. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

Mission efforts were still directed towards the maintenance and education of children (see Figures 27, 29, and 30). Indeed, even after three decades, Gsell had yet to claim a single adult convert. The baptismal register included roughly 450 souls, but these belonged to infants and adults *in articulo mortis*.³⁶ The bulk of the mission population remained school-aged children. Of these, 18 – 10 boys and 8 girls – were children of mixed-descent under the ongoing control of OLSH nuns. Their participation in the education system, therefore, was guaranteed. The involvement of local children was more variable. There were 172 – 80 boys and 92 girls – Tiwi enrolled throughout the year. The girls, with parental assent, were quartered in the convent and subject to the same supervisions as the mixed-descent children, whereas the boys were free to come and go as they pleased. This meant around 50 absconded to the pearling camp while the fleet was anchored near Pirlangimipi. Attendance rose again once the fleet departed.³⁷ Nevertheless, Gsell's gradualist policy had laid a very solid foundation upon which McGrath could build. In total, Gsell had claimed 130 wives, sanctioned numerous monogamous unions and officiated at nine sacramental marriages (see Figure 26). Peter and Sheila Forrest estimate there were roughly 300 Tiwi Catholics in 1942.³⁸

McGrath remained at Nguiu until 1948. He became fluent in the Tiwi language and is widely credited with the conversion of the entire population. In 1935, he established the Xavier School for boys. He conducted lessons in Tiwi, teaching English as a second language rather than the one of primary instruction. McGrath also began to preach in Tiwi and to conduct Eucharistic celebrations and catechism *en plein air* (see Figure 28). A. Capell notes McGrath gathered male Elders on a Sunday morning once religious services concluded and discussed aspects of their traditional beliefs:

He would get them to tell him some particular myth of importance to the theology of native religion. Then he would discuss it with them, try to show them its weakness, facts for which it did no account, its moral weakness, and so forth, and frequently was able to get admission from them that Christianity was superior in this or that respect. If he never succeeded in baptising all the elders, at least he had them on his side, and the rising generation was the more easily gathered in.³⁹

³⁶ Flynn, *Northern Gateway*, 92.

³⁷ Gsell to Abbott, 31 December 1938. NAA: A431, 1951/1294.

³⁸ Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 83.

³⁹ A. Capell, 'Interpreting Christianity to Australian Aborigines', *International Review of Missions* (April 1959): 145-165.

In this way, McGrath continued Gsell's slow grind against traditional Tiwi culture, gradually eradicating practices and beliefs which were deemed incompatible with Christian faith and morality while simultaneously converting more and more people to Catholicism. When McGrath died in 1982, he was buried at Nguui. The booklet which accompanied his requiem mass included a Tiwi account of his time at Bathurst Island after Gsell's departure:

Api ngarratuwu yipangiragamini wungukwi nginingawila.

Well he used to speak our language.

Waya ngarra wangatamiya ngirripirripunjingamini kangi jurra.

He alone we listened to in church.

Karri tayikuwanga kapi yuwunimarrinyayi.

When he found those with lots of women.

'Yita wanga natingala nyimarrimiringarra.'

'You marry only one!'

Ngarra awarra juwunjirrikurimpura.

He left that rule behind.

Ngini waya awarra natingala ngatipungumarrimuwu.

That we all marry just one.

Karrikuwani manya jinjara jajirrima awatirimarrimuwu.

Nobody anywhere marries two or three.

Awarra nimarra yinirimani kangi jurrapa,

He did that talk in church,

Wungunkila yinipangiragamini nginingawila.

And only talk our language.⁴⁰

Tiwi oral histories consider that while Gsell first brought Christianity to their shores, it was McGrath who gave them a deeper understanding of this faith by preaching in their own language. As Gsell had done before him, McGrath respected the autonomy and free conscience of the people with whom he lived and worked. His conversion strategy continued to be built upon a foundation of mutual dialogue, rather than the blatant imposition of a foreign religion. While many Tiwi adopted Catholicism, an albeit ever decreasing number did not. Their decision was respected. Nevertheless, polygamy was extremely rare by the 1950s.⁴¹ This transformation in Tiwi marriage practices was perhaps the most dramatic and enduring legacy

⁴⁰ 'Requiem Mass for the Repose of the Soul of Father John McGrath MSC', 18 September 1982. Diocesan Archives, Darwin: Series 071, 008.

⁴¹ Hart, et al. *Tiwi of North Australia* (1988), 118.

of Gsell's three decades on Bathurst Island; even if the adoption of monogamy still took place within appropriate Tiwi structures as previously noted. Under McGrath, ceremonies such as the *Pukumani* and the *Kulama* continued, and it was not until the 1950s and 1960s, as Laura Rademaker observes, that the Church began to take harsh measures against traditional beliefs, banning Catholics from attending what they termed 'pagan' rites.⁴² Disappointingly, Gsell and McGrath's patience was superseded by zealotry as subsequent missionaries demanded complete conformity with orthodox Catholicism. Unfortunately, such developments fall outside the scope of the present thesis but some final observations on these will be offered in the conclusion.

Gsell's first, and arguably most significant, project as bishop was to instigate the establishment of a new mission on Melville Island, exclusively for the education and training of mixed-descent children. As we have seen, there was always a modest number of mixed-descent children living under the care and control of OLSH nuns on Bathurst Island. In 1928 Gsell reported there were six mixed-descent children – two boys and four girls – enrolled in the school at Nguiu. The number increased to 11 – six boys and five girls – in 1935, and 18 – 10 boys and eight girls – in 1938.⁴³ In 1939, Gsell was approached by the newly appointed Director of the Native Affairs Branch, Ernest Chinnery (1887-1972), and asked if the Church was willing to accommodate Catholic children then residing in government-run institutions for 'half-castes'. He was indeed. Gsell decided that a site near the Fort Dundas ruins would make the best location for such an enterprise owing to the ready supply of freshwater. Hearn notes that Gsell initially had misgivings about locating a large mixed-descent settlement on the traditional lands of the Tiwi, but he eventually set these to one side as no suitable alternative presented itself.⁴⁴

A control station had been established there in 1939 to prevent liaisons between pearling crews and Tiwi people. In the same year, Bill Harney (1895-1962), an officer of the Native Affairs Branch, was tasked with rounding up so-called 'incorrigible natives' living around Darwin. He detained 89 people and brought them to Pirlangimpi where they were directed to build roads and other public works.⁴⁵ These people were moved further west to Milikapiti (Snake Bay) and the nascent settlement transferred to the Catholic Church.

⁴² Laura Rademaker, 'Going Native: Converting Narratives in Tiwi Histories of Twentieth-Century Missions', in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 70, 1 (January 2019): 98-118. See also Venbrux, *Death in the Tiwi Islands*, 42.

⁴³ See NAA: A431 1951/1924.

⁴⁴ Hearn, *Theology of Mission*, 41.

⁴⁵ Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 81.

Before examining the foundation of the new mission in detail, it is first necessary to identify the significant changes to Commonwealth Indigenous policy which precipitated its establishment. 1939 saw yet another development in government approaches to First Nations peoples. In January, then Minister for the Interior, John McEwen (1900-1980), announced what he termed a 'New Deal for Northern Territory Aborigines'.⁴⁶ As we have seen, mainstream Australia finally began to accept the truth that First Nations peoples were not doomed to extinction. Owing to the work of Indigenous activists and non-Indigenous advocates, Australians also began to question the unequal status of First Nations peoples and particularly the discriminatory legislation embodied in the various 'protection' acts. In March 1936, for example, the Northern Territory Half-Caste Association successfully lobbied the Commonwealth for amendments to the *Aboriginal Ordinance*. These allowed the Chief Protector to exempt certain persons of mixed-descent from the provisions of the ordinance, effectively meaning they were no longer considered Indigenous. Those who secured exemptions were able to enter prohibited areas in urban centres but could no longer enter reserves. Nor could they associate with friends or family who were still classified as Aboriginal. Individuals were also required to carry identification cards which showed their exemption status.⁴⁷ Though coming at great personal cost and leaving much to be desired, these amendments proved Indigenous people were deserving of citizenship and highlighted problems within existing legislation.

McEwen aimed to remedy the situation by assimilating every First Nations person into mainstream Australia. He intended to ensure that all Indigenous peoples, whether of full- or mixed-descent, came to live as white Australians. These policies still carried ethnocentric assumptions about the supposed superiority of western 'civilisation', and it can be very convincingly argued that the aim of assimilation was the destruction of traditional Indigenous languages and cultures. Nevertheless, it represented a significant departure from the racist beliefs about the intrinsic biological inferiority of First Nations peoples which had informed previous 'protection' policies. McEwen proposed a complete overhaul of the system, including increased funding to health, education and technical training programs, as well as for civic and (Christian) religious instruction. Missionary organisations, already providing these services, would receive a substantial boost in financial support, provided they complied with standards set by the Commonwealth. This was welcome news to Gsell, who had pestered the government

⁴⁶ 'New Deal for NT Aborigines', *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 17 January 1939. 9.

⁴⁷ Cummings, *Take This Child*, 27; Austin, *Never Trust a Government Man*, 292-312.

for increased funding for over a decade. Though the numbers would initially be low, McEwen believed that even full-descent Indigenous people would eventually qualify for the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship, becoming exempt from the ordinance once they reached a requisite level of assimilation.

In April 1939, a new Native Affairs Branch was established in Darwin and the position of Chief Protector abolished. In December 1938, and against Cook's advice, the public functions of the Aboriginals Department and the Health Department were separated. Asked which department he preferred to run, Cook replied 'both or neither'.⁴⁸ He resigned and returned to the University of Sydney. In his place, the Commonwealth appointed Chinnery as the first Director of the Native Affairs Branch. He was a noted anthropologist who had worked in various administrative roles in New Guinea, including as head of the Native Affairs Department. Between July and September 1938, Chinnery accompanied McEwen and Abbott on a tour of the Northern Territory, assessing the living and working conditions of First Nations peoples.⁴⁹ Chinnery's subsequent report formed the basis of McEwen's assimilation policy.⁵⁰

The 'New Deal' also aimed to address the so-called 'half-caste problem'. Whereas Spencer unsuccessfully sought to eliminate the growing population of mixed-descent people in the Northern Territory through segregation and Cook attempted to do likewise through their biological absorption into the white race, the new assimilation policy was less preoccupied with preventing miscegenation than it was with incorporating mixed-descent people into mainstream Australian society. Though authorities obviously continued to draw distinctions between full-descent and mixed-descent people, the focus was cultural not eugenic. It was no less harmful. Indeed the 'New Deal' was not exactly welcome news to persons of mixed-descent who had not qualified for exemptions and who were still in need of 'training' in order to attain full citizenship. One may have expected that a more progressive Indigenous policy would allow 'half-caste' children to remain with their own immediate or extended families. Instead, the policy of forcibly removing mixed-descent children from their Aboriginal mothers was continued. Those children born within wedlock, usually to a parent who had already secured exemptions, were mostly safe, yet, as before, no such legal protections existed for

⁴⁸ Ellen Kettle, 'Cook, Cecil Evelyn Aufrere (1897-1985)', *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2008), 108-109.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Gray, "'Mr Chinnery Should be Given the Recognition He Deserves": EWP Chinnery in the Northern Territory', *Journal of Northern Territory History* 15 (January 2004): 21-33.

⁵⁰ See Chinnery to Haddon, 24 April 1939. In *Haddon Papers*, Series 3000-3999: Publications, Various, 1888-1940. Subseries 3055: Correspondence, April 1939. Cambridge University Library (AJCP ref: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1264301515/view>).

children born of unions deemed 'irregular' by the Commonwealth. In many practical respects, there was very little difference between new policies and the old. Yet the most significant change regarded the involvement of missionary organisations in implementing them.

In 1928, Bleakley recommended that missions be made solely responsible for the welfare and education of 'half-caste' children.⁵¹ But Cook took a dim view of missionaries and insisted such children remain the responsibility of the state. As a result, stolen children were routinely taken to the Kahlin Compound in Darwin, the Bungalow in Alice Springs, and a government-run institution at Pine Creek. Once Cook resigned, however, Chinnery was able to revisit the issue. He agreed with Bleakley and set about transferring children to mission stations across the Territory, usually on isolated islands. This was a cost-saving exercise as much as anything else. McEwen and Chinnery may have believed missionaries were best placed to provide education and technical training, and they were certainly willing to increase subsidies, but the cost of devolving responsibility to charitable organisations was still far less than had the government undertaken the task. In June 1940, Carrodus stated there were 175 mixed-descent children in government institutions in the Northern Territory, costing the Commonwealth approximately £6,300 per annum, or around £36 per head. In consultation with the Catholic Church, he concluded that missions would only require a subsidy of £18 per child, cutting costs in half.⁵² In June 1941, Abbott asserted that the cost of establishing a single new government-run institution was estimated at around £16,000. In contrast, the Catholics wanted £2,555, the Anglicans £3,700, and Methodists £3,975, which effectively saved the Commonwealth close to £6,000.⁵³

In April 1940, Gsell tasked Rev William 'Bill' Connors MSC with establishing the new Garden Point Mission. Connors was an Australian-born missionary priest who had spent the previous 13 years in Port Moresby, where he was known to Chinnery, and at the Palm Island Reserve.⁵⁴ He enjoyed Gsell's confidence and began negotiations with the Commonwealth. Connors secured a land grant of 170 square kilometres, as well as £2,555 in funding which he supplemented with further donations from Propaganda.⁵⁵ In September, he employed 30 Tiwi men and women to begin work on the new mission site and in January 1941 they were joined

⁵¹ Bleakley, *Report*, 29.

⁵² Carrodus to McEwen, 18 June 1940. NAA: A431, 1951/1399.

⁵³ Abbott to Carrodus, 27 June 1941. *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ John Pye, 'Early Days at the Mission at Garden Point', in Thecla Brogan ed *The Garden Point Mob*, 1-12 (Casuarina: Historical Society of the Northern Territory, 1990).

⁵⁵ Connors to Chinnery, 23 April 1940. NAA: A431, 1951/1399.

by Br Edward ‘Ted’ Bennett MSC. They cleared land, constructed two dormitories, and established vegetable gardens in preparation for the arrival of the children. In February 1941, Melville Island was finally gazetted an Aboriginal reserve.⁵⁶ Gsell had long recommended this measure as a remedy to the incursions of the pearlers, but the Commonwealth was unable to comply because the entire island was leased to Vestey Brothers. Shortly before his death, however, William Vestey (1859-1940) agreed to surrender the leases, making it possible to create a reserve and effectively rendering both islands under Catholic control.⁵⁷ Connors named the mission Our Lady of Victories but it was more commonly known as Garden Point.

Cummings estimates there were 187 mixed-descent children – 89 boys and 98 girls – still living in government-run institutions in 1941.⁵⁸ Of these, 50 were Anglican, 104 Methodist, and 33 Catholic. Pursuant to McEwen’s policy, the Kahlin Compound had been closed in 1939 and the children relocated to Pine Creek while they waited for missionary organisations to finalise appropriate accommodation. The Bungalow eventually followed suit in early 1942. Throughout 1941, the Methodists were taken to Croker Island, the Anglicans split between Groote Eylandt and a new home in Alice Springs, and the Catholics sent to Garden Point (see Map 13).⁵⁹

The first children arrived at Garden Point in April 1941. They included 18 boys from government institutions and a further 22 boys already under the guardianship of the Church either at the Darwin Convent or Nguuu. They ranged in age from two to 14 years and were relegated to Bennett. In June, they were joined by 15 girls from the mainland and a further 14 girls from Nguuu. These ranged in age from eighteen months to 14 years.⁶⁰ Stanton asserts the foundation group were originally taken from all over the Territory, and included Warumungu children from Tennant Creek, Anmatyerre children from Ti-Tree, Gurindji and Warlpiri children from the Kalkarindji and Daguragu (Wave Hill) district, as well as Larrakia and other First Nations children from Darwin and Pine Creek (see Maps 14, and 16).⁶¹ Among the number were also Tiwi/Japanese children purchased by Gsell throughout the 1930s. Care and control of the children was devolved to three OLSH nuns who had accompanied the girls in June. Sr Annunciata Dew-White was placed in charge. She worked with Sr Antonius Shelley

⁵⁶ ‘Melville Island is a Native Reserve’, *Northern Standard*, 25 February 1941. 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Cummings, *Take This Child*, 45.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Stanton, *Coloureds and Catholics*, 161.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

in the co-ed school, while Sr Eucharia Pearce took over the kitchen. Tiwi people, including married couples, were also employed at Garden Point. Indeed, it appears Gsell's initial misgivings about locating a mixed-descent settlement on tribal lands were unwarranted. As Stanton attests, over the subsequent decades: 'All Coloured inmates of Garden Point Mission were totally accepted into the local community during and after their Catholic mission experiences had ended and were to be regarded as Tiwi by the Tiwi Islanders'.⁶²

The girls were not at Garden Point for long before WWII forced a retreat. The impact of the war on the Northern Territory will be discussed in greater detail below. Suffice to say that, on 18 February 1942, OLSH sisters and the girls were evacuated from Pirlangimpi, just in time to be in Darwin for the first Japanese air-raid.⁶³ While the boys and their MSC guardians remained behind, their female counterparts were taken to Alice Springs and then Melbourne, where they were guests of the Loretto Sisters at Mandeville Hall (see Figure 37). A little later, they relocated to Carrieton near Port Augusta in South Australia to wait out hostilities.⁶⁴ The girls did not return to Garden Point until April 1945. By this time, Connors was replaced by Rev William 'Bill' Flynn MSC who set about expanding the mission which now accommodated 94 children. Dew-White remained in charge of the OLSH at Garden Point until 1958.⁶⁵ The embryonic settlement matured over the next decade. To dormitories and gardens were added a wharf, school, church, hospital, maternity home, and store. Residents were engaged in mission industries, including carpentry, stock breeding, tobacco cultivation, and even crocodile hunting. The first marriages between inmates took place in 1947. Couples were encouraged to remain and build houses of their own in an area nearby which came to be known as St Anne's Village.⁶⁶ While some chose to return to Darwin, a significant number remained on Melville Island and even those who left returned to Garden Point for Christmas.⁶⁷ The Welfare Branch eventually assumed responsibility for Garden Point in 1967. Peter and Sheila Forrest note that in 1976 there were around 250 Tiwi and 50 others living at Pirlangimpi: 'This population included many of the children who had been sent to Garden Point and had chosen to stay and make their lives there'.⁶⁸

⁶² Ibid., 161.

⁶³ Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 81.

⁶⁴ Pye, 'Early Days at the Mission', 11.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁶ Pye, *Tiwi Islands*, 84.

⁶⁷ Venard, *History of the Australian Province*, 175.

⁶⁸ Peter and Sheila Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 81.

It is not intended to provide a comprehensive history of Garden Point. Unfortunately, such an undertaking falls outside the scope of the present thesis and would require an entirely separate project to do any sort of justice. However, it is worth examining in the broadest sense here because the new enterprise was illustrative of Gsell's relationship with the Commonwealth.

Ganter argues that Gsell always 'strove to keep government intervention at arm's length. His annual reports contained perfectly balanced budgets, always in round figures: £200 in – £200 out; £650 in – £650 out. He did not want his mission workers to become Protectors of Aborigines and have to administer government policy.'⁶⁹ Throughout his career, Gsell was anxious to avoid becoming a mere agent of the Commonwealth. In part, this was the consequence of self-preservation. Gsell worried his work among the Tiwi would be undermined if missionaries were given coercive powers and equated with police. Keeping the government at a respectful distance also allowed a certain level of flexibility and independence in the pursuit of his own agenda. Though Gsell accepted Commonwealth grants and assistance, he did so as a partner with the government, not as an employee, and his full cooperation was only guaranteed when his own interests aligned. As we have seen, Gsell supported Spencer's segregation and protection policies simply because they harmonised perfectly with his own policy of isolation and missionary gradualism. That Spencer's aim was to preserve a so-called 'dying race' was irrelevant to Gsell, whose actual objective was the Christian conversion of First Nations peoples. Similarly, despite his support for the racially mixed community of Darwin, Gsell manipulated anxieties which lay at the heart of Cook's eugenicist policies in order to galvanise the Commonwealth into removing Asian pearlers from the Tiwi Islands. While at first glance it may appear Gsell faithfully implemented McEwen and Chinnery's assimilation policies, a closer examination reveals he did so very much on his own terms.

Gsell had long maintained that the Christian conversion of First Nations peoples could only be achieved by concentrating on children rather than adults: 'As I have suggested before, the great thing is to take these children when they are young, when their minds are receptive. I have always been emphatic on this point'.⁷⁰ Given his ethnocentric dismissiveness of traditional culture, Gsell was clearly amenable to a government policy which promised to deliver potentially hundreds of Indigenous children into the Church. Isolated from the influence of their own families, they could be 'lifted' from their 'condition of moral squalor' and turned into good Catholics. But the overarching policy objective of assimilation into mainstream

⁶⁹ Ganter, 'Gsell', <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>.

⁷⁰ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 154.

Australian society did not receive the same enthusiasm at Garden Point. Gsell was always wary of the presumed corrupting influence of white society on Indigenous peoples. This belief motivated his efforts to transform Bathurst Island into a native reserve and it ultimately determined mission policy on Melville Island too. One can argue this subverted, to some extent, the official aims of government assimilation.

As we have seen, Chinnery intended for mixed-descent children to return to urban centres once they completed their schooling on remote island missions. Sufficiently trained and educated, they would qualify for exemptions and be assimilated into white society. It is apparent Gsell was initially willing to cooperate with Commonwealth policy. In fact, it mirrored what Gsell had already done at Nguiu. But in complying with government, he faced some opposition from Flynn and Dew-White who believed it was preferable for the mixed-descent people to remain at Garden Point. In June 1945, Hilda Abbott (1890-1984), the Administrator's wife, approached Dew-White and asked that one of the girls be allowed to work for her as a housemaid. The nun refused, explaining this was contrary to mission policy as she understood it. During a brief stay in Darwin, Gsell took two girls aside and told them they were free to work for Abbott if they wished. The girls declined and told Dew-White what had happened. Relaying the episode to Kerrins, Flynn remarked: 'I approve wholeheartedly of the Sister's action ... I intend to do my best to keep the girls here, where they have some chance, even though it means crossing swords with the Bishop and Mrs Abbott.'⁷¹ In October, Flynn asserted: 'In my opinion, to send them to Darwin at the present juncture would be equivalent to sending them to their moral and spiritual destruction. I said this to the Bishop, but my statement was brushed aside.'⁷² Flynn believed the best policy was 'to encourage the children to marry and settle down' at Garden Point.⁷³ It appears Gsell was willing to give Flynn a chance and, with time, came to share his vision.

In his memoir, Gsell reflected: 'I must admit that our attempts to look after half-castes on Bathurst Island had not proved permanently successful when, as happened, they left school to become the servants or employees of white men, only to be carried away by the examples set by their masters'.⁷⁴ In order to avoid the invariable 'corruption' of white society, Gsell reiterated his unshakable faith in missionary isolation. As he had done at Nguiu with some success among the full-descent Tiwi, Gsell hoped mixed-descent married couples could be

⁷¹ Flynn to Kerrins, 4 June 1945. MSC Archives, Kensington.

⁷² Flynn to Kerrins, 3 October 1945. MSC Archives, Kensington.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 154.

entreated to remain at Pirlangimpi and form a productive Christian village alongside missionary authorities.⁷⁵ He suggested that Garden Point was well on its way to achieving this ideal: ‘Whether a dream of Utopia or not, I had the satisfaction of seeing the beginning of my little City of Co-operation a short time before my work came to a close. ... Under the stimulating guidance of Father Flynn and Sister Annunciata [Dew-White], Garden Point seems well on the way to inaugurating a Golden Age.’⁷⁶ By fostering this vision of a Christian cooperative on an Aboriginal reserve, the Catholic Church upheld its own policy of separation and undermined a key aspect of assimilation objectives. This demonstrates once more that Gsell was only interested in implementing government policy insofar as it aligned with his own aims. He wanted to make good Catholics, not necessarily assimilated Australians.

Nevertheless, a great many aspects of the Commonwealth’s assimilation agenda were realised at Garden Point. Children were still coerced by police from their biological families – from mothers who loved them – and taken to willing missionaries on a remote island thousands of kilometres away. Their education in the English language and the inculcation of the Catholic faith necessarily involved the destruction of their traditional language, culture and religion. Cut from kin and Country, many never saw their homes again. They became the Stolen Generations. As Stanton argues: ‘the children taken to Garden Point were subjected to restrictive and quite deliberate re-education in a totally foreign environment. They were isolated, and confined and exposed to cultural values, ideologies and behaviour patterns very different to the environment from whence they came.’⁷⁷

Gsell’s response to the invariable trauma caused by forced removals was one of crushing paternalism, as the epigraph which opened this chapter plainly illustrates. He was convinced that children lived under conditions of material and moral neglect and dismissed any accusations of cruelty as naïve. He believed removals were an act of mercy and the opportunities afforded to children far greater than had they remained in ‘native camps’.⁷⁸ He maintained this view for the rest of his life. At no point in his memoir did Gsell consider the impact of forced removals on the mothers of these children. The unimaginable depths of their pain and suffering were brushed aside. His ‘compassion’ in these situations only extended to the children.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 155.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 155-156.

⁷⁷ Stanton, *Coloureds and Catholics*, 165.

⁷⁸ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 155.

The legacy of Garden Point continues to be complex. Despite the anguish of separation, many former inmates held fond memories of their childhood at Garden Point and remained committed Catholics in the Darwin Diocese. In 1990, Thecla Brogan compiled a collection of stories to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the mission. Alongside contributions from the OLSH and MSCs, were included many anecdotes from Stolen Generations persons which paint a picture of happiness and industry on an island paradise.⁷⁹ As Stanton asserts, the inmates at Garden Point ‘have their own various and conflicting stories that range from happy memories to the usual stories of abuse, separation and religious indoctrination. However, in the main part, the majority speak of happier experiences than some of the familiar stories we have come to hear about and from the Stolen Generations at other religious and government institutions.’⁸⁰ Peter Brogan’s reflections are emblematic of the complexities of experiences:

The place in which the children of Garden Point grew up and which they loved and looked upon as their own country lasted only 28 years. All these people grew up together and the Island was truly ‘one enchanted Island’. Anyone knowing their early life and the sadness in the lives of many of them in later years would not begrudge them these years of happiness. There is an extraordinary sense of solidarity among the ex-Melville Islanders.⁸¹

Of course, the bitter irony is that this solidarity among Aboriginal Catholics and the Stolen Generations of Garden Point was the consequence of collusion between the Church and the Commonwealth whose policies in the Northern Territory were undeniably responsible for that very sadness in the first place. The *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) eventually gave expression and official recognition to the deep hurt caused by missionary organisations.⁸² On National Sorry Day 1998, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference issued a statement which apologised for its role in creating the Stolen Generations. In many ways, it served as a rebuke to Gsell’s own writings and behaviour:

⁷⁹ See Thecla Brogan, *The Garden Point Mob: Stories about the early days of the Catholic Mission and the people who lived there, to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Mission* (Darwin: Historical Society of the Northern Territory, 1990).

⁸⁰ Stanton, *Coloureds and Catholics*, 161.

⁸¹ Peter Brogan ‘Garden Point Grows Up’, in *Garden Point Mob*, 84.

⁸² Australia, and Meredith Wilkie. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

We, the Catholic Bishops of Australia, wish to take the opportunity offered by this occasion of remembrance to ask the victims of the policy of breaking up indigenous families their forgiveness for any part the Church may have played in causing them harm and suffering. We note with regret that lamentable chapter of Australian history which saw the unjustifiable separation of Indigenous children from their families. We express our deepest sorrow for the suffering and hurt inflicted on Indigenous Australians which have consequences still in evidence today – social dislocation, loss of culture and identity, and a continuing sense of hopelessness in the lives of many of the First Peoples of our nation.⁸³

The Garden Point Mission must undergo a comprehensive academic study in order to unpack the complexities of its history and the personalities who shaped it. A detailed record which includes accusations of abuse as well as the less traumatic and even cheerful remembrances must be written in order to promote the important work of historical truth-telling in the Darwin Diocese. Unfortunately, this falls outside the scope of the present thesis. Suffice to say Garden Point, alongside his work at Bathurst Island, remains for Gsell one of the most enduring legacies of his episcopate. The remainder of this chapter examines the final years of Gsell's term in office, most of which was inextricably linked to Australia's wartime experience.

On 8 December 1941, Japan invaded the east coast of Malaya. Within 70 days they crushed all British resistance, capturing Singapore by 15 February 1942. They began simultaneous attacks on the Dutch East Indies and New Guinea, occupying Sulawesi and most of Borneo on 12 and 19 January 1942. Ambon and New Britain likewise fell on 3 and 9 February. Plans to invade Java and Timor were next on the agenda. During this time, Darwin rapidly became an important staging point for Allied ships and aircraft *en route* to resist Japanese advances in Southeast Asia. Fearing the possibility of an attack on northern Australia, the Commonwealth issued a general evacuation of civilians on 12 December 1941. The Catholic Church was sluggish in its efforts to evacuate personnel. All priests and brothers remained at their posts, but the OLSH at Nguiu, Garden Point and Port Keats were withdrawn to Darwin. This meant all 16 sisters, along with the mixed-descent girls, were in town by 18 February, with plans to withdraw from the Territory as soon as possible.

⁸³ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Statement on National Sorry Day*, 26 May 1998.

On the morning of 19 February 1942, 188 Japanese aircraft – 81 medium bombers, 71 dive bombers, and 36 fighters – took off from aircraft-carriers in the Timor Sea.⁸⁴ At 9.30am, the fleet passed over Bathurst Island. Recognising enemy aircraft, McGrath radioed a warning to Darwin. His message was relayed to RAAF headquarters at 9.37am but went unheeded. Spotting a DC-3 on the mission airstrip, six Zero fighters peeled off and strafed the bomber, leaving 14 stray bullets in the nearby church. At 9.58am, the first bombs fell on Darwin. Despite its strategic importance, the township and port were poorly defended and ill-prepared for the attack. The Japanese concentrated the bulk of their forces on the harbour. Within minutes the *USS Peary* was obliterated, and 90 lives lost. Meanwhile, the *MV Neptuna*, laden with explosives and tied to the wharf, went up in flames and eventually exploded, killing 45 people. A further eight ships were sunk, and 25 badly damaged, including the hospital ship *HMAHS Manunda*. Ten fighters at the RAAF base mounted a defence, but nine were shot down. Most of the township's military and civil facilities were wrecked, including the post-office which sustained a direct hit, killing nine people. The first raid was over by 10.30am, but a second began at 11.58am. This was directed towards the RAAF base: 14 grounded and uncamouflaged aircraft were destroyed, along with multiple hangers.

It is estimated that approximately 683 bombs were dropped on Darwin over these two attacks. Between 250 and 320 people were killed and another 300 to 400 people wounded. It constituted the first and most formidable of 64 raids on northern Australia over the course of the war, as Japan sought to maintain its hold on Southeast Asia. Proposals to invade Australia were tabled in December 1941 and revisited again in February 1942, but ultimately rejected. Instead, the Japanese planned to isolate Australia from America by consolidating their invasion of New Guinea and the South Pacific. Sustained bombing of the northern coastline was intended to ensure Australian submission. The final raid on Darwin took place on 12 November 1943.

Throughout the initial attack, Gsell took cover in a trench alongside Indigenous parishioners. OLSH nuns and mixed-descent girls hid beneath tables and chairs in the convent. Fortunately, none were hurt. Though the Catholic precinct survived the first raids unscathed, by the end of the war, the grounds were littered with craters created by the explosion of 16 bombs, and the church and convent were badly damaged.⁸⁵ At some point, a hollow statue of an angel which stood beside the church altar was hit by shrapnel. Its wings were broken, and a hole pierced its

⁸⁴ See Douglas Lockwood, *Australia Under Attack: The Bombing of Darwin 1942* (Sydney: New Holland, 2013).

⁸⁵ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 145-146.

side, but otherwise it remained intact. Now known as the 'Wounded Angel' (Figure 36), the statue is displayed within the new cathedral and serves as a war memorial.

In his memoir, Gsell claimed the Japanese attack on northern Australia, and even alleged plans for invasion, were foretold by the very pearlers who bedevilled his mission in the 1930s:

Incidentally, these Japanese sailors made no secret of what they believed to be the intentions of their country, often telling the aborigines that in good time they would come to take over the country. 'We,' they assured them, 'are your friends. Do not run away from us: we shall do you no harm. It is only the white men that we shall kill'. I included this information in my annual report to Canberra ... and I repeated the warning later.⁸⁶

I have been unable to find any such correspondence in official documents. While the annual reports certainly contained complaints about liaisons between pearlers and the Tiwi, they neglected to mention any Japanese imperial ambition over northern Australia. It is possible, however, that Gsell delivered these warnings verbally when living in Darwin. Nevertheless, the bombing raids seemed to validate the hostility displayed towards Japanese commercial interests in Australia throughout the 1930s. As Haultain declared in the opening passage of his own memoir: 'The first ripples of the Japanese tidal wave of expansion, a wave which curled and broke over the South-west Pacific in 1941, had become all too evident to the Australian pearling interests and Missions of North Australia, at least eight years before the second World War had become a reality'.⁸⁷ In this context, Gsell's crusade against the pearlers assumed extra meaning, retrospectively becoming the first battleground in a looming total war against the Empire of Japan.

In some respects, this theory was shared by the Tiwi. Patrick Puruntatameri, for example, claims the attack on Nguuu was an act of revenge against the harassment of Japanese sailors by McGrath:

They baled some water out of the waterhole. Father McGrath saw them. He went to them and poured out the water. 'Go away!' he said. 'We'll come back', the Japanese

⁸⁶ Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 141.

⁸⁷ Haultain, *Watch Off Arnhem Land*, 1.

said, 'and we'll fire on you'. Then later they came back to Bathurst Island with guns in their planes. It was morning, and they fired on the people and chased them into hiding.⁸⁸

Though Mungitopi cautions their vengeance was tempered by the knowledge that Tiwi/Japanese children lived on these islands: 'We can't bomb at Bathurst or Garden Point because of my daughter'.⁸⁹ This explains why the mission was only riddled with bullets, rather than annihilated by bombing. Such nuances concerned Commonwealth authorities.

Given recent contact with Japanese pearlers, military and civic officials worried that First Nations peoples may decide to assist the enemy in the event of an invasion. Just like the colonial-oppressed of Southeast Asia, there was a risk that Indigenous peoples would view the Japanese as liberators rather than invaders. These fears were unwarranted. Following the raid on Darwin, Japanese pilot, Hajime Toyoshima (1920-1944), crash-landed on Melville Island. He was apprehended by Tiwi man, Matthias Ulungura (1921-1980), taken to Nguuiu and transferred into the custody of RAAF officials, becoming the first Japanese prisoner of war captured on Australian soil. Ulungura was unable to enlist in the defence forces but he did become bodyguard and personal assistant to Corporal Moore, permanently stationed on Bathurst Island. Ulungura's story is emblematic of thousands of First Nations peoples who served Australia, despite the endemic discrimination they faced from the community. It is estimated approximately 3,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders served in the Australian armed forces during WWII. Many Indigenous servicemen enlisted in the AIF, RAAF, and RAN before 1940, when racial restrictions were imposed. They received equal pay and were treated like white soldiers. Those who served in specially raised Indigenous units thereafter, such as the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion, were still subject to discrimination. They received only a third of the pay of regular soldiers and were ineligible for veterans' benefits. Still others joined irregular units that patrolled the northern coastline, Tiwi among them, and thousands of others worked as military labourers. It would be decades before their service received official recognition.⁹⁰

On 22 February 1942, Darwin was transferred to military control and the Administration transferred to Alice Springs. Gsell left town with the general exodus of civilians, accompanying OLSH sisters and their charges. McGrath, Docherty, and Connors remained at their respective

⁸⁸ Patrick Puruntatameri, *A Story About the Japanese* (Darwin: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1976). Cited in Bathgate and Lewis, *Culture Contact Sites*, 45.

⁸⁹ Mungitopi, interview with Bathgate at Pirlangimpi, 1996. Cited in *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ See Joan Beaumont and Allison Cadzow eds. *Serving Our Country: Indigenous Australians, War, Defence and Citizenship* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018).

posts at Nguiu, Port Keats and Garden Point, while Henschke remained in Darwin. He was joined by Rev John Cosgrove MSC and Rev Frank Flynn MSC. They served as army chaplains for the duration of the war, alternating between Darwin and Alice Springs. An accomplished ophthalmologist, Flynn joined the MSCs in 1935 and was ordained in March 1942. Priest, doctor, and author, he remained a prominent figure in the life of the Northern Territory until his death at the age of 94.⁹¹ Smith re-enlisted in the RAN and the *HMAS St Francis* was mobilised to supply coastal patrols.⁹² The Church cooperated fully with military operations throughout the Northern Territory.

Gsell remained active during his three years in Alice Springs. He oversaw the construction of a Soldiers' Hall to meet the spiritual and recreational needs of Catholic and other servicemen in the township. Opened in May 1943, it operated as a Mass centre on Sundays but was used for various sports, festivals, and banquets during the week.⁹³ He also arranged the transfer of the Little Flower Mission.

The establishment of military camps within the vicinity of the mission was deemed undesirable by Church and Commonwealth authorities alike. Ever committed to missionary isolation, they selected a new site at the abandoned mining town of Arltunga, roughly 100 kilometres east of Alice Springs.⁹⁴ While initially aiming for an orderly transition, an outbreak of meningitis at the mission necessitated its immediate removal. On 13 September 1942, army transports carried 164 people – 35 men, 53 women, and 76 children – to Arltunga.⁹⁵ Over the next few months, Rev Harry Eather MSC – who had replaced Moloney as parish priest in 1939 – searched for a suitable site with a reliable water supply. Having secured a government subsidy of £750 to offset the cost of this ostensibly forced removal, he eventually chose a spot five kilometres from the town ruins. When Chinnery visited the settlement in August 1943, he was pleased with its development, noting the completion of a school, convent, presbytery, and store.⁹⁶ Though the mission progressed materially in coming years, it was hampered by an unreliable water supply. In 1953, the mission was moved roughly 120 kilometres south to the

⁹¹ See Doris M. Allen, *Frank Flynn MSC: A Remarkable Territorian* (Kensington: Chevalier Press, 1994).

⁹² See Luggier "St Francis" lent to RAN. Claim by Catholic Mission, Darwin. NAA: MP138/1, 603/217/2207.

⁹³ See Frank Flynn, 'Demonstration of Faith at First Mass at New Soldiers' Hall at Alice Springs', *Southern Cross*, 7 Mary 1943. 5.

⁹⁴ See John Pye, *Santa Teresa and East Aranda History, 1929-1988* (Darwin: Colemans Printing, 1989); and Jolien Harmsen, *You Gave Us the Dreaming: Aboriginal Law and Catholic Law – Changing Religious Identities of Arrernte People at Charles Creek, Arltunga and Santa Teresa in Central Australia, 1936-1991* (Nijmegen, Netherlands: Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Nijmegen, 1993).

⁹⁵ Abbott to Carrodus, 10 October 1942. NAA: A431, 1951/418.

⁹⁶ Chinnery to Abbott, 9 August 1943. NAA: A431, 1951/418.

present site at Santa Teresa (Ltyentye Apurte), where the Catholic Church continues its ministry with the Arrernte people.

Gsell returned to Darwin in June 1945, as military forces withdrew, and the township returned to civilian administration. Frank Flynn accompanied his bishop on the trip from Alice Springs, which also served as a tour of the diocese. Flynn recalled that Gsell was ‘anxious to make a leisurely journey, calling at the numerous Army camps and Allied Workers Council’s quarters as well as at all the homesteads of the cattle stations that lay close to our route’.⁹⁷ Ganter describes this ‘carefully orchestrated itinerary’ as a ‘symbolic hand-back of authority over the missions to the Bishop’.⁹⁸ In September, he proceeded to Bathurst Island where he received a hero’s welcome and officiated at a triple wedding to celebrate their deliverance from the war and a return to business as usual at the Catholic mission.⁹⁹

Gsell’s remaining years in the Northern Territory were preoccupied with pastoral visits to his mission centres. In 1947, he resolved to make his second *ad limina* visit to Rome. The old missionary had not returned to Europe since 1921 and he was in need of a holiday. He visited family and old friends in the Diocese of Strasbourg, before making his way to Issoudun where he ordained eight MSC priests. On 2 January 1948, Gsell met with Pope Pius XII (1939-58). They reminisced about their student days at St Apollinare before turning to more official matters. Gsell recalled: ‘His Holiness kindly received me in private audience and for seventeen minutes we had a private talk about the state of the church in my diocese and in Australia. He was most interested in the poor Aborigines of the country and inspected with keen attention the photos of my black children, especially the group of little girls I had bought.’¹⁰⁰ Gsell explained his gradualist approach to the Pope, including his interventions into Tiwi marriage customs. Pius gave Gsell his blessing: ‘Yes, I understand, you buy the little girls to set them free.’¹⁰¹ If there were any residual doubts about the unorthodox manner in which Gsell converted the Tiwi, they were now dispelled: ‘The approval of the Head of the Church is quite enough for me.’¹⁰²

Gsell returned to Australia in May 1948. Before his departure, he secured papal approval to retire from his position as Bishop of Darwin. While he waited for his replacement to be

⁹⁷ Frank Flynn, *Distant Horizons* (Kensington: Sacred Heart Monastery, 1947), 67.

⁹⁸ Ganter, ‘Bathurst Island Mission’, http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/mission/Bathurst-Island-Mission-1911-1938-1978#Bathurst_Island_after_Gsell.

⁹⁹ Flynn, *Distant Horizons*, 71-72.

¹⁰⁰ Gsell, ‘Fifty Years a Missionary’, 264.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Gsell, *Bishop with 150 Wives*, 106.

announced, he toured the diocese by aeroplane, visiting all the parishes and mission stations under his jurisdiction (see Figure 38). The trip culminated in the consecration of a new church at Katherine.¹⁰³ O'Loughlin was eventually appointed to succeed Gsell on 13 January 1949 (see Figure 39).¹⁰⁴ He was consecrated at a ceremony in Adelaide on 20 April 1949 and installed in Darwin on 22 May.¹⁰⁵

Gsell bade farewell to Darwin on 18 October 1949. He was almost 77 years old and had served the Territory for over four decades. On the eve of his departure, he celebrated a Pontifical Benediction, served at the altar by four Indigenous assistants. This was followed by a concert and a series of valedictory speeches. O'Loughlin proclaimed: '[Gsell] may depart, but a monument will remain, a monument to his wise policy, his dogged determination and his persevering toil'.¹⁰⁶ Speaking on behalf of the Administrator, Government Secretary, Reginald Sylvester Leydin, thanked the retired bishop for the great assistance he had rendered the Commonwealth in mission fields and declared that the only real progress made in this respect had been under Gsell's guidance. He then remarked: 'Bishop Gsell will always be a part of the Northern Territory, and the Northern Territory will always be a part of His Lordship. He will remain always in the hearts and minds of the people of the Territory.'¹⁰⁷ A prophetic sentiment, Gsell's influence over Indigenous policy certainly ensured an enduring legacy.

For his part, Gsell canvassed the turbulent history of his diocese and all his tangible achievements. Alluding to Psalm 126, he asserted: 'I scattered the seeds in tears, but I have gathered the fruits in joys'.¹⁰⁸ He drove down the Stuart Highway, early the next morning. Gsell spent a month at Alice Springs, six weeks in Adelaide, and a further eight in Melbourne before finally arriving in Sydney and to his retirement to the Sacred Heart monastery in Kensington.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 160.

¹⁰⁴ 'Bishop O'Loughlin Consecrated at Adelaide: First Native of City to be Raised to the Episcopate', *Advocate*, 28 April 1949. 3.

¹⁰⁵ 'Colourful History of the Diocese of Darwin: Reviewed by Archbishop Beovich at Installation of Bishop O'Loughlin MSC', *Advocate*, 2 June 1949. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Cited in Gwyneth Sullivan, 'The Blacks Cried When He Bade Them Goodbye: Long and Splendid Missionary Career in the Northern Territory Closes – Bishop F.X. Gsell MSC DD OBE Retires', *Southern Cross*, 4 November 1949. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Psalm 126:5-6 reads: 'Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seeds to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying the sheaves with them.'

CONCLUSION

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.¹

I visited Wurrumiyanga most recently on 10 March 2020, where I spent time in the historical church of St Therese. Designed by Hayr and constructed with Tiwi labour, the building was completed in 1940 (see Figure 40). Its contrast with the Peter Chanel Chapel at Domus Australia, the description of which began this thesis, is stark. This latter space features symbols of white Australian nationalism and celebrates a connection to Ireland now standard in the imaginary of mainstream Australian Catholicism. It is one in which Indigenous perspectives are relegated to the margins. Yet this cannot be said of the church on Bathurst Island, where Tiwi expressions of Christianity are prominent. The sanctuary stands as a testament to the inculturation achieved in recent decades (Figure 10). It is decorated with a colourful mural which synthesises Christian symbols and Tiwi motifs, and which includes paintings of ancestral beings from the creation period or *Paleneri*.

The most notable element of the sanctuary is its altarpiece, which features a man holding an infant heavenward (Figure 42). At first glance, one may be forgiven for thinking these figures are a Tiwi representation of Saint Joseph holding the infant Christ, but closer inspection reveals it to be Purrukapali and his son Jinani, both important ancestral beings within the Tiwi mythos. Purrukapali was the only son of Mudungkala, the old blind woman who created the world. He married Bima, who gave birth to their only son, Jinani. Towards the end of *Paleneri*, Bima began an affair with a man named Japara. During a tryst, Jinani was neglected too long and perished in the heat of the sun. Enraged, Purrukapali struck his wife and banished her. Japara offered to resurrect the boy, but Purrukapali was inconsolable. Decreeing all living things must die, he carried his son into the ocean and was consumed by the waves. This event brought death into the world and ended *Paleneri*. Bima became the curlew, whose lament is still heard in the bush today, while Japara transformed himself into the moon. Shortly afterwards, Tokampini, Purrukapali's father-in-law, performed the first *Pukumani* mortuary ceremony and established all customary laws. In some versions, however, it is Purrukapali, not Tokampini, who performed the *Pukumani* for Jinani, establishing the law before succumbing to death.

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, 28 October 1965.

The altarpiece recognises the centrality of Purrukapali to Tiwi cosmology, while its prominent position in the church is indicative of the receptiveness of contemporary Catholicism to Indigenous spirituality. Flanked by two *arawunikiri* spears, Purrukapali holds up the boy. This could reference tradition whereby fathers lift infants toward the sun, though it is also likely the altarpiece depicts the moment before Purrukapali carried Jinani into the ocean because he is clearly dressed for the *Pukumani* ceremony. Among the most important ceremonies of Tiwi ritual life, the *Pukumani* ensures the soul of the dead passes from the land of the living into that of the spirits. Once maligned as a pagan rite, its depiction within this Christian space shows just how far the Church has come in its most recent project of inculturation. Above the image of father and son is another symbol of great importance and one which references another key ceremony: the *Kulama*. Whereas *Pukumani* is concerned with death, *Kulama* celebrates life. For three days and nights during the full moon at the end of the wet season, the Tiwi sing and dance on a ceremonial ground marked with large concentric circles at the heart of which is a fire. Traditionally a time of initiation, the festival involves the transfer of knowledge through ceremony, as initiates pass through each circle on their way to the centre. The image on the altarpiece is a symbolic representation of this ceremony, at the core of which is overlaid a painting of a cross fashioned from *arawunikiri*. This indicates the Christian message is central to ceremonial knowledge and religious life on the islands but is clearly understood through a fundamentally Tiwi frame of reference.

Reflecting on what we now know about Gsell's distaste for syncretism, it is perhaps surprising such an image should appear in a church on the very site of the mission he founded, though much changed in the years following his departure from the Northern Territory. Throughout the 1950s, the Commonwealth intensified its assimilationist agenda. Alongside the Church, the government introduced development programs with the intention of preparing the Tiwi for full citizenship. A Tribal Council was established in 1961 and eventually superseded by the Tiwi Land Council in 1978 when official control of the islands was transferred back to its Traditional Owners under the provisions of the Commonwealth *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976*. The Catholic Church remained a constant presence on the islands throughout this period. As mentioned, the 1950s saw a regrettable crackdown on Tiwi culture. Abandoning the relative tolerance of Gsell and McGrath, mission authorities forbade Catholics from participating in *Pukumani* and *Kulama* ceremonies, even if these were still conducted in secret and at a distance. Though most Tiwi became Catholic, they never forgot their traditional culture, and by the 1970s many were disenchanted with the ethnocentrism and intolerance of the clergy.

Fortunately, their frustrations coincided with a re-evaluation in Catholic thinking on non-Christian religions. Here the monumental changes occasioned by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) were crucial in allowing Indigenous Catholics the opportunity to express a Christian religious practice which was meaningful to them.² Central to this were the constitutions and decrees promulgated by Pope Paul VI (1963-1978). *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), for example, stressed that, rather than dismiss non-Christian religions as superstition or magic, the Church should promote constructive mutual dialogue: 'Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too'.³ Similarly, *Ad Gentes* (1965) urged missionaries to engage with the national and religious traditions of those they sought to convert, to 'gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows'.⁴ These sentiments were further reinforced in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), which asserted:

... what matters is to evangelise man's culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense ... always taking the person as one's starting-point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God.⁵

Naturally, these statements provided Indigenous Catholics with an opportunity to assert the importance of traditional culture in expressing an authentic Christian faith. For once, the Church in Australia was receptive to these ideas.

It is within this context that a delegation led by Rev Cyril Connolly MSC visited Bathurst Island in 1985 to meet and consult with Tiwi Catholics.⁶ During the conference, Elders such as Ted Portamini expressed frustration at being compelled to live a double life. They were determined to show the visiting priests that the foundation of their Christian faith was in fact their deep commitment to traditional culture. Esther Babui, for example, drew parallels between *Genesis* and *Paleneri*, arguing the story of Purrukapali and Bima contained essentially the same substance as the account of Adam and Eve. Another Tiwi Elder explained the redemption meaning behind Purrukapali: 'a man who was not afraid to die, who carried his son

² See Gabrielle Russell-Mundine and Graeme Mundine, 'Aboriginal Inculturation of the Australian Catholic Church', *Black Theology* 12, 2 (August 2014): 96-116; See also Hearn, *Theology of Mission*, 236-316.

³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, 7 December 1965.

⁵ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975.

⁶ See C. Connolly, 'Report: Listening to the Voices – Stage II – Aboriginal Conference', *Series 071, Folder 008, MSC Files*. Diocesan Archives, Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia.

into the rising sea, as a resurrection hope, in the midst of the evil that had come into his life'.⁷ They also stressed that *Pukumani* and *Kulama* contained no pagan elements and recommended the Church allow them to integrate these traditional ceremonies into their Catholic sacramental life. Reflecting on the meeting, Connolly wrote: 'This seems to me to state that their minds and hearts were truly Christian, and that they were the ones who are now capable of seeing the coherence between their own culture and its use in expressing their Christian beliefs and spiritual longings'.⁸

When Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) visited the Northern Territory in November 1986 (see Figure 41), he delivered a speech at Alice Springs addressed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in which he famously declared: 'the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others'.⁹ He acknowledged the depth and complexity of Indigenous culture and spirituality, and stressed there was no intrinsic conflict between Catholicism and many elements of Indigenous religion. He issued a challenge to the Australian Church to wholeheartedly embrace the contributions of First Nations peoples. This statement further legitimised the aspirations of Tiwi Catholics, and by 1989 the sanctuary within the Church of St Therese was redecorated to express the realisation of this vision.

Similar stories of Catholic inculturation can be found all over the Northern Territory in the missions and parishes established during Gsell's episcopate. To the experiences of the Tiwi can be added those of Aboriginal Catholic communities at Wadeye, Daly River, and Santa Teresa, as well as at Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Alice Springs. Indeed, the ongoing contributions of First Nations peoples to Catholic religious practice – not to mention the place of traditional spirituality within the contemporary liturgy – is a fruitful area of study which already promises to enrich our understandings of Indigenous Christian experiences and perspectives, as well as providing for a more comprehensive history of the Catholic Church and community in Australia. The influence of European missionaries on this outcome is, of course, an integral aspect of such scholarship.

In his conference notes, Connolly posited there had been three waves of Christian evangelisation on the Tiwi Islands. The first wave came with Gsell, who introduced the

⁷ Cited in Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. See also Hearn, *Theology of Mission*, 306-317.

⁹ John Paul II, *Address to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, 29 November 1986. Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia.

Christian message, the second came with McGrath, who preached this message in the Tiwi language, and the third came with the synthesis of traditional culture and Christian faith by the laity themselves. In this context, Gsell was remembered with gratitude for having helped the Tiwi understand they are a Christian people and for providing the first outlets through which they could express their composite faith. Here the missionary's gradualism and apparent willingness to work with traditional culture – rather than against it – set a precedent for Church authorities and Elders alike to promote the realisation of a truly Tiwi Catholicism. Perhaps as a consequence, *Patakijiyali* continues to be held in high esteem by the Christian community of the Tiwi Islands. Yet this thesis has demonstrated that Gsell's career and legacy were far more complicated.

During his four decades in the Northern Territory, he exerted significant influence over Indigenous policy through strategic collusion with secular authorities. Gsell viewed himself an equal partner with the government. Though he did not always share in their ideological assumptions about race, he cooperated with the Commonwealth for the sake of mutual advantage. He lent support to the segregation and protection policies of Spencer because they harmonised perfectly with his own notions about gradualism and aspirations for missionary isolation. He goaded Cook's anxieties about miscegenation to safeguard his mission against outsider interference, and he assisted Chinnery in implementing assimilation policies because these forced potential converts into the jurisdiction of the Church. At all times, Gsell maintained his independence. He was careful to avoid any assumption that he operated as an agent of the state, and his interpretation and implementation of official policy was always on his own terms and with the ultimate objective of Christian evangelism in mind. Nevertheless, by endorsing the Commonwealth and by providing an effective exemplar for the realisation of their policies, he ensured that his influence extended well beyond the shores of Bathurst Island.

Gsell's effect on the Australian Catholic Church was no less significant. Notwithstanding the plethora of notable missionaries which have appeared in this narrative, it is undeniable Gsell was unique among his mainstream Australian contemporaries. Whilst at times he embodied an ethnocentric paternalism, which was intrinsically critical of traditional Indigenous culture, he certainly challenged a great many racist assumptions about First Nations peoples. His writings and public statements abound with testaments to the intelligence, deep religiosity, and practical capacity of his converts. Indeed, his commitment to missionary outreach in the face of hostility from within his own order ensured that, when the institutional Church finally did reconsider its position on the matter, there were many success stories with which to validate renewed efforts.

Though their cultural and religious insensitivities certainly caused well acknowledged hurt, the work of Gsell and missionaries like him helped encourage the empowerment of many Indigenous Christian communities in Australia today. This is especially the case for Tiwi people.

Gsell could not have foreseen many of the monumental changes which occurred during his time in the Territory or since. But many of his decisions resulted in positive outcomes. The declaration of the entirety of Bathurst Island a reserve, for example, guaranteed that no new agricultural or pastoral leases were taken up in that vicinity. It ensured the European population of the island never exceeded more than a handful of missionaries within the vicinity of Wurrumiyanga, and it is likely that this decision prevented violence and the dispossession which often accompanied colonisation. Indeed, massacres of First Nations peoples by Europeans persisted in the Northern Territory until as late as 1928. Though the Tiwi experienced their fair share of colonial violence in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the presence of the mission safeguarded against further bloodshed. Indeed, from Tiwi oral histories we know that Gsell was regarded as a peacemaker, protecting the local people from the incursions of buffalo-shooters which previously plagued the islands. When this latter group departed, it effectively extended his jurisdiction from Bathurst Island to neighbouring Melville. The most significant consequence of this policy was that the Tiwi maintained an unbroken connection to their ancestral lands. This is a testament to their resilience, but it is also undeniable the legal protections achieved by Gsell were extremely beneficial, placing the Tiwi in a strong position to reclaim traditional ownership under provisions of the *Land Rights Act*.

Alongside this unbroken connection to Country, one can argue the mission helped facilitate the maintenance of a great many aspects of Tiwi custom owing to Gsell's gradualist approach to Christian conversion. While even a cursory glance at his memoir and public statements reveals that Gsell embodied a paternalistic ethnocentrism and dismissiveness of traditional culture, it is also apparent he was willing to uphold elements which he believed were not in strict conflict with Catholic doctrine. Though he believed such elements would eventually disappear as European 'civilisation' and the Christian religion consolidated their hold on hearts and minds, he was willing to hasten slowly and in this respect he demonstrated a tolerance and compassion rare among his contemporaries. Though it is undeniable that his campaign against polygamy and child marriage transformed Tiwi society from a polygamous gerontocracy to a monogamous patriarchy, this did not represent an attack on traditional culture in its totality. Christian marriages were still conducted under the edicts of traditional law, and sacred

ceremonies like *Pukumani* and *Kulama* continued while Gsell, and later McGrath, oversaw the mission. This afforded the Tiwi over four decades with which to adapt to European culture, embracing some elements while rejecting others and all the while enjoying the freedom to practice their traditional customs on their ancestral lands. Though it was not his intention, Gsell's willingness to affirm aspects of Tiwi culture certainly aided the most recent project of Catholic inculturation on the islands.

It is also worth reiterating that all these changes to traditional culture were achieved through active consultation with the Tiwi. As we have seen, Gsell did not force his ideas. He upheld Tiwi law and only interfered in marriage customs at the direct request of Martina, a Tiwi woman. Over the next twenty years, Gsell bought the marriage rights to 130 women and girls, but again this was done through direct negotiation with parents, promised husbands, and often at the instigation of the very individuals concerned. Though there was obviously some pressure from missionaries to do so, the Tiwi fundamentally chose to adopt companionate marriage because it was appealing to them. This speaks to the relationships of mutual benefit enjoyed by the missionaries and the Tiwi people. Indeed, Gsell lived at Wurrumiyanga for three decades, during which time he built meaningful connections with his neighbours: men and women for whom he cared deeply. It is doubtful he and his missionaries would have endured there so long if it were not for the acceptance and ongoing support of the local people. Here Gsell's respect for Tiwi autonomy was crucially important. While it is true school-aged children received board at the mission, their presence there was always assured by parental consent, and youths were never permanently separated from their families. This ensured that the social dislocation suffered by many First Nations peoples during the colonial period was not an essential element of the Tiwi experience at Gsell's mission. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the mixed-descent children who were brought into the orbit of the Catholic Church during this time.

It is apparent that the relatively positive cumulative effects of Gsell's policy interventions for the Tiwi have completely overshadowed his more questionable complicity in the formation and implementation of policies which resulted in the forced removal of children of mixed-descent from their families. As we have seen, the first subjects of Gsell's evangelism were not the Tiwi but rather the Stolen Generations. While the former came voluntarily into his mission, the latter were coerced by police. Gsell was by no means committed to the White Australia Policy. He did not share in the racial anxieties of secular authorities who remained forever vexed by the growth of mixed communities in northern Australia. Nevertheless, he was motivated by a

religious zeal and presumed humanitarian concern which allowed him to capitalise on official policy, accepting stolen children into the control of the Church from as early as 1910 when the practice first began. In this light, the foundation of Garden Point in 1941 represented an acceleration in a much older program, which received fresh impetus in the era of assimilation. While there is still much work to be done in this area of Northern Territory Catholic history, it is undeniable Gsell was responsible for a great deal of suffering. His decisions resulted in the loss of language and culture, as mixed-descent children were ripped from kin and Country and taken to a remote island mission. Few could now argue in good conscience that the ‘gift’ of western ‘civilisation’ and Christianity were adequate compensation for their stolen birthright and the ongoing realities of intergenerational trauma. It is hoped that this re-evaluation of the missionary and ecclesiastical career of Gsell has brought his involvement with the Stolen Generations into sharp relief. It is a legacy which is just as significant as his work among the Tiwi.

This thesis has gone beyond the legend of the ‘Bishop with 150 Wives’. It has revealed a man of powerful conviction and remarkable vision who left an indelible stamp upon the history of the Northern Territory. Yet, his legacy remains complex, and even conflicting. Gsell did not respect traditional culture. Indeed, he worked tirelessly for several decades to alter it while also endorsing assimilation policies many now consider tantamount to genocide. But he was also quite progressive for his time. He did not hold with racist assumptions about Indigenous people as unintelligent or incapable of industry. Instead, he lauded the achievements of his converts. In this respect, he was well ahead of his fellow bishops and even other missionaries. Yet all this was underwritten by a serious paternalism, exacerbated by Eurocentric understandings of Catholicism which persisted well into the 1970s and are still evident in some sections of the Australian Church today. His attacks on polygamy and child marriage were a sincere effort to free women and girls from what he considered a crippling form of sexual slavery. Yet his attitudes towards traditional religion and spirituality are less to be admired, and his willingness to force mixed-descent children from their families remains among the most questionable elements of his episcopate.

Fundamentally, the process of demystification has been an exercise in nuance. Rather than shy away from the complexities of Gsell’s character and career, it is vital that we acknowledge and accept them if we are to work towards a more sincere and authentic truth telling about our shared history in Australia.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Tiwi Creation Period

In the beginning the world was dark and desolate. There was neither light, nor water, and the land was flat and featureless. Yet, beneath the ground dwelled spirits.¹ One day, Mudungkala dug her way to the surface in search of food. She was old and blind, and she carried three children clasped to her breast: her son, Purrukapali, and her two daughters, Wurupurungala and Murupiyankala: spirit ancestors of all Tiwi people. Mudungkala appeared in the south-east of Melville Island and slowly crawled north. The path made by her tracks filled with water, becoming the tideways of the Clarence and Dundas Straits. She made her way around the entire landmass and then, deciding it was too large, created the Aspley Strait. When her journey was complete, every strait and islet formed, she placed her children upon a beach. Using a great torch, she lit up the sky, making day and night, before filling the islands with an abundance of plants and animals so that her children would have food. Her work thus complete, she vanished forever.²

When Purrukapali was grown, he visited the homes of the spirit children and brought some back so that his sisters could be mothers. Murupiyankala had one daughter, Tukumbuna who married Wilindu. They in turn had two daughters, Wilinduela and Numanirakala, and a son, Tokampini. His wife, Waia, gave birth to their daughter, Bima, who married Purrukapali before

¹ The following description of Tiwi cosmology is drawn from Maryanne Mungatopi who recorded *Palaneri: The Creation Period* in 1998. One of the immense benefits of the advent of the Internet has been the ability of First Nations peoples to record and disseminate accurate information about their culture, history and traditions to a broad audience. While this information is not necessarily published in the traditional print-media format, it nevertheless allows Indigenous peoples to control their narratives and is the product of extensive consultation. The following websites rely on Mungatopi and were used to inform my writings here: 'Creation Stories', *Tiwi Design*, <https://tiwidesigns.com/pages/creation-stories>; Robert Soto, 'Tiwi Creation Stories', *Aboriginal Art Online*, <http://aboriginalartonline.com/regions-tiwi2-php/>; 'Tiwi Culture', *Jilamara Arts & Crafts Association*, <https://jilamara.com/tiwi-culture/>; 'Culture', *Tiwi College*, <http://www.tiwicollege.com/culture.php>; and 'Creation Stories', *Tiwi Land Council*,

<http://www.tiwilandcouncil.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&p=248&l=2&id=60&smid=120>. Versions of these stories are also recorded by anthropologists and historians. See for example: Pye who cites Michael Tipungwuit in *Tiwi Islands*, 25; Morris, *Isolation to Cultural Change*, 14; Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 47; and Sandra Le Brun Holmes, *The Goddess and the Moon Man: The Sacred Arts of the Tiwi Aborigines* (Roseville East, NSW: Craftsman House, 1995), 11.

² This legend provides a Tiwi explanation for the rising sea levels encountered at the conclusion of the Pleistocene era. Another legend tells of two men, Puruti and Jirakati, who went spear fishing in a lagoon near the northern entrance to the Aspley Strait. This was shortly after Mundungkala had created the world, and the sea was then freshwater. Spotting a large creature moving about beneath the waterlilies, they loosed their weapons. To their horror, they discovered the creature was their mother, Tipuru-undunga, and that they had wounded her in the neck. Screaming in pain and urinating in fright, she rushed into the sea. Polluted by her blood and urine, it became salty and undrinkable. One can likewise appreciate this story documents the corruption of freshwater sources caused by drastic climate change at the end of the Last Glacial Maximum. See Charles P. Mountford, *The Tiwi: Their Art, Myth and Ceremony* (Melbourne: Phoenix House, 1958), 26.

giving birth to their son Jinani. Wurupurungala married Andjalui and had one son Wuriuprinili. And so, the descendants of Mudungkala multiplied.³

Purrukapali lived with Bima and their infant son on the east coast of Melville Island. At their camp was also an unmarried man named Japara. Every day Bima left camp with Jinani to gather food for her husband. Yet Japara often persuaded her to leave Jinani beneath the shade of a tree and go off with him into the bush. Their affair had gone on for some time. One particularly hot day, Jinani was neglected too long and perished in the heat of the sun. Purrukapali was distraught and enraged when he discovered his dead son. He struck Bima with a throwing stick and banished her to the bush. Shaken with remorse, Japara promised to resurrect Jinani within three days, but Purrukapali was inconsolable. The two warriors fought bitterly until both were severely wounded. Purrukapali then took the boy's body and walked backwards into the sea. Before he disappeared beneath the waves forever, he decreed that death should come to the entire world. Just as Jinani had died, so too would all creation.⁴ There was no death before this time. Japara transformed himself into the moon after seeing the pain he had caused. Yet even he could not escape Purrukapali's commandment. Though he is eternally reincarnated, Japara still suffers death for three days every month. Bima became the curlew, whose anguished lament can still be heard as she wanders the wilderness at night, crying in sorrow for her transgressions.⁵

The death of Jinani brought *Paleneri* – the Tiwi creation period – to a close. Following the tragedy, Tokampini called all the original creator beings together and performed the first *Pukumani* burial ceremony for his son-in-law. Now that death had come into the world, everyone needed to know how to bury the dead correctly to ensure that their soul would enter the spirit world in the right way.⁶ Tokampini taught them the rules of behaviour and the laws of marriage and tribal relationships which had to be obeyed by all. In some versions of the story it was Purrukapali himself who passed on this information before he died, performing the

³ Mountford provides this detailed genealogy of Tiwi creator beings. *The Tiwi*, 25.

⁴ Mountford quotes the Tiwi: '*Mauliantanili awangtini tangini mu mu*', translated as: 'You must all follow me; as I die, so must you all die.' *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵ Mountford argues that the source of Bima's remorse is not her infidelity to Purrukapali, but rather that her lust and neglect resulted in the death of Jinani. Overcome with grief she exclaimed: '*Bili wangia tingatia*', translated as: 'Evil woman am I to have caused the death of my son'. *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ Hart and Pilling observe that 'the dimly seen coastline of Australia was *Tibambinum*, the home of the dead, to which all Tiwi souls went after death.' *Tiwi of Northern Australia*, 9.

Pukamani instead for Jinani.⁷ These are immortalised in dances, songs and designs which accompany Tiwi ceremonies to this day.

Once the law had been established, the creator beings transformed themselves into various entities – animals, plants, heavenly bodies, and natural forces – and dispersed across the islands, forming the basis of Tiwi totems and skin groups.⁸ These ancestral spirits still dwell in the island landscapes, and the people have looked after it ever since.

Appendix 2: Pukumani Ceremony

Following the precedent first set by Purrukapali and Tokampini, the *Pukumani* ceremony ensures that deceased persons find their way to the spirit world. The Tiwi believe that the spirits of the dead remain in the land of the living until the conclusion of the *Pukumani*. If the rites are not performed correctly, there is a serious risk that the unhappy spirit will cause mischief or harm to the living. The ceremony is therefore among the most important. While allowing for the full expression of grief, it also provides a platform for artistic expression through song, dance, painting, and sculpture. It is a public ceremony and takes place two to six months after the initial burial or *Iliana*. The final ceremony culminates in the erection of the *tutini*. Symbolic markers of the prestige with which the deceased person was held during their life, these elaborately carved and decorated grave posts take several months to prepare and are employed as gifts to placate the spirit of the departed. Shortly before the *Pukumani* the *tutini* are placed around the grave. Participants in the ceremony paint themselves in natural ochres and perform a series of ceremonial dances or *yoi*. Some *yoi* are totemic, whereas others serve to perform the narratives of newly composed songs. There are others which must also be performed by certain kin of the deceased. At the conclusion of the ceremony, when the final notes of the *amburu* death song have died away, large ceremonial baskets called *imawalini* are upturned atop the *tutini*. The gathering then disperses and the *tutini* are left to decay.⁹

⁷ See Forrest, *Tiwi Meet the Future*, 43-45.

⁸ For example, Wurupurungala became the sun-woman, Andjalui became fresh water, Wilinduela became the crocodile and Numanirakala became red ochre, while Tokampini became the yellow-faced honey eater. Tokampini had many wives: Paninduela, Aragoutourina, and Mantinuria who became eucalyptus trees, Miatrina became the pandanus tree, Piriloukala the catfish, Mandubuka the sand-fly, Kudjatumpi the march-fly, Baraka the spider, and Puruliangkala the bush fire. See Mountford, *Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁹ 'Culture', *Tiwi College*, <http://www.tiwicollege.com/culture.php>. See also, 'Dance and Ceremonies', *Tiwi Land Council*. <https://tiwilandcouncil.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&id=60&l=2&p=249>.

Appendix 3: Kulama Ceremony

Whereas the *Pukumani* ceremony is concerned with death, the *Kulama* ceremony is an annual celebration of life. It takes place towards the end of the wet season and involves three days and nights of singing, dancing, and ritual body-painting. A key element of the *Kulama* is the preparation and consumption of the poisonous yam, *Dioscorea bulbifera*. The yams are harvested from monsoon forests and soaked in freshwater to leach out toxins. A ground-oven is prepared, and the yams slowly roasted. On the third day of festivities, the yams are eaten to ensure good health for the coming year.

Traditionally, the *Kulama* also provided the occasion for initiation ceremonies. The first *Kulama* was performed by Purutijikini, a boobook owl man, and his wife Pintoma, a barn owl woman. Their first initiate was Jirakati, the white-bellied sea eagle, who still wears the ceremonial paint to this day. At the close of the *Paleneri*, all the spirit ancestors gathered to perform a second *Kulama*. This included all stages of initiation, as well as the preparation of yams for ritual consumption. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the spirit ancestors agreed that its form should remain unchanging. The Tiwi believe that, when a golden ring forms around the moon towards the end of the wet season, Japara is performing the *Kulama* with the assistance of a great multitude of star people who sing and dance within the ceremonial circle. This is the signal to begin their own ceremonies on earth.

Throughout the festival, a great many songs and dances which aim to promote health and prosperity are performed within a ceremonial dancing ground marked with large concentric circles at the heart of which is a fire. One's position within the circles corresponds to one's stage of initiation. The festival involves the transfer of knowledge through ceremony, as initiates pass through each circle on their way to the centre.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: Paul Newton, *Our Lady of the Southern Cross – Help of Christians #2*, 2010, Domus Australia, St Peter Chanel Chapel, Rome, sanctuary.

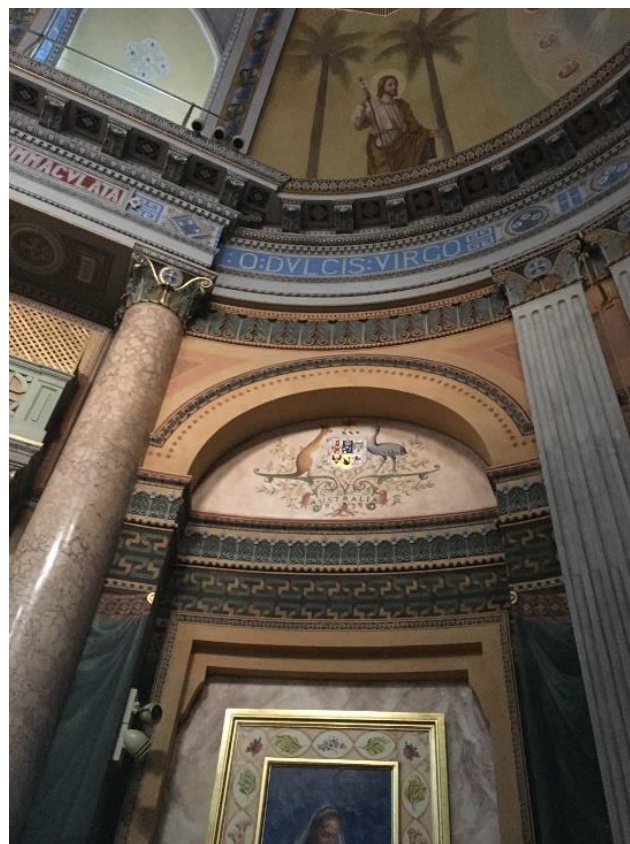


Figure 2: *Commonwealth Coat of Arms*, 2010, Domus Australia, St Peter Chanel Chapel, Rome, sanctuary. Photo Michael Francis.



Figure 3: *Celtic Cross featuring Stations of the Cross, 2010, Domus Australia, St Peter Chanel Chapel, Rome, vault of the nave. Photo Michael Francis.*

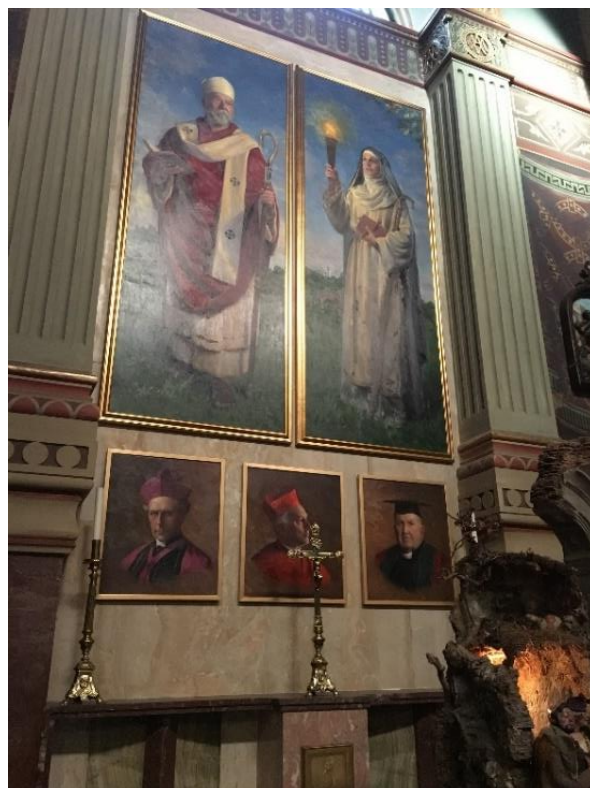


Figure 4: *Paul Newton, Saint Patrick, Saint Brigid of Ireland, Archbishop Daniel Mannix, Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran, and Archbishop Sir James Duhig, 2012, Domus Australia, St Peter Chanel Chapel, Rome, side chapel. Photo Michael Francis.*



Figure 5: Paul Newton, *Venerable Francis Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận*, 2011, Domus Australia, St Peter Chanel Chapel, Rome, side chapel.



Figure 6: Luigi Guglielmino, *Martyrdom of Saint Peter Chanel*, 1918, Domus Australia, St Peter Chanel Chapel, Rome, side chapel. Photo courtesy of Monsignor John Boyle.



Figure 7: *Cross decorated with Indigenous motifs*, 2010, Domus Australia, Rome. Photo Michael Francis.

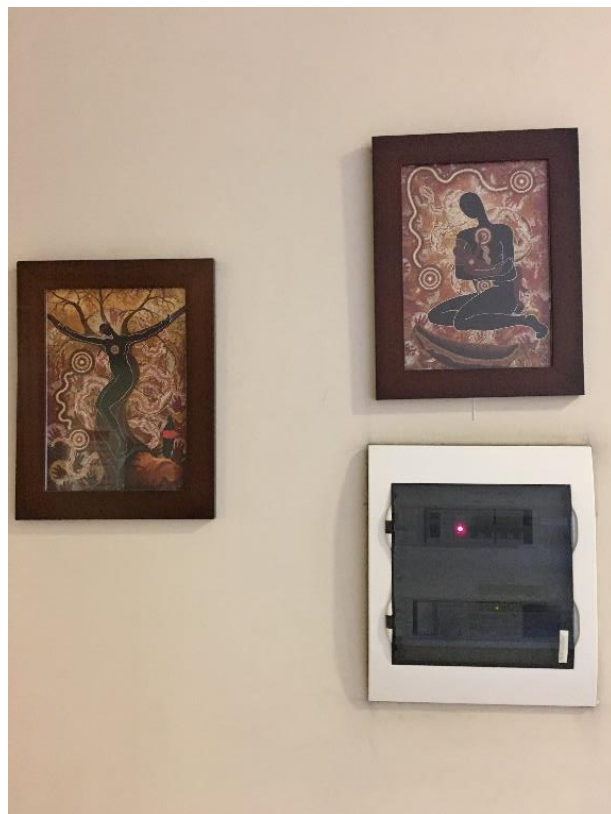


Figure 8: Richard Campbell, *Crucifixion*, and *Madonna and Child (Mimi Ngaire)*, 2010, Domus Australia, Rome. Photo Michael Francis.

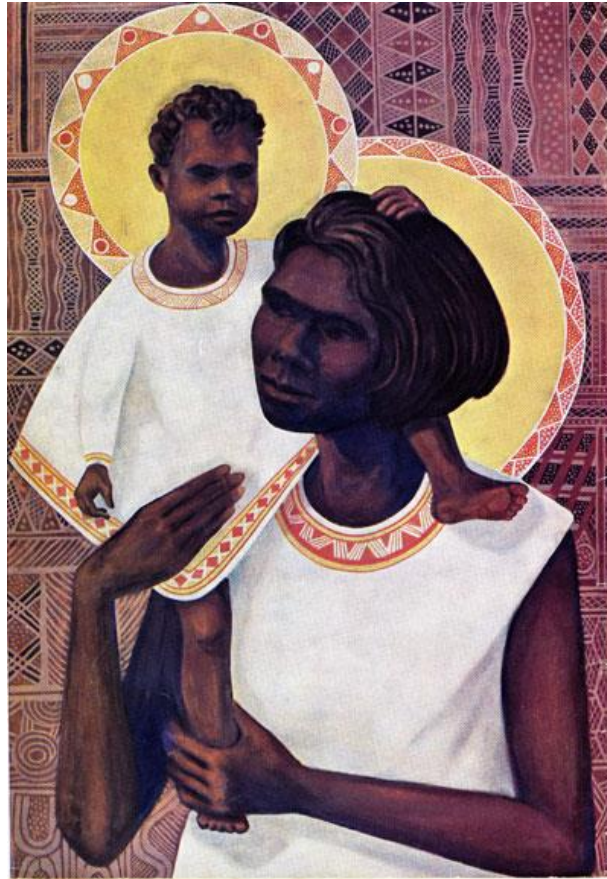


Figure 9: Karel Kupka, *Aboriginal Madonna*, 1970, St Mary's Star of the Sea Cathedral, Darwin. In Jessica De Lary Healy, 'Karel Kupka and the Master-Painters of Arnhem Land: The Biography of an Aboriginal Art Collection', *Gradhiva* 12 (2010): 198-217.



Figure 10: *Sanctuary of St Therese's Church*, Wurrumiyanga. 2018. In [australias.guide: Northern Territory. australias.guide/nt/attraction-tour/catholic-church-precinct/](http://australias.guide/northern-territory/attraction-tour/catholic-church-precinct/).

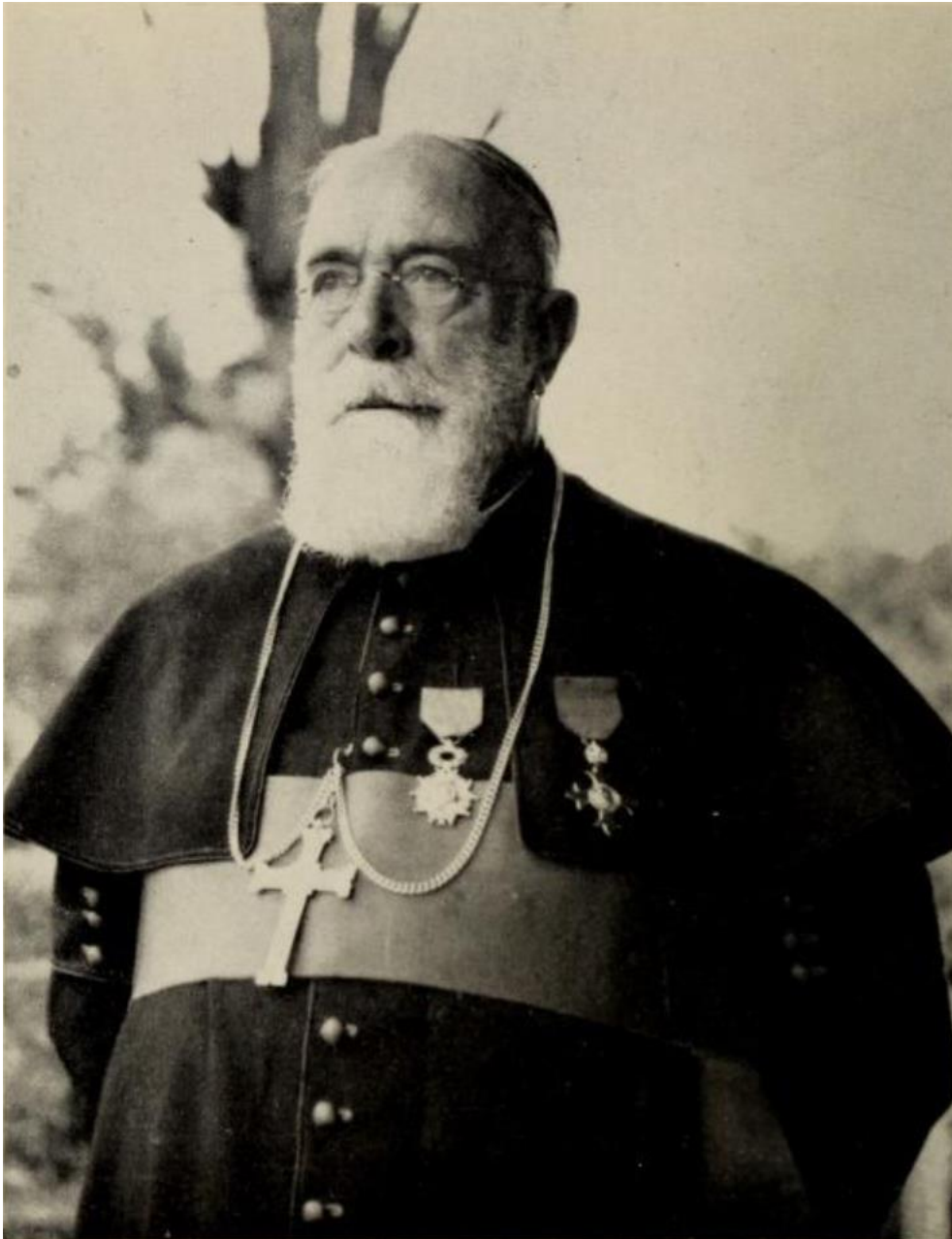


Figure 11: *Monsignor Francis Xavier Gsell MSC, 1955. In Francis Xavier Gsell 'The Bishop with 150 Wives': Fifty Years as a Missionary (London: Angus and Robertson, 1955), Frontispiece.*



Figure 12: *Ceremonial Headdress* created by the Mekeo people of Papua New Guinea and presented to Pope Leo XIII by Bishop Verjus in 1892, plant fibres, wood, shell, bone, cockatoo and bird of paradise feathers, 273 x 102 x 93cm, Vatican Ethnological Museum, Rome.
<http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-etnologico/collezione/copricapo-cerimoniale.html>.



Figure 13: *Catholic Church, Darwin, 1895*, State Library of South Australia, Adelaide. <https://collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/resource/B+11506>.

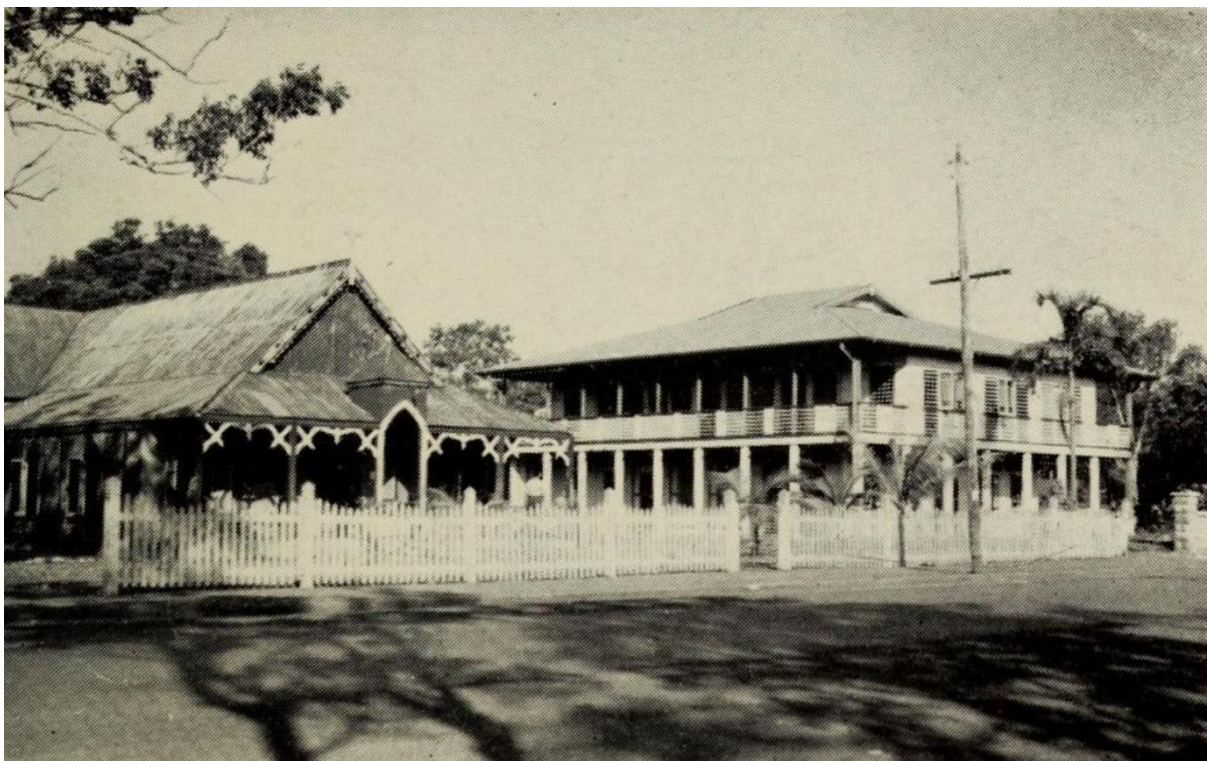


Figure 14: *Old St Mary's Cathedral and Bishop's Palace at Darwin, 1956*. In Francis Xavier Gsell, *The Bishop with 150 Wives': Fifty Years as a Missionary* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1955), 48.



Figure 15: *Monsignor Gsell, Administrator Apostolic of Victoria and Palmerston, circa 1911.* In Regina Ganter, 'Gsell, Francis Xavier Ep. (182-1960)', *German Missionaries in Australia*, courtesy of Benoît Gsell, Benfeld and Dominique Thirion, Strasbourg.
<http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/biography/gsell-francis-xavier-ep-1872-1960>.



Figure 16: *Bathurst Island Mission Church, 1914*, Northern Territory Library, Darwin.
<https://hdl.handle.net/10070/4814>.



Figure 17: *Bathurst Island Mission*, 1914, Northern Territory Library, Darwin.
<https://hdl.handle.net/10070/789>.



Figure 18: *Bathurst Island Mission Station*, 1914, Northern Territory Library, Darwin.
<https://hdl.handle.net/10070/5585>



Figure 19: James Pinkerton Campbell, *Natural esplanade at the [Bathurst Island] Mission looking southeast toward Buchanan Island*, 1912, National Library of Australia, Canberra. <https://nla.gov.au:443/tarkine/nla.obj-146759606>. Joe Cooper (left) and Monsignor Gsell (right) are in near distance, while OLSH nuns, Sr Joseph Schaap and Sr Kieran Doyle, with Indigenous women and children visible in rear.

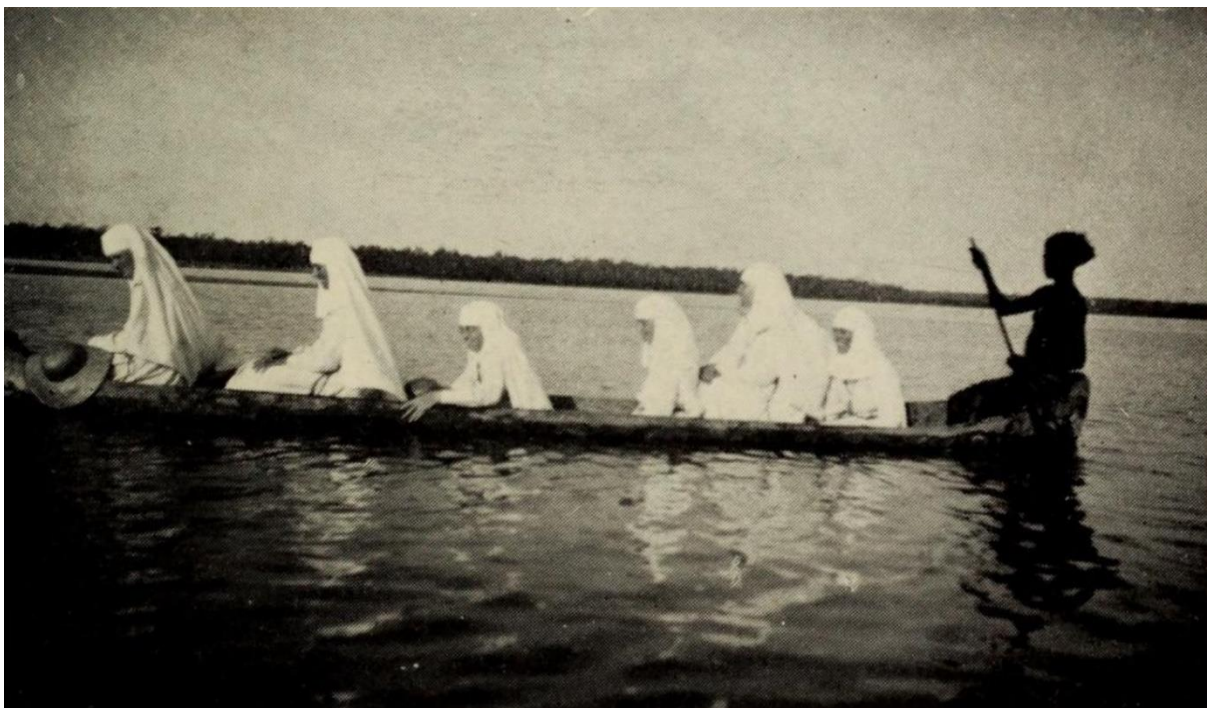


Figure 20: *Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart traversing the Apsley Strait in dugout canoe with Tiwi guide*, circa 1940. In Francis Xavier Gsell, *'The Bishop with 150 Wives': Fifty Years as a Missionary* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1955), 48.



Figure 21: *Portrait of Martien Mateo 'Mathew' Ga, 1915, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.* <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C73237>.



Figure 22: *Martina and Argau Portaminni with their two daughters, Elizabeth and Mary, circa 1930s.* In Francis Xavier Gsell, *'The Bishop with 150 Wives': Fifty Years as a Missionary* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1955), 65.



Figure 23: *Tutini* graveposts commissioned by Monsignor Gsell for 1925 Vatican Exposition, 1924, wood and natural pigments, 181 x 17cm, Vatican Ethnological Museum, Rome.
<http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-etnologico/collezione/pali-funerari-pukumani.html>.



Figure 24: John William Bleakley, *OLSH nuns and Tiwi children outside Bathurst Island Mission School*, 1928, NAA: A263, ALBUM.



Figure 25: *Sister Gerardine Corrigan OLSH with mission children at Nguuu, circa 1930s, Patakijiyali Museum, Wurrumiyanga, Bathurst Island.*



Figure 26: *Monsignor Gsell and the Double Wedding Group (Jean [16] and Xavier [19], and Aloysius [18] and Christina [15] accompanied by their witnesses, Bernadette, Clement, Margaret-Mary and Alfred Murray), 16 January 1932. In *Australian Annals of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart* (January 1933): 37.*



Figure 27: *Bishop Gsell with First Holy Communion children, circa 1930s, Patakijiyali Museum, Wurrumiyanga, Bathurst Island.*



Figure 28: *Father John McGrath MSC preaching en plein air, circa 1930s, Patakijiyali Museum, Wurrumiyanga, Bathurst Island.*

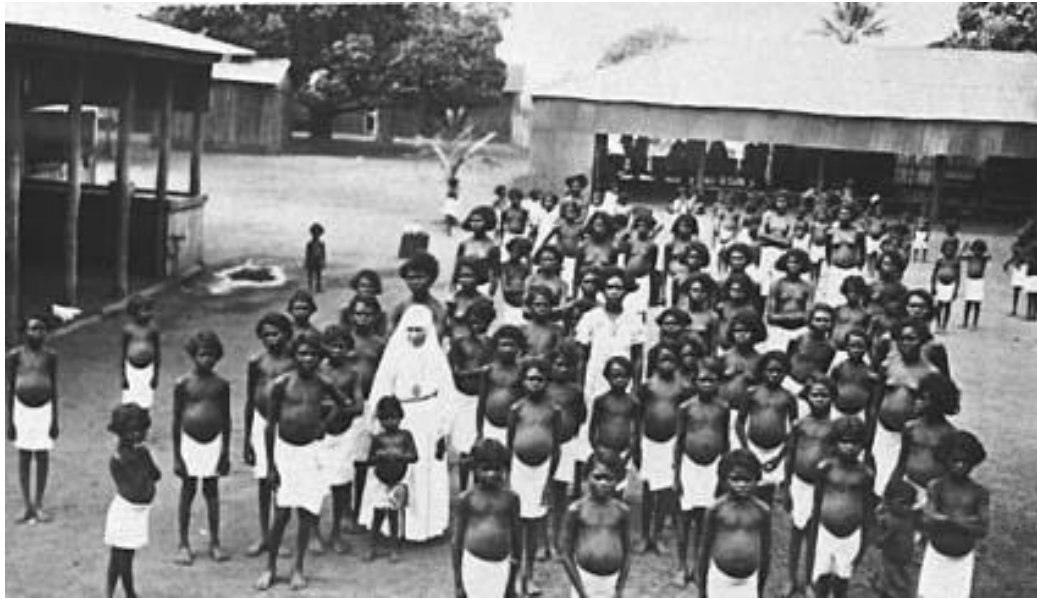


Figure 29: Charles Abbott, *Bathurst Island Mission Girls and OLSH Sister*, 1939, NAA: M10, 3/35.



Figure 30: Bishop Gsell, Peter Hayr, Brother George Carter, and Rev John McGrath with Mission Girls attired in the cotton dresses customarily worn to Sunday Mass, 1939. NAA: M10, 3/34.

Father Gsell's Heroic War With the Jap Slavers



For 23 Years He Has Fought Against the Wicked Traffic, Buying the Helpless Native Girls to Protect Them and Sheltering Them on His Unique Island Sanctuary—But Now His Enemies Have Learned a New Trick

Father Gsell, Apostolic Administrator of the Northern Australia Territory, Who Has Bought More Than a Hundred Girls to Save Them From Cruel Husbands or Brutal Japanese Slavers.

The Young Slave's Fate Is Sealed Once She Is Aboard the Pearler's Logger. After Terrifying Experiences She Is Either Sold Again, or Marooned, and If a Gunboat Pursues Them, the Slavers Destroy All Evidence by Tossing Their Captives to the Sharks.

To pay about \$20 worth of goods and had on his hands ten little colored maidens of ages ranging from nine to fourteen years.

That was problem enough, but the worst was yet to come. Up and down the coast spread the good news that the spendthrift white man was ready to outbid the Japs for girls. The Japs, aware of the price of the girls, were shrewdly figuring that soon the priest would have more on his hands than he could feed or shelter. Then his corner on the girl market was being made by making the price of females "so ivory" cheaper than ever. It was miles ahead of the present false Scotch whisky trick, but Father Gsell beat it. Taking over the large minkah mission, he turned it into a sort of virgin sanctuary, under the management of himself and then three nuns from far off Melbourne.

The colony was almost despoiling, but some way had to be found to graduate the girls back to a safe life, on the mainland, or eventually it would be necessary to take care of them all their lives, and there is where Father Gsell outmaneuvered the Japs. After two to three years' education, the girls were sent back to their villages, but now nobody, not even their own fathers, could sell them, that is nobody but Father Gsell, who still owned them.

From the girls came troping back to him, each with a fiancé of her own choice. Father Gsell not only waived his property rights in the brides, but married them free for free, five times, however, such a thing is never done.

So highly desirable are island graduates that girls and wives who have never been there are beginning to wear skirts because they think it the smart thing. The numbers at the sanctuary grew from 100 to nearly double that when the new Japanese strategy upset everything.

The Jap no longer holds an auction, but goes straight to the finest temporary home of the father of an attractive maiden and shares the contents of one pint with the man free. Something for nothing is as irresistible a proposition on the North Coast as it is elsewhere. By the time the pint is empty the father is in a condition, making it easy for the Jap to buy the daughter for another pint. The wily pearl fishermen are getting the girls at about 40 cents a head, much below the old price.

"You bought one yourself," said one of the father-salween. The missionary was stumped. Of course he had not bought that poor little child for a wife, but he knew that no amount of talk would convince them. Only time and example would prove it to them, and, meanwhile, the Japs would be off with the same that had saved the other one. He must buy these too, so he simply outbid it a expressiveness Oriental. These sly bargainers, fearful of running up the price of girls, let Father Gsell have them all at only a shade more than they usually paid. At that he had

A typically savage-looking Tibbonian of the Mainland Such as Japanese Pirates Are Buying With Whiskey as a Bait for Selling Them Their Young Daughters.

DARWIN, Australia.
FATHER GSELL, Apostolic Administrator for the Northern Territory, Diocese of Australia. In town seeking ammunition and reinforcements for his heroic 23-year-old war to stop the Japanese pearl fishermen from

The wife problem came later, but with even greater persistence when at last of night a little 10-year-old girl beat on the door of his bungalow, on the mainland. In heart-breaking tones the child said to a husband she hated. Father Gsell was the only person who would even think of protecting her, and if he failed, she would kill herself.

It was a tough problem. In the missionary's eyes the girl was demanding an inalienable right of woman, but, in that part of the world nobody had heard of such an idea. According to their customs, which had all the force of law, a man had as much right to sell his daughter as he had to sell a fish he had caught. When a specially fat and healthy looking girl baby was born, men often made a deal with the father to deliver her to him when she should be some six or eight years old.

When times were hard, he could trade his youngest for at least a couple of pigs, and perhaps give away those a little older. Those still older, for whom there were no takers he could get rid of by simply pointing a spear at them and telling them to go. What else they lived or starved afterward was their affair. If a wife was caught in infidelity or even flirting, there was a special kind of divorce. The wife was tied to a tree and the angry husband with 12 light, stenciled javelins, stationed 90 paces away. This is always at least 100 yards because the erring wife is permitted to pick some long-legged friend to measure the distance.

To spear a woman at 100 yards is pretty good throwing, but the bush boys are all experts, and, therefore, to give the trembling target a further break, the man is forced to throw against any wind there may be, or, if no wind, with the sun in his eyes. It is said that there are not many casualties. If the wife survives she is free to marry anyone who wants her and is usually claimed by the correspondent.

Of course, Father Gsell was planning to change all that to a system of monogamous Christian marriage, but having no army or police with which

Beautiful Bathurst Island, the Maiden Sanctuary, Where Father Gsell Protects and Schools the Girls He Has Bought Until They Are Old Enough to Take Care of Themselves.

A Group of the Native Girls of Bathurst Island, Ranging from 2 to 14 Years, Whose Value to the Slavers Amounts to About 40 Cents Each.

Father Gsell's Helpers, the Three Nuns Who Have Volunteered to Aid Him in His Fight Against Slavery.

There also were the father and uncle of the girl admitting the payment and insisting, as honorable men, that the child be delivered to the customer.

Father Gsell knew that the entire population was solidly behind these earnest arguers, and, if he should resist, it would justify them in killing him. Being killed probably frightened the rest very little. No man afraid of death would ever take such a job. But to be killed in this way would be an embarrassment to his church, his government and his successor. That was not what he was there for and it must not happen.

Yet to let them have the girl he had promised to save was more than he could bear. Suddenly came the inspiration for an easy solution. He placed a few beads, a little cloth and a broken jack knife in front of the jittery dance, and that savage's ugly countenance became wreathed in smiles. A few

Figure 31: 'Father Gsell's Heroic War with the Jap Slavers', *The American Weekly*, circa 1938. NAA: A659, 1939/1/7917.

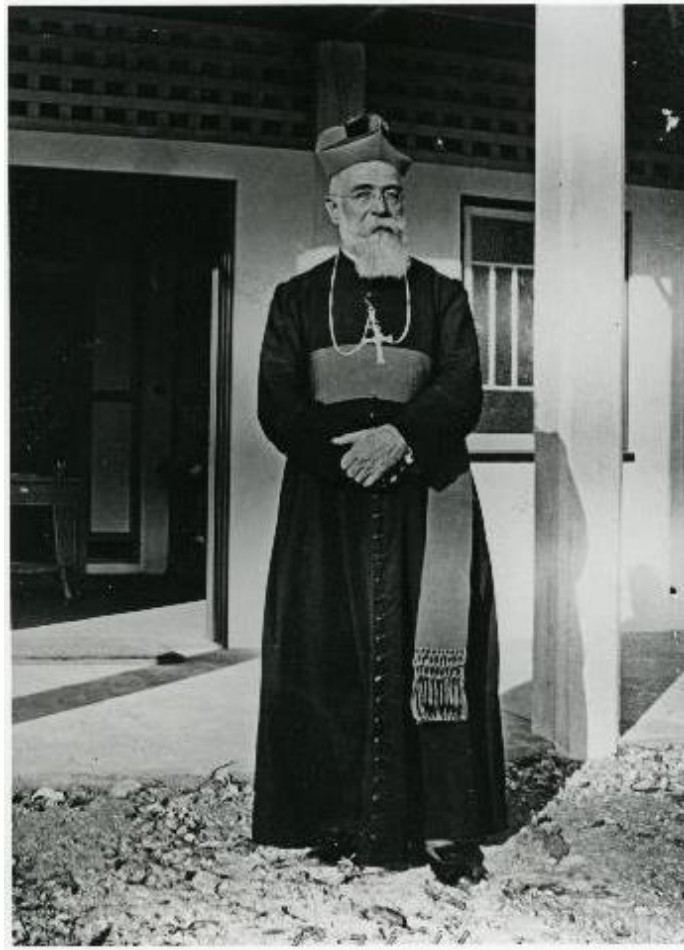


Figure 32: Jessie Litchfield, *Bishop Gsell outside the Darwin Presbytery*, circa 1938, Northern Territory Library, Darwin. <https://territorystories.nt.gov.au/jspui/handle/10070/7988>.



Figure 33: Jessie Litchfield, *Bishop Gsell in ecclesiastical garb outside Darwin Cathedral*, circa 1938, Northern Territory Library, Darwin. <https://territorystories.nt.gov.au/jspui/handle/10070/5544>

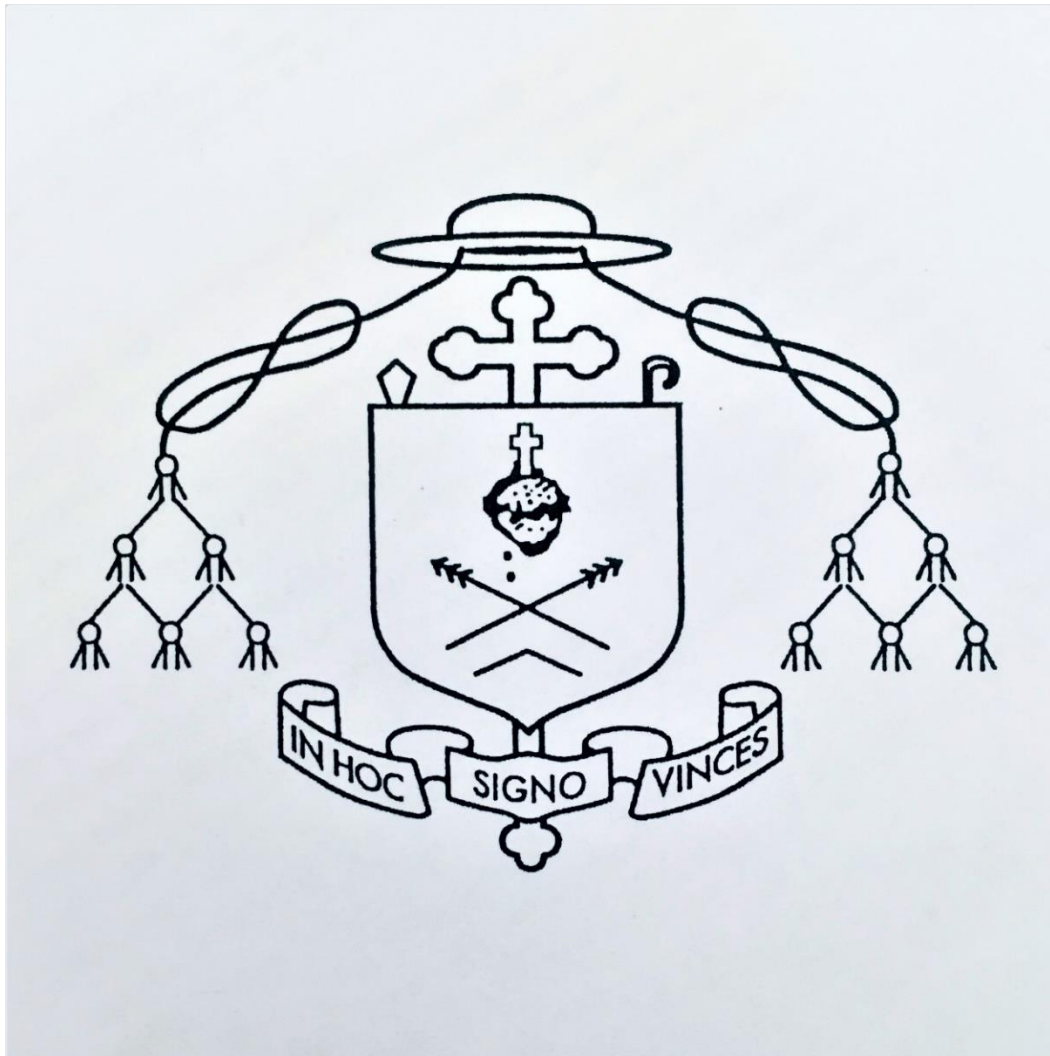


Figure 34: *Ecclesiastical Device of Bishop Francis Xavier Gsell MSC, 1938.* In Stephen Hackett, 'A Centenary Celebration: Father Francis Xavier Gsell', *Cathedral Magazine* 9 (September 2006): 22-24.



Figure 35: *Flag of Free France, Cross of Lorraine variant, 1940-1944,* <https://freesvg.org/flag-of-free-france-1940-1944-cross-of-lorraine-variant>.



Figure 36: *Wounded Angel Memorial*, 2020, photograph, St Mary's Cathedral, Darwin. Photo Michael Francis.



Figure 37: *Newsreel featuring 'Refugees from Melville Island'*, 1942, short film, British Movietone, uploaded 21 July 2015. <https://youtu.be/FNFws5vYsHQ>. Includes images and voices of girls of mixed-descent, formally resident at the Garden Point Mission, who were then staying in Melbourne. **Please copy and paste above link to your web browser if the video does not work properly in this format. Apologies for the inconvenience.**



Figure 38: *Bishop Gsell chatting with Tiwi men, circa 1947. In Frank Flynn, *Distant Horizons* (Kensington: Sacred Heart Monastery), 1947. Sister Anne Gardiner identifies the men as John, Alfred Fernando, Reginald Tipiloura, and Tobias Pilakui. The fifth gentleman is unknown. See *We Are Wiser For Their Words: Celebrating 100 years of Catholic Faith, Nguiu – Wurrumiyanga, Bathurst Island, 1911-2011* (Darwin: Nguiu Nginingawila Literature Production, 2011), 5.*



Figure 39: *Monsignor Gsell with his successor, Monsignor O'Loughlin, circa 1949. In Francis Xavier Gsell, 'The Bishop with 150 Wives': Fifty Years as a Missionary* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1955), 129.



Figure 40: *Bathurst Island Church and Congregation, 1954.* In John Pye, *The Tiwi Islands* (Darwin: J.R. Coleman, 1980), 46.

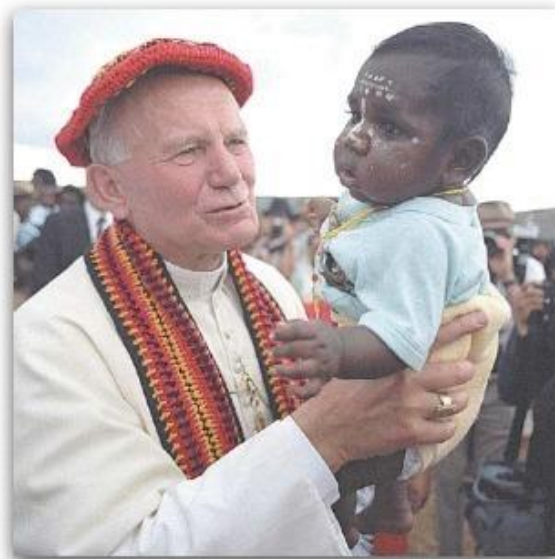


Figure 41: *Pope John Paul II holding Liam Pandella at Alice Springs, 1986.* In Frank Brennan, 'The Pope in Alice: 25 years on', *Eureka Street* 21, 23 (2011).
<https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/the-pope-in-alice--25-years-on#>.

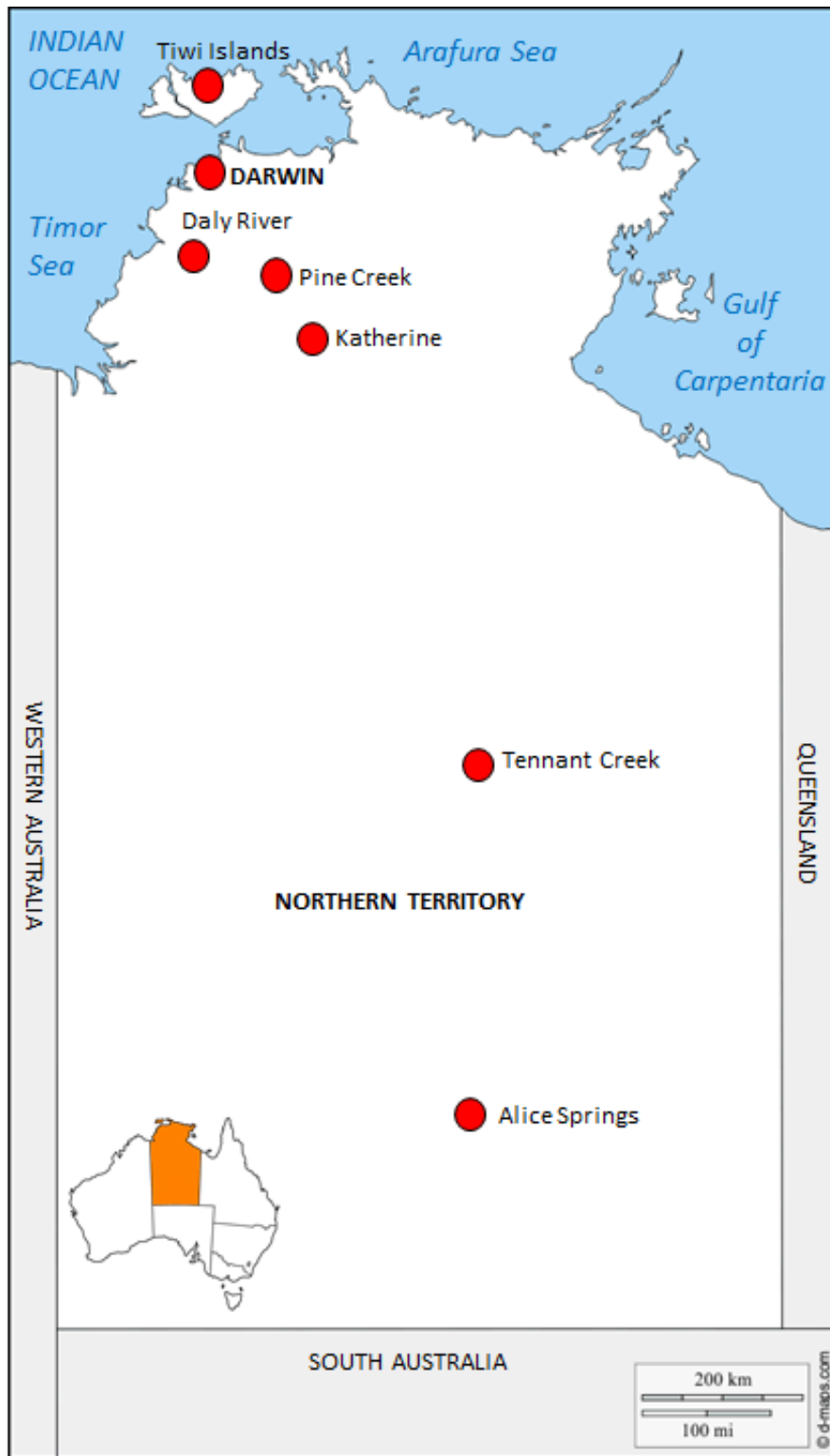


Figure 42: *Altarpiece featuring Purrukapali and Jinani*, circa 1989, St Therese's Church, Wurrumiyanga, Bathurst Island. Photo Michael Francis.

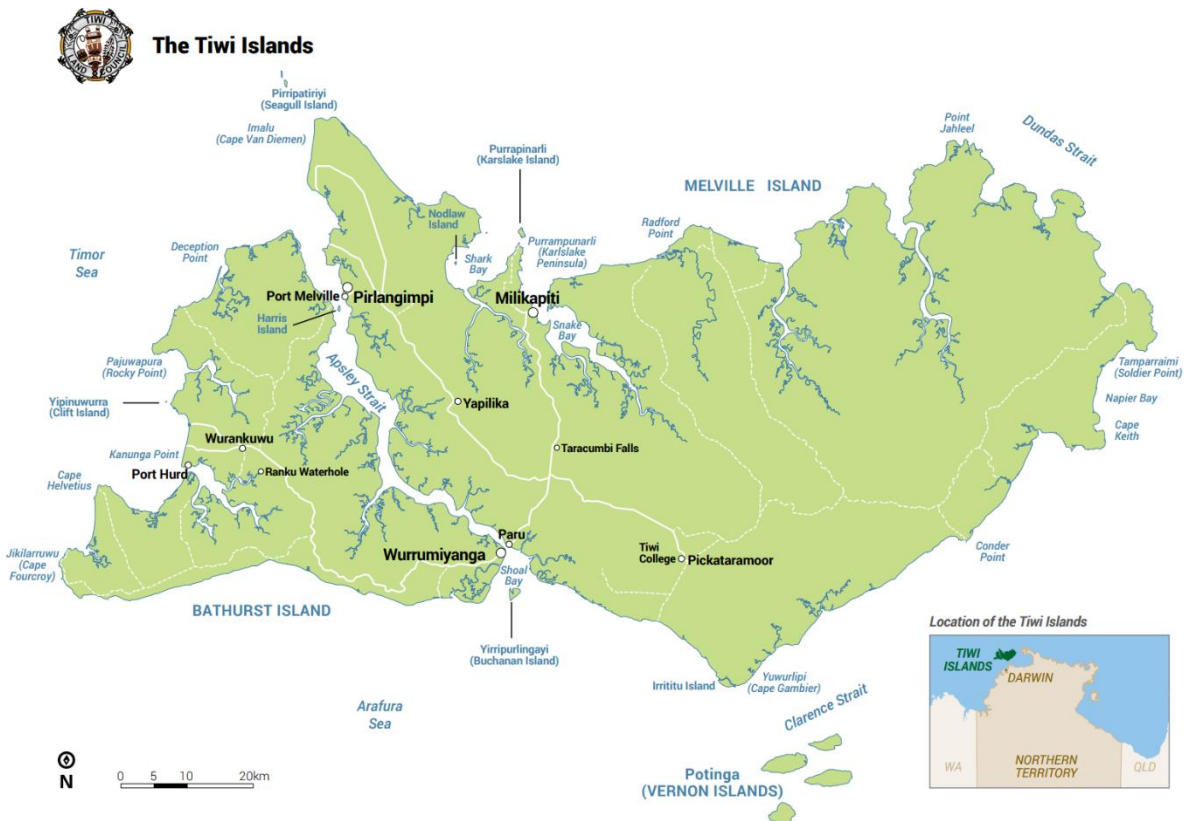
MAPS



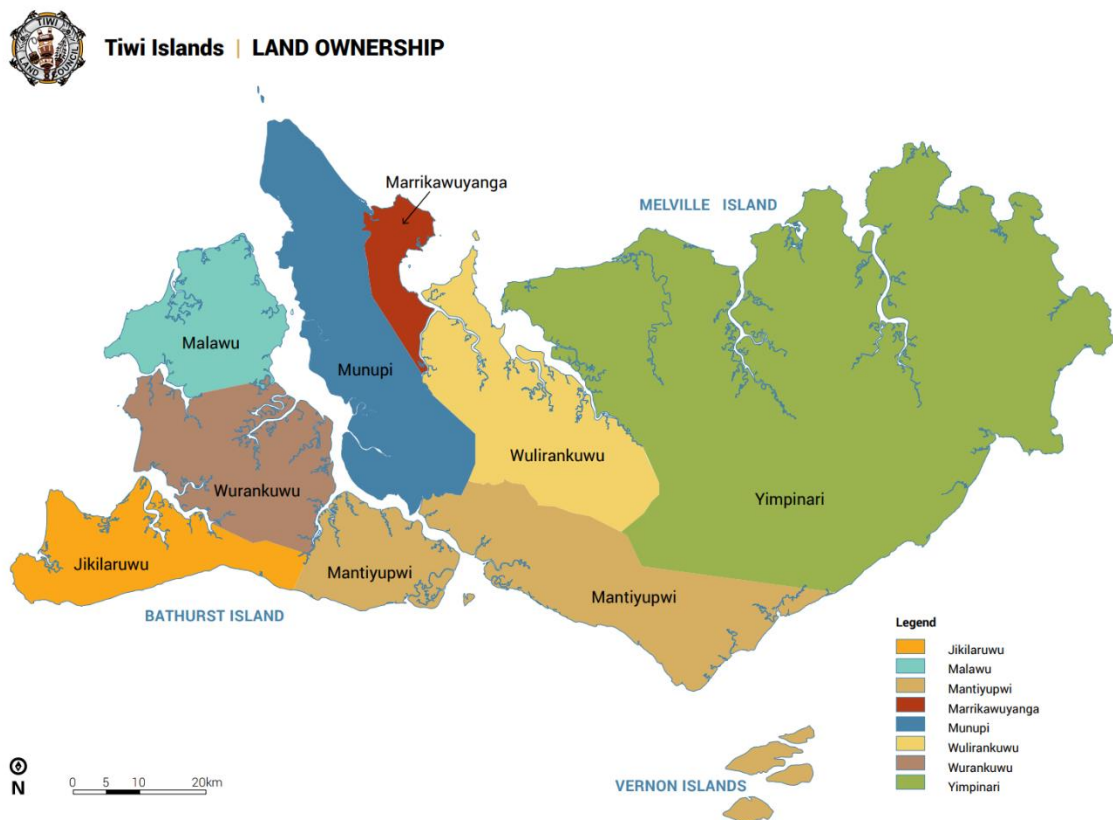
Map 1: Detailed map of the Northern Territory with cities and towns, 2020, OnTheWorldMap: Free Printable Maps. <http://ontheworldmap.com/australia/state/northern-territory/large-detailed-map-of-northern-territory-with-cities-and-towns.html>.



Map 2: *Simplified map of the Northern Territory, Australia. 2020.*



Map 3: Tiwi Land Council, *Map of the Tiwi Islands*, 2020.
<https://www.tiwilandcouncil.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&p=265&l=2&id=67&smid=194>.



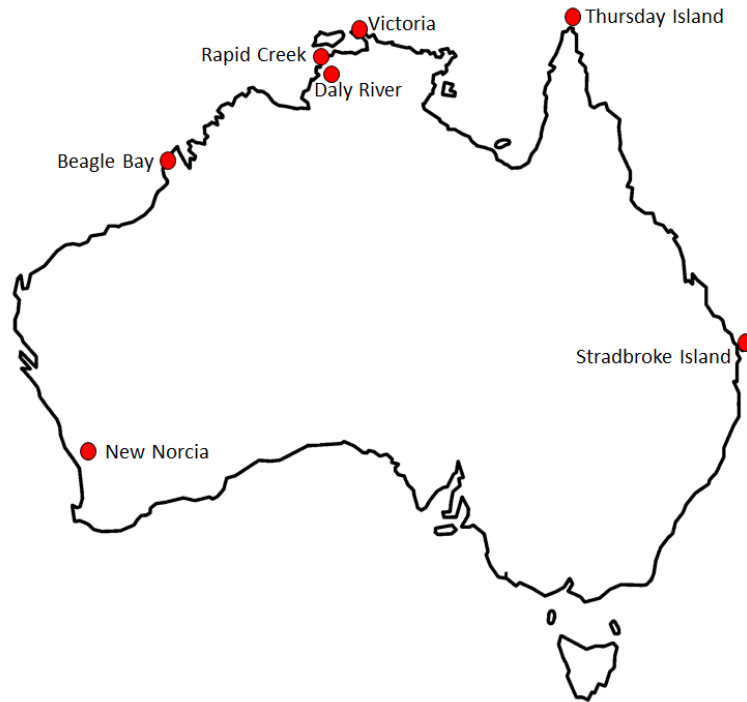
Map 4: Tiwi Land Council, *Map of the Tiwi Islands showing traditional land ownership*, 2020.
<https://www.tiwilandcouncil.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&p=265&l=2&id=67&smid=194>.



Map 5: Map of the Torres Strait Islands region of Australia. In Patricia Valery and Torukiri Ibiebele et al. ‘Diet, Physical Activity, and Obesity in School-Aged Indigenous Youths in Northern Australia’, *Journal of obesity* (2012).



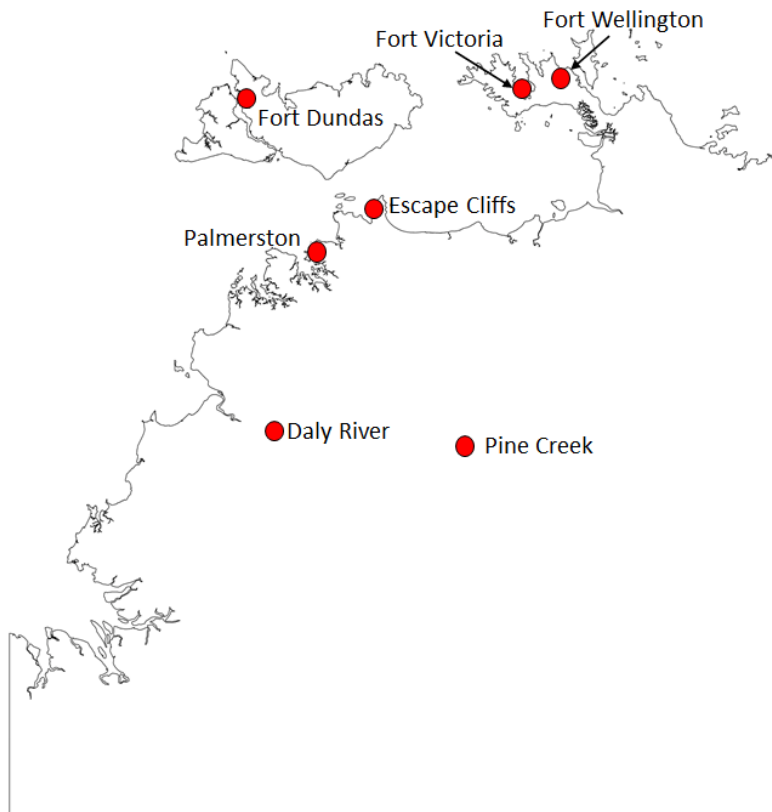
Map 6: South coast of Papua New Guinea from Yule Island to Amazon Bay. In Robert Skelly et al. ‘Changing ceramic traditions at Agila ancestral village, Hood Bay, Papua New Guinea. *Australian Archaeology* (2018): 1-15.



Map 7: *Australian Catholic Missions, 1843-1899.*



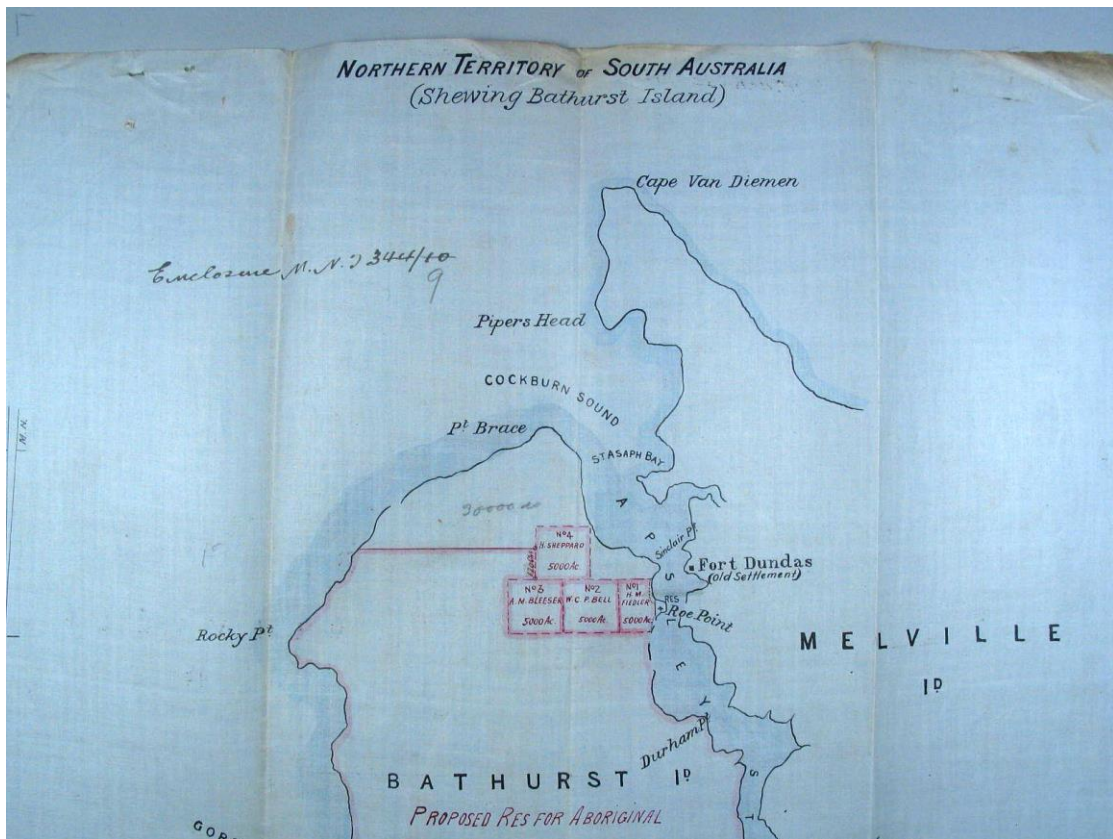
Map 8: *Australian Catholic Missions, 1900-1942.*



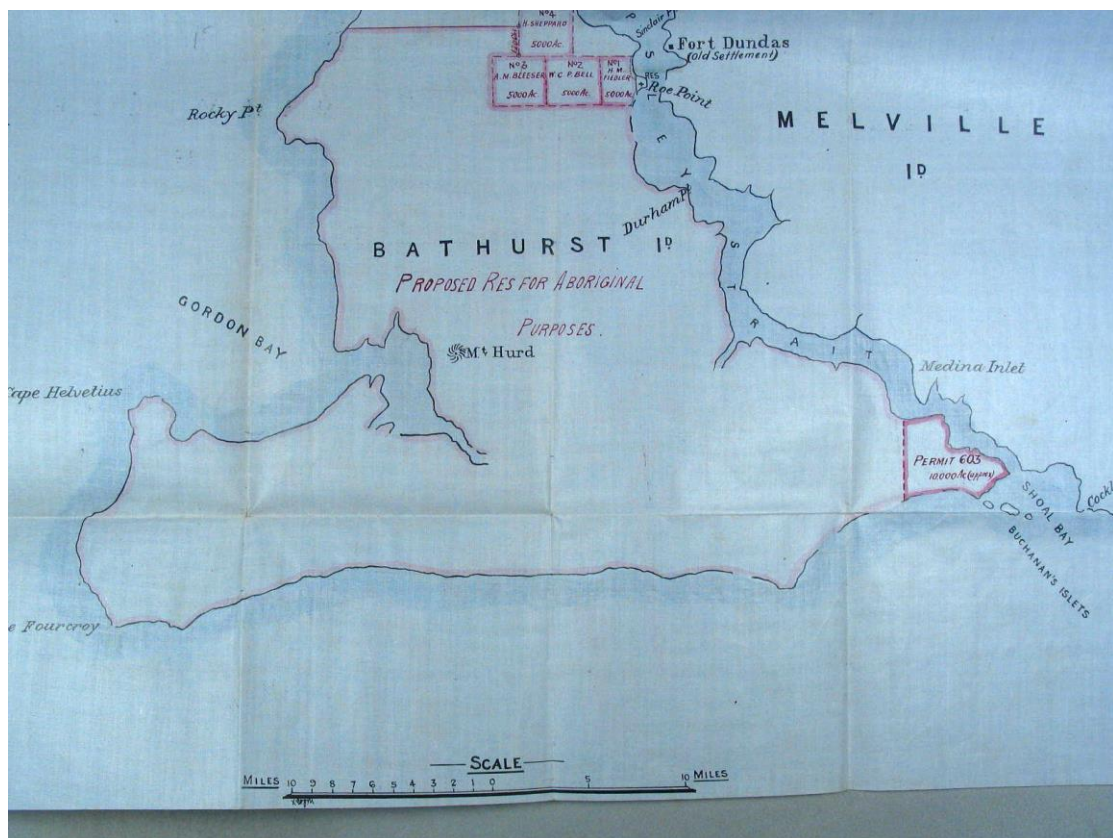
Map 9: Northern Territory colonial settlements, 1824-1910. Courtesy of Sarah Belet.



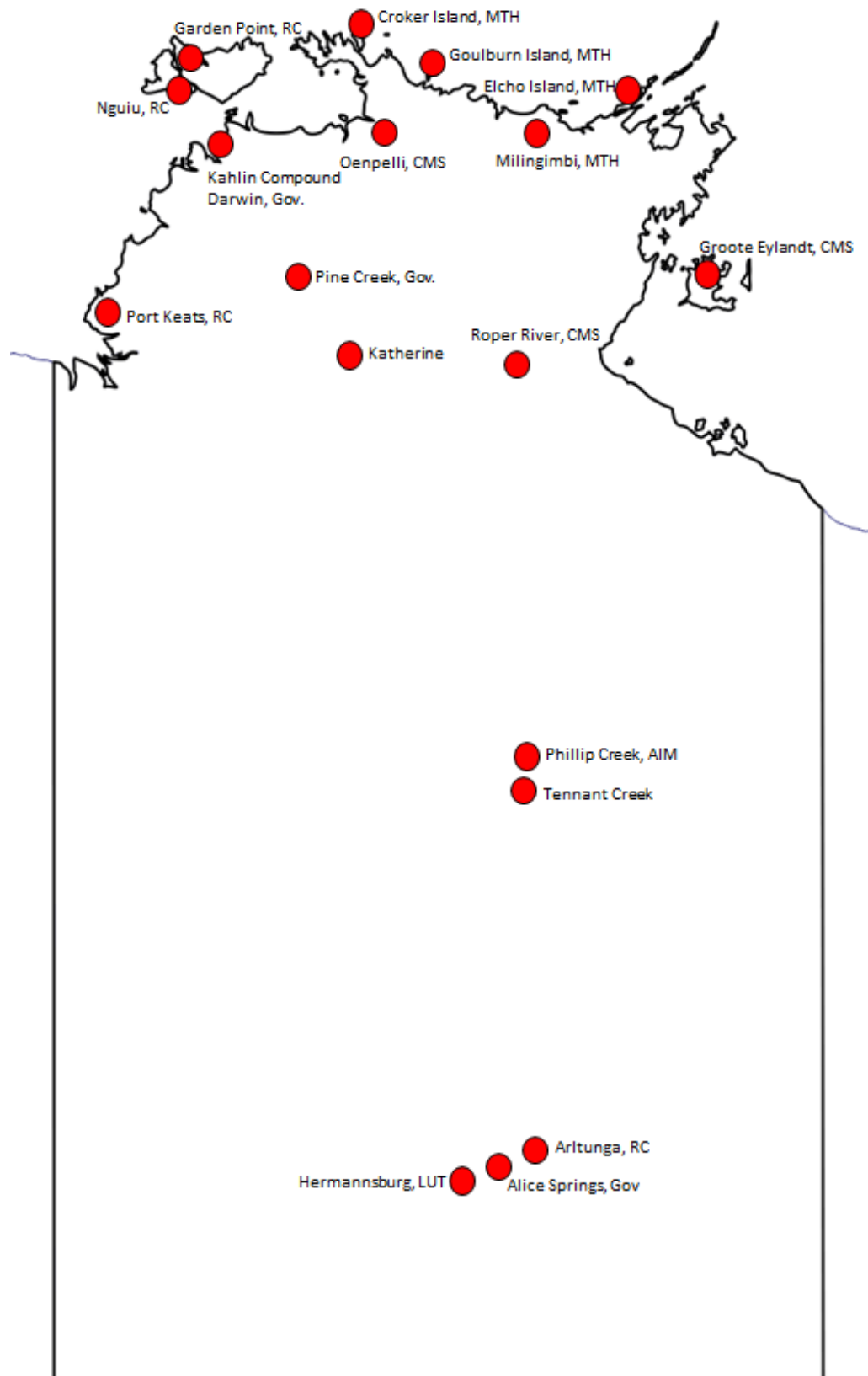
Map 10: Kimberley Region road map, including Catholic missions and major settlements such as Broome, Beagle Bay, Lombadina, Kalumburu, and Wyndham, 2020, Australian Travel and Tourism Network. <https://www.atn.com.au/wa/north/kimberley-roadmap.html>.



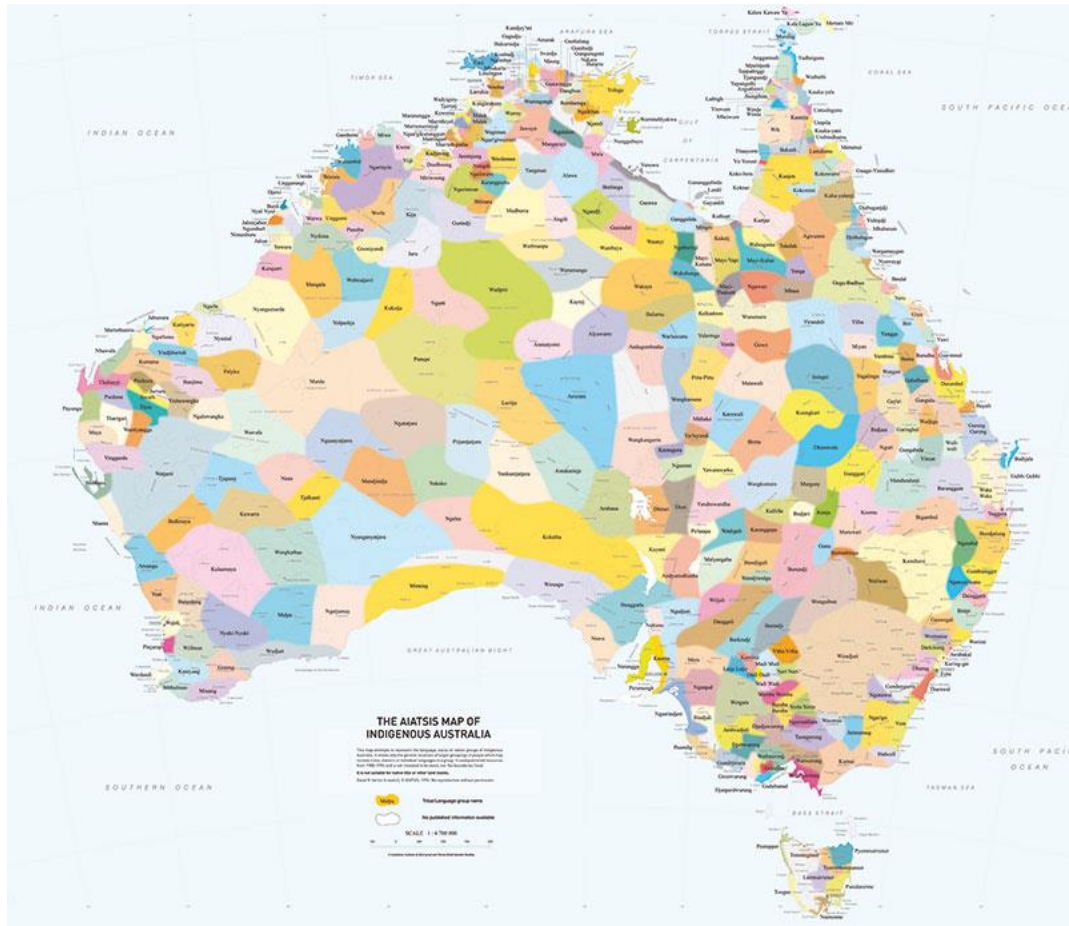
Map 11: Agricultural Leases, Bathurst Island, 1910, NAA: A1, 1938/33126.



Map 12: Proposed Reserve for Aboriginal Purposes, Bathurst Island, 1910, NAA: A1, 1938/33126.



Map 13: *Northern Territory Missions, 1908-1942.*



Map 14: AIATSIS, *The AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia*, 2019.
<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia>.



Map 15: AIATSIS, *AIATSIS Map: Kimberley, Fitzmaurice, North and Arnhem Regions*, 2019.
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