

Author Biography

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From Paternalism to Superiority: Colonial Ideologies of the New Norcia Mission, 1847-1974

Evie Levin

In 1974, the final Indigenous reserve and residential school in Australia shut down, more than a century after it first opened its doors. As the last of these institutions to close, the end of the New Norcia Mission appeared to indicate shifting public consciousness away from historical ideas about race and Indigeneity, the lifeblood of the European colonialism that created modern Australia. Founded by Benedictine missionaries Bishop Rosendo Salvado and Joseph Benedict Serra in Western Australia in 1847, New Norcia was an institution established for the express purpose of Christianizing the Nyoongar people who lived there. Most reports and policies within the Mission during the 1840s to 1860s heavily emphasized the paternalistic desire to “enlighten,” “save,” and “civilize” Indigenous people.

However, as European scientific ideas about racial hierarchy solidified by the mid-1860s, discussion and policy surrounding New Norcia shifted focus from natives’ religious inferiority to their genetic, biological inadequacy. Perhaps the most significant development in the implementation of systemic racism at

this time was the Half-Caste Act of 1886 and the advent of racial categorization based on blood ratios. By the 1900s, the pseudoscientific conception of race had firmly embedded itself in colonizers' consciousness, manifesting in the violent bioessentialism of Eugenics theory, and enforced at New Norcia by Chief Protector of Aborigines, A. O. Neville. This shift was not unique to New Norcia, nor was it unique to Australia. It encompassed European colonial powers all over the world as new scientific theories were utilized to reinforce old power structures. European colonialism's legacy still reverberates to this day, impacting survivors of the Eugenics policies and the generations that came after. However, due to the New Norcia Mission's long history and extensive public documentation in newspapers and journals, it is an ideal case study to trace the broader development of colonialist ideology from one of religious paternalism to racial superiority.

Colonialism as Christian Paternalism (1847-1860s)

To fully realize the ways that missionaries—like those who established the New Norcia Mission—weaponized religion to further the colonial enterprise, it is vital to first understand what colonialism is and how it operates. For this reason, I will modify the definition given by modern historian and professor Wolfgang Reinhard in his 2011 book *A Short History of Colonialism*. Reinhard characterizes colonialism as “one people's control over another people through the economic, political and ideological exploitation of a development gap between the two.”¹ This research diverges from Reinhard's term “development gap.” In his text, he expresses that the phrase should be interpreted as entirely free of value judgment for either side.² While I do not disagree in content, I am hesitant to accept the statement's neutrality, as distinguishing a “gap” in development may indicate the underdevelopment of one society, and the developmental superiority of the other. Thus, I will refer to this principle as simply “developmental differences,”

1 Wolfgang Reinhard, *A Short History of Colonialism*, trans. Kate Sturge (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2011), 1.

2 Ibid, 2.

to connote that both societies are equally developed but have just developed differently. Essentially, I will define colonialism as the process of a foreign nation gaining economic, political, and ideological control over a different nation, by way of exploiting the neutral but irreconcilable differences in sociopolitical systems, methods of war/weaponry, and resources between colonizer and colonized societies.³

Reinhard also discusses motivations behind European colonialism, citing socio-economic, political, and, most pertinent for the purposes of this argument, religious motives. He states, “At stake was often a desire to bring true faith to the heathens, true culture to barbarians. Such missionary aspirations were ideologically instrumentalized, but they must nevertheless be taken seriously and cannot be dismissed as mere smokescreens.”⁴ I would like to highlight this statement to clarify the way in which this paper understands missionary Christianity. While, in large part, these missions were employed to achieve secular colonial motivations like economic and political domination, this does not mean that those who carried out missions were doing so in bad faith. On the contrary, as illuminated by award winning Western Australian historian Anna Haebich, most missionaries believed in their divine duty to save colonial subjects from religious customs that they deemed false, even as they may have also had more secular influences.⁵

This religious factor is the key to defining the ideology of the earlier stages of colonialism, an ideology that would dominate much of the colonial world until the mid-1860s: religious paternalism. I have come to identify religious paternalism, within the scope of colonialism, by three distinct factors. Colonizers must believe in the essential, “universal truth” of their own religion, and, by extension, the falsity of the religion of the colonized. They must then deem non-

3 Reinhard, 2.

4 Ibid, 6-7.

5 Anna Haebich, “Neoliberalism, Settler Colonialism and the History of Indigenous Child Removal in Australia,” *Australian Indigenous Law Review* 19, no. 1 (2015/2016): 22.

believers to need aid and enlightenment, oftentimes through infantilization and dehumanization. These values must then coalesce into institutions and policies with the intent of “educating” the non-believers in the “real truth” of the world which ultimately constitute the structures of the assimilationist machine of colonialism.

The nature of religious paternalism and the ways that it enforced colonial systems are thoroughly exemplified by the founding and early structure of the New Norcia Mission as well as the ways print publications discussed the Mission from the 1840s to the early 1860s. In fact, the institution itself was founded by Spanish Benedictine Bishop Rosendo Salvado in 1847 for the explicit purpose of converting the native Nyoongar people to Christianity.⁶ After spending several months in Western Australia and living with the native people, Salvado narrated in his memoirs, “We made it our business to tame their wild hearts as far as possible, and to prepare them to receive some notions of the Christian Faith and its mysteries.”⁷ The bishop’s expressed motivation fell firmly in line with the paternalistic belief that native people’s religions were false, and the Nyoongar people needed the guidance of missionaries. Additionally, the rhetoric of “taming”—as one would a wild animal—infantilized and dehumanized the natives he referred to, further exposing his paternalistic belief that they needed to be saved.

Expanding on this theme, Salvado explained, “It is not surprising that the Benedictines, who civilized an old world, should be entrusted with the care of the new one... this task was very appropriate for the family of St. Benedict...whose zeal, charity and educational methods changed the face of Europe in the darkest days of history.”⁸ The sense of righteousness and religious supremacy in this proclamation implied that the Indigenous people residing there were inherently

6 Rosendo Salvado, *The Salvado Memoirs*, ed. and trans. E. J. Stormon (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1977), 18.

7 Salvado, 51.

8 *Ibid.*, 12-13.

unable to “care” for themselves and thus in need of “charity” from an outside, colonial force.

The operation of the New Norcia Mission embodied the paternalistic belief that local Indigenous people were incapable of taking care of themselves. Early in his memoirs, Salvado set the rule that people be fully clothed, despite the Nyoongar practice of going without clothes during the summer. The missionaries enforced this policy by handing out food to those “properly” covered on both the top and bottom and denying food to those who were not.⁹ An attempt to “lift them above their wretched condition,”¹⁰ not only did Salvado’s rule force any Indigenous person who wanted a warm meal to abandon their way of living, it also placed a negative moral judgment on this way of living. In conjunction to smaller-scale rules, the most prominent means by which religious paternalism manifested itself in the structure of New Norcia was through its heavy emphasis on teaching sedentary agriculture as the foundation to a “real” civilization. Salvado again wrote “The only answer is to... teach these work-shy nomads to settle down to a community life in one spot. From this arises the necessity of an establishment directed by... missionaries who... devote themselves entirely to the moral and civil education of their neighbors and the glory of God.”¹¹ Here, Salvado not only implied that the natives were lazy and needed to be taught proper work ethic, but also deemed his missionaries the only people up to the task. By educating the Nyoongar people on how to be sedentary and labor in the “right” way, he believed he would bring them closer to God—the driving goal behind many missionary actions at this point in time.

Furthermore, Elicia Taylor, a historian on Indigenous child removal, discusses the Mission’s structure in relation to native people in “Benevolent Benedictines? Vulnerable missions and aboriginal policy in the time of A.O.

9 Salvado, 70.

10 Ibid.

11 Salvado, 55.

Neville.”¹² This work tracks the shifting relationship between New Norcia and the secular Australian government, and the influence it had over policy at the Mission. Addressing Salvado and the beginnings of Norcia, Taylor illustrates how, due to the theological motivations of the missionaries, they were initially respectful of Indigenous family units. While still compelled to live on and perform agricultural work for the Mission, families were allowed to stay together: a fact that will become a focal point in later sections.¹³ Early in the span of Norcia’s existence, missionaries also encouraged native people to practice hunting and spend time outside “if they appeared to become unmotivated.”¹⁴ These practices indicated the potential faith that Salvado and the other Benedictines had in their aim: they didn’t necessarily want to destroy native societies, and at the very least were more focused on trying to “civilize” them and teach them the “proper” way to live. However, regardless of the sincerity that these missionaries had in their paternalism, the specifics of their policies regarding native peoples were still colonialist and violent.

Much of Salvado’s dehumanizing language in his memoirs was mirrored extensively in the newspaper coverage of New Norcia Mission, demonstrating a broad cultural acceptance of paternalistic rhetoric to justify their colonialist practices. The 1862 article “Progress of Catholicity Among the Natives of Western Australia” from the *Freeman’s Journal* is a vital example of distinctly religious paternalistic language, common before the mid-1860s. The author, pseudonymously “Believe,” recounted their visit to New Norcia, and describes the conversations they had with the Superior. Believe illustrated, “the truths of Christianity,” and praised Norcia’s attempts “to render [Indigenous people]

12 Elicia Taylor, “Benevolent Benedictines? Vulnerable missions and Aboriginal policy in the time of A.O. Neville,” *Aboriginal History* 42 (2018), 103.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Taylor, 103.

intelligent and civilized creatures.”¹⁵ They also referred to native people as “neophytes” and expressed disgust at the “peculiar and unpleasant odour which is emitted from the bodies of the aboriginals—even after they had been subjected to a thorough cleansing.”¹⁶ This documentation is significant in two ways. First, the article displayed the nature of public discourse surrounding Indigenous people as foolish children who needed Christianity to save them from a “primitive” and “ignorant” status. Second, this column, and other similar papers written between the 1850s and 1860s, reveals that there was little to no discussion of biology or race. Instead, newspapers infantilized native people on intellectual and religious bases.

Transition towards Social Darwinism (mid-1860s-1900)

By the mid-1860s, the purely religious ideology behind colonialism began to shift toward a more scientific, biological view of human nature due to the increasingly popular philosophy in Europe known as Social Darwinism. Based on the scientific theories in Charles Darwin’s 1859 book *On the Origin of Species*, Social Darwinism extended Darwinian principles of natural selection and struggle for existence to the social structures created by human beings. To define the fundamental doctrines of this burgeoning ideology, I will refer to Mike Hawkins’s book *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as a Model and Nature as a Threat*. In this book, Hawkins defines natural selection as the process by which intraspecies variation is passed onto offspring—if advantageous to the survival of the organism—with the ultimate result being the extinction of “less evolved” forms of the species.¹⁷ In conjunction, Hawkins defines struggle for existence as the idea of competition, with intraspecies competition always being the most brutal. These facets, combined with the

15 Believe, “Progress of Catholicity Among the Natives of Western Australia,” *Freeman’s Journal* (Sydney, New South Wales), June 21, 1862.

16 Ibid.

17 Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as a Model and Nature as a Threat* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25.

“assumption...that this determinism extends to not just the physical properties of humans but also to their social existence,” create the basis of Social Darwinism.¹⁸

Here, I would like to note that ideas about biological differences among humans were not invented at this time and existed in various disparate forms since the first wave of colonialism in the fifteenth century. However, it was not until the 1860s that the influence of colonialism led mainstream European thought to coalesce these separate scientific theories into one cohesive ideology.¹⁹ Anna Haebich illustrates this shift in “Neoliberalism, Settler Colonialism and the History of Indigenous Child Removal in Australia,” citing, “In the 1830s, post-abolitionist Britain basked in the glow of evangelical humanitarianism and missionary endeavor...to transform Indigenous people to become ‘industrious, sober and useful’...By the 1860s, British humanitarian optimism had hardened along with racism.”²⁰ Colonialism opened Europeans up to a wide range of belief and behavior among different groups of people and introduced them to completely different worldviews, casting doubt upon the Christian social order they had always held to be the sole universal Truth.²¹ Presented with challenges to their strong socioreligious values, Europeans adopted ideas about racial hierarchies and Social Darwinism as they were able to provide a replacement for the now-unstable belief in *divine* social hierarchy. Through this more empirical—but still stratified—structure, Europeans could uphold their pre-existing conviction of superiority, while accommodating for the influx in competing belief systems.

Social Darwinism’s solidification of racial categorization had drastic tangible impacts on the way that white colonialists viewed Indigenous Australians on a national scale, and therefore influenced policies enforced at and reporting about the New Norcia Mission. One of the most prominent, enduring concepts of Australian natives that arose out of this Darwinist climate was the myth that

18 Hawkins, 30.

19 Ibid.

20 Haebich, 22.

21 Hawkins, 23.

Indigeneity was dying out and being “purified” from the bloodline, a concept I will refer to as the Extinction Myth.²² Ripped straight from struggle for existence, white Australians theorized that due to the inherent superiority of whiteness, “less evolved” native genes simply could not compete. While strictly pseudoscience and demonstrably fallacious, colonialism had detrimental impacts on Indigenous populations as settlers encroached further on their land, which white people observed and attributed to Darwinist theories nature.²³ Hand-in-hand with the Extinction Myth came new racial categories to divide and assign social value to native people, rooted in Indigenous-to-white blood ratios. Labels like “half-caste”—having one Black parent and one white parent—and “octoroon”—one-eighth Black ancestry—were utilized by officials to signify proximity to whiteness and assign racialized traits like intelligence, cleanliness, and civility based on the category’s closeness to “white.” Undoubtedly, this began to have definite impacts on Australian Indigenous policy.

These impacts were made manifest in what is arguably Western Australia’s most notable policy change of the era: the Aborigines Protection Act of 1886, colloquially known as the Half-Caste Act. Under the guise of “protection”—distinctly paternalistic rhetoric—this act was detrimental to the self-determination of Indigenous people in Western Australia and effectively changed New Norcia’s role from a strictly religious institution to a partner in the secular government’s more science-based doctrine. This policy directly involved the government in the lives of native people and defined “Aborigines” as “Every Aboriginal Native of Australia, and every Aboriginal half-caste or child of a half-caste, such half-caste or child habitually associating and living with Aborigines, shall be deemed to be an Aboriginal within the meaning of this Act.”²⁴ This officially set parameters as to how much “white blood” one could have without

22 Rosemary van der Berg, *Nyoongar People of Australia: Perspectives on Racism and Multiculturalism* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2002), 37.

23 Ibid.

24 “Aborigines Protection Act 1886 (1886-1906),” Find&Connect, 2018.

thus being considered white. While it is unclear whether people with higher white-to-native blood ratios were considered white, “half-castes” were decidedly not. Most important, though, was the creation of a new government department, the Aborigines Protection Board, and a leadership position in the form of Chief Protector of Aborigines.²⁵ The Australian government granted this new board the rights to interfere in child caretaking, distribute “welfare” to Indigenous adults, and force native children into apprenticeships until the age of 21. The legacy of the Board of Aborigines and its power over individual Indigenous lives will be explored more in the next section.

The advent of biological and racial categories is also very clearly reflected in the evolution of reporting on the New Norcia Mission starting in the mid-1860s. A striking evolution, up to this point there had been little to no scientific rhetoric in newspapers and reports. As early as 1868, there was discussion of distinctly racial divisions between children at the Mission, frank mentions of the Extinction Myth, and even advocating for the “eradication” of Indigeneity. This is made clear in a *Herald* article from Fremantle, WA on January 4, 1868, entitled “The Native Mission of New Norcia, Victoria Plains.” The column read, “Black children soon grow tired of mental application...I doubt that they can be compared to the white boys of the same age in quickness of apprehension and retentiveness of memory. Half-caste children show better intelligence.”²⁶ Here, the author demonstrated the practice of distinguishing groups of New Norcia children by race and applying non-biological traits to each group. Fully Indigenous children were rendered unintelligent and lacking memory retention, while white children were considered the pinnacle of academic accomplishment. Biracial children fell somewhere in between. Perhaps more alarming was the espousal of exterminatory rhetoric as the article reads, “To attempt eradicating at once the deeply rooted customs of the race, even in the rising generation, is not

25 “Aborigines Protection Act 1886 (1886-1906).”

26 “The Native Mission of New Norcia, Victoria Plains,” *Herald* (Fremantle, WA), Jan. 4, 1868.

deemed expedient.”²⁷ This statement alone displays a clear progression of colonial intent, expressing the desire to not only “enlighten” and “civilize” native people but annihilate their race and culture. The only problem standing in their way was that it was “not expedient” with the implication that if it were, it would be done.

On a different note, it is important to discuss the ways that religious paternalism of the early decades persisted. The author of this column makes frequent reference to “Divine Providence,” stating, “The lessons of piety, laborious life and self-denial...is [*sic*] supposed to be the most efficient means of impressing the imitative native mind with respect and love for religious truth.”²⁸ These arguments reveal that while religion was still a strong motivator, ideas of colonial superiority in New Norcia and Australia as a whole were beginning to be enforced by science and biology, solidifying a racialized power structure.

Further manifesting a racial rhetoric, newspapers also expressed the Extinction Myth, indicating its widespread influence in Western Australia and settlers’ consequential treatment toward natives. In a critical letter to the editor of the *Adelaide Observer* from March 27, 1869, W. W. Thwaites lamented the poor treatment of Indigenous people at New Norcia. Laden with his own religious paternalism, Thwaites mourned, “Their lands have been taken from them, and they are fast dwindling away, and no effort seems to be made to arrest their apparent fate” and “we wept for the sufferings of the octoroon, when poor half-castes—with white blood coursing through their veins—are more degraded than the slave, and receive no sympathy.”²⁹ While on the surface this perspective seems sympathetic to the plight of Indigenous people at New Norcia, Thwaites only perpetuated the same problematic ideology. The belief that Indigenous people were dying out rapidly and would soon become extinct was attributed to the fundamental inferiority of native peoples’ genes and their inherent inability

27 “The Native Mission of New Norcia, Victoria Plains.”

28 *Ibid.*

29 W. W. Thwaites, “Treatment of Aborigines,” *Adelaide Observer* (Adelaide, South Australia), March 27, 1869.

to thrive as well as white people. The innate inferiority of Indigenous genes is additionally expressed as Thwaites referenced Indigenous-to-white blood ratios, the hallmark of Social Darwinist racial hierarchies. He raged against New Norcia, not because of the intrinsic injustice of forced assimilation, but because those native children closest to whiteness, the “half-castes” and “octoroons,” were treated the same way or worse than those of full Indigenous ancestry. Rather than outliers, the messages in these articles were the norm for the entirety of reporting on Norcia from the 1860s to the 1900s, illustrating the pervasiveness of this newly cemented doctrine of race science.

Domination of Race Science and Eugenics (1900s)

The biological essentialism of Social Darwinism would be taken to its logical extreme by the Eugenics movement of the 1900s, which employed the principles of Natural Selection and Struggle for Existence in a material attempt to speed up the evolutionary process and exterminate “unfavorable” populations. Much current discussion of Eugenics focuses on a more holistic perspective, looking at *all* its impacts and the reasons why it was adopted by societies all over the world. In this vein, Eugenics is not strictly racial in nature and, thus, is not entirely synonymous with race science.³⁰ The ideology has also had calamitous impacts on people sharing non-racialized traits like homo/bisexuality and mental/physical disability.³¹ However, as this paper addresses race and colonialism specifically, I will narrow the theory to its fundamentals: the ways the theory grew out of Social Darwinism and how it furthered racial colonial projects like those in Australia. Broadly, The National Human Genome Research Institute defines Eugenics theory as a “pseudoscientific theory that claims it is possible to perfect people and groups through genetics and the scientific laws of inheritance. Eugenacists used an incorrect and prejudiced understanding of the work of Charles Darwin and

30 Diane B. Paul, John Stenhouse, and Hamish G. Spencer, “Introduction: Eugenics as a Transnational Subject: The British Dominions,” *Eugenics at the Edges of Empire*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2.

31 Ibid.

Gregor Mendel to support the idea of ‘racial improvement.’”³² In essence, Eugenics is commonly conceived of as the physical manifestation of Social Darwinism through deliberate actions and policies to “perfect” humans by identifying “bad” kinds of genes and “breeding” them out. To supplement this understanding, I will employ the work of acclaimed Dutch historian Frank Dikötter and his article “Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics.” He argues, “Eugenics was not so much a clear set of scientific principles as a ‘modern’ way of talking about social problems in biologizing terms...Eugenics gave scientific authority to social fears and...lent respectability to racial doctrines...It allowed modernizing elites to represent their prescriptive claims about social order as... irrevocably grounded in the laws of nature.”³³ Eugenics theory had its heyday at the turn of the 20th century and remained highly popular during the period between World Wars I and II, with a legacy extending decades after it initially declined in the 1950s.

The Eugenics movement in Western Australia and its government’s resulting policies regarding the New Norcia Mission were a direct result of the Social Darwinist doctrine of the previous era. One of the most crucial pieces of legislation to ultimately enable Eugenics to thrive was the Aborigines Act of 1905. This policy granted the government legal guardianship to all Indigenous and “half-caste” children under 16 years old, and effectively allowed for the kidnapping of children from their families and relocation into residential schools.³⁴ Furthermore, the Aborigines Act of 1905—in conjunction with the establishment of the Aborigines Protection Board by the Aborigines Protection Act of 1886—enabled the appointment of infamous Eugenicist A.O. Neville in 1915 to Chief Protector of Aborigines. This position granted Neville immense

32 “Eugenics: Its Origin and Development (1883-Present),” National Human Genome Research Institute, last modified Nov 30, 2021.

33 Frank Dikötter, “Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics,” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (Apr 1998): 467-468.

34 Taylor, 104.

legal power over Indigenous people and allowed him to spearhead policies like half-caste child removal, in an unambiguous move toward white homogeneity.

Referring again to the vital work, “Benevolent Benedictines,” Elicia Taylor provides a detailed history of Neville’s appointment and policies that would permanently alter both Indigenous societies in Western Australia, and New Norcia itself. Initially employed at the Department of Immigration and Tourism, Neville was reluctant to change his post, but the Aborigines Department was insistent due to his administrative capabilities.³⁵ Once made Chief Protector, Neville constructed a three-step plan to enforce Indigenous assimilation. Crucially, this plan stemmed from a firm belief in the fictitious Extinction Myth cultivated by Social Darwinism. First, he aimed to enforce segregation of natives from the general Australian population at reserves like New Norcia. Second, he theorized that all the older natives would die out in two or three generations, and he could begin to integrate the assimilated younger generations into the general populace. Third, in the meantime, all Indigenous people would be forced under the direct rule of the Aborigines Protection Board and moved to settlements.³⁶ This plan, however, would prove to be ineffectual because it was so pivotally founded on a false belief that all Indigenous people were dying out. Taylor explains, “Throughout his term, Neville was confronted by...the false assumption of the Aboriginal population’s inevitable extinction. In fact, the rapidly increasing ‘half-caste’ population had raised significant challenges for Neville in his attempts to accommodate prevailing societal attitudes within his policy decisions.”³⁷ It is for this reason that “half-castes” became the biggest worry among white officials for several decades: they simply did not know what to do with them.

In response to the “half-caste problem,” Neville adopted and implemented extreme Eugenics throughout his time as Chief Protector, most

35 Taylor, 100.

36 Ibid, 104-105.

37 Taylor, 112-113.

notably the forced relocation of “half-caste” children to New Norcia Mission. He reported on his beliefs and treatment of Indigenous people in his post-retirement 1947 book *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community*. Famously, Neville’s book contains extensive photographic and illustrative documentation of different categories of native people, and diagrams of how he intended to “breed” the Indigency out.



Figure 1. A. O. Neville, *Three Generations, Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community*, 1947.

Neville's image of three generations of people of Indigenous descent provides a visual reference for the way that Neville and his constituents hoped to eradicate native genes (see fig. 1). When examined from right to left, as instructed on the diagram, it is clear that with the introduction of more white genes into the bloodline, the children of each subsequent generation appear to approximate whiteness much more closely. It also serves as a demonstration of the different categories Indigenous people were forced into: “half-caste,” “quadroon” and “octoroon.” In this way, Neville aimed for a tactic of “dilution,” decreasing the ratio of “white blood” to “Indigenous blood” with each generation

until the Indigenous percentage was so small as to be rendered nonexistent, so too rendering Indigeneity extinct. These policies, particularly the kidnapping of children and removing them to missions to be assimilated, had detrimental impacts on the children taken—known today as the Stolen Generations—and all successive generations of Indigenous people. Forced assimilation was an important weapon of Eugenics and extermination as it “drove ongoing dispossession, cut transmission of knowledge and culture down the generations, and contributed to elimination of local populations by preventing their reproduction,” according to Haebich.³⁸ As the tangible manifestation of the kinds of Eugenic race science espoused by Neville in his time as Chief Protector and in his book, the practice of the native child removal actively contributed to the ongoing destruction of Indigenous cultures, societies, and populations to the benefit of colonialism.

Neville’s strategies were not looked on favorably by many authorities at the New Norcia Mission as they felt their own religious power waning under strict governmental guidelines. However, they still actively participated in the forced rehousing and education of the Stolen Generations.³⁹ The increasing encroachment of secular government rules onto what had been founded as a purely religious institution to “help” Indigenous people caused tension between Neville and the Abbot at the time, Catalan. Taylor notes three major areas of tension. First, the Mission felt increasingly uncomfortable with the influence of a predominantly Protestant government and turned heavily toward sectarianism. Second, Abbot Catalan’s responsibility as agent of the Eugenicist government, taking in members of the Stolen Generations, fundamentally contradicted his purported duty to care for the Indigenous population who he lived with. Third, the government’s crackdown on biracial marriages caused conflict among residents, despite its initial purpose as a tool of Christianization.⁴⁰ This conflict

38 Haebich, 21.

39 Taylor, 98.

40 *Ibid.*, 102.

could be considered symbolic of the way that, by this point in history, science, biology, and Eugenics had essentially overtaken religion as the key justification for colonialism. However, Taylor writes that “despite significant tensions...historians point to a symbiotic relationship in which missions were dependent upon state support for their existence, and state bureaucrats were reliant on mission compliance with policies related to Aboriginal child removal, institutionalisation and assimilation.”⁴¹ Regardless of Abbot Catalan’s objections towards Neville and his policies—which Taylor suggests were more religiously based than racially based—ultimately, they still worked together to enforce violently racist policies, tear apart families, and promote Eugenicist ideas that Indigeneity could and should be expediently exterminated.

Conclusion (2010s)

Nearly 50 years after the New Norcia Mission shut its doors, on October 21, 2017, Australia’s Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse issued a press release revealing that, from 1950 to 2010, 7% of all Catholic priests in Australia had been accused of child sexual assault.⁴² Perhaps even more shocking to some was the revelation that at New Norcia, the number of child sexual assault accusations was 21.5%, a striking triple of the nationwide percentage.⁴³ *Bringing Them Home WA*, a website and newspaper dedicated to “truth, healing, justice, and reconciliation” for the Stolen Generations reported that while the Norcia authorities had apologized, they were unwilling to take further action to aid Stolen Generation survivors.⁴⁴ Stolen Generation spokesperson Margaret Drayton stated, “the Benedictine community...[doesn’t] appear to be prepared to explore more strategic opportunities to improve the future for survivors...A visit to the Museum at New Norcia attempts to portray

41 Taylor, 99.

42 Laalia, “New Norcia Survivors Want the Truth to be Told,” *Bringing Them Home WA*, Oct. 23, 2017.

43 Ibid.

44 Laalia.

a picture of happy healthy children being well fed and looked after, but this was far from the reality.”⁴⁵ As indicated by the alarming rates of child sexual assault within the final 20 years of New Norcia’s 127 years of existence, the violence of colonialism and racism ran deep within the Mission environment. A mere apology with no follow-up was little reparation for the generations of trauma, loss of culture, and structural inequality inflicted on Indigenous people by New Norcia Mission. As such, the WA Stolen Generations Aboriginal Corporation demanded more be done. Executive Director of the Corporation, Jim Morrison urged, “the Commonwealth and State Governments to support these Survivors to expose the awful Truth of what happened to these children and to acknowledge the need for some form of Justice through compensation and comprehensive support to enable the Survivors and their families to Heal and move on.”⁴⁶ Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, these requirements were not met in 2017 when the devastating numbers were first made public.

The failure of New Norcia to address the material impacts of their violent colonial past and provide reparations was made abundantly clear when in 2021, Nyooonar survivors were still demanding to know what happened to the children who did not make it out of New Norcia’s schooling system. On October 30, 2021, Claire Moodie reported on Australia’s ABC News that while over 2,000 children were forced into New Norcia’s schools from the mid-1860s to the 1970s, only 275 children were officially reported on the Mission’s burial register.⁴⁷ Essentially, over 1,500 Indigenous children died in the “care” of New Norcia authority figures throughout its century of schooling and were never logged nor buried properly. According to Moodie, there are over 300 graves at New Norcia’s cemetery, but the true number is unknown due to the large swaths of land with an “unknown”

45 Laalia.

46 Ibid.

47 Claire Moodie, “Plea to find children’s burial sites at New Norcia, where the town cemetery contains unmarked graves.”

number of unmarked burial sites.⁴⁸ Dallas Phillips, a Ballardong-Nyoongar woman, told the press, “I’d like to see the graves maintained, with proper signs... Find out what they died from, how they died, when they died... Let’s help them, they deserve the respect and acknowledgment.”⁴⁹ The legacy of colonialism and the violent, racist ideologies it cultivated are felt all over the world, as people from Indigenous societies worldwide are fighting for justice for the genocidal acts that they, their families, and their ancestors have experienced for centuries. As Phillips remarked, not even respect or acknowledgment have been adequately paid to the survivors of such a brutal, bloody history. The same power structures that allowed for Bishop Rosendo Salvado to create an institution in a foreign country based on religious paternalism, embedded race science into societies all over the world, and justified the kidnapping and forced assimilation of Indigenous children are still acting to prevent Nyoongar people from receiving the fundamental respect they deserve to this day.

48 Moodie.

49 Ibid.

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