Unpacking Stories from the New Norcia Photographic Collection

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The New Norcia Photographic Collection of some 60,000 images is a vital component of the New Norcia Archives, the largest private archive in Australia that provides a continuous historical record from the foundation of the New Norcia mission in 1846 to the present. The photographs provide an invaluable visual record of local people and visitors, of the land, farms and buildings, the cycles of religious and secular events, and the daily life of residents there. Significantly the collection contains unique photographs of the original Yuit people and of Aboriginal children sent to live at the mission from the 1870s to 1970.

This paper seeks to provide new perspectives on the collection by briefly examining its background history and its place in Australian colonial photography. This is informed by the author’s long-term familiarity with the collection based on the use of images to illustrate books and papers on Nyungar history and a presentation on the photographs at an Australian Studies conference in Barcelona in 2004, as well as discussions with New Norcia archivist Peter Hocking and local historians. This account is a preliminary investigation; further archival research is required to more fully document the background. The paper also includes critical readings of early photographs in the collection taken by Fr. Santos Salvado (1811-1894), brother of Bishop Rosendo Salvado, founder of New Norcia Mission.

There has been a recent surge of interest in recording the histories of collections of photographs and objects in public and private collecting institutions. In *Photographs Objects Histories* Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart remind us that photographs are ‘objects that exist in time and place’; they are created and ‘used, kept and stored … transported relocated, dispersed, or damaged, torn and cropped’. They are material objects that show physical traces of time, use and change. They have their own stories to tell. Photographic collections are similarly charged. They do not remain ‘dormant and clouded by the dust of ages’ but change over time, sometimes dramatically as they are relocated, reorganized and reformatted and as they attract fresh audiences, new uses, and even public controversy.

The New Norcia Photographic Collection dates from 1867 when Fr. Santos Salvado landed in Fremantle bringing with him one of the first privately owned cameras in Western Australia. Prior to his arrival Santos was chaplain and confessor at the court of Isabella II of Spain and it was in the Escorial (court monastery) that he learned the craft of photography, then still in its infancy. Surrounded by the sumptuous art of the court and the learned discussions of his colleagues Santos developed a distinctive style that created images of great beauty of composition, light and texture that were also packed with information about his subjects. It is also the case that the photographic technology of the times created many of the most enduring and beautiful historical photographs. Santos Salvado remained at New Norcia for ten years in a form of exile. In Spain in 1868 Queen Isabella II was forced off the throne, all Royal properties confiscated, and religious authorities exiled. During this time he created portraits of the New Norcia monks and Yuit and other Aboriginal adults and children living at the mission. A feature of the photographs is that most were taken outside against

![Father Santos Salvado OSB, photo taken at New Norcia during his ten years of life at the New Norcia Mission. c. 1867, New Norcia Photographic Collection 40380P](image)
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the walls of the pro cathedral to catch the light, the technology of flash devices not being available at that stage. On his return to Spain Salvador took on the role of representing the interests of the mission there. His glass plate photographs remained at New Norcia having been carefully labeled and dated for future reference.

The collection rapidly expanded following Salvador’s departure as hundreds of photographers added their images to the collection. There were other significant changes. Technology changed from Salvador’s glass plates to photographic prints to the digital age of today. The collection was reorganized to facilitate access for researchers. Archivist Wendy McKinley photocopied and indexed the early photographs and bound them into the light green albums held at New Norcia and the Battye Library. These are the starting point for any researcher approaching the collection. Present archivist Peter Hocking is developing internal image databases, beginning with Salvador’s portraits of the Spanish monks, and has identified and indexed all Aboriginal photographs in the collection.

With greater access the collection is now being put to an expanding range of uses: from illustrations in historical publications, to guides for the restoration of New Norcia’s heritage buildings and promotion of the town’s entrepreneurial and tourism activities as well as the monastery’s continuing role as a major spiritual centre. There are also frequent requests from families with historical ties to New Norcia. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal descendants of former mission residents and individuals who grew up there. For many these are the only photographs they have of those times and they become personal treasures in family albums.

This relocation from archive to home provides an instructive example of how photographs exist as objects in time and place and of how they can take on new meanings and significance over time. The recuperation of images from archives by Aboriginal people from the 1980s has been a national trend, leading to tension and controversy in many instances and requiring the development of a new ethics to govern protocols of access and use.

Deborah Poole writes that colonial photographs of subject people were part of a ‘visual economy’: they were produced and then ‘distributed, circulated and consumed’ within particular sets of colonial social relations and in ‘unequal flows and exchanges’ within domains of colonial representation. As they circulated across boundaries of empire and state the flows of images influenced and were in turn shaped by public knowledge about subject peoples and official policies and popular attitudes to them. Across time and place they were put to new uses and took on fresh meanings. We can see this operating during the nineteenth century in intersections between colonial photography and Aboriginal people in Australia who inadvertently provided a significant source of employment for practitioners of the craft commissioned by government, commercial or scientific interests or motivated by personal reasons.

Roslyn Poignant argues that photographers ‘captured’ Aboriginal people in their images, locking them into colonial perspectives and regimes of surveillance to meet the purposes of European audiences. They used technology and pictorial conventions of the time and added particular structural features to heighten Aboriginal people as different, whether as exotica, racial or cultural types, dying remnants, scientific specimens or objects of government or mission reordering and control. As the nineteenth century progressed under the influence of Social Darwinism earlier more sympathetic representations gave way to degrading images of scientific racial typologies, anthropometric evidence, salvage data and government propaganda.

The earliest identified Aboriginal photographs in Australia were daguerreotype portraits of people from the Kulin Nations of central Victoria made in 1847 by Douglas T Kilburn. There is a strong warm presence in them despite Kilburn’s observation that the sitters were initially unwilling to cooperate for fear that this would ‘submit them to some misfortune befalling them’.

The 1860s and 1870s, when Santos Salvador was taking his photographs at New Norcia, were decades of rapid development and saw the production of many iconic images of Aboriginal people. There is a strong sympathy in the powerful studio portrait of Tasmanian Aboriginal woman Truganini taken in 1866 by Charles Alfred Wooley. The albums of Clarence River people created by German photographer John William Lindt in 1875 and 1876 were produced for commercial purposes, mainly for sale as postcards. They exemplify the quality that could be achieved using the wet plate process however they represented their Aboriginal subjects as generic examples of racial and cultural types and displaced remnants. Another major subject for photographers during this period was mission and government settlements and their Aboriginal residents.

These same decades witnessed the climax and then decline of the mission enterprise of Christianizing and civilizing Aboriginal people in southern Australia. Established in 1846 New Norcia benefited from the Catholic revival of missionising during the 1850s, particularly with the increased number of monks who migrated there to work. With its Benedictine Rule of settled monastic life regulated by regimes of prayer and work and commitment to self-sufficiency, learning and hospitality it became a model of missionary success. Bishop Salvador’s vision of transforming Yout land into a monastery village and the people into settled working families seemed to be just within reach. An 1858 census documented 92 Aboriginal people (36 being children).
associated with the mission, some living in the new cottages built for their use and farming small plots of land allocated to them. Some boys and youths were being taught and cared for by the monks while a few girls were sent down to the Sisters of Mercy in Perth. Then during the 1870s the mission was devastated by a swathe of Aboriginal deaths from epidemics of tuberculosis, bronchitis and syphilis. A consequence was that Salvado was obliged to realign his vision and transform New Norcia into an institution taking in Aboriginal children from around the colony.

On the other side of the continent a similarly successful mission settlement had been established to the north east of Melbourne. Set up in 1860 Coranderrk was the outcome of the Victorian government’s strategy to confine Aboriginal people on missions and reserves to assimilate into mainstream colonial society. The Aboriginal families moved there took advantage of their situation and made the place their own by farming the land and erecting small wooden cottages. However the government’s actions from the 1870s in resuming the land and pushing mixed race families off to fend for themselves in the wider community severely disrupted community life at the settlement.

Early photographs from both missions demonstrate a remarkable degree of similarity. They are dominated by tangible evidence of progress: cleared lands under crop, new buildings. Aboriginal children surrounded by the trappings of civilised life, sedentary families posed in the manner of colonial settlers outside their cottages, and scenes of community outings where residents relax on river side picnics or engage in the main sport of cricket. Details of composition, the subjects’ clothes, grooming and posture, and contextual props all combine to provide compelling proof of the missionaries’ success.
In her book on the history of Coranderrk Jane Lydon describes such images as being a vital part of the colonial project of knowing and governing Aboriginal people. They were also propagandist images intended to communicate missionary and government policies of assimilation and to attract support – financial and spiritual – for the institutions. Salvado’s New Norcia photographs had an added level of visual intelligence and sophistication, reflecting his own courtly training in photography and the erudition of his intended audiences, the mission’s wealthy patrons who included Spanish royalty and Church dignitaries in Rome. Examples are Salvado’s photographs of monks posed with Aboriginal children to suggest various types of manual work such as harvesting, blacksmithing, boot-making or tailoring. The inclusion in the images of the tools of trade suggests the influence of cartes de jours – small photographs of workers similarly posed that were popular with the nineteenth century working class. The arrangement also pointed to the intended future of their Aboriginal subjects.

An extraordinary photograph demonstrating the narrative of successful Christian conversion and redemption taken in 1867 by Salvado shows Father Bernard Martinez baptizing the Yuit elder [Michael] Takenent assisted by Br Fulgentius Dominguezon. Takenent’s wife Turkiena and young daughter Kathleen sit at his feet while two older daughters Clara and Selastasia kneel behind him. Of eight other Yuit people present two are elders holding spears, Calinga standing behind Father Martinez and Minga. This photograph is a detailed narrative of conversion from traditional life to Christianity. There is also the comparison between Takenent’s wife and daughter clad in traditional bula (cloaks of kangaroo skin) with his older daughters in western dresses, both of them students at the mission’s St Joseph school for Aboriginal girls opened in 1861. Also contrasted are the weapons, bula and adornments of the Aboriginal men and the monk’s plain dark habits with their paraphernalia of baptism and a book, presumably containing the words of the sacrament of baptism.

This image directs us to the question of the role played by Aboriginal subjects in the making of colonial mission photographs. Jane Lydon,14 drawing on her detailed reading of historical sources and images of Coranderrk, rejects summary conclusions about Aboriginal people being captured and coerced by European photographers. She calls for more nuanced readings of the relationships between photographers and Aboriginal subjects expressed in the images. Lydon notes the Coranderrk residents’ interest in the images, sending some as tokens of friendship to family and friends and using others to tell their stories of survival and to lobby the government to allow them to remain on the mission lands. Certainly there is no suggestion of coercion in the facial expressions and body language in

Salvado’s photograph of Takenent’s baptism. This is not to deny the element of capture evident in thousands of other colonial images, in particular those taken during the later nineteenth century to demonstrate scientific theories of racial degeneration and evolution. Nor is there any intention to discount the discriminatory ways that photographs of subject people were used in colonial visual economies.

Photographs, writes critic Susan Sontag, are ‘clouds of fantasy and pellets of information’.15 They must be read with caution. We assume that we see reproduced in them the truth of people and places distant from us in time and geography. We think our vision is clear as we scan them for information. But Edward Said and Michel Foucault remind us that photographic images and practices represent a ‘truth’ reflecting their makers’ ‘cultural and political dispositions’.16 What were Santos Salvado’s intentions in creating his photographs? How did he compose his images to include or exclude visual information or to enhance a particular point of view? How can we, coming from different times and cultures, read the cultural codings in Salvado’s images of the Yuit people and Spanish monks? How do we overcome the distancing influence of time that shifts meanings, drops others, or create them anew? There is also the random element that is always present in photographs; the camera can never completely drive out the incidental that renders them open to other readings and uses. It is this inability to exclude argues Christopher Pinney that makes photographic images ‘so textured and fertile.’

Then we must ask what preconceived ideas from the mesh of our lived experience and our imaginings of the past do we project onto them? We can create new meanings simply through the act of looking at the photographs. How then do we avoid interpreting them according to the agendas that we want to demonstrate?

We need more consciously nuanced ways of reading images and their relationship with their contexts then and now. Nicholas Peterson urges us to avoid generalized
fictions of colonialism and instead to study examples of localized practice." Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister suggest locating and studying photographs in situ: tracing where they are held in archives or galleries, how and where they circulated in colonial visual economies across time and place, identifying the contexts that produced them and the tropes and conventions that gave them meaning, tracking how they were transferred down the generations and the meanings they accrued along the way, and finally how they may have reentered the peoples' own troubled past in the present. Still they wonder whether this helps to recover the past or does it add more layers of alien meaning and serve to maintain the inherently unequal relations of dominance in which many colonial images were originally produced?

The author has attempted to meet these standards of practice by working in situ with the photographs and the archivist at New Norcia, documenting the history of the collection and its place in colonial Australia photography and speaking with descendants of the Aboriginal people represented in the images. Published accounts of the mission and translated records and correspondence available to the public have also been researched. All of this adds life and movement to the static images in the collection and increases our understanding. We gain a vivid impression of the tensions and joys of life there, of the people and the course of their lives and of the narratives of European migration and displacement of Aboriginal people. There are intimations of Yuit people being in place in their country and of monks and transferred Aboriginal children coming to accept New Norcia as their home. There are stories of intercultural clash and contacts and of sharing of knowledge and discovery. Imbedded in the stories and the painted dark eyes of Salvador's Aboriginal subjects is the reminder that these images of progress and transformation were also memento mori. Considering them in hindsight and in the parlance of nineteenth century extinction discourse they poignantly depict the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction.

In the images of the mission landscape and buildings we see the early foundations of what Fr Kevin Seasholtz describes as a 'monastic geography of time and place' where monastery architecture, the monastic lifestyle are 'grafted onto a local scene'. There are intimations of the emerging dialogue between the place and what it was to become, the changing rhythms of time imposed by sacred observances over the liturgical year, and set times and places for work, meals and holy readings. We also see the impact of the great input of work by the monks assisted by Aboriginal workers in transforming the place. Yet in many of the views there is also a palpable sense of isolation and melancholy.

Santos Salvador created individual portraits of the Benedictine lay and religious brothers who made up the backbone of this fragment of monastic life. In later group photographs the men with their long beards and dark habits appear as exemplars of a unified team of men bound together by the cadences of the Benedictine Rule and their shared missionary purpose as well as Bishop Salvador's regime of work, prayer and strict discipline. Their unity was also nourished by geographical and cultural isolation from the predominantly English speaking protestant colony as well as the men's celibacy in a settler society of married couples and families. However cutting across this appearance of harmony and accord were social, economic and political differences brought with the men from Europe and the tensions inherent in all small closed communities. Then there were the men's psychological and physical pain and fears from the stresses of being in a strange new land and the heavy demands on their labour. Their individual personalities and idiosyncrasies and suggestions of the impact of life in the monastery are powerfully present in Salvador's portraits, which also taunt us with many unanswerable questions about the lives and thoughts of these men. What do we make of Sebastian Argeni (1829-1877) who spoke to no one for 25 years at New Norcia but attended mass each Sunday and kept himself always busy washing and mending clothes and working in the garden? What of the lively features of mission carpenter Buenaventura Alsina (1829-1893)?

We know from diary notes that a sense of caring and affection grew up between various monks and Yuit people. Some photographs suggest the camaraderie that comes from shared work. This is to be expected in the case of the monks whose voluntary exile cut them off forever from family and friends. However, there were also misunderstandings and conflict, an inevitable outcome of the collision of cultures. What was the connection between the choristers posed with the mission organist and music teacher Brother Odo Altra at the harmonium in another of Salvador's photographs? We know that in addition to these choristers Brother Altra trained a brass band and 20-piece string orchestra made up of Aboriginal boys. Musicians will know that
children in mission clothes. The image of the brother is Christ-like, indicative of Jesus’ proclaimed love for children. There is also an assertion of a proprietorial claim over the children. Compositionally, the Brother and infant form a triangle with the seated children; the human relationship is between them. The Aboriginal men are placed on either side of the triangle; they frame the group to indicate their outsider status and relegation to the past. Or have they deliberately placed themselves there to assert their superior relationship to the children? Certainly the man Chukk stands out prominently with his spear, tribal cicatrices, emu feathers held up by a buckled leather belt, breast ornament possibly of pearl shell traded down from the Kimberley coast, nose bone, and headdress of possum skins, surmounted by feathers. Despite the mission’s dedication to the worship of Mary as the mother of Jesus the children’s mothers are absent from the photograph. A touching element in the image is the blur of little Pat’s head, unable to remain still for the duration of the sitting, unlike the Aboriginal men accustomed to standing stock still in the hunt.

In contrast to the pessimistic views of other colonists, Salvado was convinced of Aborigines’ capacity to learn. He advocated a gentle process of gradual change that fitted their temporal and spiritual needs. He would become known around the Australian colonies and down the generations of mission history for this approach. His optimism was reflected in Santos Salvado’s images and matched by reports in the colonial press that the children appeared contented and happy. Yet mission records

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At that time Salvado had no legal power over the Yuit people and could only rely on persuasion to entice them to participate in his vision of settled mission life. He drew on the networks of friendship and knowledge of language and culture forged while he lived with the families in the bush, his understanding of their love of performance and music, and above all, the attraction of a regular supply of food, as other colonists also took up Yuit lands and resources. However, he was prepared to invade family relationships if required to achieve his goals of educating the children, despite acknowledging the intense love between parents and offspring.

The undercurrents of tension in the processes of Christianising and civilising the Yuit children are evident in Santos Salvado’s photographs from 1867 of Brother Pablo Clos, clad in his hooded black habit, nursing the infant boy Pat while two Aboriginal men wearing buka stand at his side. At his feet sit several

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show few conversions and irregular school attendance with only a small number of children remaining on a regular basis in the so-called orphanages. Santos Salvado represented his brother’s civilising ideals for the children in the series of photographs referred to earlier where they engage in various religious and secular activities under the supervision of the monks. Each is like a mini performance for the audience’s edification. Brother Mauro Marciano sits sewing with two boys suggesting a sustained relationship of teaching and learning rather than the reality of irregular attendance and the children’s continuing involvement in Yuit culture. The children’s drab mission uniforms suggest the institutional regime: rise at sunrise, dress and wash, prayers, go to church and assist at mass, sing the 116th Psalm, 7 am breakfast, work to 11 am and then take lunch.

Bishop Salvado organized the children’s training strictly along gender lines: boys learned manual work (farming, gardening and trades to earn a living) while girls were taught household duties (sewing, cooking and fancy work) as well as light seasonal work in the mission orchards and at harvest time. Their destiny was to become good wives and mothers according to the ideals of monogamy and motherhood promoted by the Catholic Church. Sometimes in the 1860s Salvado employed Mrs. Judith Butler as schoolmistress for the girls at St. Joseph’s. That he had high ideals for their education is evident in a photograph from 1867 of Mrs. Butler with Frances Mingal, Eliza, Elena Tainan and Cecelia Yaki. The girls hold open books and writing paraphernalia is placed prominently on the desk before them. In religious training Salvado was convinced that conversion would improve the status of Aboriginal women. His goals are suggested in a photograph of a baptism conducted by Father Martinez where a boy and girl lean together at the baptismal font framed by two altar boys, testimony themselves to the power of baptism and conversion.

The brothers sought to direct the young people in their choice of marriage partners and supervised their courtships. Young Yuit men were known to come into the mission to seek wives. Perhaps the portraits of three beautiful young women, all dressed in the same white outfit, were made to impress young men at the mission. The monks, drawing on memories of their lives as children in Spain, also instructed them in how to live as Christian families in the mission cottages, thereby creating the basis for an enduring mission community. Some couples were allocated small farming blocks that they were told belonged to them by right. The model of a working husband and dependent wife shifted relations between the genders and served to undermine Yuit women’s traditional roles and extended kin networks.

There are many life stories to be told from Santos Salvado’s photographs of Aboriginal people. There is the story of Mary Helen [Cyper] Pangieran who became Australia’s first woman telegraphist in the 1870s. A well-known character at the mission and the surrounding district was William Monop whose life...
has been documented by Mary Eagle. At the age of twenty-one he arrived at New Norcia apparently seeking a wife. He converted to Christianity and married and remained there with his wife and children for the next ten years, moving regularly between the mission and the bush. Monop was multi skilled across cultures—he was a skilled farm worker, excellent cricketer and was well liked by locals in the Victoria Plains district. But he also remained a Yui man steeped in the traditions of dance and performance with developed mabarn powers and extensive networks of relationships with Aboriginal people to the south, north and east. In 1907 he was working with Daisy Bates in Perth recording Aboriginal traditions and produced a series of drawing of traditional items and foods, which are now held in the National Library of Australia.

The New Norcia Photographic Collection warrants a full-scale, systematic project of indexing and digitizing to open it up to researchers. The work already completed by the New Norcia archivists is extensive but much more remains to be done. The future depends on extensive resources being made available to the New Norcia archive. This heavy obligation cannot be left to the managers of New Norcia alone. These photographs represent a priceless collection of our heritage that must be protected and maintained for and by the Australian nation.

End Notes


