

Father Duncan McNab

By Bill Worth



Father Duncan McNab was a Scot, born in the highlands, 11 May 1820. As a cousin to St Mary MacKillop, he heard stories from letters of life in Australia and, even during the early years of his studies for the priesthood, he expressed his desire to one day work in the Great Southern Land among the Aboriginal people.

Ordained on 8 March 1845, it was not until 1867 that Father McNab finally received permission from his Bishop in Argyllshire Scotland to migrate to Australia. He worked initially in Victoria, in Geelong, Portland and Bendigo before moving north to Queensland where he appears to have been given some sort of mandate by Church authorities to minister among Indigenous people, as a type of personal mission that ranged far and wide.

Readily aware of the plight of poor Catholics back in Scotland, particularly those who were land-less, he worked zealously to better the welfare of Aboriginal people in the northern colony. His efforts, as strenuous and forthright as they were, gave rise to a growing number of enemies among the landed gentry and the leading citizens of the day and eventually he welcomed an invitation from Bishop Griver to move to Western Australia in March 1883.

After spending some time as Chaplain to Rottneest Island penitentiary, the missionary call inspired Father McNab once more when, at the encouragement of the then Perth Vicar General, Father Matthew Gibney, he accepted the challenge to begin a Mission to Aboriginal people in the Kimberley. Eventually, in June 1885, after some time in Derby while forlornly waiting for the arrival of an assistant priest, Father McNab set off on an exploratory journey to the Dampier Peninsula, landing at Swan Point, north-west of Derby, in Bardi country. He had just turned 65 years of age.

He had no formal training for this mission, no understanding of the local languages, and no real plan for what

came next. But the experience of his work in Queensland assisted him to appreciate the enormity of what lay before him and diminished the culture shock that inevitably accompanied such an apostolate in a remote location. He steadfastly held on to the hope that others would come after him to rescue his work among the peninsula inhabitants and thereafter improve upon it.

He travelled extensively in the area, observing and mixing with local people. When he met a young Aboriginal man called 'Knife', who had been working on the pearling luggers and could speak English, and who was willing to act as an interpreter, the first resident priest in the Kimberley was suddenly able to communicate with the people of his vast parish. To this end he began to write a dictionary of the Bardi language. In December 1885, together with Knife, he established himself at Goodenough Bay, among the Nimanboor people, seventy kilometres south of Swan Point. This site was closer to Derby and a more central location for the work of his apostolate.

In April 1886, his long awaited assistant arrived, Father William Treacy. Together the three man team built a bush-timber Church, a rough hewn residence, a bower shelter out of spinifex and they established a garden to grow whatever they could. The Mass, their daily prayers and devotions, and their determination to be faithful to their vocations sustained them in a harsh wet-season environment. Local Aboriginal family groups visited and brought gifts of fish and bush foods, and listened to the missionaries speak of this son of God, Jesus, whose word is "Spirit and life." The seeds of faith were thus first scattered on Kimberley soil.

Five months later, while in Derby collecting supplies, Father McNab heard stories of the gold rush in Halls Creek and reports that many miners were dying in the harsh conditions without the benefit of the Sacraments. Accompanied by Knife, he immediately

set off on the eight hundred kilometre journey determined to assist however he could. He prayed for the sick, said Mass for the faithful, gave the Last Rites to the dying and presided over their burials. He baptised and counseled and in many instances consoled a vast number of those desperate men who had lost companions during their quest for riches.

On his return to the mission, and suffering fatigue and a grave illness himself, Father McNab discovered that Father Treacy had been taken south to Perth after a bout of severe malarial fever. Bush fires had destroyed the buildings and the garden was in ruins. Feeling the effects of his debilitating sickness and overcome with tribulation Father McNab left the Kimberley by ship for the Northern Territory where he rested and recuperated.

Eventually, this most generous crusader for the rights of Aboriginal people, whose very life personified the idea of dogged determination, found his way back to Melbourne Victoria and stayed with the Jesuits in Richmond. He died in 1896.

For some, his mission in the Kimberley was a failure. He converted no-one, baptised some on their death-bed and left a mission in ruins. Yet stories of him remained; stories of kindness, sincerity and trust. He had sown the seeds of certainty that the word that he proclaimed was Good News in difficult times. It was upon this foundation that others were able to build.