

# Mary MacKillop

## *A woman ahead of her time*



The young Mary MacKillop c1860

### *Education*

Mary MacKillop's aim, as a Sister of Saint Joseph, was to respond to the needs of isolated children, of all denominations, who were not receiving any education.

In the beginning, in 1861, Father Julian Tenison Woods, the Parish priest, and Mary MacKillop were concerned that the free education provided by the state would not meet the needs of Catholic children.

It was while Mary was working as a teacher in a Catholic school in Portland, Victoria that Father Woods invited her to come to Penola to establish a school there. From there, they provided free education to children in the area. The first school was in a disused stable, which had been renovated by Mary's brother, John MacKillop to make it suitable as a temporary school. In 1867, a permanent school house was built near the church in Penola, and there the work continued. Mary became the first Sister, of the newly formed Order of the Sisters of St Joseph.

The school soon attracted 50 students from the surrounding area. In 1867, Father Woods became the Director General in Catholic Education and moved to Adelaide where he invited Mary to join him. She and Sister Rose Cunningham moved to the new convent in Grote Street, Adelaide. The new school was established in the Cathedral Hall, in nearby Wakefield Street. Dedicated to the education of the children of the poor, the Sisters of St Joseph was the first Religious Order to be founded by an Australian.



The school house at Penola, South Australia, built in 1867

In an attempt to provide education to all the poor, particularly in country areas, a school was opened at Yankalilla in October 1867. Subjects taught included arithmetic, spelling, reading, writing, poetry, grammar, geography, history, needlework for girls and book keeping for boys, as well as religious activities such as hymn singing and prayers. By the end of 1869, more than seventy Sisters were educating children at twenty-one schools in Adelaide and in country areas such as Macclesfield and Kapunda. As Mother Superior General, Mary was responsible for establishing schools throughout Australia and New Zealand from the 1870's into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.



Sculptor: Judith Rolevink

## Poverty

Mary grew up in poverty. Her father had been involved in several failed businesses before abandoning the family to live in Scotland for 17 months. It fell to Mary to provide for her family as there was no 'poor relief' in the 1840s. When she moved to Penola, she became aware of families living in poverty and of the children who suffered as a result. She valued education greatly, and saw the necessity of providing the children of these poor families with an education to improve their lives. This she did by her work in the school and it was a short step from there to devoting her life to ministering to poor children and consequently, their families.

The Sisters of Saint Joseph were involved with ordinary people. Many of these were poor, and the Sisters chose to live simply, just like the people with whom they worked, and they had no ownership of personal belongings. They believed that God would provide for their essential needs. Consequently, in Adelaide and in some country areas and, later, in other states, Mary and the Sisters relied on begging in the streets to supply their daily needs and those of the children and adults they cared for. They accepted anything that was offered to them. They soon became ingenious in converting food that had been discarded by others into nourishing meals. The Sisters also appealed to people for discarded clothing and offered their services for employment such as doing laundry work and sewing clothes. Through the generosity of the people of Adelaide, any excess to their needs was passed on to the Orphanage, located firstly in the Adelaide suburb of Walkerville, then later in Hazelwood Park.



Group of early Sisters of Saint Joseph - late 19th Century

## *Women in Society*

Mary MacKillop was ahead of her time in portraying the position of women in society. Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australia were generally seen as the weaker sex whose task in life was to get married, bear children and provide a secure home base for the family. If they went to work, the types of jobs that they were involved in were in the areas of domestic duties such as governesses and servants, serving duties such as teachers and nurses and factory labour, such as in the clothing trades.

Because of her family circumstances, it became necessary for Mary to go out to work as a teenager so that she could earn money to provide for the rest of her family.



Mary MacKillop c 1882

## *Mary MacKillop as a young Sister*

After establishing the Josephite Order along with Father Woods, Mary met with strong opposition from the established Catholic Church because it disapproved of:

- the Order drawing its supporters from the working classes
- the equality of members of the Order
- their working amongst the poorest in society
- their reliance on begging for their support
- their moving openly in the streets and other public places which 'real Sisters' just did not do.

Mary resisted the opposition, and as a consequence, was excommunicated for a short time as a way of bringing her back into line. This issue and her steadfastness in maintaining her belief that the Order was to be centrally controlled instead of being under the control of a local bishop, set her apart from what was expected of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In addition, her travelling widely throughout Australia, New Zealand, Italy, France, Germany, England, Scotland and Ireland, marked her as being ahead of her time. As Mother Superior General, the head of the Order, she immersed herself in the Order's administrative tasks. Very few women in that era held such positions in society.

## Social Justice

Mary MacKillop had grown up in a family affected by poverty. Her father was a failed businessman who had left the family and had gone back to Scotland for 17 months. Mary had to go to work to provide for the family in his absence.

When she went to Penola and set up the new religious congregation with Father Woods, the two founders aimed to provide a sound Catholic education for the children of poor families. Because they understood the hardships and the miseries of the poor, they were determined that those who joined the Order should do everything in their power to ease the distress of the poor. Therefore, they decided that after school had finished for the day, Mary and the Sisters would visit the children's parents and any aged or sick people in the area. Later in Adelaide and other areas where they lived and worked, they would go to the Adelaide hospital, gaol and Destitute Asylum to bring comfort to the people in those institutions. There, they discovered the more seamy, sordid side of city life and the real misery that existed in society.

In addition, they took up responsibility for the care and management of boys and girls in the St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage where they provided food, clothing, bed linen and other everyday necessities. Also they set up a Catholic Female Refuge Centre in Adelaide, as Mary had expressed grave concern for the welfare of women who had been newly released from gaol and were in moral danger. This refuge's responsibilities extended to caring for unmarried mothers and former prostitutes of all denominations, providing for them based on their needs.

There was still a large group of people who needed their assistance. These included:

- neglected children and young people who needed care and instruction because of their idle and delinquent habits
- aged and destitute women who did not want to go into destitute asylums
- women who became temporarily ill or destitute
- young females who had recently arrived from overseas and needed a home.

The Sisters was set up home to help these people. Situated on West Terrace in Adelaide, was called "*The Providence*", because the Sisters relied solely on the providence of God for its existence. there was no government funding in those days! In fact, its survival depended on the Sisters begging and private charity. Need was the only criterion for admission to these places; if there was room, people could stay as long as they wished regardless of their race, culture and religion. Here, they were provided with food, clothing, bedding and medical care.

For most of its history, the Sisters were only allowed to cater for women. If men came to "The Providence" and associated institutions for help, these centres operated a system of outdoor relief. However, there are stories of a sister, Hilda MacNamara, in "The Providence", feeding men, clothing them, sobering them up if they were drunk, listening to their stories and even sheltering them from the police.

The work of the Josephites continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and expanded into all states and New Zealand.

## Independence

Mary MacKillop was a woman ahead of her time. Her work in providing for her family, in setting up the school in Penola, in establishing and running the Josephite Order, her steadfastness in resisting opposition from bishops, who disliked her methods and opposed her centralised control of the Sisters of Saint Joseph and her extensive travel interstate and overseas, demonstrate that she was a strong, independent and self-reliant woman.



## *21st Century: Mary MacKillop's Legacy*

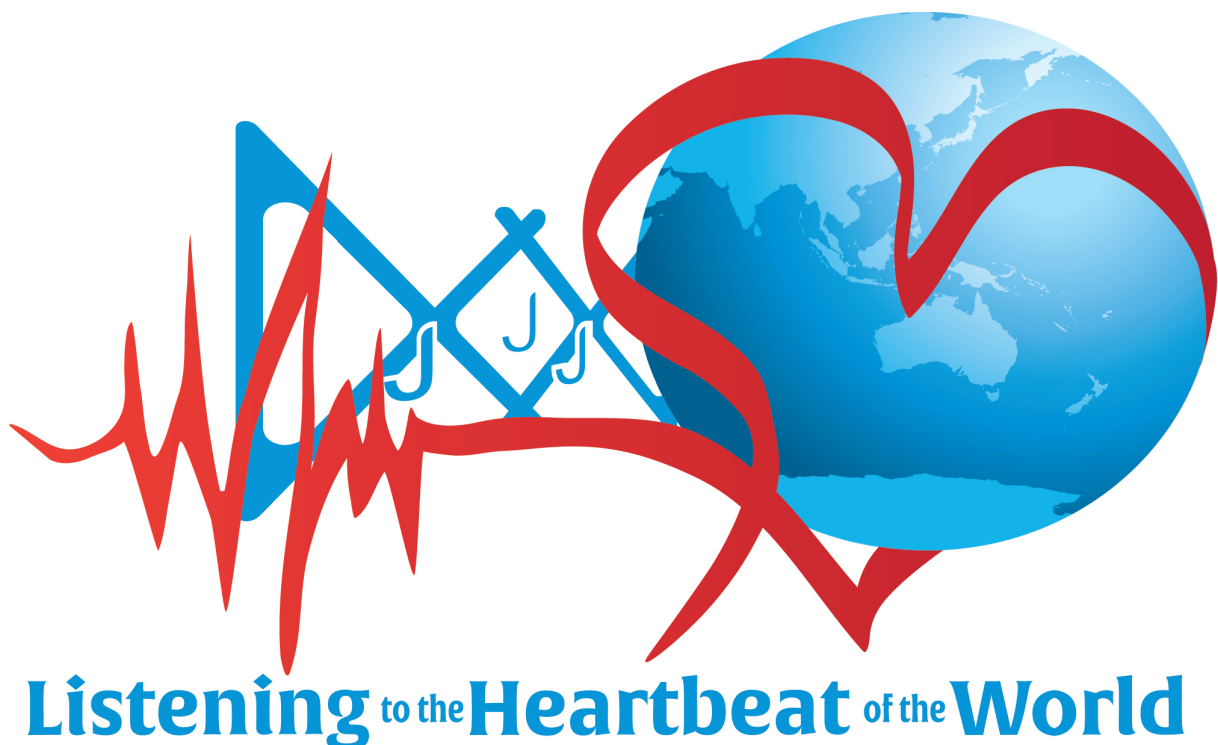
Mary MacKillop's legacy is international! Currently, there are more than 750 Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart: a vibrant group of women scattered across Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Scotland, Peru, Brazil and Timor Leste.

The Josephite Sisters were a uniquely Australian group of women, who were drawn from all levels of colonial society to help educate children in outback areas, provide homes for orphans, care for single mothers, and shelter the aged and homeless.

Affectionately known as the 'Brown Joeys', the Josephites differed from other congregations of nuns in Australia during the late nineteenth century, venturing out in groups of two or three to rural areas where there was often no established Catholic Church structure to live (as they still do today) among the people, sharing their daily lives and responding to their needs.

Today's Josephite Sisters engage in pastoral work as well as professional roles, including teaching, administration, social services, law, psychology, nursing, aged care, community development, adult education and support for new arrivals in Australia and New Zealand, to name just a few.

The Sisters of St Joseph celebrate that, across the world, countless people have embraced Mary's spirit - 'charism' - in many places and in a myriad of ways. The Sisters affirm that Mary's special spirit is alive in them, and in the hearts of countless people, in crowded cities, struggling towns and poor villages around the world. They believe women, men and children with 'Josephite hearts' bring God's love, healing and hope in myriad ways where loving kindness and compassion are needed.



Logo: Mary MacKillop Precinct Adelaide