

**DUNCAN MCNAB, JAMES QUINN,
AND THE MISSION TO THE QUEENSLAND
ABORIGINES 1875-1880 ❀**

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In September of 1875, the Scottish priest and campaigner for Aboriginal rights Duncan McNab arrived in Queensland and to the diocese of James Quinn. The Catholic missionary effort to the Aborigines has been summarised by Eugene Stockton in these terms: ‘on the one hand there is the record of missions established in isolated corners of the continent. On the other hand, the record of the official church is one of general apathy, with intermittent stirrings of a troubled conscience’.¹ As we shall see, McNab undoubtedly was a ‘troubled conscience’. Did Quinn respond with ‘general apathy’? This paper looks at McNab's activities in Queensland at this time and in particular, examines the relationship he had with his Bishop. In so doing it explores some of the dynamics of the Catholic response to the Aboriginal issue in the nineteenth century.

McNab had arrived in Australia in July of 1867 in the company of the Archbishop of Sydney, John Bede Polding, with a view to working with Australia's indigenous population. In the face of critical shortages of priests, especially English speaking ones, the Bishop of Melbourne, James Goold chose to retain McNab's services in parish work until 1875. McNab had applied to join Bishop Salvado's monastery at New Norcia but was refused on account of his age – he was fifty years old.² Finally released from parish duties, the Scotsman arrived in Queensland in September 1875 quite possibly in the belief that changes were afoot in the northern colony in the wake of a recent government commission on the Aboriginal

issue.³ The precise circumstances under which McNab came to Queensland are unclear. Yvonne McLay, James Quinn's biographer, states that he was invited by the Bishop⁴. Another study claims that McNab wrote to Quinn offering his services.⁵

McNab duly reported to Quinn two days after his arrival and 'requested' permission to work with the Aborigines in Quinn's diocese. In effect he told Quinn of his mission and delivered him an ultimatum.⁶ Quinn was not usually the type who responded well to ultimatums but nevertheless seemingly received McNab in good grace and was amenable to his designs. Doubtless the Bishop was sceptical however about the likelihood of success.

Throughout the previous fourteen years of his episcopacy Quinn had shown little inclination to address the challenge of Aboriginal evangelisation. The major Catholic initiatives in the northern colony predated his appointment. There had been a Passionist Mission at Stradbroke Island from 1843 to 1847. There had also been an attempt to relocate New Norcia founder, Rosendo Salvado, to a separate diocese for the Aborigines at Maryborough.⁷ Both had been gestures inspired by Polding. Quinn had the opportunity to reconsider the Maryborough option when it was re floated by Mother Vincent Whitty for the Sisters of Mercy in 1863. He chose not to undertake the mission; stating that he 'did not have sufficient priests or religious for the work already begun with the whites'.⁸

The response was characteristic of Quinn and the Irish tradition in which he was steeped. It is a telling statistic that, in an institution as dominated by the Irish presence as the Catholic Church was in Australia in the later half of the nineteenth century, virtually all attempts at Aboriginal evangelisation in the eastern part of the country at least, were undertaken by non-Irish, and in most cases non-English speaking clergy. By the late 1850s more than seventy-five percent of the Australian clergy were Irish.⁹ A history of the Catholic missions to the Aborigines need only draw attention to the efforts of three Irishmen, George Dillon, John Brady¹⁰ and Matthew Gibney. Dillon settled members of the Burraborang tribe on to land in his parish near Sydney between 1869 and 1877 and Brady played

a part in the New Norcia mission in Western Australia. As Bishop of Perth from 1887, Gibney worked to improve the conditions of Aborigines at Beagle Bay and in other parts of the western colony. Most prominent in the evangelisation effort however were the Englishman Polding, the Scot McNab, the Frenchman Pierre Marie Bucas as well as Spanish Benedictines at New Norcia, Italian and Swiss Passionists at Stradbroke, Austrian Jesuits at Daly River in the Northern Territory, French Trappists at Beagle Bay in the Kimberleys and their successors - German Pallotines. Missions it seems, were often staffed by non-English-speaking Europeans who could not be used elsewhere. Not only did the Irish/Australian hierarchy commonly fail to instigate missions to the Aborigines; they frequently failed to support those that had been undertaken by others, as McNab was later to complain to Rome.¹¹

True, many Australian Catholic communities simply could not support the cost of missions to the Aborigines. The issue of their evangelisation nevertheless received a very low priority. Irish clergy, in the main, came to Australia without lofty ambitions as regards the Aborigines. Irish Catholicism emphasised the maintenance of those who were already Catholic, even if only nominally, to the exclusion of activity with those who were not. Their primary concerns were, first, their own social survival and not that of the Aborigines; and second, with bidding for a colonial respectability which did not go hand in hand with pursuing such controversial and unpopular causes as Aboriginal rights.

Quinn, it seems, had carried with him from Europe an appreciation of the Aborigines' plight. In Paris in May 1860, after he had been apprised of his episcopal appointment and six months before sailing from Liverpool, he had presented to the Central Council of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, a paper on Queensland, largely devoted to the condition of the Aborigines and their ill-treatment by white settlers.¹² His priorities were dramatically re-ordered on arrival in Australia however, by a sense of the enormity of his task in attending to what he called the 'spiritual destitution' of Queensland Catholics.¹³ The Brisbane bishop's behaviour typified a colonial clergy preoccupied with the more temporal aspects of their

religion; a clergy dealing with the practical concerns of running a parish or diocese and with demonstrating the tangible rewards for their efforts in the form of churches, schools, seminaries and orphanages. It was not an ethos conducive to meeting the elusive, perplexing and seemingly insurmountable challenge of Aboriginal evangelisation. Therefore when McNab came face to face with Quinn in September 1875, he also confronted a tradition of behaviour with which he would grapple for the remaining years of his life.

McNab was not without allies in the Church. From the late 1860's, Rome had been urging the Australian bishops to greater efforts on the Aborigines behalf. The Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome had demanded that the issue of Aboriginal evangelisation be placed on the agenda for discussion at the 1869 synod.¹⁴ The Australian bishops produced a strongly worded condemnation of injustices perpetrated by white colonists, but avoided responsibility for ameliorating the situation.¹⁵ Quinn, like most Australian bishops, was anxious to absolve diocesan clergy of any responsibility towards treating their Aboriginal charges. He argued, with some cogency, that it was demanding work for which they were not qualified or trained. It is likely therefore, that Quinn was prepared to accommodate and even support, initially at least, McNab's roving commission, in so far as it did not make demands on the other clergy under his episcopal authority. McNab's mission was frustrated too, as we shall see, by polemics, political undercurrents and personality clashes within the Australian Catholic Church.

The Irish homeland experience was a factor in the response, or some might say non-response, to the Aboriginal 'problem'. Equally, values transported from the Old World coloured McNab's perceptions of his Irish co-clerics, in particular Quinn. In Scotland, prior to his departure for Victoria in 1867, McNab had fallen foul of his Irish parishioners. From 1848 to 1867 McNab was parish priest at Airdrie, Lanarkshire in Scotland's industrial lowlands.¹⁶ His parishioners, like those in most lowland Scottish parishes, were almost exclusively Irish, or descended from Irish, who had migrated from famines in their homeland seeking work.¹⁷

The numerically dominant Irish faction within the Scottish Catholic Church was resentful of the monopoly exercised by the Scots over ecclesiastical property and senior appointments.¹⁸ The chief organ of their protest was the *Glasgow Free Press*, later the *Free Press*. Between 1851 and 1868 Scottish clergymen, amongst them McNab, were consistently and belligerently pilloried in its columns. In 1862 one contributor to the paper commented of McNab, 'I know well how he hates everything Irish'. Several other letters followed to similar effect, culminating in a Leader devoted to McNab's 'crimes' in 1862.¹⁹ McNab was repeatedly attacked over the following years. He was regularly charged with financial improprieties²⁰ and even after his departure in 1866, was reported as having absconded with 'thousands of pounds' of parish funds.²¹ The reportage was provocative, pernicious and poorly substantiated. It was typical of a style for which the paper was later to receive papal censure and for which it was eventually closed down in 1868.²² Even had McNab been non-prejudicial to the Irish, he may have been justified in changing his views after the *Free Press* campaign. McNab however was no innocent in the proceedings. In 1866 he published a pamphlet in which he argued that Saint Patrick had been born in Scotland.²³ While a cogent argument it was hardly a diplomatic gesture under the circumstances. Though the *Free Press*' charge of peculation seems misdirected, the anti-Irish label was quite conceivably justified.

James Quinn, on the other hand, was aggressively Hibernian, to the point of actually changing his name to 'O'Quinn' during the O'Connell celebrations of 1875, to honour his heritage in what he called 'the oldest, noblest and most chivalrous race in the world'.²⁴ Quinn had also demonstrated intolerance of any freelance clergy or non-diocesan religious orders operating in his area of jurisdiction.²⁵ Further to this he had decisively suppressed clerical revolutions in 1862 and 1867²⁶ and ran his diocese like an autocrat. He was also engaged in a protracted power struggle with McNab's cousin, Mother Mary MacKillop, over control of the Josephite Sisters stationed in his diocese. The feud culminated in the Josephite withdrawal in 1880.²⁷ As his biographer tells us: 'the bishop ruled as an absolute episcopal monarch, in a manner, which met all

challenges to his authority with further assertions of that authority'.
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The messianic, driven, uncompromising, impatient McNab confronted Quinn. The bishop was authoritarian and yet a builder. He was someone who saw his role as laying the foundations for an Irish church in Queensland. He valued institutions and was prepared to compromise on many counts in society at large, if not within the church itself, to promote the status of Catholicism in the new land. Thus, when McNab met Quinn in 1875, many of the pre-conditions for non-cooperation were already in place. It was not long before the uneasy peace in their relationship degenerated into open hostility.

On his arrival McNab had requested assistance for his mission from Quinn. In particular he asked for the services of Pierre Bucas who had gone to Queensland specifically to work with the Aborigines and who had three years experience with the Maoris.²⁹ Quinn promised Bucas' release from parish duties on the arrival of a replacement priest in the diocese. According to McNab, 'another and another and another came and yet he was still withheld.'³⁰ McNab was disappointed by his failure to obtain Bucas' experienced assistance and sceptical at Quinn's motivation for withholding it.

Quinn, for his part, encouraged McNab to take up some land on behalf of the church and to try to settle the Aborigines upon it.³¹ McNab had absolutely no intention of doing such a thing and viewed himself as a political lobbyist, a social theorist and an agitator for reform – roles, which could barely be accomplished on some remote mission. McNab appreciated that the land had been violently appropriated by white colonists without compensation to its original owners and railed against the claim that the Aborigines had forfeited their entitlement to land by virtue of their failure to exploit its agricultural and pastoral potential. He advocated freehold title for Australia's indigenous inhabitants and recognised that land possession was at the root of the struggle between black and white. This was to be his outstanding contribution to colonial discourse on the Aborigines and one for which he is rightfully best remembered.

In effect he foreshadowed the land rights movement which followed a century later.

In his role as advocate for the Aboriginal cause McNab was appointed in 1876 to a government commission for the amelioration of the Aborigines condition, under the chairmanship of Mathew Hale the Anglican Bishop of Brisbane. McNab geared his efforts to the provocation of public indignation at the treatment of the Aborigines. His commitment to what he believed was their cause was fanatical. The Commission, on the other hand, acted less as a prod to public conscience than as part time agent of a civil administration less than fully committed to Aboriginal rights – an administration much like Quinn’s episcopacy which was taking careful, not to say timid, steps to realise limited and expedient goals.

Bucas had, in the meantime, proposed a permanent mission in the vicinity of Mackay and was preparing to obtain a piece of land for that purpose. Quinn responded in June 1876 by opening a bank account in his, Bucas’ and McNab’s names, without the latter’s consent and borrowing money to pay for the first instalment of the purchase. McNab objected and disavowed responsibility for any debts incurred by the bishop.³² Quinn in fact had a reputation for indiscreet land dealings³³ and generally chaotic financial management.³⁴ This may have been a factor in McNab’s response. It was probably not the foremost consideration however. Quinn wanted a show piece. He and probably Bucas, envisaged a permanent mission for the Aborigines conceived along the lines of New Norcia. That institution had, to date, been the singular ‘success’ in the Catholic evangelisation effort. It had an international reputation³⁵ and was highly visible evidence of the Catholic presence. It would thus likely to have matched with Quinn’s conception of the role of the church and gone a long way to pleasing his superiors in Rome. McNab’s peripateticism, on the other hand, offered no such example. McNab objected to the notion of a permanent mission on the grounds that the Aborigines would not leave their own country to come to it.³⁶ Further to this he insisted that: ‘by thus limiting my action, I could benefit only a few individuals, perhaps one or two hundred whereas I

desired to secure civil rights for all, and to succeed in conferring a general benefit.’³⁷

McNab was also reluctant to stray far from his base in Brisbane.³⁸ His ambitions could best be realised by vigorous lobbying of the government and the commissioners. For McNab, the Aborigines’ plight was less a church problem, than a political one, for which he sought political solutions. He conceived of a mission unconstrained by ecclesiastical trappings. His ambition to ‘secure civil rights for all’ transcended the then established parameters of missionary work.

It was Quinn who reminded McNab of the missionary’s traditional role by insisting that he abandon his dealings with the government and undertake the task of instructing the Aborigines in the Christian faith. He pointed to the inefficacy of McNab’s lobbying efforts and yet accused him of being ‘a mere tool or agent of the government’.³⁹ McNab of course denied the accusation simply claiming that ‘the Blacks were in the power of the government from the beginning, and to it alone I could apply for their civil rights.’⁴⁰ McNab complained to Roger Vaughan, The Archbishop of Sydney, that Quinn was in fact ‘more trammelled by the Government’ than he was.⁴¹ Despite Quinn’s Irish nationalist proclivities and the authoritarianism of his diocesan administration, he pursued a policy of tolerance and cooperation in his dealings with the wider Protestant community.⁴² Patrick O’Farrell concedes that Quinn’s tolerance in these dealings ‘sprang from conviction.’ It was, however, O’Farrell claims, ‘a tactical conviction rather than one of principle: good relations with his colonial world seemed to him necessary to the work of his church.’⁴³

McNab on the other hand rarely entertained ‘good relations with his colonial world’. He was much too indignant and intolerant of its social injustices. He was intolerant too of Quinn’s ecumenism and his seeming preparedness to compromise on some matters of liturgy in a bid to attain his integrationist goals. McNab was also particularly scrupulous in matters of Catholic dogma. It was just one more source of friction in a relationship which was doomed never to succeed. The ultimate victim of the failure of that relationship was McNab’s

scheme for Aboriginal amelioration. Marginalised from the Catholic mainstream in Queensland, McNab was unable to mobilise the weight of the Church behind his lobbying efforts. His initiatives were resisted by an almost exclusively Protestant administration whose opinion of him was, despite their claims to the contrary, doubtless coloured by sectarian prejudices. McNab thus reaped few of the benefits and most of the disadvantages of his denominational affiliation.

McNab kept himself throughout 1875 and part of 1876 on money saved from his parish work in Victoria. After this was used up, he relied on funds solicited from within the diocese⁴⁴ under the authority of a letter provided by Quinn for that purpose.⁴⁵ He was highly critical of Quinn's reluctance to fund the mission outright.⁴⁶ He was convinced too that Quinn withheld resources from his mission unjustly and that the Irishman's budgeting priorities were askew.⁴⁷

McNab's funds were meagre. Worse than this, their supply was tenuous. Quinn's permission to beg for money could be revoked at any time. Fully cognizant of this, McNab complied with Quinn's request that he begin the process of conversion of the Aborigines.⁴⁸ McNab was convinced, as Polding had been years before,⁴⁹ that the Aborigines' material wants should be thoroughly met before any attempt at religious conversion was made.⁵⁰ He was also hesitant to convert them for fear that their status as Catholics would further jeopardise their chances of receiving government assistance.⁵¹

There were other factors too which probably contributed to McNab's reluctance to evangelise. He could observe the Aborigines' material circumstances and knew something of the history of their persecution. He could thus draft a blueprint for action based on these perceptions. McNab was considerably more ignorant, however, about Aboriginal spiritual values. One analyst claims that Catholic procrastination over Aboriginal evangelisation was largely a product of an ignorance of their religious values and a lack of confidence about how to proceed.⁵² The notion prevailed in the Catholic Church, as in most others, that the Aborigines had no religious

susceptibilities. The absence of the signs of formal religious observance such as temples and god figures was read as lack of religiosity in general. It was understandable yet critical misreading. Missionaries, in fact, confronted spiritual values as strongly held as their own.⁵³ Many made the mistake of believing that Aboriginal spirituality was a *tabula rasa* on which they could inscribe Christian values. Later, in 1887, McNab noted that the Aborigines held religious beliefs, the details of which they were reluctant to communicate to outsiders.⁵⁴ This observation was informed by more than ten years experience of missionary work. There is no evidence that McNab, in 1877, was any more aware of the profundities of the Aborigines' religious beliefs than any of his contemporaries.

Despite this ignorance, McNab set about his task of conversion methodically. Prior to venturing forth he arranged for copies of his photograph to be distributed in the area in advance, in order that the local tribes would recognise him.⁵⁵ On encountering bands of Aborigines he pitched his tent in the vicinity of their encampment and commenced instruction to the young,⁵⁶ dressed in a 'clerical habit with glaring colours and crucifix'.⁵⁷ In refreshing contrast to most of his contemporaries, McNab considered the Aborigines to be 'quick of apprehension and susceptible to training'.⁵⁸ He believed that success would surely follow if they were 'reasoned with, and each point of doctrine clearly explained to them'.⁵⁹ Regrettably for McNab, his methods proved less than successful. According to Tom Petrie's account he was mocked in his absence by the blacks.⁶⁰ Reflecting on his missionary career in later years, he ruefully acknowledges that, in twelve years of labour, he had probably made no permanent converts.⁶¹

McNab's compliance with Quinn's request for religious instruction for the Aborigines did not mark the end of the conflict between the two clergymen. Broader political currents within the Australian Catholic Church were shifting them further into mutually hostile camps. The period of McNab's mission in Queensland was a particularly troubled one in the history of the Australian church. McNab had a bit part in a conflict played out between Roger Vaughan and the suffragan Irish bishops in other parts of the

colonies; one of whom was Quinn's brother and another his cousin. The origins of the controversy are complex. It has been suggested that it was rooted as much in the traditional tensions between diocesan and regular clergy, as in the more obvious English/Irish enmity.⁶² McNab's relations with Quinn, and thus by extrapolation the efficacy of his mission, were severely prejudiced by the Scotsman's unequivocal alignment with the Vaughan and the Benedictines.

According to Quinn's biographer, 1875, the year of McNab's arrival in Queensland, was also the year in which internal disharmony within the Australian Catholic Church reached new height. In the months prior to McNab's arrival, the Archbishop of Armidale, Timothy O'Mahoney, had been reported to Rome on charges of alcoholism and sexual immorality. The charges were probably false, yet the failure of Vaughan in Sydney to support O'Mahoney against the allegations, meant that the case became a rallying point for the Irish bishops with James Quinn at their head.⁶³ Two years later it was Quinn who was at the centre of a controversy. At the 1877 Provincial Synod a 'Syllabus of Accusations' was read against him. The syllabus alleged once again drunkenness and immorality as well as charging that 'The Bishop of Brisbane and his Irish priests spend on debauchery what the people give them for the administration of the blacks'⁶⁴ The complaint had its origins in a set of previously unconnected gripes and grievances recorded in letters home from Italian priests in Quinn's diocese during the early 1870s. The complaints were later collected and edited in Rome. Quinn's supporters set about organising a defence. They circularised a refutation of the accusations which all the priests in the diocese were requested to sign.⁶⁵ McNab refused.⁶⁶

In June 1878, at the height of the fracas, Quinn chose not to renew the faculties for McNab's mission. McNab became powerless to act for the Aborigines in Quinn's diocese, which comprised most of Queensland. He was convinced that the decision was prompted by his failure to support the Bishop against the charges and advised Vaughan of such.⁶⁷

Once again however, McNab was no innocent bystander in the fracas. Rome had called upon Vaughan, by then Archbishop of Sydney, to investigate the complaints. He did so in May 1878 by requesting information from all the priests in Quinn's diocese, except for those who were obviously favourable to the Bishop, such as his three nephews – the Horans.⁶⁸ The method of investigation has been described by Quinn's biographer, with some restraint, as 'irregular'.⁶⁹ McNab responded with relish and forwarded a list of twenty-seven specific incidents of 'improprieties' to Vaughan in July 1878.⁷⁰ McNab got his revenge but he lost his mission.

By December 1878, McNab had also resigned from the government commission and launched a vitriolic campaign against his fellow commissioners in the pages of the *Brisbane Courier*.⁷¹ The Commission or what was left of it closed ranks. McNab fired his volleys in a bid to ignite public outrage, but found in its stead a mixture of apathy and spite. In the later half of 1878 he worked his way north out of Quinn's diocese and into the Vicariate of Cooktown which had been created in 1877 and which encompassed much of the tropical region of the colony. There the Vicar-Apostolic Giovanni Cani was demonstrating a rather more positive approach to Aboriginal evangelisation than Quinn in the south.⁷² McNab's stay in the north was cut short by health problems and in April 1879 he returned to Victoria en route to Europe.

At the beginning of 1879 he sailed from Melbourne on an around-the-world trip which took him through Egypt, Southern Europe, the British Isles and the United States. In Rome in September of that year he drafted what amounted to a supplement to his major report to Vaughan of July the previous year. Here he broadened the scope of his attack beyond Quinn to the Australian bishops in general who were taken to task for their inertness on the matter of Aboriginal evangelisation.⁷³ Many of his sentiments echoed those of Propaganda and his deputation was, on the whole, well received by Cardinal Simeoni in Rome, culminating perhaps in the Austrian Jesuit mission to the Northern Territory in 1882. McNab began a tour of French, English, Scottish, Irish and later American seminaries and

monasteries in what was to prove an unsuccessful bid for support and personnel for a renewed mission.⁷⁴

By February 1881 McNab was back in Victoria writing letters detailing abuses against the Aborigines, complaining about government inaction and agitating for reform. In the years that he had committed to the Queensland mission (September 1875 to 1880) McNab had raged and cajoled, badgered and bullied. He had shown unflinching commitment to his cause but had been deeply scarred by the experience. In 1881 he was 61 years old and in declining health. When in Rome he had asked to be relieved of his missionary duties, but had been ordered back to the front by Simeoni.⁷⁵ While he continued to show his zeal in his public dealings, his more intimate correspondence showed a rather different face. There spoke disillusion, fatigue and a rapidly encroaching sense of futility. One month after his return from the United States he wrote to his cousin Mary MacKillop: 'My labours for the blacks seem fruitless and hopeless'. His labours were ongoing however – back in north Queensland, at Rottneest Island in Western Australia and later in the Kimberleys. His health broken he eventually returned to Victoria in 1887. Duncan McNab died in Richmond in September of 1896.

He had swum against the current. He first conceptualised and theorised on the Aboriginal situation and then proceeded frantically to attempt to actualise these theories. His approach was a radical departure from the pragmatic responses or non-responses that characterised church and state policy on the Aborigines through the colonial period. McNab's was maverick figure on his roving commission in Queensland. He showed deference to his superiors if he perceived their actions to be in the best interests of the Aborigines and would brook no departure from doctrinal orthodoxy in the administering of the sacraments. McNab was a stickler for Catholic form and a fierce anti-Protestant who, while moulding his worldview to the treatment of a colonial issue – the Aborigines – unlike his bishop, was little prepared to make concessions to, and compromises with the colonial realities which confronted him.

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He is currently employed as a Senior Librarian at the University of Queensland Library. Mark is also a songwriter, musician and singer and has released CDs of his original music.

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- 73 McNab 'Memoria' to Simeoni, 15 September, 1879.
- 74 McNab to Simeoni, 11 Dec. 1879, *S.C. Oceania*, Vol. 13, fol. 178.
- 75 McNab to Bishop Griver, 1 March 1885.