

**‘SEA PICTURES’ IN THE PRESENTATION TRADITION
ST. URSULA’S YEPPOON:
A CATHOLIC GIRLS’ BOARDING SCHOOL
ON THE CENTRAL COAST OF QUEENSLAND**

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This presentation is about the unique phenomenon of a boarding school founded by the sisters of the Presentation Order in an undeveloped seaside settlement in 1918.

The Presentation Sisters arrived in Longreach on February 13, 1900 to set up a convent high school and to staff a parish school. They were responsible for establishing an educational centre that was accessible to young and old, regardless of religious belief.

Memories in the Central-West of Queensland are long when it comes to recalling the schooling that children and adults received from the Presentation Sisters. Skills based subjects which gave students the best opportunity to obtain employment were sought. Evening lessons in maths and book-keeping ensured business success for the town’s people. The entire community was entertained by the concerts of music and drama performed by the students. For young women the goal remained that they were to be prepared for their place in society as wives and mothers. It was from these institutions of Our Lady’s College Longreach, St. Ursula’s and later St. Rita’s in Brisbane that girls were invited to join the Presentation Sisters.

An article by Tom McMahon that was published in the *Longreach Leader* for the golden jubilee that marked the arrival of the sisters there, noted tongue in cheek, that... there was no hell in Longreach until Tuesday thirteenth of February, 1900.

By 1909, established rail links and future plans for railway lines throughout Eastern Australia and inland Queensland give some idea of the optimism for settlements in such remote areas. The population included many Irish Catholics and the bishops of Australia were keen to ensure the faithful were afforded every opportunity to take their place on all social levels and that the faith was nurtured. It is interesting to note how prominently Cork is shown on a map of that time. It is the site of the deserted Old Cork Station between Longreach and Winton marked in larger print than either of those towns.

The journey of the first community of sisters from Longreach to Yeppoon with goods and chattels loaded on to the train for the new school is a testimony to the good will of all religious communities in the Central West. Railway lines were washed away and the sisters' journey stalled first at Alpha, where they received shelter at the Josephite convent, then at Emerald where they had their own Presentation Sisters and finally they reached Rockhampton where they were welcomed by the Sisters of Mercy. In Bishop Shiel's opening address recorded in the *Daily Record* Rockhampton, January 22, 1917, he speaks of the success of the Longreach and Emerald ventures and refers to the sisters as

beautiful, gentle characters whose success in delivering a... grand, refined and thorough education has been noted in the glowing reports of the Inspectors of State Schools and by their success in public contests with other schools.

Yeppoon is on the Central coast of Queensland and is 48 kilometres north east of Rockhampton. The first European settlers arrived in the Yeppoon region in 1865 and pineapple and sugar plantations were established. The famous Ross Creek is named after the Ross family which had arrived in the district in 1862.

The area was surveyed in 1872 and was originally named Bald Hill. The present name is presumably of aboriginal

origin meaning 'big water'. Robert Medew in his book *Daughters of Time* quotes a Henry Campbell Anderson who was born in Yeppoon in 1892 and who remembers as a boy that the houses of the township were few and far between and that there were two aboriginal native camps, one occupying the site where St. Ursula's now stands. It seems appropriate that the staff and students enjoy a close relationship with the original owners of the land as indigenous students are enrolled there now (Medew 1976). At various times over the ninety years plus both the indigenous people of Yeppoon and the Presentation Sisters sought each other out and their lives were intertwined.

It was Robert Ross who built the wharf in the creek where boats brought provisions for Yeppoon from Rockhampton via the Fitzroy River. Ross Creek eventually became the harbour for Yeppoon's fishing fleet. I mention Ross Creek quite early because it features prominently in the sporting and recreational activities of the St. Ursula's girls throughout its entire history. These original concrete harbour walls became the starting blocks for the St. Ursula's swimming expeditions both competitive and non-competitive.

While the geographical location presented its own set of unique circumstances and challenges in 1918, the Bishop of Rockhampton (Bishop Shiel) knew of the Presentation Order founded by Nano Nagle in Cork, Ireland, in 1775, which had been pioneering Presentation educational foundations throughout the Australian colonies from 1866.

The four Yeppoon foundation sisters represented the fourth wave of members in the Nano Nagle tradition from Kildare (Ireland) to Wagga Wagga, then Longreach and finally Yeppoon. Three of the four sisters were Australian born all of whom had entered in Longreach, while their superior Mother Patrick Madden had come from Ireland to enter at Wagga after attending the Presentation Convent in Galway

City. Sister Stanislaus O'Rourke came from Longreach. Sister Clare McMahon came from Sydney. Sister Aquinas McReady had been educated by the Mercy sisters and entered from Emerald where her father was the Postmaster.

From the Wagga Wagga foundation the Presentation Order had brought to Longreach and then to Yeppoon the three-tiered levels of European style educational offerings which were: the expensive boarding school offering enriched education to girls from five years of age upwards, the middle school which was a fee-paying day school for both boys and girls, and the poor school which in Australia was replaced by the local parish school.

In Yeppoon the sisters conducted the dual system of parish school at a cost of six pence per pupil per week and the boarding and day schools which were merged and students were prepared for the Junior Public exams.

There was no Catholic church or resident priest in Yeppoon until 1927 when Yeppoon was registered as a separate parish, so Mass on Sunday and at most two days a week in the largest classroom was celebrated by visiting priests. The parish primary school starting with prep years took students of about five years onwards.

One such student was John Hutton, a member of a well known Yeppoon family. At age four, his mum was ill so he began his prep year at an early age. Being so young and because of his mother's illness, John was taken by his teacher Sr. Laurence for his afternoon nap up to Sr. Joan who was bed-ridden and extremely ill and was nursed by Sr. Laurence. John tucked up beside Sr. Joan each afternoon and was lulled to sleep with stories from Sr. Joan. John was later to boast cheekily that he had slept with a nun from four years of age.

During the Second World War, American soldiers on leave on the coast sought out the nuns to share some time with them, bringing along their Bing Crosby records and under

the nuns' watchful eye were allowed to play tennis with the girls. These few stories serves as an illustration that both boarders who in some cases were not able to travel home for school holidays and the people of Yeppoon experienced a warm and homely presence in the Presentation community despite fairly strict rules of enclosure.

These rules remained in place well into the second half of the twentieth century. However it was a far cry from the strict enclosed rule from which the Order had emerged as it sought permission to adapt to its mission in remote regions of Australia.

The foundation members of the first community as mentioned were Mother Patrick Madden, Sisters Stanislaus O'Rourke, Clare McMahon and Aquinas McReady, with the legendary Mother Ursula Kennedy overseeing operations. Her notes record that

...on taking possession, the Sisters opened a Primary School with 30 to 40 pupils which was named St. Joseph's and a Boarding School which numbered 25.

It is probably not coincidental that the first registered boarder was Greta Forrest from Longreach and it raises questions about in what ways the boarding school at Yeppoon was to be different from the school in Longreach.

Much planning and careful consideration went into the foundation at Yeppoon. Obviously there was optimism in the growth and development of both the Central West and the coast, for a seemingly ambitious foundation of a boarding school in a remote seaside town. The answer may initially have been as simple as the need to provide the sisters with a holiday place.

The Josephite Sisters had already arrived in the area and it was with them that the Presentation Sisters holidayed as some respite from the extreme summer conditions of Longreach.

Their friend and mentor Father Healy arranged the purchase of land in 1915 and engaged the architects Beresford and Dibdin to draw up plans for a two story building (MacGinley 1977). It is also interesting speculation about the timing of such a venture with the First World War raging and a severe drought. However, the railway line from Rockhampton was completed in 1909 and there were available bullock teams and labour from the by then failing sugar mills.

It is interesting to speculate about the design of the first St. Ursula's building, because Rupert Goodman in his work on Secondary Education in Queensland from 1860 to 1960, describes the kind of curriculum offered by church schools in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as resembling the cold uninviting dwellings of stone and hard wooden pews (Goodman 1968). This building must surely have made a bold and dramatic statement about the presence of a significant phenomenon on the Central coast of a pioneering region of Queensland. Did it look cold and uninviting? I don't think so – was it a bold statement about the nature of education to be conducted there?

In the 1990s, the original building was demolished and a replacement which is the boarding house has been built on the right hand side of the 1923 convent building.

St. Ursula's College Yeppoon was registered as a secondary school on October 21, 1920 which meant that holders of Government scholarships could take out their scholarships at the college. The high school comprised fee-paying primary classes as well as the secondary pupils. The Presentation Sisters in Australia remained true to their original mission to the poor but were requested to extend the scope of education from the parish-owned school where a minimal or no fee was charged, and to provide for the needs of all levels of society.

If the architecture was symbolic of these levels of education that were offered by the Presentation Sisters, this three-

storeyed building certainly illustrates the levels of education on offer. The parish primary school called St. Joseph's was on the ground floor and above was the accommodation for the sisters and the secondary school. When a primary school was built across the road this lower level became music rooms and a recreation area.

The sisters at Yeppoon were graduates of the original education tradition based on the curriculum of the French Ursulines in which the Irish Presentation Sisters had been schooled. The pedagogical objectives of Madame Jeanne Campan took Napoleon's ideals of a public education to a new level for women, and even though she stated that the object of women's education must be directed towards domestic virtues, nevertheless she introduced French language, mathematics, history, writing and geography so that all students 'can have the pleasure of educating their daughters themselves'(Rogers 1994). She further developed a curriculum in her boarding schools that included the study of literature, ancient, sacred and French history, geometry, a smattering of natural sciences, drawing, music, languages and needlework.

In the Australian colonial scene much of this curriculum survived with the sciences tending to fade into the background for some time in favour of the demand for commercial subjects.

The architecture of the buildings suited to tropical climates was a visual reminder of the adaptation that the sisters made to the needs of their young students. They came from remote regions and the recreation by the sea was surely the most satisfying compensation for being away from home. Sports like hockey were played on the beaches and swimming carnivals and diving competitions were held in Ross Creek.

While that curriculum prepared young ladies to take their place as wives and mothers in society, there was the strong social vision of Bishop Quinn and succeeding Queensland

bishops to establish an integrated society where Catholics could stand shoulder to shoulder in all walks of professional life. He therefore ensured that registered Catholic schools had the same access to funding through Government inspection, and that all pupil teachers from the Catholic system also be accepted as candidates at the examinations of the Department of Public Instruction.

The Presentation Sisters were well versed in setting up a secondary education system that qualified it to be subsidized by the Government through the Grammar Schools Act of 1860. The Presentation Order in Ireland had availed itself of government funding with the establishment of the framework devised by Stanley, then Chief Secretary of Ireland, without losing any ground relating to the original vision of the founder, Nano Nagle. The survival of their schools in Ireland was more secure than orders such as the Christian Brothers who had opted for total independence, because the Presentation Order remained linked with the national board and the public system of primary education established in Ireland in 1831 (MacGinley 1983).

The first State High Schools in Queensland were opened in 1912 and then only in selected centres without Grammar schools. It would not be until the 1950s that there was any school providing higher education in the remote central west of Queensland, other than Our Lady's Presentation College Longreach. St. Ursula's Yeppoon was the first of the secondary schools on the Capricorn Coast. It was followed by St. Faith's Anglican College for girls in 1923, which closed in 1963, St. Brendan's Christian Brother's boys boarding school in 1940 and the State Secondary School in 1957.

At the outset it can be clearly understood that education in the order-owned colleges was non sectarian in their enrolment policy. These were the only educational institutions available in the remote areas of Queensland. As Goodman points out the government persisted with its policy, post the Second World War, that secondary education was primarily the business of church

run and grammar schools.

Bishop Shiel, who was instrumental in establishing the Presentation Order in Yeppoon, made very clear the rationale behind the plan. He is quoted in the *Morning Bulletin* on January 21, 1917 in his opening address as saying that the sisters would

persevere with that courage and self sacrifice of all our nuns who never think of self as long as there are souls to whom they can impart the knowledge and comfort of religion and the development of the mind which by their own education and attainments they are so fitted to impart.

He went on to state that

this venture was a great business opportunity for the town having boarders at the school and as a mark of gratitude he would hope to hand over the convent free of all debt!...that this indeed was a venture for true education.

As early as 1917 it was mooted that a Christian Brothers College would also be built so that Yeppoon would become a centre of real Christian culture. However this was not to occur until 1940.

Perhaps being free of all debt was a noble aim but, while recalling the achievements covering ninety years education at St. Ursula's, it is important to consider that there were sparse funds to resource a community of sisters and students. Fees from schooling, music and boarding rarely covered running costs. Sisters and students worked for long hours to present concerts for the town which showcased the curriculum and the talents of St. Ursula's but also brought in desperately needed funds. Both parish priest and the sisters' community lived basic hardworking lives seven days a week and, with boarders, the sisters were on call twenty-four hours every seven days. Repairs of buildings and acquiring furniture were thrust on the good will and skill of parents, particularly local Yeppoon parents, while extra money was sought from

more wealthy parents to buy uniforms and books for the needy student that the sisters always took in free of charge.

These realities are not recorded but these experiences live on strongly in the memories of those who experienced this charity. As one elderly stateswoman of the Order said to me firmly, 'that's what Nano Nagle would have wanted'. The days of five year strategic planning, professional upgrading, Commonwealth funding and diocesan loans, were a long way off for an educational institution such as St. Ursula's throughout the first sixty years of its existence.

On December 9, 1929 there was the report of the end of year display and concert. On display were needlework, plain and fancy, samples of painting, penmanship and mapping. Superior and Principal, Mother Aloysius in her report presented a significant statement of the key outcomes of education at St. Ursula's. She stated:

The Christian education of Australian girls has first claim upon our attention. She reported that through solid instruction, the sodalities and the fact that the girls are daily communicants, they will carry through life, we trust, a lasting spirit of loyalty and devotion to Holy Church (Murtagh).

She reported that in the Christian Doctrine exams to Grade VII the highest grades had been attained, and in the Public exams every candidate entered had secured a good pass with extension scholarships. Students in the commercial classes had gained shorthand and typing certificates and in music students had been prepared for the Board of Music exams, London. In 1930 Domestic Science is listed in the curriculum as well as tennis, vigoro, basketball and circlos. The girls were taken to swimming on the beach as the college had its own bathing shed.

What is most telling is that student school work was entered in country and district shows throughout the length and breadth

of the State, for example, in Toowoomba, Maryborough and Brisbane as well as Rockhampton. One of the best marketing strategies to justify Catholic education and specifically to advertise the quality of education at St. Ursula's was surely to have students' work win major prizes in these regions to demonstrate that they could compete with state and other religious schools.

In 1932 the first student on completing the senior examination went on to university and by 1937 there was an enrolment of twenty-seven in the secondary school. The subjects offered were Maths, Latin, French, Geography, English, Commercial, Music, Arts and Domestic Science. Once again the Superior's report highlights.

...The fine religious spirit with the reminder to the girls that they live up to the high ideals inculcated during their schooldays so that they will be a source of edification in their home parishes (Murtagh).

This was to be a sentiment that was continually repeated by succeeding superiors as if it were a reminder that the girls and boys who had been privileged with a Catholic boarding school education would carry the faith back to their remote communities that had not the opportunity to have the faith explained and practised.

In its fiftieth year the public statements remained unchanged that the aim of Catholic education was preparation not only for a particular vocation in life but was also preparation for one's eternal destiny.

By 1970 it is a significant observation that the bishop as traditional guest speaker at the end of year speech night was replaced by educational authorities, to inform the community of the emerging restructuring of assessment and tertiary entrance procedures from external exams to internal assessment as a result of the Radcliffe and Radford reports.

This is also the post Vatican II era.

This era represented the significant shift in the school landscape in Queensland when the new secondary junior course of three years placed immense financial burdens on Church-run schools, and signalled a more serious commitment for religious secondary school teachers to seek tertiary qualifications and to comply with the introduction of compulsory teacher registration. While the fundamental purpose of secondary education was debated between University and State, a significant change was looming for the administration of schools run by independent religious institutions (Goodman 1968).

The need to provide ‘missionaries’ to educational outposts no longer existed and members of religious orders, trained specifically to staff educational facilities, either left religious life or sought other types of ‘missionary’ outposts. Members of religious orders sought to put in place permanent ‘signposts’, to ensure that the continuity of what were deemed valued traditions would remain, based on what was described as the original ‘charism’ of the founder.

St. Ursula’s Yeppoon functions today as an Independent Catholic Boarding College for girls owned by the Presentation Congregation of Queensland administered by a Principal and College Leadership Team and managed by a Board of Directors. One Presentation Sister is active in the College as a Campus Minister and lives away from the college.

The diocese today extends from Mackay in the north, to the Northern Territory border in the west, and Bundaberg in the south. Yeppoon is situated in its eastern boundary, the Pacific Ocean. Boarding students for St. Ursula’s for the most part have come from within that geographical area, with significant numbers of girls having enrolled from Papua New Guinea until 1975 when that country gained independence from Australia

and there was the subsequent withdrawal of Aus-Aid for its school students. Day-students have come from the settlements surrounding the township of Yeppoon.

The current change in the proportion of day students to boarders is accounted for by the ongoing shift in population from rural Queensland to coastal regions and the gradual urban development on the Capricorn Coast triggered in the 1970s by the Iwasaki Resort Development north of Yeppoon.

**In 2009 there are 509 students
of whom 383 are day students and 120 are boarders.**

The development of the educational phenomenon that is St. Ursula's can best be summarised by this framework based on a model from the Queensland Bishops Project of 2000. It parallels the vision for education in the Presentation Tradition in St. Ursula's Yeppoon over ninety years, with the changes that have occurred in the Church and society. The Presentation Sisters by their very feminine, highly educated and cultured presence had embarked on a mission that helped shape the social and cultural landscape of Central Queensland. It is not too bold a statement to make that in fact they, along with other religious orders of women and men, were at times solely responsible for any educational initiatives that contributed to the social and cultural development of the remote and isolated Central Queensland of the early twentieth century.

The influence of this tradition on the Church, society and culture of Central Queensland over the first 90 years of the development of St. Ursula's is the subject my research.

The resilience and robust growth of St. Ursula's may not just be the result of the changing demographic on the Capricorn Coast, but there is strong evidence that the will and vision

of educated and accomplished women of the Presentation Order provided for continual questioning and adaptation to ensure its relevance as an educational institution. It appears to have signalled its relevance in the 21st Century not just to the Church but to society, which struggles to find a value base to underpin its educational goals for each and every Queensland child.

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She is currently pursuing studies at the Australian Catholic University (Brisbane Campus) exploring the history of St Ursula's Yeppoon which was founded by the Presentation Sisters in 1918.

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