

Fr Julian Tenison Woods: 'Father Founder'

In 2010 Sr Margaret Press RSJ prepared the following articles for publication in the Diocese of Parramatta.

There is a well-known painting of Blessed Mary MacKillop and Father Julian Tenison Woods standing together. Mother Mary is known far and wide as foundress of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, yet she always referred to Julian Woods as Father Founder. She reinforced that description by writing his life story after he died.

What could be the reason for her steadfast acknowledgment of the joint role of this Australian-born daughter of Scottish parents and the English priest? In fact, it is impossible to reflect fully on her life and work without knowing about his.

The life story of Julian Edmund Tenison Woods can be divided into two parts, the experiences of both giving colour and inspiration to his life's work.

Until the age of 23, he lived in England and France; the rest of his life was spent in Australia, with an excursion to South East Asia in the latter years. His parents, James Woods and Henrietta Tenison were, in fact, both Irish, but when the Catholic lawyer wished to marry the daughter of a Church of Ireland rector, descendant of an Archbishop of Canterbury, the couple moved to London. With their family of one daughter and seven sons, they lived in and around Southwark or sometimes in the country at Sydenham.

For the last years of her short life, Henrietta Woods and the younger children, including Julian, lived on the island of Jersey. Julian and most of the Woods children were baptised at the nearby church of St George, Southwark, now a cathedral.

Although the Woods children attended a variety of schools in their area, their education by their father and some tutors ensured that they were well versed in literature, history, classical languages and natural science. Julian's father and three of the older boys became well-known journalists. Their religious formation was haphazard, but when Julian had already begun work at The Times printing house, he met and was influenced by some of the most remarkable priests of this day, Fathers Frederick Oakeley, Frederick Faber and the Passionist Father Ignatius Spencer. His deep prayer and sacramental life had led him to join the Passionist order in the hope of eventual ordination as a priest.

Formation in transition

After profession, however, his health could not match the austerity of their life, and he was advised to leave and find a more congenial climate in the South of France.

Here he joined the newly-formed Marists, and again his recurring health problems prevented his perseverance in that order. He was given a teaching position in the college near Toulon, which was then under the guidance of the saintly Peter Julian Eymard. Julian Woods dates his love of the Eucharist and devotion to Mary from those years with St Peter Julian. As well, his lifelong study of geological formations began in his excursions around the Auvergne.



Artist Reg Campbell's painting of Mary MacKillop and Fr Julian Tenison Woods © [Sisters of St Joseph, Perthville](#)

He returned to London in 1853 and, after some study of laboratory scientific procedure with his brother John, and attending art school, he was introduced to Bishop Robert Willson of Hobart. The Bishop invited him to accompany his party to Tasmania to continue his studies towards ordination and teach in a seminary, which the Bishop hoped to begin there.

And so the first eventful part of Julian Woods' formation was now in transition, on a long sea voyage during which he studied his theology and spirituality books under the guidance of Bishop Willson. However, his hopes for this Tasmania experience were never fulfilled.

After riding through the island in order to act as chaplain to the many convict settlements, and learning that his role was then to be a teacher in a school for sons of settlers, Julian informed the bishop that he wished to return to England.

He never did seem to manage his relationship with bishops after this experience!

Two of his brothers, Edward and James, had married and, with their families, were living on the mainland by this time. Edward was working as a journalist in Melbourne, and James in Adelaide was employed by the Central Roads Board. Julian decided to visit both brothers before leaving Australia, and so arrived in Adelaide in late 1855.

To support himself he took work on The Adelaide Times newspaper and contemplated the possibility of following his brothers' advice to marry and settle down.

At this point he came under the notice of Bishop Francis Murphy, who suggested that he place himself under the guidance of the Jesuit Fathers who had recently been established at Sevenhill and complete his studies in preparation for priestly ordination.

And so the patchwork of study, which began with the Passionists in England, continued with the Marist Fathers in France and on the long voyage to Australia finished with the Jesuits in South Australia. In January 1857 he was ordained priest by Bishop Murphy at St Patrick's Church in Adelaide and began this new phase of his life.

'Ten Years in the Bush'

After three months, Bishop Murphy informed Julian that he was to travel to the southeast of the state and become the first pastor of Penola parish, which covered a huge area, becoming lively as a passage-way to the Victorian goldfields. The bishop suggested that he take his young brother Terry, who had come to join his brothers in South Australia. So began the period which Julian always referred to as his 'Ten Years in the Bush', in a lecture which he delivered many times in later years. In that memoir he told of those years' experiences, living with the warm-hearted people of the southeast, in a small cottage in Penola.

From there, he spent weeks at a time riding around the district, from Robe to Bordertown, around the Coonawarra district and into Victoria, from Portland in the south to Edenhope in the north, so as to celebrate Mass and the sacraments for the Catholics there. It was in Portland that he first met two families which were to be important in his future life, the family of John Finn and their neighbours, the MacKillops. He instructed Mrs Finn and received her into the Catholic Church, her sponsor being the youthful Mary MacKillop from next door.



The Penola Years and beyond

The Penola years were busy times, years which Julian filled to overflowing in his usual way. Churches were to be built and placed under the patronage of St Joseph at Penola, St Teresa in Mount Gambier and Our Lady Star of the Sea at Robe.

A parish school was conducted by two sisters, the Misses Johnson. As he rode around his parish, no time was wasted. His horse must have been both knowledgeable and trusted, as his rider continued to read one of his many books from those on science, spirituality, literature which he regularly ordered from booksellers in Melbourne. He visited every station and small settlement, joining the family at meals and often providing piano accompaniment for evening enjoyment of song and dance.

Since the heat of the day often made travel difficult, he made time to widen his knowledge of the natural characteristics of the region, to make notes and later write articles for scientific journals, some significant in subsequent development, such as that reporting on the Coonawarra terrarossa, 'suitable for viticulture' or his description of the Naracoorte caves. He corresponded with eminent scientists in order to understand the nature of the region, and to provide material for the articles and books already coming from his desk. These most frequently dealt with geological topics.

About the middle of his term in Penola, Mary MacKillop, his young friend from Portland, came to Old Penola Station, owned by her uncle Alexander Cameron, to act as governess to his daughters. She had already begun her long task of supporting her mother and younger siblings, but had dreams of giving her life to a religious order devoted to the care of poor children. When Julian Woods visited the Camerons, the two shared many a conversation and became firm and trusted friends. They spoke of their hopes of setting up a school in Penola which would serve all the Catholic children, not only those who could afford to pay for tuition. Mary had already returned to Portland and was teaching in the school there when the Misses Johnson had announced that they were both to be married soon and asked Father Woods to find someone to take over their classes.

Some frantic planning and action followed with Annie MacKillop setting up school in the Penola church with twelve pupils, then Mary and their sister Lexie joining her in renting a small cottage, barely big enough to house them, let alone their pupils. So their brother John came to convert the stable into a classroom. Once the Penola people realised the quality of the girls' teaching, the future of the school was assured, and the next step for Julian and Mary was to form a simple community. This was not yet possible, although Mary adopted a simple black dress and bonnet.

The simple beginnings of Mary and Julian's venture

In the midst of building and equipping the stable-school, Julian learned that he was to be moved back to Adelaide as the new bishop's secretary. He wrote some simple directives for Mary and Blanche Amsinck who had come to join them, and when Bishop Sheil visited Penola before Julian's final departure, he blessed them, addressing Mary as 'Sister Mary', signalling the simple beginnings of their venture.

The bishop gave to his secretary the duty of organising parish schools, and after observing those already in existence and conditions in Adelaide, Julian could see the difficulties ahead.

One problem was the absence of any other religious group in South Australia to share the task; another would be the novelty of a religious community which lived and moved among the people they served, not traditionally enclosed or remote.

Difficulties had never deterred Julian from forging ahead with a plan which he believed was God's will for him and those he served. He wrote a more formal rule of life for Mary and those who joined her in community life in Adelaide, and Bishop Sheil signed it. She and her companions made their first vows in the tiny oratory in Pelham Cottage in June 1867.

Within a year there were 25 young women in the group, dispersed around rapidly opening country schools, an orphanage and a women's refuge. During his five years in Adelaide as its first Director of Education, Father Woods saw to the establishment of a school system. He formed an Education Council composed of both lay and clerical members, as well as parish boards. The Council dealt with the location of schools, curriculum, teacher training standards and fundraising.

The model school was located in the cathedral hall, with Mary as its head. To these activities Julian added his direction of the growing numbers of sisters and normal parish duties as well as being one of the Diocesan Trustees. Not all the diocesan clergy agreed with his methods, and the absence of the bishop for more than a year added to the dramatic, confusing events which culminated in the bishop's attempt on his return to excommunicate Mary and disband the sisters. After an episcopal investigation, they were restored to their former status, but Father Woods was no longer to be their director.

He left Adelaide in 1872, after the departure of a group of sisters to Bathurst, a new diocese in western New South Wales whose Bishop had been one of the investigators. Father Woods was asked by Bishop Quinn to give to those sisters a Rule which would establish them as a diocesan community under his control; he complied by simply repeating his original rule, and continued to visit and direct them.



The next period of Julian Woods' life was that of a travelling preacher of missions, since he needed to support himself, and to keep sending sums of money back to Adelaide to defray the diocesan debt there, which had fallen to his lot as the sole remaining trustee. The Marist Fathers in Sydney welcomed their novitiate companion to their home at Villa Maria, Hunters Hill, and from this base he travelled around New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland in response to requests for missions.

Sr Margaret Press' reflections on the Life of Fr Julian Tenison Woods were published by the Diocese of Parramatta on 30/09/2010 and 1/10/2010 See:

<http://www.parra.catholic.org.au/news---events/latest-news/latest-news.aspx/fr-julian-tenison-woods---father-founder-.aspx>