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CONVERTING SALVATION: Protestant Missionaries in Central Australia, 1930s-40s

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A thesis submitted in September 2004 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University
DECLARATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, my own work, except where acknowledged in the thesis itself, and the material has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for a degree at this or any other University.

David Trudinger
30 August 2004
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Supervisor, Professor Ann Curthoys, for the advice and assistance that she has provided me during the ‘long march’ of this thesis. Her marvellous support and encouragement have been much appreciated. I also thank John Docker, Peter Read, and Robert Barnes at the Australian National University for their help.

The staff at the various libraries and research archives I have utilised have always been very helpful. I thank especially the staff at the National Library of Australia, the Mitchell Library, the South Australian Museum Archives, the Mortlock Library at the South Australian State Library, the State Records Office of South Australia, the Lutheran Archives, the Ara Irititja Archives, Uniting Church Archives, and the libraries of the Universities of Adelaide and Queensland, and, of course, the Australian National University. I would like particularly to thank Lea Gardam, John Dallwitz, Ron Lister for their friendly help, and Jonathan Nicholls especially for lending an ear and dispensing advice at some crucial times.

I thank the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Institute and the Australian National University for financial assistance during the research and writing of the thesis.

I owe an especial debt of gratitude to my family for giving me the time, support and understanding one needs from loved ones to complete this sort of project. Especially I thank my children, Ben and Ava, for their love, tolerance and good humour. Eve, my partner, has been a tower of strength and support to me and for this, among many other things, I dedicate this thesis to her.
Abstract

Using the intellectual, political and discursive 'construction' of a Presbyterian mission site, Ernabella, in Central Australia during the 1930s and 40s, and against the background of the established and iconic Lutheran mission at Hermannsburg, missionary discourse on indigenous Australians is examined, particularly the discourse in which the significant Presbyterian missionary JRB Love and his fellow churchman Dr. Charles Duguid participated. Discursive and political interactions between these two and missionaries such as FW Albrecht of Hermannsburg and John Flynn of the AIM are utilized to explore the fraught and fragmented nature of the missionary discourse in Central Australia in relation to issues such as rationing and feeding, curing indigenous illnesses, 'half-castes' and the removal of children, work and education issues, language and translation, and the christianization, conversion and 'civilising' of indigenous people. Missionary discourse and praxis is approached through a provocative reading of the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas whose delineation of the *face to face encounter with the Other*, where responsibility is taken for 'men dispossessed and without food', is posited as having some relevance and resonance to and within the mission site itself. While conflict, unequal power relations and paternalism were evident, with missionary discourse sharing traces of racial and cultural disparagement of Aborigines with a wider colonial/settler discourse, the general 'avidity of the colonial gaze' was diluted in the mission contact zone with traces of hospitality which at least to some extent replicated and reciprocated the politics of hospitality proffered to the missionaries by 'their' Aborigines. Central to this discourse of hospitality was the unorthodox preparedness of the Love/Duguid administration at Ernabella and (to a lesser, but surprising, extent) FW Albrecht's regime at Hermannsburg, to 'convert' the notion of 'salvation' from one with mainly spiritual connotations to one more to do with the physical 'saving' of the indigenous body and the indigenous collective: saving bodies became as important, if not more so, than saving souls, the traditional missionary imperative. While some complicity with colonial, cultural and religious regimes for re-forming and re-making the indigenous body is acknowledged, some reassessment is suggested to postcolonial (or postmodern) readings of mission sites as always places predominantly of cultural destruction, domination and hegemony.
Preface

I was born in 1949, the son of Presbyterian missionaries, Ronald and June Trudinger, at Ernabella Mission Station. I lived on the Mission site until 1957, when our family left Ernabella under difficult circumstances. I remember that from Ernabella you could see Mount Love, a beautiful purple sight in the blue distance and to me, as a small boy, the most imposing mountain in the world. My father told me that it was named after the Rev. JRB Love, who had been superintendent of Ernabella before I was born. Perhaps it was the name. Even then I knew that 'Love' was an important thing. Perhaps it was just the mountain. But I used to wonder then about Mr. Love and who he was. I have other memories of this time, such as shadowy, now-forgotten figures talking in hushed voices about the 'imagined destinies' of the Aborigines, of the possibility of them 'dying out'.

Mission history is, then, in my blood. Fifty years after seeing that mountain, I have written a thesis in which JRB Love and Ernabella Mission Station figure prominently. Yet, strangely perhaps, I feel no intense desire to either defend or criticise missions, or missionaries themselves. I have a certain sympathy and admiration for missionaries, these committed people, deep in the Outback, with their Doctrines and their Book. Yet I also have a distaste for their arrogance and presumptions, and I feel a deep empathy and admiration for Aboriginal people who had to attempt to make sense of these strange intruders into their country.

I have no wish to write a grand narrative in the style of the triumphalist missionary epics of the past. But while most in this country were indifferent to the fate of Aboriginal people, or rode roughshod over them, there were men and women who encountered Australian Aboriginals in their Landscape, as the Other, and in that gestural 'moment', which might last a lifetime, that face to face encounter, were established complex and ambivalent bonds, some of dominance and deference, but also others of desire and fantasy, of affection and possession, of obligation and responsibility. It is more in the attempt to begin to unravel these sorts of affiliations than any simple desire to defend or censure that I have written this thesis.
Abbreviations

AAM – Australian Aborigines’ Mission
AFA – Aborigines’ Friends’ Association
AIM – Australian Inland Mission
AMS – Aerial Medical Service (forerunner to RFDS)
APB – Aborigines Protection Board (SA)
BM – (Presbyterian) Board of Missions
CP – Chief Protector
FRM – Finke River Mission
GAA – General Assembly of Australia (Presbyterian Church)
NLA- National Library of Australia
NT – New Testament
NT – Northern Territory
RFDS – Royal Flying Doctor Service
SA – South Australia
SAM – South Australian Museum
SASL – South Australian State Library
UAM – United Aborigines Mission