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New Norcia's Old Conflict

The monks of Australia's only monastic town deny it was once the site of Aboriginal suffering.



Monk's progress



Monks, Mammon and mystery

In the monastic town of New Norcia, everything is owned by the founding order of Benedictine monks – even its history, according to a new documentary.

Over the smooth brown hills of New Norcia, a dark cloud began forming around the time Abbot Placid Spearritt received a call from a film crew in Perth in the middle of last year. It was a request to make a documentary in one of the most photogenic places in Western Australia, the only monastic town in the nation. Back then, Spearritt could hardly have predicted the request would lead to an argument with a television network, a dispute over history archives, a Freedom of Information request and a head-on collision between

two versions of history at New Norcia. At first it seemed like just another media request, run-of-the-mill stuff in a place with its own public relations machine to pump out publicity. "Monks, Music and Mystery", reads one New Norcia brochure, offering mass with the Benedictine Order, a stay at the monastery guesthouse or at the picturesque town hotel.

And the place has history to parade, dating back to 1846 when Spanish monk Dom Rosendo Salvado built a primitive bush chapel one summer on the parched Victoria Plains. By the 1880s, the mission controlled nearly a million grazing acres and ran a small town, with its own post office and courthouse. Vatican funds, foreign monks and religious artworks poured in.

"You will see paintings by Spanish and Italian masters," reads the brochure, "gifts from the Queen of Spain and a fascinating array of artefacts which tell the story of New Norcia's time as an Aboriginal mission, as a centre of the monks' extensive farming activities, and as a place of education and culture."

More than 30,000 tourists make the 90-minute drive north from Perth each year. It's a pilgrimage of culture and consumerism – visitors buy "monkburgers" at the local Salvado roadhouse, or browse in the gift shop where monk worry dolls and monk fridge magnets sit alongside shelves of upmarket gourmet foods.

For this – literally – is New Norcia Inc. The town and everything in it is monk-owned; so are the many enter-

story Victoria Laurie



Left: New Norcia's "inmates" in class, 1970; girls from St Joseph's "orphanage" pose for a sewing photo, 1960s. Opposite page, from top left: Religious procession at New Norcia, mid-'60s; Abbot Placid Spearritt, 2000; a sister with two "orphan" girls, 1970.

prises that lend the monastery name to a wide product range. From wood-fired oven breads to olive oil and almond biscotti, the product distribution has reached sublime heights. In Qantas first-class cabins, New Norcia biscuits are handed around in boxes "depicting the unusual architecture of the Benedictine monastery".

Even the monastery's business manager, Dom Christopher Power, uses the word "reinvention" to describe New Norcia's repackaging as a source of nostalgic consumerism. Few glossy magazines or visiting TV crews have ever questioned why the religious order worships both God and Mammon. Or whether the image fits, when few of the remaining 13 monks play any role in producing New Norcia-brand bread, oil or wine.

Such criticisms seem churlish when, as Abbot Spearritt often explains, the survival of a unique town is at stake. Registered in its entirety on the National Estate, New Norcia has 60 buildings, nearly half of them listed by the National Trust.

As he shows *The Australian Magazine* its cracked ceilings and musty corners, Spearritt describes the massive problems New Norcia faced when he arrived in 1983. "The place was running at a loss, and we faced a lot of empty buildings that needed maintenance," he says. Twelve million dollars is required over the next 15 years to restore the town, \$150,000 a year just to keep the doors open. "We don't waste any of the profits we earn."

Without the marketing promotions, the tourist trail,

the supportive media, the abbot would argue, how is New Norcia expected to survive? But none of this was what the film crew from Perth wanted to depict, and that was the problem.

WHEN WRITER FRANK RIJAVEC INTERVIEWED MORE THAN 50 people about their childhood experiences of New Norcia, he quickly realised these were stories that had rarely been told. Rijavec is a West Australian director and writer whose epic 1994 documentary *Exile and the Kingdom*, made collaboratively with a north-west Aboriginal community, won him an AFI award.

With Aboriginal narrator and co-writer Harry Taylor, Rijavec recorded dozens of hours of recollections for an SBS documentary. The interviewees included Taylor's father, Alf, and other relatives from a family that saw three generations grow up behind New Norcia's locked gates. Growing up in the care of monks and nuns at New Norcia was not, in the opinion of most interviewees, a good experience.

"An orphanage without orphans," Ivan Hayden observes wryly; "none of us were orphans."

He is standing outside St Mary's Boys' Orphanage, beneath tall windows along a wall flanking the main road into New Norcia. "These windows had bars to hold the boys in the dormitories so they couldn't get out," Barry Winmar recalls. He notices the bars are gone; inside, the rows of beds and other traces of his

childhood have made way for a new Education Centre.

Hayden, Winmar and a group of other Aboriginal Nyoongar people have returned to New Norcia to take part in Rijavec's documentary. For they – not the monks or New Norcia Inc – will be the subject of the film, along with events that happened as recently as the 1950s, '60s and '70s. "But whenever I go back," says Bernie Ryder, "my biggest disappointment is that there isn't an Aboriginal perspective there."

"Olive-picking was a favoured pastime by all," visitors read in the text accompanying photographs of monks inspecting a bountiful harvest. Yet the Aboriginal interviewees remember long, unpaid hours – often in school time – spent clearing stones from paddocks, picking the orange crop or harvesting olives. "If you didn't pick them all up," recalls Jim Drayton, "you got belted."

In the old laundry, now a display room for farm machinery, Irene Absolam recalls standing as an eight-year-old "on a little box, to wash dirty hankies for the

priests". The older orphanage girls were an essential part of the workforce; they washed, mended and ironed the laundry from New Norcia's two colleges for white children (not opened to Aboriginal children until the 1960s). "What people tend to forget is that a lot of work, a lot of building and farming, was done with Aboriginal hands," says Ryder.

Images of neat children and smiling nuns and monks appear on walls around the town. But the Aboriginal interviewees say no pictures show the impact of a strict Catholic ethos that separated sexes in compounds behind tin fences and kept siblings apart. Thirty-nine-year-old Charmaine Walley remembers crying herself to sleep as a child, unable to reach her sisters next door. "You had to get past the nuns."

And no pictures record the site in a New Norcia field where police shot at Barry Winmar when he tried to run away from the mission. Several people recalled having their heads shaved as punishment, or getting a hiding. Describing the severe beating one of his friends received for running away, Winmar breaks down on camera. "He wouldn't cry," Winmar sobs, "and they kept hitting him."

Jim Drayton's memories are of adults dealing with hopelessly big groups of children, without adequate resources, and tensions building up when Spanish-speaking nuns and monks could not understand the children. He can see their problems. "These people had no training, they had no kids of their own. And then they get landed with 100 to 200 kids to look after." ▸

Nostalgic consumerism:
History is repackaged and
sold to the more than 30,000
tourists who visit each year.

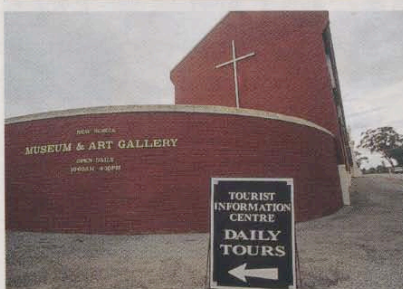
On the new interpretative billboards in the Education Centre, the story is different. A school superintendent in 1959 finds the mission "very well organised and efficiently run". A visitor's letter praises the tidiness of the laundry and the mission school, and the "bright and healthy" appearance of the girls.

Rijavec came across less positive official reports, spanning three decades, about conditions at New Norcia. Like the native welfare officer in 1969 who noted a lack of training and felt there was "no awareness [by nuns] of emotional needs and problems of adolescents". Or a damning medical survey which noted that, out of 92 children, more than 60 had untreated medical conditions ranging from defective hearing to nasal discharge, scabies and dental problems.

There are two versions of New Norcia's recent past. In one, kindness rules in the treatment of children, physical and spiritual needs are met, and food is plentiful. In the other, the prevailing memories are of sheep's head soup and meals so poor that, in 1970, a welfare inspector recommended an urgent investigation into the children's diet, as well as medical and dental attention "to bring the children up to basic standards".

"Looked at from any point of view," he wrote, "[New Norcia] lacks the basic requirements necessary for the long-term care and training of children. No further wards of state to be admitted."

If this was a major reason for the closure of New Norcia's orphanages in 1973, the Education Centre version is different. It features a complimentary letter to the then abbot from the Commissioner of Aboriginal Planning. "The fact that orphanage-type accommodation is no longer required in your area for Aboriginal



"We don't believe there was ever a stolen child in New Norcia," says Abbot Spearritt. Some might have been removed by police, "but we didn't".

children is surely a vindication of past policies ... [Aborigines] are now able to make their way in the general community."

The word "orphanage" was always a misnomer; none of the people Rijavec interviewed had been an orphan. Walley vividly recalls the temptation of the ice cream that lured her into a car, and on to a one-way journey to New Norcia. Angelina Taylor was collected by a monk from her kindergarten "and when we got to New Norcia, the door just closed".

Some Aboriginal parents placed their children there, although a welfare inspector in 1960 wondered how willingly. "Some grounds for suspicion have been found that mission staff members tend to convince some native parents that they cannot look after a child and that it is in the child's best interests to be admitted." Some parents told him they wanted to take back their children but had been "dissuaded" by mission staff.

"There were no Stolen Generations here," the female tour guide confidently informs tourists at New Norcia.

Standing in front of St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage, she tells them that "little girls were left on the doorstep when Aborigines went walkabout, so nuns were brought in to start up a girls' school".

For Rijavec, the term Stolen Generations naturally applied to New Norcia. Others saw it that way, too; in the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing Them Home* report, testimonies by ex-inmates of New Norcia are accompanied by black-and-white images of girls tending laundry and small children lining up for inspection.

Last year, New Norcia photographs featured again. A Stolen Generations gallery was opened at the West Australian Museum; the central image on the entrance wall and on the catalogue cover is "Brother Pablo Clos nursing an infant boy, Pat, New Norcia Mission, c. 1860s". In both cases, the pictures had been provided on request by the state Battye Library of West Australian History where the Benedictine Order lodged large amounts of mission documents and

archival photographs in 1983. Although a loan, the state library has spent large sums of money cataloguing, preserving and copying the material. This, after all, is an important part of the state's history. But the Order was unhappy about the library releasing its photos, and the museum's use of them. Abbot Spearritt and Dom Power contacted them both to register their concern that they had not been consulted, and that New Norcia photographs were being displayed under the too-general category of "stolen generations".

"Of course we don't use that term," an indignant Abbot Spearritt told *The Australian Magazine*. "We don't believe there was ever a stolen child in New Norcia. Never." There might have been a few children forcibly removed by the police, he conceded, "but we didn't remove them".

A SIMILAR DISCUSSION UNFOLDED AFTER RIJAVEC AND HIS producer, Carmelo Musca, met with Spearritt last year to explain their ideas for a documentary. Their original intention was to combine two stories, the Benedictine monks' religious mission and its actual impact on indigenous people at New Norcia. For this, they needed the Order to tell its side of the story.

The film would acknowledge the compassion shown by New Norcia's founder, Salvado, toward his native converts, and how his mission to "Christianise and civilise" had led him into conflict with colonial officials over their brutal tactics toward Aborigines.

But in later years, the film-makers argued, New Norcia mission had cooperated with the state by taking in Aboriginal children and state wards, and assuming total control over their lives. Some childhood inmates felt they had suffered badly in the institution. So how did the Order reconcile its past, its religious life and the recent experience of many Nyoongar people?

This was to be the central theme, Rijavec wrote in a follow-up letter to the abbot: "I wish to be candid with you and accept the possibility of being turned away, rather [than] deceiving myself and you about what I am



New Norcia Inc: Monk worry dolls, tea towels, plates, mugs and (below) gourmet foods on display at the gift shop.



wrote a rebuking letter to SBS, saying the film-makers had "trespassed on our property" and their actions would "have a harmful effect on the reconciliation process". He felt the monks had been "badly treated" and requested that any sections filmed on their premises be removed from the film. SBS wrote back that it stood by the film-makers, and refused "to give any undertakings ... that we would limit or interfere with [their] editorial independence."

But Rijavec would discover the monks still had the upper hand. Many of his interviewees had been photographed as children or young adults at New Norcia, and Rijavec routinely applied to the state library

On the same day in March that Rijavec and Musca wrote their terse letter to the minister, Spearritt wrote to library chief Allen, apologising for "nearly three years of silence" and asking to resume negotiations.

Allen says discussions are "positive" and hopes the monks will consider donating their archive. It's unlikely. "We want to make our material available but we want it to be under our control," Spearritt says firmly. And why, he asks, did New Norcia's detractors overlook the fact that it has opened up its own monastery archives to academics and publishes a *New Norcia Studies* journal?

"When we get decent historians wanting to do work,

The focus on the town as an Aboriginal mission "is a distortion". It would give the monks "bad publicity" and be "bad for reconciliation".

thinking." He hoped the proposed film could be a reconciliatory gesture, "an open-faced movement forward into a refreshed, shared spiritual future that I hope all parties desire".

The abbot and Dom Power were appalled by the tenor of the letter. "It was full of preconceptions which we don't recognise, it's weird stuff," Spearritt told *The Australian Magazine*. He took exception to the word "suffered". "There are some Aborigines who would say they suffered at New Norcia but there are plenty who would say they didn't suffer," he says. And the film's major focus on the town as an Aboriginal mission "is a distortion, because it was always much more than that".

"It would distress some of our Aborigines, and would certainly give us adverse publicity which is not what New Norcia needs. And it would be bad for the cause of reconciliation." Former residents with good memories of the place were not consulted, "and we think [Rijavec] is dividing Aborigine against Aborigine".

Spearritt and Power told the film-makers, "Thank you, but no." Without their cooperation, they assumed the project was dead. But in August, Rijavec rang the monastery to tell them he was arranging a visit by Aboriginal ex-inmates to New Norcia. He asked for permission to access orphanage dormitories and chapel areas that were not open to the public. Spearritt declined.

Several weeks later, Rijavec's contingent arrived with a video camera to film their recollections. Like the tourists, they were on private property but assumed they were free to wander around public areas and – as the tour guide invited – to "take pictures anywhere you like, except [flash photos] in the museum".

After wandering around the outside of buildings, a relative of Harry Taylor's showed the group some paintings she and Taylor's aunt (an employee at New Norcia) were preparing in the kitchen of the former boys' orphanage, now the Education Centre. The group filmed inside some adjoining rooms, until Dom Power arrived and politely asked them to leave. The abbot

to buy print copies of nearly 100 images to put in the film. But the library informed him it couldn't issue copies without the monks' permission; the answer was no.

Rijavec was furious, and lodged a Freedom of Information request to find out the precise reasons for the refusal. He was also puzzled; other individuals – and agencies like the WA Museum – had often obtained copies from Battye library staff without referral to the monastery. And a 1986 library document, signed by New Norcia's own resident librarian, allowed that photographs "may be copied for members of the public and subsequently published without further reference to me and at the discretion of the [Battye] librarian".

Rijavec and Musca felt that at the heart of the matter was the appearance of censorship by a public institution whose mandate is "equitable access to information resources".

"We consider the library's role in blocking use of the photographs to be an extremely serious breach of [its] principles and ethics," they wrote in a letter to Mike Board, the state minister responsible for the library. "[It] should not be acting as gatekeepers to information which for one reason or another is disapproved of by an interest group."

The controversy has forced an admission by State Librarian Lynn Allen that it is "not a situation we are happy with at all". The New Norcia collection was lodged in the Battye library without any formal preconditions, "a historical error coming back to haunt us", she told *The Australian Magazine*.

The Benedictine Order insisted the 1986 agreement was invalid; Allen says repeated attempts to negotiate the archive's status ended inconclusively in 1997. That archival copies had been periodically issued in the interim, without reference to the monastery, was "a mistake", she says; until ownership or access can be renegotiated, the monks can indeed control their property inside a public institution.

Curiously, the dispute between the monks and the film-makers has triggered a new round of negotiations.

we encourage them and give them access to records." But not if they adopt a dissenting view of history? "Wouldn't any family refuse to give a photograph of a wedding to somebody who they thought was going to tear it up?" he responds.

RIJAVEC'S FILM, *THE HABITS OF NEW NORCIA*, WILL BE shown this weekend. It has become the story of New Norcia as told by its former Aboriginal inmates, and the monks' voices are not heard. Spearritt, who has not seen the film, fears it will be "wholly negative and untruthful – I don't think they're looking at all the stories". He is angry about the film but, when he rises to defend his religious colleagues, oddly echoes some of its sentiments.

"It's very difficult to imagine in the year 2000 what it was like trying to run a children's institution of any kind in the 1950s, without any training in childcare, with people who didn't have their own children, who had been separated from their own parents at age 14. That was the culture from which the Spanish monks and nuns particularly – and some Australian ones – came.

"They were being asked to do a very difficult job, and had no resources to do it. The government gave us one shilling and sixpence a day – what could you feed them on that money?"

Meanwhile, Spearritt says, the spirit of reconciliation exists in the new Education Centre, where visiting schoolchildren can collect bush tucker, paint faces and learn Nyoongar words. "For God's sake!" says Drayton in disgust; in the same place, he observes, he was deprived of culture, language and family.

For now, two versions of New Norcia remain. The white tourists arrive – and probably leave – with little insight into the Aboriginal "orphan" experience, and the Aboriginal ex-inmates wince as they peruse the monks' tourist brochure. Come and stay in New Norcia, it says – "ideal for family gatherings". ☉

The Habits of New Norcia screens on SBS, June 3, at 7:30pm.