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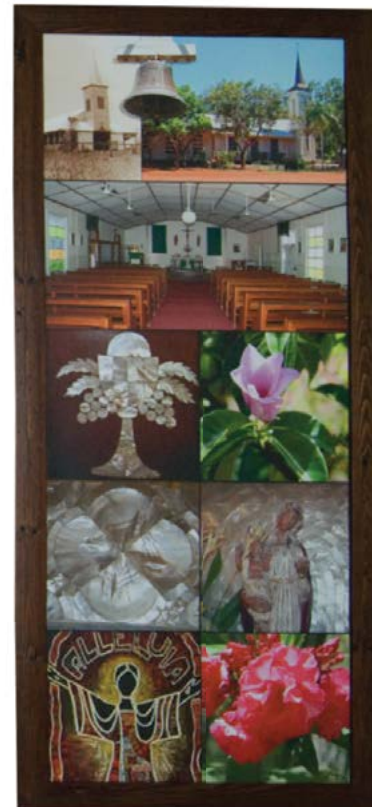


Sisters of St John of God in the Kimberley: A Journey Near Completion and A Story Still to be Told

Paul Lane

Nulungu
Publication
Series

Nulungu
Insights No. 2



WARNING: This document may contain images and names of people who have sadly passed away.

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Cover Photo

Natural Cathedral of Beauty by Yaja Hadrys (photographic art on canvas 1009x408, 1009x810, 1009x408). Courtesy of SSJG Heritage Centre Broome.

Cover Artwork

Seeing Country by Nyapuru Laurel.
Nyapuru Laurel was a Walmajarri artist and educator from the Kadjina Community (part of Millijidee Station) in the Kimberley region of Western Australia on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. Along with her sisters, brothers and mothers, Nyapuru advocated to set up the remote Wulungarra Community School and, through her work, contributed to the passing on of knowledge of the land, law and culture to future generations. She passed away in August 2015. Extracts from *Seeing Country* are located throughout this publication.



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Thank you to Helen Martin of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome for her review and helpful commentary on a version of the near final manuscript.

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Acronyms

SSJG: Sisters of St John of God
WA: Western Australia



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INTRODUCTION

The Sisters of St John of God (SSJG) arrived in the Kimberley in 1907 and through the following 110 years played a critical role in the story of the region: when it comes to health, education, and social development in the Kimberley over the past century the SSJG are central characters. As with many other institutions, the SSJG have reached a time in their journey where they are seeking to transition their values and experiences into some lasting benefit for the Kimberley and its people. It may be that the Sisters will no longer have a physical presence in this part of Australia but they are determined that their story will, in whatever way possible, provide some understanding to future generations of a part of the country whose colonial history bears so little resemblance to that of any other part of Australia.

The SSJG Story

It can be considered a dangerous thing for an institution to attempt to tell its own story, especially if it is through the eyes and perceptions of those people whose lives have been so dramatically affected by their engagement with that particular institution. Most modern institutions spend a proportion of their energy and resources in ensuring that “their story” and their public persona are presented in line with the image that the institution wants to project. Further, this is often done in order to seek a validation of their achievements and contributions to the society of

which they have been a part; however, this has not been the way of the SSJG.

The 122 years since the SSJG arrived in Western Australia (WA), and 110 years since the first of them arrived specifically in the Kimberley, parallel the planning for and the creation of the State of WA, from The Swan Colony to a State of the Commonwealth of Australia. Established with Federation in 1901, the subsequent policies and related administrative actions of the WA State Government, particularly in relation to the treatment of Aboriginal people, would have a huge impact on the lives of the people in the Kimberley and the Sisters who had come to work with those same people.

In 1907 when the SSJG arrived in the Kimberley they were one of only three major institutions that have subsequently remained and are still working in the region for what is almost the entire history of WA (the other two being the State Government itself and the Roman Catholic Church). This is a very rare claim that the Sisters make, and their contribution to the Kimberley community can, in many respects, be judged as equally critical to the development of the region as either of the other two institutions.

The SSJG established and operated our first schools, our first kindergartens, our first training institutions for young women, and our first nursing centres (Figures 1–5). The Sisters staffed the Government



Figure 1 The Sisters of St John of God in Broome in 1916 (photo courtesy of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome Item SSJG-0040300).

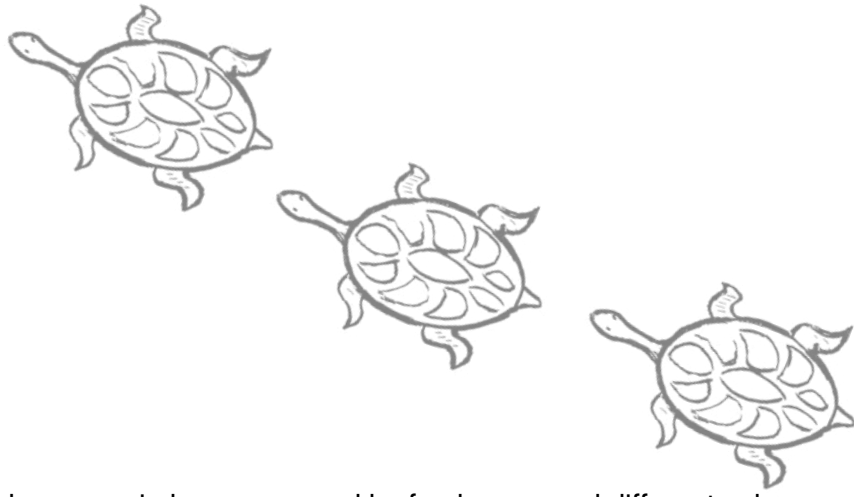


“Remember, the natives did not ask us to come. We are here of our own choice and can only remain by their goodwill and the grace of God.”

Mother Antonio O’Brien, Beagle Bay Mission, June 1907, as cited in Durack (1969:203)



Figure 2 Derby Native Hospital (photo courtesy of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome Item SSJG-0002534).



Leprosarium at Bungarun and many regional hospitals and clinics. The first remote mobile community nurses employed by the State—those whose task it was to travel to remote stations and communities and provide health services in the 1970s—were from the ranks of the SSJG. One of these women, Sister Damian Branigan, was tragically killed in a vehicle rollover on the Great Northern Highway in 1973 during her work.

As with every story there will be judgments that each of us might make as to the achievements—beneficial or otherwise—of an institution and its members. This inevitably will be the case in the historical assessment of the role of the SSJG in the Kimberley over the past century. Indeed, these same achievements will

again be reassessed by fresh eyes and different value sets by future generations in the way of all historical assessment.

Sharing their Journey

With the *Stories and Paintings* Exhibition that was launched at the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome on 15 June 2017, the Sisters themselves have taken a very different approach to putting forward their story for scrutiny and assessment. The Sisters have sought to describe their Kimberley journey in the context of their relationships with those who have shared aspects of that journey, including those who have seen and understood the “shared journey” from a very



Figure 3 St Mary's School Broome ca 1967 (photo courtesy of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome Item SSJG-000027).



different—and not necessarily happy—perspective. Not every Kimberley Aboriginal person sees their engagement with the institutions of colonisation in the same light. Perhaps not every experience and engagement with the SSJG was as productive or rewarding for some people as others, yet the Sisters have not sought to avoid, to silence, or to ignore these aspects of their shared history.

There is one thing that differentiates the SSJG from many other institutions that have played a role in the Kimberley story: the Sisters have



Figure 4 Analysing skin smears for leprosy bacilli, Bungarun, Derby Leprosarium 1950s (photo courtesy of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome Item SSJG-0042119).



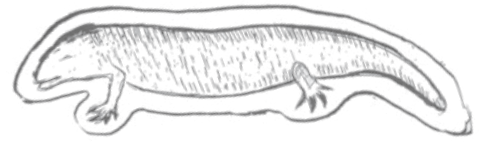
Figure 5 Dispensing medication at Bungarun, Derby Leprosarium, ca 1967 (photo courtesy of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome Item SSJG-0076206).

been prepared to not only consider internally their performance and contribution in the Kimberley, but they have also been prepared to open up their own assessment of the achievements to the scrutiny and assessment of those whose lives were impacted by their engagement with the Sisters. In particular, the Sisters have been prepared to explicitly assess their participation in the enactment of the policies of governments, in the knowledge that many of those policies and administrative actions have been condemned in multiple Royal Commissions and Inquiries over the past century. This process of internal assessment has not been without the risk of pain and stress that such open analysis can, and indeed did, cause within the community of Sisters. To confront these historical outcomes has required a courage that many other institutional participants in the enactment of policies of dispossession and assimilation have generally found themselves incapable of confronting with truth and honesty.

If any of us are in doubt as to the pain such endeavours can cause, a knowledge of the process that the Sisters imposed on themselves in preparing a united submission to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families 1996 (Wilkie 1997), assists us to understand the courage that they demonstrated at that time. The Sisters dealt with the matter in the spirit of community, and the courage displayed in that process was justly rewarded when the Sisters, as one, delivered their submission to the Commissioners at the hearings here in Broome, with hundreds of the members of the Kimberley Stolen Generations sitting alongside the Sisters in solidarity and support.

...we take pride in the achievements of the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley and are committed to the recognition and progression of those achievements.

From *Bringing Them Home* (Wilkie 1997)



The Future for the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome

The unique aspect of telling the shared Kimberley history that is manifested in the work and displays undertaken through *Stories and Paintings* and, even more so, the permanent *Relationships Exhibition* at the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome, is that we are all invited to participate in, learn from, and contribute to the telling of the story. In that learning, telling, and contributing we are given the opportunity to place our particular perspective to the story and so to understand and to know the perspectives of others.

As Governments and other institutions that were

created of and for a particular time and purpose, the SSJG have come to a moment in their journey where they have recognised, that with limited members (albeit of sprightly good health), that it is time to engage with their friends and partners to plan for the future and a time when there are no longer any SSJG in the Kimberley. There is now a need to explore how, in what manner, and by whom the important work and values that have been the foundations of the SSJG work might be sustained into the future.

The Sisters have recently decided to initiate a process of transition and renewal for the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome and the Bungarun Archive Project (Figures 6 and 7), and planning steps are



Figure 6 The Bungarun Archive Project: the capture of images and social history data from patient records compiled by the Sisters, as government employees, over the 50 years (1936–1986) of the operation of the Bungarun Leprosarium (photo courtesy of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome Item SSJG-0080256).

now being taken to ensure that the shared history of the Kimberley SSJG and their community partners remains a shared journey.

The SSJG have determined that this task of “Transition and Renewal” will be underpinned by some very basic principles, albeit with some very complex challenges:

- **Honesty:** The SSJG and their team have sensitively and accurately developed a Centre where a critical part of the Kimberley story can be put before us in all its complexity without relying on simplistic story telling or historical gloss to sensitise the issues;
- **Historical Value:** A recognition that the SSJG in

the Kimberley have devoted themselves for over a century in working with and for the people in the region and that their story is a key chapter in the post-settlement period in this part of Australia;

- **Knowledge:** To create a resource for Western Australians that allows us to effectively understand our contemporary society through the lens of a complex and challenging historical framework; and,
- **Cultural Integrity:** That the values and cultural integrity of the Kimberley people can, in coming years be promoted and enhanced by the work undertaken by the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome in whatever institutional form that might be established for the future guidance and governance of the Project.

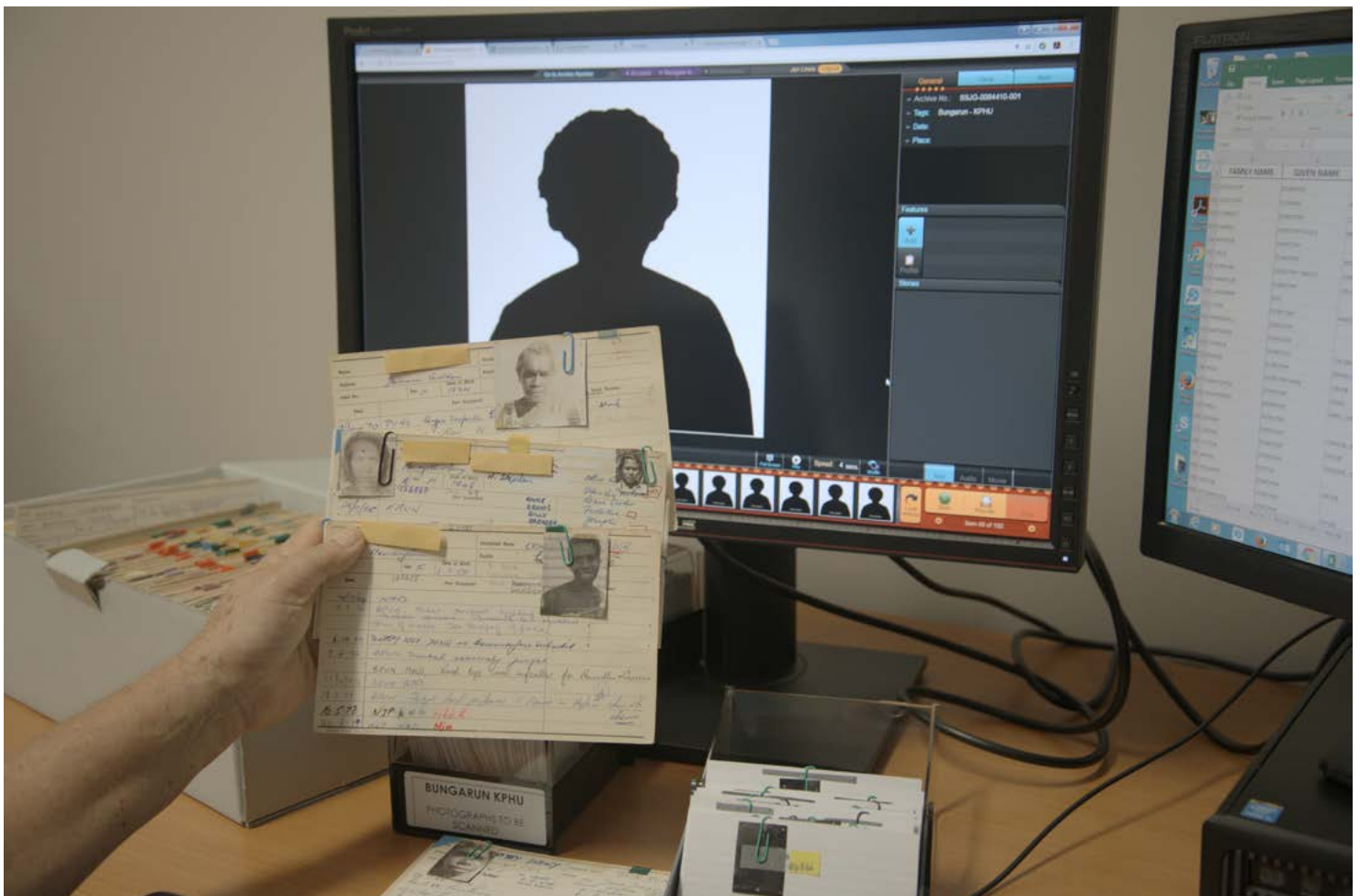


Figure 7 The Bungarun Archive Project: preparation of the archive for digital access to families (photo courtesy of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome Item SSJG-0086532).



Details of the process being undertaken by the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome and their partners were shared with the Kimberley community in mid-2017. We have all been encouraged to consider how we might assist in the process of transition and renewal so that as many voices as possible might be heard and their views incorporated into the planning for the future role of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome. This will be a whole of community process: it is not simply about an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal set of values or experiences. Reflecting the concept of the pomegranate with its multiple seeds, which has underpinned the work of the SSJG here in the Kimberley for over a century, there will be a place at the table for all who come with open hearts and a vision of a shared future for those who call the Kimberley home.

In closing, I draw your particular attention to one of the artworks in the *Stories and Paintings*

Exhibition entitled *The Natural Cathedral of Beauty*, a set of three panels shown on the front cover of this publication and herein as Figure 8. While it is artistically very beautiful, for me it tells a more complex and a very unique aspect of the story that I have tried to convey to you, albeit briefly, in this paper. The usual symbols that often aspire to tell the stories of grand institutions, in these three panels are absent: there are no depictions of great monuments or historic architecture; there are no grand schools or convents or Centre's of Medical Excellence. Rather, the three panels in their simplicity reflect that which has underpinned the history of the Kimberley SSJG and those values that they best represent:

- Engagement with the people and families with whom they served and shared their lives;
- A love and respect for the beauty of the often harsh environment in which they worked; and,
- A steadfast unlimited commitment to their faith and vocation through their fellowship as Sisters.

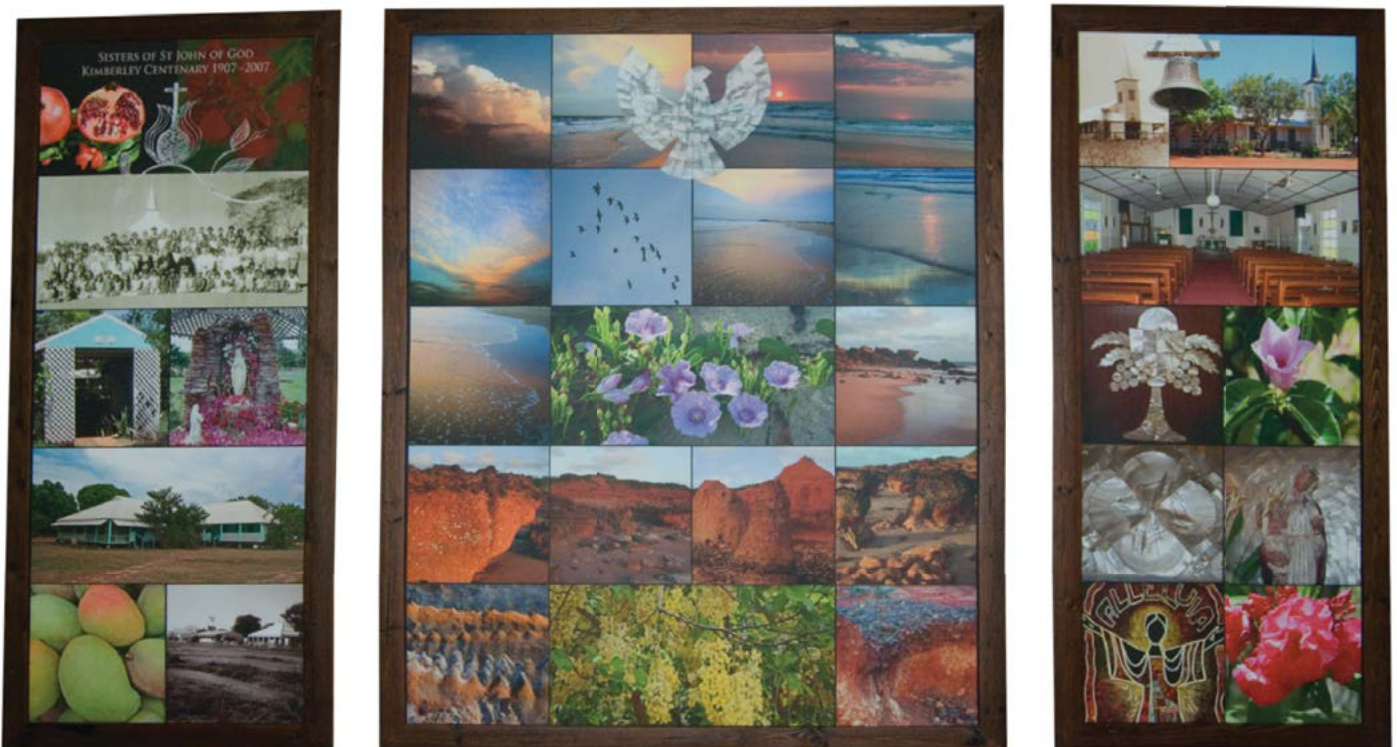


Figure 8 Natural Cathedral of Beauty by Yaka Hadrys, part of the Gifts for Sisters Collection (photo courtesy of the SSJG Heritage Centre Broome).



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Author Biography

Paul Lane is the Executive Director of the Lingiari Foundation, a human rights social development organisation based in the Kimberley. He is also a Director of the Kimberley Institute, which is a policy research organisation focusing on governance and sustainability issues.

Paul has a long career in Indigenous human rights and social development issues, including having worked on and been involved in some of Australia's most significant legal and political events impacting on Indigenous people in the past 45 years, such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

In recent years Paul's focus has been in working with Aboriginal groups across northern Australia on the securing of Native Title outcomes for their traditional lands and waters. This work has involved

partnerships with the Northern Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance, Eco Trust Australia, and numerous Land Councils on matters of sustainability, and land and sea management. A great deal of this work has focused on Indigenous economic and social participation strategies, and the development of structures to enable long term participation in future carbon economies, and land and resource management for Indigenous people.

Paul has an ongoing role in refugee advocacy and protection through the Edmund Rice Centre for Social Justice. In that role he has visited Afghanistan on several occasions, monitoring outcomes for asylum seekers who have been returned from Australia to their country of origin. Paul is also a member of the Romero Network for Human Rights and Solidarity which has a Latin American and Caribbean focus on human rights and enhancing the economic empowerment of rural poor in that part of the world.

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