

Mary MacKillop's Story

Throughout her life Mary MacKillop had to struggle against poverty, prejudice, and the hostility of powerful and petty people. She was truly an Aussie Battler.

Her parents were Scottish immigrants who settled in Melbourne where Mary was born on 15 January, 1842. Money worries were never absent from Mary's life. The boom and bust gold days saw the MacKillops suffer continual financial instability and consequent strains on family life.

From her teens to mid-twenties Mary supported the family, working in a stationery business and then as a school teacher and governess. When she was twenty-four she took the first of what were to be many courageous steps in her life.

At the time she was working as a governess in Penola, South Australia. She wanted to serve the poor, particularly by educating the "bush children". With the encouragement and help of Father Julian Tenison Woods, the Parish Priest of Penola, she opened a school in a stable on 19 March, 1866. She wore a simple black dress as a sign of a radical life-style change. The Bishop, priests and people called her 'Sister Mary'. The title became official in 1867 when she took her vows as a Sister of St Joseph.



The first school set the pattern of the many to come. It was for the children of the working class. The education it provided was basic and thorough, aiming to make the children independent, employable and well-grounded in their religion.

Soon, other young women joined with Mary MacKillop and as well as schools, they established places of refuge and rehabilitation. With Father Julian Tenison Woods' assistance, Mary developed a Rule for the Sisters of St Joseph who were dedicated to helping to meet the material and spiritual needs of struggling peoples. They served in the country and in the bush, very often in isolated communities of two or three Sisters. They taught the children, visited homes, hospitals and prisons, and often provided leadership in the local Church where there was no priest.

A stylized signature of Mary MacKillop in grey ink, written in a cursive script.

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Unfortunately, it was not long before the freshness and vitality of this initiative faced opposition in the Church. Mary had a radical vision of the way she wanted her Order of Sisters to be structured. She wanted them to be free to be sent anywhere in Australia. Shanty towns for miners and tents along new railway tracks saw the Sisters coming and going according to the needs of the people. So that this could happen she opted for a unified order with central control within the Order and not subject to direction by the Bishops of particular dioceses. Mary also refused to model her new Order on European lines. There were to be no "Lay Sisters" to do the menial chores. Every Sister was to help with the work regardless of background or credentials. The Constitution or Rule which Mary developed for the Sisters enshrined therefore both equality and central control. This brought Mary into direct conflict with the Bishop of Adelaide. Mary calmly withstood all opposition to these basic principles of her approach.

As a result her stand gained for her the sentence of excommunication, hastily thrust on her on 22 September 1871 by the ill and badly informed Bishop of Adelaide. The excommunication ban was removed by the Bishop on 23 February 1872 but the conflict on principle continued. Mary did not capitulate. She decided to take her cause to the highest authority in the Catholic Church – the Pope in Rome.

On 28 March 1873, only 31 years of age and a professed Sister of St Joseph, Mary MacKillop went to Rome alone, dressed as a widow. She managed to gain an audience with Pope Pius IX on 1 June and a hearing from the Vatican authorities. Within a year she secured approval of the Rule. Arriving back in Australia with the future of the Order apparently secure, Mary encountered new conflict and disappointment. Unhappily, Father Woods who had done so much to help her to found the Order and to write the Rule was sorely disappointed that Mary had agreed to the changes on poverty. He felt betrayed by Mary.



The rift with Father Woods deepened. Despite his scientific genius and great personal goodness his poor judgement of character made his guidance of the Sisters disastrous. He misinterpreted the decidedly odd behaviour of a few Sisters in Adelaide as evidence of "holiness" and he put them in positions of authority. Mary was in

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Queensland establishing schools and communities. Her perceptive letters of the time illustrate her vision, courage and leadership as the enormity of the situation began to dawn on her.

She and the Sisters were subjected to a Commission of Inquiry which was conducted in a disgraceful and inept manner and was later declared illegal. Even towards the final stages of her life she experienced opposition. She was deposed as Superior General on technical grounds in 1885 but was later reelected overwhelmingly by the Sisters.

Her personal life and character were also subjected to innuendo and rumour. Plagued with chronic headaches she was prescribed brandy. Some accused her of being an alcoholic even though the dose was administered by a nurse. These insinuations about her character were anonymous and cruel, causing much mischief.

Mary MacKillop's attitude to those who wronged her was one of forgiveness and respect. She never tried to score cheap points or to hang onto old hurts. Her many existing letters are evidence of her amazing capacity to forgive and excuse, again and again. She simply refused to criticise, let alone whinge or whine.

After suffering a stroke Mary lived at North Sydney, her health deteriorating but her keen mind alert to the end. She died peacefully on 8 August 1909. Despite all the hardships which dogged her life, Mary's work continued to experience phenomenal growth. Schools and other institutions multiplied over Australia and New Zealand as the number of Sisters increased.



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