The Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, founded at Penola in South Australia in 1866, is one of the largest congregations of women religious in Australia. The institute was founded by Mary MacKillop and Father Julian Tenison Woods to provide an elementary education for the children of poor Catholics in rural areas. Its original Rule, written by Woods in 1867, included the twin principles of absolute poverty and central government. The institute was not to own property (though this requirement was later modified) and was to be governed by a Sister Guardian (later, Superior General), whereas other congregations of women lived in convents and were subject to their local bishop. Mary MacKillop insisted that central government was essential for Australian conditions, both to maintain the unity and spirit of the institute and its method of education and to support sisters who lived in isolated communities.\(^1\)

The principle of central government, resisted by bishops who wanted to control the work of religious orders within their dioceses, led to the early fracturing of the institute into two streams. In Bathurst, Bishop Matthew Quinn insisted that the Josephites form a diocesan congregation with the bishop as its ecclesiastical superior; this separation occurred in 1876. Julian Tenison Woods rewrote the original Rule to fit the requirements of a diocesan institute. The Bathurst Congregation later made foundations in other Australian dioceses (Maitland, Goulburn, Hobart and elsewhere), which later formed independent religious congregations, and in New Zealand where they became the Sisters of St Joseph of Nazareth.

In 1888 Rome approved the Institute of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart as a centrally governed congregation with its mother house in Sydney. Its members wore brown habits and were therefore known as Brown Josephites, whereas members of the various diocesan institutes wore black habits and were known as Black Josephites. The former (later called the Central Josephites) looked to Mary MacKillop as their founder while the Diocesan Sisters revered Woods as their ‘Father Founder’, though they knew very little about him. The various Josephite congregations, working in separate dioceses and each of them over time developing a distinct ethos, had

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very little contact with each other. Between the Central and the Diocesan Josephites there was a good deal of mutual suspicion as each branch saw itself alone as faithful to the original Rule.

This estrangement began to dissolve in the 1960s. In 1967 the Diocesan Josephites in Australia and New Zealand formed a federation and during the 1970s the Central and Federation Sisters began to collaborate in joint ventures. An historians’ group, which eventually embraced historians from all branches, was initiated in 1995. Following the beatification of Mary MacKillop in 1995 the moves for unification speeded up. In 2008 the Conference of Josephite Leaders was formed, bringing together leaders from both Central and Federation congregations. From 2012 all but one of the diocesan congregations merged with the Central Josephites. In 2017 there are two groups under the Combined Josephite Leadership: the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, with its congregational administration in North Sydney, and the Sisters of St Joseph Lochinvar, based in the Hunter Valley.

The co-founder of the institute, Mother Mary MacKillop, was beatified by the Pope in Sydney in 1995 and canonised in Rome in 2010 as St Mary of the Cross MacKillop. These events stimulated an extensive literature on Mary MacKillop and her family and an edition of some of her letters. At the same time, the Josephites began to encourage research on their history. This reflected the growing interest among historians in the history of Catholic religious sisters, the example of other women’s congregations in Australia which since the early 1980s had published numerous books on their history, and a realisation that, with declining numbers, it was important to record the contribution of the institute both to the Catholic Church and to the wider Australian society. Initially this research was undertaken by Josephites with university degrees in history; several important studies were undertaken as doctoral theses. More recent works have been written by lay Catholics and by others who have no particular religious belief. Between 1989 and the present over forty books have been published on Mary MacKillop and the history of the Josephites in Australia, in addition to scholarly articles and booklets and pamphlets for popular readership.

The first biographies of Mary MacKillop were by an anonymous Sister of St Joseph (1916) and by a Jesuit priest George O’Neill (1931). The first modern accounts of the life of Mary MacKillop and the beginnings of the Sisters of St Joseph were by Osmund Thorpe and William Modystack. Thorpe was a priest of the Passionist order while Modystack was a parish priest in Adelaide. Thorpe’s biography, first published in 1957, was the
more scholarly work. Both books provided reliable accounts of Mary’s life for ordinary readers, based upon some archival material but without much social or religious context. They went through several editions and introduced many people to the life of the co-founder of the Sisters of St Joseph, providing the background to the cause for her canonisation.

Alongside these was a pioneering study of Father Julian Tenison Woods by Sister Margaret Press of the Perthville (Bathurst) Congregation of Josephites. This project arose out of the call of the Second Vatican Council for religious orders to renew their life by recovering the particular vision (‘charism’) of their founders and adapting it to the modern world. Woods was a gifted but controversial figure who evoked intense devotion from some and hostility from others wherever he went. During his life he was instrumental in founding three religious congregations: two branches of Josephites and the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Press’s biography, first published in 1979 and reissued in 1994, provides a nuanced portrait of this complex man. She also edited Mary MacKillop’s biography of Julian Tenison Woods; in 1903 Cardinal Moran had refused to allow its publication. In 1989 the *Australasian Catholic Record* devoted a special issue to Julian Tenison Woods to mark the centenary of his death.

As an academic study, Sister Marie Foale’s *The Josephite Story*, dealing with the founding and early years of the institute, was an important contribution to the literature. Foale’s book, drawn from her University of Adelaide doctoral thesis, was based on a very large body of archival material. It was notable as the first work to place the emergence of the institute within its South Australian context and to explore in a balanced way the reasons for the problems and tensions within the infant community and its conflicts with bishops and clergy.

The first ‘authorised’ biography of Mary MacKillop was written by Father Paul Gardiner SJ, *Mary MacKillop: An Extraordinary Australian*. From 1984 Gardiner was Postulator of the Cause for her canonisation, a post which involved extensive research in Rome and around Australia and New Zealand. From this material he prepared the Positio Super Virtutibus that was presented to the panel in Rome which approved Mary MacKillop being declared ‘Venerable’ in 1992. The unabridged text of the Positio, with additional material, was published in two volumes in 2015. Gardiner’s work was enormously important but by its nature it was not a critical biography. More accessible for many readers is Lesley O’Brien, *Mary MacKillop Unveiled*, a concise biography of Mary MacKillop with fresh insights. Gardiner (who died in 2017) is himself the subject of a biography by Margaret
Muller.9 In addition, several works have been written on members of Mary MacKillop’s family: Sister Bernadette O’Sullivan on Mary’s mother Flora MacKillop, and Sister Judith Geddes on Mary’s sisters and brothers.10 Sister Margaret Paton and Sister Pauline Wicks have both written books exploring the spirituality of Mary MacKillop.11 Teresa McDonald, who in 1872 led the first Josephite foundation in New South Wales, at Bathurst, is the subject of a sensitive biography by Marie Crowley.12

Complementing these biographies is a collection of a thousand letters from and to Mary MacKillop, selected from a much larger body of letters held in the Josephite Archives in North Sydney and edited by Sister Sheila McCreanor. Between 2004 and 2016 she has published six books of letters, with extracts from some other primary documents, on subjects and periods in Mary MacKillop’s life that are of special interest to present-day Josephites. In these letters we hear the voice of Mary MacKillop in various situations and moods: affectionate letters to her mother, encouragement, advice and admonitions to the sisters, negotiations with priests and bishops, and accounts of her visit to Rome in 1873 and her travels around the Australian and New Zealand colonies.13

There are now substantial histories of the Sisters of St Joseph in every state. The first of these regional studies was by Sister Kathleen Burford, Unfurrowed Fields on the Central Josephites in New South Wales, Sister Joan Ryan, A Seed is Sown on their early decades in Victoria, Sister Marie Foale, The Josephites Go West on Western Australia up to 1920, and Marie Crowley, Women of the Vale on the Perthville Congregation.14 These were followed by Jill Barnard, From Humble Beginnings on Victoria, Sister Margaret McKenna, With Grateful Hearts! on Queensland, Sister Josephine Brady, St Joseph’s Island on the Diocesan Sisters of St Joseph in Tasmania, Sister Mary Cresp, In Her Footsteps on Western Australia from 1920 to 1989, Marie Crowley, Except in Obedience on the Diocesan Sisters of St Joseph in Victoria (Ballarat diocese), Sister Marie Foale, Never See a Need on South Australia, and Robyn Dunlop, Planted in Congenial Soil on the Lochinvar Congregation from 1883 to 1917.15 A second volume is in preparation. Sadly, Sister Anne Player died before her work on the history of the Goulburn Congregation was completed. Her work is being continued by Sister Laraine Crowe and a book will be published. Sister Bernadette O’Sullivan’s account of Mary MacKillop in New South Wales from 1880 to 1909 will appear in 2018. Research is also being carried out on the members of a small congregation of Josephites in the Western Australian Goldfields and on new ministries undertaken by the Josephites since the 1960s in New
Guinea, Peru and among the Aboriginal people in North-West Australia. Other projects are being planned, including a history of the motor missions which provided religious instruction for children in rural areas where there were no Catholic schools.

From these books a number of common themes emerge. One is the geographical dispersion of the various branches of the Josephites. In the mid-twentieth century when their total number peaked at around three thousand, they worked in all but three of Australia’s twenty-seven dioceses and ran parish schools in hundreds of communities around Australia, mostly in working-class suburbs and country towns. In rural areas, where the sisters usually lived in modest houses, they became closely associated with the communities they served. They were the friendly face of the Catholic Church. Secondly, although the Josephites were an indigenous foundation, almost every Josephite congregation drew a substantial number of recruits from Ireland. From 1927 to 1974 the Central Josephites operated a juniorate at Newmarket in County Cork from where over three hundred young women joined the institute. Thirdly, there was the social composition of the Josephites. Because they required no dowry the majority of sisters came from working-class or lower-middle-class families. They related well to ordinary Catholics. Fourthly, their piety, like that of working-class Catholics, was not based upon liturgical observances but on the repetition of simple prayers and the recitation of the rosary. This did not start to change until the late 1950s. Fifthly, until the 1960s when state aid to non-government schools began to transform their lives, they were poor. Poverty was a daily reality and their communal life was austere. Sixthly, there was the wide range of their work. Although founded to teach in schools, the Central Josephites, in responding to needy people around them, almost immediately became involved in social welfare: care of women prisoners, the aged poor, unmarried mothers, orphans and other ministries. The Diocesan Josephites, by contrast, were teachers and only conducted schools, both primary and secondary. Finally, there were tensions with bishops. This was not uncommon in women’s congregations but it was a particular issue for the Diocesan Josephites. In each of these congregations, some bishops were benevolent and were remembered with affection but others were oppressive and intervened with a heavy hand in internal matters.

The history of the charitable institutions and social welfare work of the Josephites was pioneered by Marie Foale in two works on South Australia: Providence and Think of the Ravens. Kathleen Burford’s Unfurrowed Fields includes a survey of the Josephites’ extensive ‘Social Apostolate’
in New South Wales, and Margaret Press wrote a history of St Margaret’s
Hospital in Sydney.19 Jill Barnard and Karen Twigg, *Holding on to Hope*
is a history of the various child, youth and family agencies founded and
operated by the Josephites in Victoria. These merged in 1997 with other
agencies to become MacKillop Family Services, operating in three states.20
Barnard’s *From Humble Beginnings* surveys the welfare works of the
Victorian Josephites alongside their work in education.

The beatification and canonisation of Mary MacKillop led to several
works that explored the wider significance of these events. These include
Sheila McCreanor, *Mary MacKillop and the Print Media*, which explores
the cultural representation of Mary MacKillop in newspapers and journals,
and two collections of scholarly essays edited by Alan Cadwallader and
Josephine Laffin.21

For those who wish to learn more about the life of Mary MacKillop and
the history of the Sisters of St Joseph there is a museum and bookshop at
Mary MacKillop Place, Mount Street, North Sydney. In Melbourne there
is the Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre in East Melbourne and at Penola
in South Australia there is an interpretive centre alongside the Woods–
MacKillop Schoolhouse. The Mary MacKillop Museum in Adelaide is
being redeveloped.

These books on the history of the Sisters of St Joseph shed light on
substantial slices of the history of the Catholic Church in Australia, especially
on the roles of women, Catholic schooling and charitable institutions, and
the life and work of the church in local communities. They deserve to be
more widely known.

**Endnotes**

1 Kath Burford, ‘Mary MacKillop’s Perceptions of Central Government for the
Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart’, *Journal of the Australian Catholic

2 Osmund Thorpe, *Mary MacKillop: The Life of Mother Mary of the Cross,
Foundress of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart* (London: Burns
rev., North Sydney: St Joseph’s Generalate, 1994); William Modystack,

3 Margaret M. Press, *Julian Tenison Woods: ‘Father Founder’* (Sydney:
Catholic Theological Faculty, 1979; 2nd ed., North Blackburn, Vic.: Collins
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5 Australasian Catholic Record, vol. 66, no. 3 (July 1989). It contains the previously unpublished text of a lecture by Woods on ‘Ten Years in the Bush’, recounting his years in the South-East of South Australia, and articles by Anne Player, Thomas Boland, Margaret Press, Marie Therese Foale, Austin Stevens and Roderick O’Brien.


8 Lesley O’Brien, Mary MacKillop Unveiled (North Blackburn, Vic.: Collins Dove, 1994).

9 Margaret Muller, Father Paul Bernard Gardiner SJ: A Long Journey ‘ad maiorem dei gloriam’ (Penola, SA: Mary MacKillop Penola Centre, 2016).


13 Sheila McCreanor (ed.): Mary & Flora: Correspondence between Mary MacKillop and her Mother, Flora McDonald MacKillop (North Sydney: Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, 2004); Mary MacKillop in Challenging Times, 1883–1899: A Collection of Letters (North Sydney: Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, 2006); Mary MacKillop on Mission to her Last Breath: Correspondence about the Foundations of the Sisters of St Joseph in Aotearoa New Zealand and Mary’s Final Years, 1881–1909 (North Sydney: Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, 2009); Mary MacKillop and a Nest of Crosses: Correspondence with Fr Julian Tenison Woods, 1869–1872 (North Sydney: Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, 2011);


16 Mary Cresp, God’s ‘Good Time’: The Journey of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in Ministry with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2013).

17 Clare Aherne, The Letter under the Pillow: 150 Years, 2 Continents and 840 Heroic Irish Women (Dublin: Carrowmore, 2016), tells the story of the Irish-born Josephites in the form of (imaginary) first-hand accounts based upon archival sources.

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19 Margaret M. Press, *Sunrise to Sunrise: The History of St Margaret’s Hospital, Darlinghurst, 1894–1994* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1994).
