

Saddle for a Pillow

Father Julian Tenison Woods made an outstanding contribution to 19th century Australian life through his pioneering work as an inspirational missionary priest and brilliant natural scientist. His legacy lives on at Penola in south-east South Australia where he spent 10 happy years in the bush.

Story and photos MARGARET MULLER

It is a long way from St George's Cathedral at Southwark in South London, where Julian Tenison Woods grew up, to the small wooden building at Penola that served as both church and residence for the newly-ordained missionary priest when he arrived in 1857. The South-East was also far removed from the natural history collections in the British Museum that had intrigued him as a boy, and from the Royal Academy where he had learnt to draw them. However, it provided something even more stimulating – endless scope for pioneering scientific work, particularly in the field of geology. Or, as he put it, “When out in the far bush, in the prosecution of my duties, it has been a most delightful employment ... to study the great unpublished works of Nature.”

When the 25 year-old Woods set off into the unknown for Penola, which might have been on the moon for all anyone could tell him about it, he was a self-described “new chum, able to ride a horse pretty well and that was all”. After a rough voyage from Port Adelaide to Robe, during which he shared the hold with fellow passengers, flour bags, packages and rats, it took him two days to ride the 73 miles inland to Penola along a bush track strewn with the discarded possessions of Chinese immigrants on their way to the Victorian goldfields.

The new chum was immediately responsible for an immense 22,000square-mile mission district that covered all of South Australia south of the River Murray. He was almost



constantly in the saddle, often using it for a pillow. Woods travelled with geological hammer and pocket lens tucked into his saddlebags alongside a Greek Testament and portable altar service, and came to know the district, its people and the exigencies of bush life intimately.

Summer brought exposure to the burning sun and the Australian mosquito that he said defied any attempt at sleep. In a letter to a Melbourne-based scientific friend he wrote, “I only came home yesterday from a tour of 18 days in killing weather, with precious little meat, and yet having to provide refreshments for the fleas of about twelve shepherds’ huts”. He also commented in relation to constraints on his time for scientific work, “If you think I have nothing else to do, I wish as a punishment that you were my horse for a month.”

In winter, he frequently rode for miles with water lapping at his saddle girths and risked drowning in swamps or flooded creeks, which was the sad fate of the Presbyterian minister. Apart from one serious accident involving a fence, ditch, frantic horse, broken saddle and flattened chalice, Woods managed to negotiate the bush and its challenges and remain relatively unscathed.

Above: Typical country around Penola, South Australia.
Right: Julian Tenison Woods, circa 1860, during his time in Penola (courtesy Mary MacKillop Penola Centre).





Above: Mary MacKillop, who co-founded the Sisters of St Joseph with Julian Tenison Woods (courtesy the Trustees of the Sisters of St Joseph). Right: The Woods-MacKillop schoolhouse, Penola 1867. Bottom Right: The Julian Tenison Woods exhibition in the Mary MacKillop Penola Centre.

◀ He navigated by compass and the stars, but once lost his way during a wild storm while travelling between the coast and Mt Gambier with his friend, horsebreaker and steeplechaser Adam Lindsay Gordon. According to Woods, they crouched under a tree waiting for the moon to rise and the literary Gordon recited long passages from various authors on the subject of storms. "We could not light a fire, and I only had to shiver while he gave me the tempest scene in *King Lear*, which he knew by heart. He was much amused when I asked him whether he would not like a nice drink of cold spring water after his exertions."

Such navigational lapses were rare, although Woods often received puzzling directions of a type still heard to this day, sometimes abetted by a mud map: "Follow this track until it disappears, then go on until you come to a swamp. Keep that to your left until you see a mob of white cattle. Leave them behind you and you will come across a road which will take you to a burnt hut which is five miles from the home station." You can't miss it.

BUSH TRACKS

During the 12 years after he left Adelaide in 1871, Woods covered vast distances as his itinerant missionary work took him from Cape York Peninsula in Queensland to Tasmania's Recherche Bay. State governments sought his scientific expertise and he drew crowds wherever he preached or lectured.

Woods travelled by horse, coach, buggy and boat in meeting his diverse commitments, and he faced many hardships. When crossing mountainous terrain during the New South Wales winter he had to contend with snow and ice, while the north Queensland wet season provided the challenge of alligators, frogs, and mosquitoes in plague proportions. Most trying and dangerous, however, was a 65-mile journey he made from Port Douglas to the Hodgkinson gold diggings on a rough track through newly-opened and partly explored country, shadowed by hostile Aborigines. On the first night, armed only with a single charge in an old double-barrelled gun, he kept watch for a frightened woman and her three children. Next morning he celebrated Mass in her hut.

In Tasmania, Woods used all his bushman's skills to give missions in similarly remote farm houses, woodcutters' cottages and fishermen's dwellings. He had worked with convicts on "this beautiful island" years earlier and observed: "In no part of the world did I ever see a greater contrast between the dispositions of men and the face of nature." By 1878, however, he was deeply concerned about its forests, stating that "The only way to prevent the wholesale destruction of timber will be by proclaiming reserves or State forests as they have done in Victoria ...

or the forests of Tasmania, peerless and priceless as they once were, will soon be things of the past."

After Woods returned to Port Darwin in 1886 from his Asian sojourn, he spent four months investigating the geology and mineralogy of the Northern Territory for the South Australian Government, and found it to be exceptionally rich in minerals. He subsequently wrote a number of memorably vivid letters to the *Sydney Morning Herald* about his explorations.

Of the Victoria River he said, "I am used to the lonely wilds of Australia and have been familiar with them for more than half my lifetime, yet this great solitude of a river strangely impressed me". During a longer journey that followed the courses of the McKinlay, Mary, Katherine and Daly Rivers, he was considerably less impressed by wild dogs: "Not the least obnoxious habit of this objectionable animal is the way he pours forth his feelings in the most melancholy howls that ever came from the throat of dog to make night hideous." And as for crocodiles:

"These shady lakes are so beautiful and attractive that, crocodiles or no, we could scarcely resist the temptation of a plunge or a swim ... They ate a bar of soap where one of the men had been washing. *Mundetur corda eorum!*" May their hearts be cleansed, indeed. For the fifty-three year-old Woods, this successful but physically demanding journey proved to be the last of many he made through the Australian outback.

AN ENQUIRING MIND

Woods's contribution to Australian geology must be ranked among his most significant accomplishments. He was a first-rate, highly productive geologist/palaeontologist during the time when the geology of Australia was being documented for the first time, and also during the time of the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. An interesting time for a Catholic priest/palaeontologist!

He published extensively between 1857-1887, often in leading international journals and commonly with quite modern titles. He published major books on Australian geology and exploration history. In 1878 alone he published 19 papers that would be accepted today as scientific papers. He contributed to the understanding of the geology, through his own observations, of South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, New Zealand, New Guinea and Malaysia at that time, including estimates of the coal reserves of Queensland, and tin resources of what is now Malaysia.

He had leading roles in many scientific societies and was honoured by them, for example as Honorary Member of the Royal Society of Tasmania from 1882. He was in regular correspondence with the leading international scientists of his day and achieved an excellent international reputation. Many species of organisms are named in his honour.

My personal association came from studying a group of microfossils from north-western Tasmania and discovering a previously-undescribed genus of foraminifera. The family to which it belonged contained many genera named after people whose name ended with 'n'. It is now formally *Tenisonina*.

— Patrick G. Quilty AM, Honorary Research Professor at the University of Tasmania's School of Earth Sciences.

On these long journeys a hungry and fatigued Woods was totally dependent on bush hospitality and he received a warm welcome from squatters and shepherds, Catholics and Protestants alike. A talented musician, he played for dances after dinner, and enjoyed singing as well as bush storytelling. He also recalled the time when every man was a kangaroo hunter, and he was not ashamed to say that he had amused himself in that way too, although he lost two of his favourite dogs to tiger snakes – one a fine kangaroo dog, the other a brave little terrier.

It was his pursuit of science, however, that gave him constant pleasure. He missed no opportunity to observe, record and collect the material for his first book, *Geological Observations in South Australia*, which was published in 1862 and is still listed as a primary source in modern scientific



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papers. With meticulous detail and great flair, he described the varied beauties and rich fossil deposits of the Naracoorte Caves, now World Heritage-listed. Having correctly deduced that the whole South-East was sub-marine in origin, he identified the Coonawarra ridge, with its renowned terra rossa soil over limestone, as one of a series of former coastlines. He brought the extinct Mt Gambier volcano and its blue crater lake to vivid life for his readers in Australia and overseas.

Woods used his considerable powers as a writer and speaker in many ways. A passionate advocate for the Aboriginal people, he helped many who were suffering the effects of European-introduced diseases and alcohol. He also spoke eloquently from his Penola pulpit about the urgent need to provide a free Catholic education, initially for the rural poor. Listening intently was a feisty young governess who rode to Mass on 'Donkey', a brute of a horse that was very fond of bolting. Her name was Mary MacKillop. To meet this need, she and Woods co-founded the uniquely Australian Sisters of St Joseph, who were to flourish under her strong leadership. The sandstone schoolhouse in Penola that Woods built for her in 1867 is visited by thousands of people each year and stands as testimony to their initiative. The pupils of the nearby Mary MacKillop Memorial School, and their compatriots throughout Australia, continue to give it spirited life.

On becoming Director-General of Catholic Education in Adelaide, Woods temporarily left the bush, and science. It was not until he subsequently assumed the more independent lifestyle of a missionary priest in Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland that his scientific output was again prolific. At this time he also founded the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Brisbane and collaborated with Bishop Quinn of Bathurst in the development of the Diocesan Sisters of St Joseph.

During an interlude in Asia, Woods exchanged a horse for an elephant when he examined the geology of the Malay Peninsula for the British Government in 1883. The Admiralty also engaged him to investigate the coal resources of the Far East during the troubled period that culminated in the Russo-Japanese war. His accurate assessments of coal supply, which were delivered with the utmost secrecy, reportedly increased the strength of the Royal Navy in that part of the world by a force equivalent to half-a-dozen good-sized frigates.

After completing a scientific study in the Northern Territory on his way home, an exhausted Woods eventually returned to Sydney. He died there in 1889 at the age of 56, having stoically endured nearly three years of slow torture from a number of diseases, including beriberi. His monument on the hillside overlooking the Pacific at Waverley Cemetery honours the exceptional contributions he made to Australia and its people as both priest and scientist.

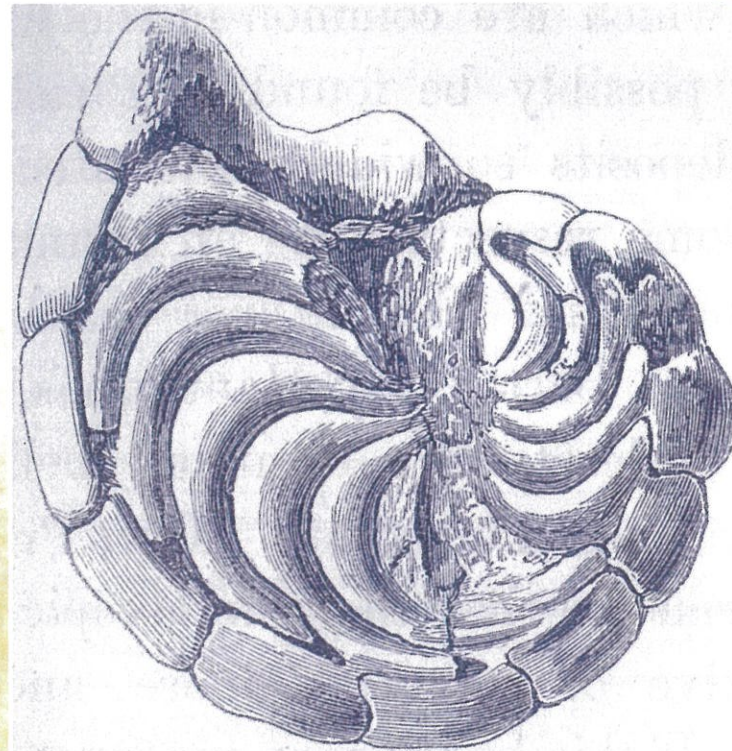
Born in London and buried in Sydney, this cultured cleric was a bushman for most of his life.

Sources: Julian Tenison Woods, *Geological Observations in South Australia*; Lecture 'Ten Years in the Bush'; Letters to William Archer; 'Personal Reminiscences of Adam Lindsay Gordon'; *Memoirs*. Mary MacKillop, *Julian Tenison Woods, A Life*.

VOLCANIC INTERESTS

While his main geological work concentrated on sedimentary rocks and their fossils, the small volcanic centres, such as the Blue Lake, Mt Gambier, and Mt Schank, SA, excited his interest and he went on to study active volcanoes in the Philippines and Japan. His description of the massive eruption of Krakatoa in 1883, the first by a geologist, attracted world-wide attention.

— Dr David Branagan has retired from the Geology Department of the University of Sydney.



Nautilus ziczac. Mount Gambier.

AN ENLIGHTENED EDUCATOR

One thing I greatly admire about Julian Tenison Woods was his willingness to 'have a go'. He believed and acted upon the supposition that it was better to make a contribution, however small, than to do nothing. Take, for example, the founding with Mary MacKillop of the Sisters of St Joseph to provide schooling for bush children. Think of the arguments against commencing such a venture in Penola in 1866. Penola was a one-horse town. Who would join the sisterhood? Given the small population and its isolation, what were the long-term prospects for a religious order? Honestly, they could be politely described as impractical dreamers or, more bluntly, as stark raving mad. Woods refused to allow lack of books or isolation from other men of science to thwart his desire to investigate the natural history of the South-East. He set up a network of contacts in Australia and even wrote to the great British geologist, Charles Lyell, for advice. Though much of his work in science has been superseded, in this field as in others he 'had a go' with the materials to hand. Others have built on his contributions.

— Dr Anne Player RSJ is a Canberra-based Sister of St Joseph.



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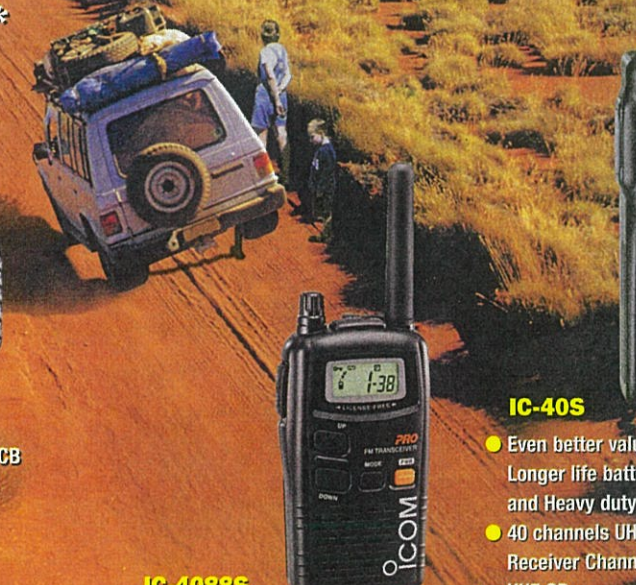
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