Book Review


In the course of the years from 1997 to 2003 spent at Tarlena, Sixteen Mile and Madang, Laurence McCane came to love the Melanesian People and appreciate the work of the Marist Brothers amongst them. A Marist Brother from Australia, McCane rejoiced in the opportunity to record the Marist Brothers’ story as a tribute to those who created it and as a means of encouraging the generation of local Brothers currently following in their footsteps.

McCane’s history of the Marist Brothers in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea covers a period from 1845–2003. In this long span of time, however, the presence of the Brothers was not continuous since, after a short-lived missionary effort from 1845 to 1852 with the Marist Fathers, the Brothers departed and did not return until 1938.

The emphasis in the book is on the Solomon Islands-Bougainville area, with twenty of the twenty-seven chapters devoted to developments in the Solomon Islands and Bougainville: eleven chapters deal with the Solomon Islands alone, seven chapters describe events in Bougainville and two chapters (chapters 12 and 27) are shared by both regions. Of the remaining seven chapters, three refer to St Xavier’s High School on Kairiru Island, one to further developments in the East Sepik Province, and one chapter each to Rabaul, Goroka-Sixteen Mile-Madang, and Enga-Western Province. The emphasis is on earlier events rather than later, on earlier ventures rather than those more recently undertaken.

The Marists are presented with great sympathy by the author as men who worked hard, usually in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, bent on improving schooling and the physical circumstances of the students. To this end, they published books, adapted curricula, built classrooms, houses, dormitories, swimming pools and dams, and established gardens, so that the reader gets the overall impression of multi-skilled schoolmen dedicated to the work of improving the lot of the people of Papua New Guinea-Solomon Islands, particularly through education. In so doing, the author reveals the hopes and disappointments, the successes and failures of the Brothers, underlining their humanity without glossing over their shortcomings.

The narrative generally follows a pattern for the more enduring ventures: an introduction referring to missionary activity prior to the coming of the Brothers, events leading up to their arrival, problems in the early days,
accomplishments and failures in the course of time, and finally, as at St Xavier’s, Kairiru, and St Joseph’s, Rigu, departure. Short-lived ventures are dealt with in brief accounts, usually of three or four pages. Such places include Par, Goroka, Tarakbits, Kiunga, Buin, Asitavi, Marai, Kungingini and Bongos. Marist communities established less than twenty years ago continue in Madang and Yangoru. Reasons are provided for the departures from many locations, e.g. World War II, the Bougainville Crisis, shortage of personnel, the decision of a parish priest and danger from raskols.

Stories embedded in the narrative feature prominently and rouse a whole gamut of emotions. From the early war years comes the sad story of three young Brothers, John, Augustine and Donatus, killed by the Japanese. A fascinating story is told of the retrieval of the bones of Japanese airmen from the wreckage of a plane. When brought back to St Joseph’s, Tenaru, suddenly and inexplicably, from the room where the bones had been laid, an intermittent knocking was audible until the visit of a Japanese Shinto priest. The humour of the incident in which Brother Chris and Sister Ingeborg beat the roadblock into liquor-free Enga is not lost upon the reader. Sister Ingeborg, unaware of bottles of liquor hidden under her passenger seat, and well concealed by her capacious skirts, indignantly denied the presence of liquor at the police roadblock while Brother Chris remained silent. Excitement and danger characterise the escape of Brother Bryan Leak from Bougainville to the Solomons during the Crisis years when he and companions were fired upon by the PNG Defence Force from a helicopter, and later almost lost their lives in a storm at sea.

McCane has chosen not to provide a wider context of missionary activity for the Brothers who occupy centre stage almost exclusively, even though vigorous missionary activity was being pursued by other Catholic Church organisations and other Christian denominations at the same time in Papua New Guinea-Solomon Islands. Glimpses of missionary activity of other groups are gained incidentally through their contact with the Brothers. No social or political context of any length is provided apart from Chapter 12, ‘From the Marching Rule to the Bougainville Crisis: Cautionary Tales of Nationalist Movements’, which contains informative social and historical material with perceptive critical comments by McCane. The chapter is especially valuable if the reader associates it with later chapters that refer to times of tension in the Solomons and the Crisis in Bougainville.

For much of the story, the author has presented the events of several schools or regions in stages, e.g. ‘Tenaru’s growing years 1948-1958’, ‘Developments in Bougainville 1949-1965’, ‘The Rabaul Story 1950-1959’. This endeavour to treat several locations during one period of time before moving on to a new time span has meant a frequent movement of the narrative from one geographical location to another, which some readers might find confusing, as they have to recall the thread of a story that may have been discontinued several chapters back. To illustrate anew: the story of Tenaru is first dealt with in chapters 6 and 8, then taken up again in chapters 17 and 27; the birth of St Joseph’s, Rigu, is found in chapter 7 and subsequent developments in chapters 11, 18 and 26. It would have simplified the story for the reader if stories of a
particular location or even region, e.g. Bougainville, had been told in their entirety without jumping back and forth from one place to another.

Photos abound, some dating back to World War II, but on the whole they are of good quality and enhance the narrative. Importantly, many chapters have maps that are clear, accurate and related to the text. Such maps have a special value for the reader who is not familiar with the region of Papua New Guinea-Solomon Islands. At the very end of the book (p.376), a map showing most of the islands of Melanesia in relation to one another, might have been better placed at the beginning of the book in order to orient the reader - even though this map is associated with the formation of the Marist Melanesian District as it came into being at the end of this history.

McCane does not use one of the recognised methods of referencing which may not please all historians, but he always identifies the narrator of a story or the source of a statement within the text. Quotations in abundance are drawn mainly from the personal recollections of many Brothers and occasionally from past students, from the Marist Monthly, school magazines, Marist house annals, the District newsletter and the Melbourne Province newsletter. The author interviewed eighty people in writing this work and obtained additional material by correspondence, an indication of his diligence and of his good fortune in having so many living witnesses to consult.

Finally, McCane has written an entertaining story that will be a goldmine for generations of Marist Brothers who will find in it material for reflection and inspiration in the years ahead. The book will also be of interest to associates of the Marist Brothers, especially past students, to members of other religious congregations in the region who may find in this book a mirror of their own experiences and to anyone interested in Papua New Guinea-Solomon Islands history.

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