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STUDYGUIDE

ISSUE 33 AUSTRALIAN SCREEN EDUCATION

Sisters Pearls and Mission Girls



Introduction

THE SISTERS OF ST JOHN OF God have lived and worked among Aboriginal people of the Kimberley region in the north-west of Australia for almost 100 years.

This fifty-six minute documentary tells their story—why they came to the area, what they did, and how they had an impact upon Aboriginal people’s lives.

At a time when churches are being put under close scrutiny for their personal, social and cultural impacts upon Indigenous people, what final judgement can we make about the Sisters of St John of God in the Kimberley region?

Curriculum links

Sisters, Pearls and Mission Girls has relevance for students of:

- Australian history
- Indigenous Studies and
- Religious Studies

at middle and senior secondary school.

Exploring themes and ideas in the film

1. The video shows a re-enactment of the arrival of the first Sisters in the area in 1907. Find and mark these three key places associated with the Sisters on this map below: Derby, Broome and Beagle Bay. (see map)



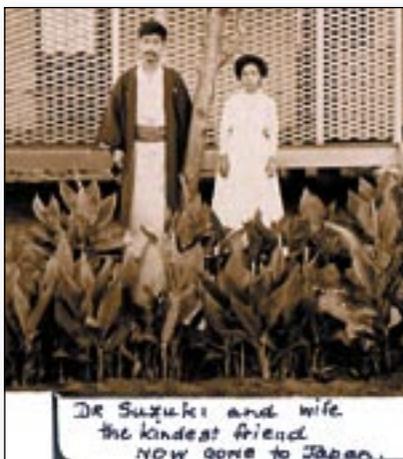
Why did women become missionaries?

- 2 Why did religious orders set up missions among Aboriginal people in remote areas of Australia in this period?
- 3 The video stresses that most of the Sisters who originally came to the area were Irish. What difficulties or problems might this have created for the Sisters, and for the Indigenous people?
- 4 The aim of missionaries, in coming into an area at this time, was usually to 'civilise and evangelise' the Indigenous people. What potential good do you think missionaries could do in these places?
- 5 What potential harm do you think their activities could do to the Indigenous people?
- 6 What difficulties did the Sisters have in establishing themselves in the area?
- 7 Why do you think they persevered in their efforts?

What impact did the sisters have in Broome?

BROOME: Situated over 2000kms north of Perth, on the most cyclone prone coast in the world, even today it remains one of Australia's most isolated townships. Around 100 years ago it was a wild frontier town that had more in common with its Asian neighbours than it did with the rest of Australia. The exotic cultural mix of the town—Malay, Chinese, Filipino and Aboriginal—can be traced back to

Below: Dr Suzuki and wife. The kindest friend. Now gone to Japan



the early days of the pearling industry when an exemption to the White Australia policy allowed indentured Asian workers to be employed on the pearl luggers. The pioneer Sisters established their first convent in Broome in 1908. Today it is home to around five Sisters.

- 8 What was the nature of the society in Broome to which they came? In particular what impact had the pearl shell industry had on the Indigenous people of the area?
- 9 How were the Sisters different to the missionaries who had originally come to the area?
- 10 What were the main activities of the Sisters in Broome?
- 11 Questions 3 and 4 asked about the good and harm that missionaries could do. What good does the video suggest the Sisters did? Did they do any harm?

What impact did the sisters have in Beagle Bay?

BEAGLE BAY: A remote Catholic mission 120kms north of Broome on the Dampier peninsula. First established by French Trappist monks in the 1890s, the German Pallottine priests and brothers took over around the turn of the century. When the pioneer sisters arrived here in 1907 directly from Ireland, it was nothing more than a few bark huts. By the 1950s it was considered a 'model' Catholic mis-



Below: Pearling Crews, Broome



Above: Japanese Convent

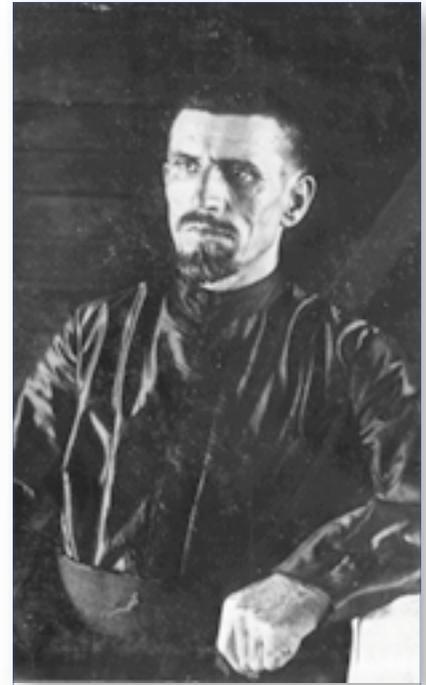
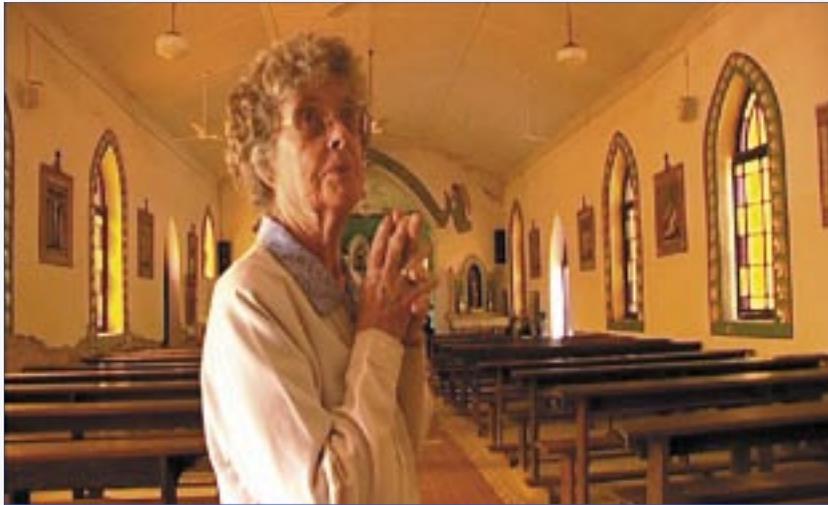


Above: Parking lugger, Broome



Above: Japanese Students, Convent School, Broome. Below: Some more little Japanese kids





sion, with its own school, bakery, farm and dormitories housing scores of so called 'half-caste' children from all over the Kimberley. Today it is home for two Irish sisters, 85-year-old Bernadette and the youngest of the St John of God Sisters, 63-year-old Sheila. The focal point of the community is still the beautiful white washed church with the newly restored steeple that towers above the surrounding tamarind trees.

Above Left: Bernadette. Right: Br Mathias Kasparck. Below in order: BB Bakery, Phillip and Matthew; Br Henry Krallman; Fr P Collins; Frances in Church



12 The sisters went to Beagle Bay to establish a mission. They looked after children brought there as a result of government policies to separate half-caste children from their Indigenous families—the 'Stolen Generations' policy. What impact did the sisters have on the children in their care?

13 Questions 3 and 4 asked about

the good and harm that missionaries could do. What good does the video suggest the Sisters did? Did they do any harm?

What impact did the sisters have in Derby?

DERBY: A small town around 200kms north east of Broome with a landscape dominated by boab trees and huge tides, it is one of the hottest and most inhospitable parts of the Kimberley. The Sisters first came to Derby in the 1930s and nursed at the Native Hospital, then later at the Leprosarium,



where they remained for over fifty years. At the peak of the leprosy epidemic, the Derby Leprosarium housed nearly 300 Aboriginal people suffering from the disease. Derby is still home to four elderly Sisters.

- 14 Some of the sisters went to Derby to set up a leprosarium. The video talks about their policy of 'tough love'. Why was dealing with leprosy such a difficult thing to do?
- 15 Questions 3 and 4 asked about the good and harm that missionaries could do. What good does the video suggest the Sisters did? Did they do any harm?

Is Sisters, Pearls and Mission Girls 'good history'?

In 1995 the director of the film, David Batty, was approached to film the centenary celebrations for the Sisters of St John of God.

In the course of researching their humble video I was constantly amazed by their selfless acts of kindness and determination in caring for the sick, uneducated, distressed and down trodden ... They seemed to have earned a deep love and respect from the Aboriginal community as a whole. I soon learned that over the past 100 years these women had witnessed, and been party to, the rapidly chang-

ing world of the Aborigines of north-west Australia. I finished the video and moved onto other projects but I always felt it was a story that needed to be told ...

This documentary is the result of Batty's return to that story, but is it a good source of history?

- 16 Discuss what you think is needed of a good historical documentary—for example, must it present a variety of points of view about the topic? Must it critically evaluate those points of view?
- 17 Apply your criteria to this film—does it pass your test?

Look at this information about the making of the film.

- The program was commissioned by the ABC in February 2002. Shooting commenced in April 2002 at locations in Broome, Beagle Bay and Derby and continued through to the final days of the edit in November 2002.
- Archival material was sourced from all over Australia. Months were spent in the Sisters' archive in Broome, sorting through thousands of photographs and documents that have miraculously survived the last ninety years.
- Recollections of the pioneer Sis-



Above: Jeni McMahon and David Batty



This page: Director David Batty on a film shoot.



ters were uncovered in beautifully handwritten notes and letters carefully transcribed on the backs of pages and envelopes and between the lines of other documents.

- Some very old and rare 16mm film was unearthed at the Pallottine Society in Perth as well as some fantastic still photographs from the Broome Historical Society and the Broome Diocese archives. The historical re-enactments, shot on 16mm film by director David Batty, are based on primary source material uncovered in the St John of God archive.

- 18 Does this information influence your judgement of it as good history? Identify the ways in which this information reveals strengths and weaknesses of the film as history. Discuss your ideas.

An overall assessment of the impact of the Sisters on the people of the area

- 19 The video focuses on the judgement of many older Aboriginal people about the impact of the sisters on their lives. Identify the various comments or judgements that people make about the influence of the Sisters on their lives.
- 20 One of the most controversial and bitter issues in Australian history is the 'Stolen Generations' policy. Under that policy many 'half-caste' children were removed from their families without permission. In the Kimberley area, girls who were removed from their families were placed with the Sisters of St John of God, who cared for and educated them. What is the attitude of the Sisters to their involvement in policies that took children away from their families? What is the attitude of the families involved?
- 21 The film shows the restoration and re-dedication of the church tower at Beagle Bay. How could this be seen as a metaphor or symbol for the role of the church in the area?
- 22 At the start of this unit you were asked to think about what impacts missions could have on Aboriginal people. From the evidence presented in the film, explain what you think the impact of the sisters of St



Left: Group of kids with a Sister. Above: Paul Cox at the BB Bakery, 1961

John of God were in these areas:

- spreading their religious beliefs ('evangelising')
 - educating people
 - preparing people for the workforce
 - providing health care
 - protecting, enriching or harming Indigenous people's culture
 - family life.
- 21 Imagine that you have been asked to write a brief summary of this film for inclusion in a television guide. In that guide you need to help viewers understand the nature, content, themes and arguments in the film. You also need to give your opinion of it. Create your review, trying to keep that summary to about 150 words.



Above: Rev William Droste

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Above: A Sister with two children. Below: Children praying.

