

The Abbey Press

New Norcia's Printing and Publishing History

by Joan Oakland

The birth of the Abbey Press at New Norcia in the early 20th century fulfilled Salvado's dream of having the monastery be a place conducive to the printed word. From its humble origins as a bookbinding shop, the Press grew into a bonafide printing press by mid-century, printing small booklets, the parish newsletter and eventually the monastery's newspaper, *Pax*. When a Perth printer took over printing the popular shire newspaper four years later, Abbey Press returned to its modest origins, printing primarily pamphlets, ceremonial sheets, notecards, wedding announcements, and greeting cards.

Aside from his religious zeal and adventurous spirit, Bishop Salvado, founder of New Norcia's 175-year-old monastery, possessed two additional defining character traits: he was keen to spread the 'word' (of Christ and the Church) and he loved the printed word. 'My intention is to set up, little by little, a library in this Australian bush', he wrote in his 1880 diary. 'A community without books is like an army without arms'.¹

Sixty years later the first biography of Rosendo Salvado rolled off the press and onto the bookshelves of that library. Said author Dr John T McMahon in the preface, 'I am delighted that the Abbey Press of New Norcia is printing a third edition of my humble, but sincere tribute to Bishop Salvado'.²

But Salvado's dream of spreading the word extended far beyond the first publication of his biography in the mid-20th century. Many books, pamphlets, magazines, newsletters, yearbooks and even psalters, musical scores, wedding announcements and Christmas cards were published through the monastery, many of which were also printed on the monastery's own printing press. 'Abbey Press' was an arm of the monastery's multifaceted

industry in the 20th century that ultimately helped put New Norcia on the map. It not only spread the word of the Gospel, it disseminated information on the activities of the monastery beyond its isolated location in the Australian bush. Ultimately, the archive of published material from Abbey Press presents its own unique history of New Norcia.

The Birth of Abbey Press

The New Norcia Archive contains records of the Abbey Press from 1908 to 2001. The first scant records of 1908 and 1917 mainly have to do with bookbinding, an industry that was established within the monastery compound in what is now the library.³ Dom Augustine primarily ran the bookbinder shop, training younger monks in the craft until it finished in the 1990s due to lack of interest.⁴

During the 1920s and '30s a periodical entitled *Modern Ideas in Printing* was procured from the Printers' Trade School in South Australia.⁵ The selection of design ideas contained in each volume suggests a growing interest in

developing a printing operation at New Norcia, though no evidence exists that any equipment was acquired at this early stage. It wasn't until the 1940s that things really got moving in the development of Abbey Press. Dr McMahon's biography of Salvado may have been the first significant publication to come out of the press, though it is likely that the actual printing of the booklet was done in Perth.

In a letter dated 20 February 1945 from Sr Joseph of the Benedictine Community at Rydalmere (now Jamberoo) in New South Wales to 'Lord Abbot', the sister thanks him for 'sending the magazine' and expresses her surprise 'that you were able to print it during these days of war rationing'.⁶ This likely refers to the *St Ildephonsus' College Magazine*, an annual publication first printed Christmas 1913, though it was published independently of Abbey Press.

On 10 August 1945 Abbot Catalan received a letter from Alphonsus Dudley Scott at Clifton in Mt Lawley in which he states:

I am in receipt of your letter and wish to inform that I had received no information regarding any further interest in Brother Paul Keaney's Printing Plant after our submission and your kind inspection...if you are interested in further plant I will make enquiries and inspection if possible.⁷

The first equipment to run the printing side of Abbey Press was likely procured in 1946. The centenary publication *New Norcia 1846–1946* states that 'a medium-sized printing press, the latest acquisition, may soon, we hope, give wide scope for new activities'.⁸ This was probably instigated by Br Francis, aka Hugo Fassel, an

Austrian-born monk whose family owned a printing business (*Figure 1*).

Following his return to Austria in 1958, Fassel wrote to the abbot requesting a letter to 'attest that Mr Hugo Fassel established in the year 1946 a letterpress printing-shop at New Norcia where he acted as hand- and Lino-compositor and letterpress machinist till 1958'.⁹ He was in need of a licence to operate the family business, to which he'd obviously returned after relinquishing his life as a monk.

Though no records for the purchase of the printing press exist, it undoubtedly refers to the large black press that resides in a far room of the New Norcia Archives. Originally called the 'Wharfedale Machine', this bulky cast iron press was invented in the 19th century by the company that was later known as Dawson, Payne & Elliot of London (*Figure 2*). It is said to have revolutionised the printing industry, which hadn't seen many changes since the Gutenberg wooden press was invented in Germany in 1454. The inclusion of the cylinder when used in conjunction with a flat bed offered many advantages over the traditional methods of printing from two flat surfaces. To this David Payne added a stop-cylinder machine with a travelling bed that could deliver print without having to be stopped.¹⁰ Though the first Wharfedale was manufactured in 1856, it's likely that the press purchased second-hand by New Norcia was closer to the turn of the century as its construction is more complex than those first machines built in the mid-19th century.¹¹

It's in this far northern wing of the monastery, abutting the bakery, where Abbey Press first operated. The first 'Catalogue of Type used by the Abbey Press' was published in 1947 (revised in 1954 and again in 1996 and 1999), which suggests enough activity was happening on the letterpress to justify the need for a fonts guide. However, what was actually produced on the press in its first eight years of operation is hypothetical as no attribution is made to the printer for the few publications published by Abbey Press during that period. (The 1946 centenary publication, while published by Abbey Press, is attributed to 'Service Printing Co Ltd' in Perth as the printers.) It is possible that later editions of Dr McMahon's Salvado biography came off the monastery press, or any of several other small booklets produced in this period (eg *Pax*, an information



Figure 1: Br Francis at the printing press NNA 72908P

booklet on New Norcia produced sometime in the late 1940s or early '50s).¹²

From Newsletters to Newspapers: The Growth Years

In May of 1953 the parish priest of Holy Trinity Abbey, Fr Gerard, established a fortnightly news-sheet to be disseminated through the Church. Endorsed by Abbot Gregory, the single sheet foolscap-size *Sunday Leaf* aimed 'only at offering the parishioners of New Norcia some Sunday Gospel thoughts, with other thoughts of religious interest, and information of events taking place in the Mission and in the Diocese'.¹³

The parishioners were mainly identified as 'the Native population' for whom the 'Cathedral Church' was originally built, but the editor acknowledges that 'divine favours and graces are dispensed to everyone who comes in to ask for them with confidence, irrespective of colour and nationality'.¹⁴ One must assume that the literacy levels of these parishioners had developed enough by this stage to justify the publication of written material through the Church.

The first fourteen issues of the *Sunday Leaf* were printed on two sides using two colours, black text and a green masthead, which included an early rendition of the PAX symbol, and a green decorative border. The Cou-

rier 12 font and the somewhat clumsy layout of the type however suggest that the newsheet was typewritten and hand-assembled rather than printed on the letterpress machine. After only thirty-six issues the *Sunday Leaf* folded on 31 January 1954. According to the editorial printed in its successor, *PAX*, the demise of the parish bulletin was caused when 'the Roneo Duplicator, used in its production, went out of order'. This, along with 'other adverse circumstances', caused the *Sunday Leaf* 'to go out of existence as quietly as it had come into it'.¹⁵

Four months later a new publication came out of the Abbey Press which would take the industry to a new level of professionalism. The weekly *PAX* was established as the 'official organ of the Abbey Nullius of New Norcia' on 6 June 1954 and would continue as the principal public 'voice' of the Mission for the next fifteen years (*Figure 3*, p. 54).

PAX as the Peak

In the early days *PAX* saw itself in humble terms. 'Today we are launching out a little publication of our own', writes the editor in the first edition.¹⁶ Not wanting to aggravate any sensitivities at *The Record*, the premier periodical of the Catholic Press in Western Australia, the editor acknowledges the 'kind help' offered by this newspaper in the past and offers 'our sincerest thanks'



Figure 2: the Wharfedale printing machine, currently residing in the New Norcia Archives; with Archivist Peter Hocking. Photo: J Longbottom

for its many favours. He goes on to assure readers that 'it is not in the spirit of exclusion that we are striking out by ourselves, but rather in the spirit of cooperation and in the hope of adding a little quota to the great amount of good that is being done by the official Organ of the Archdiocese'.¹⁷

This initial modest self-image is important to keep in mind as we monitor its growth over the fifteen years of its publication. As we shall see, by midway through its life *PAX* would become in style and content a news medium that very much rivalled its predecessor, *The Record*.

As with the *Sunday Leaf*, one of its principal aims was to offer 'religious instruction'. But it now also considered events which are of 'greater interest to the local people than to outsiders' to be worthy of inclusion. Along with the reflection on the Sunday Gospel, the early issues of *PAX* include excerpts from the *Monastery Chronicle*, announcements and other local news, albeit stories with primarily a spiritual focus. It did make space for more secular topics however, including sport (cricket), the weather and a few jokes and unusual quips. (An example comes from the 28 November edition when *PAX* reports on the sighting of a flying saucer by 'some of us monks' on a Saturday evening. Admitting that they weren't really 'sure it was a flying saucer', the reporter goes on to describe the 'beautiful brilliancy' that lit up the sky for a few seconds. He concludes with some philosophical rumination: 'What was the motive power: cosmic...atomic...accumulated star heat? Did it portend anything? Beings from another planet...trying to get in touch with us?' If so, he concludes, 'their behaviour... was highly suspicious'!¹⁸

Within six months the success of *PAX* was evident. Issue number 27 on 5 December 1954 acclaims that it has doubled its size. From its original four-page, folded A4 sheet with its simple two-column layout, the newspaper jumps to a four-page A4 two-colour publication. The inclusion of decorative fonts for headings, captions and drop-caps, and an illustration on the front lends a more sophisticated appeal to its presentation. Perhaps the most important development in this issue is the inclusion of advertising. Along with its continuing mission as a 'news organ for our diocese' that provides 'some useful reading matter for Sundays', the editor insists that the newspaper will remain free. The inclusion of advertisements—there are five: two local, two Perth-based and one national—will help 'defray expenses'.¹⁹

The next six months see further increases in the quality and presentation of the paper. Its centre of focus gradually expands to include more news from neighbouring towns (eg 'Boys' Town, Bindoon'),²⁰ historical exposition (eg a biography on the founder of the Marist brothers starts with no. 36 and runs across nine consecutive issues),²¹ and social commentary, from a Catholic perspective. These latter reflect the maturing of how the monastery saw itself, not only within its geographical context (the emerging view of its significant role in Western Australian history), but also as a member of the wider Church, which began to feel threatened by broader secular forces in the leadup to Vatican II. Issue no. 62 gives considerable space to an article emphasising the threat of communism, which it calls the 'foulest tyranny ever to trample the earth'.²²

On its first anniversary *PAX* congratulates itself for strictly adhering to its original mission: to be the official news-organ for the diocese and to provide 'useful Sun-

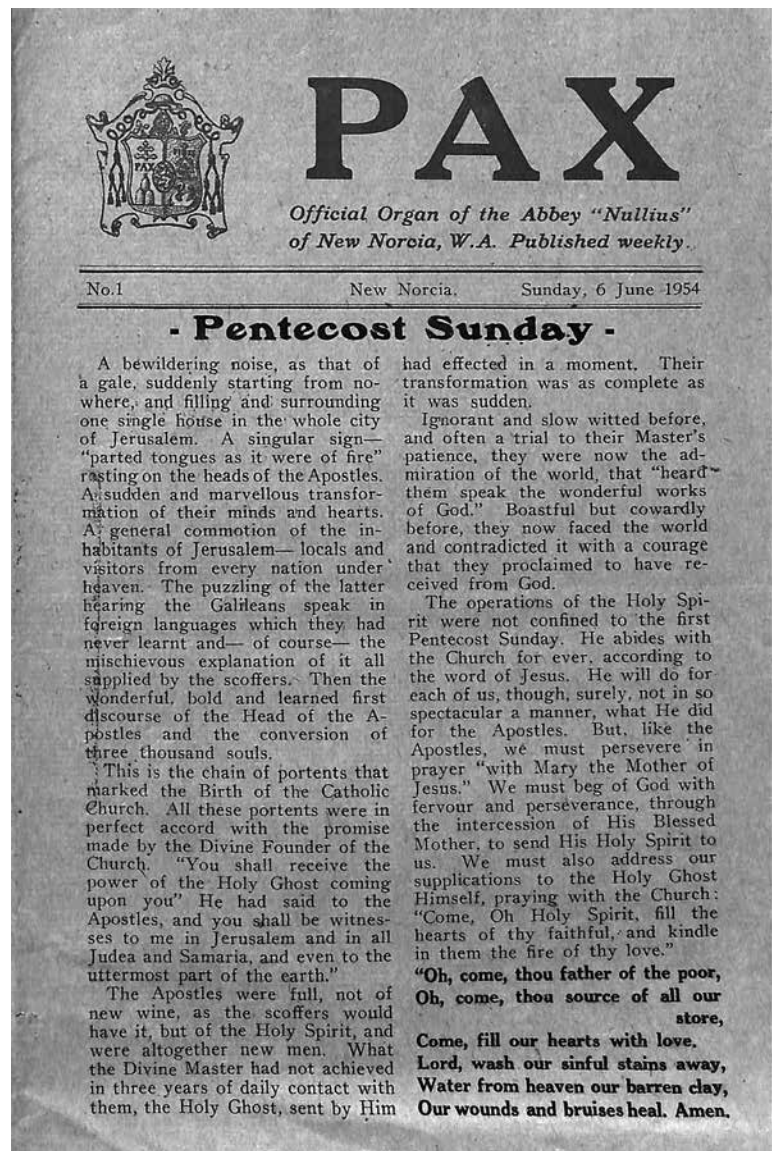


Figure 3: first edition of *PAX*, June 1954. NNA A5-5_19540606

day reading'.²³ The design moves from the two-column newsletter style to a more sophisticated three-column layout, including block articles and increased advertising space. In April of the following year *PAX* moves to a four-column layout, with reduced font size that allows the editor 'to get more matter into our little paper'.²³ In an effort to 'constantly...make *PAX* more interesting', content increases to include 'Letters to the Editor' and a 'Kidz Kolumn'. Four months later issue no. 111 reduces the size of its masthead, along with the pre-eminence of its Sunday Gospel reflection on the front page. The inclusion of an additional two articles on the cover squeezes the Gospel reflection into less than half of the page.²⁵

The following three years of publication provide further evidence of *PAX* moving away from its original mission and humble beginnings as it continues to grow in size, distribution and quality. Increased reporting on world news and the diminishing focus on the Sunday Gospel

(in several editions during this period it doesn't even appear) suggest it may have been susceptible to wider influences than the local parish.

The July 1959 edition of *PAX* sports a bold new format, faintly reminiscent of that other Catholic 'organ' referred to in *PAX*'s inaugural issue (Figure 3).²⁶ Indeed, this is the first issue produced by Vanguard Press, publishers of *The Record*. Gone is the personable voice of the local editor, replaced by the detached voice of an 'Editorial', with its focus on world issues and social concerns. The diminutive *PAX* masthead is replaced by an imposing 200-point font. Bold headlines broadcast events of local, national and international significance. The tight six-column layout and inclusion of multiple photographs and increased advertising space gives the paper a newfound authority in the mainstream press. *PAX* had come of age.

Why did the monks let go of the reins? It is suggested that the monks 'were too busy to keep *PAX* going'.²⁷ But it may also have been influenced by the departure of Fr Francis in 1958, the principal operator of the letterpress. While the newspaper continued to be published by Abbey Press, edited by monks (Fr Bede Lazaro, Fr Justin Bruce, Fr Stephen Lennon and Fr Bernard Rooney acted as editors), and report on monastery events, the tone and style of *PAX* continued to move towards greater independence from the monastery and its original purpose. Much of the reporting over the final decade of publication focused on issues relating to the reform taking place in the Church. Inclusion of a regular feature entitled 'Roaming Around in Science' suggested the rising influence of the scientific worldview.²⁸

Evidence of the portending demise of *PAX* can be found in its last year of publication. While editorial shrank in size, so did the amount of advertising (the final issue contained just eleven ads compared to twenty-four during its peak in the mid-1950s), and it was clear that *PAX* had lost its support, both in terms of readership and financiers. Whether this was caused by the reform of the '60s, which saw many Catholics leave the Church, or loss of interest in the publishing industry by the monks is impossible to know. But when the last issue of *PAX* was published in August 1968 the engines of Abbey Press went quiet.



Figure 4: *PAX* as printed by Vanguard Press, 1959. NNA SI-B_1959 07

The Twilight Years

In the years following the cessation of *PAX*, two monks were instrumental in reviving Abbey Press from its temporary dormancy. Dom Umberto Spadanuda brought with him his experience as an offset printer when he came to the monastery in 1973. By then letterpress printing had been largely superseded by offset lithography, which again revolutionised the printing process as images and text could be combined easily on a single page (letterpress printing had always needed the two processes to be performed separately).²⁹ Many of the dusty old machines currently housed in a room of New Norcia's Education Centre are relics of this era of Abbey Press. Amongst this equipment are a Multilith Offset

printing press Model 1250, a guillotine, folding machine and platen press. These machines facilitated the small print runs for the various brochures, pamphlets and stationery produced by Abbey Press in the final decades of the 20th century. Perhaps Dom Umberto's greatest contribution as a printer was his publication of a new Psalter for the monks. During this period the Abbey Press equipment was located in what is now the Guesthouse lounge room.³⁰

Dom Benedict Mudd, editor of the early editions of *New Norcia Studies*, took Abbey Press into the digital age. In a business statement drafted in the late 1990s, Dom Benedict writes that 'the Abbey Press ventured into desktop publishing in early 1994', with the purchase of an external hard drive and scanner in 1996, a new computer with more sophisticated hardware in 1997, and a zip drive towards the end of that year.³¹ While much of his work was done either for the monastery or *gratis* to affiliates of New Norcia, Dom Benedict made an attempt to run the enterprise as a profitable business, charging \$20/hour for 'all work undertaken by The Press'.³² Along with printed pamphlets, ceremonial sheets, notecards and wedding announcements, Dom Benedict also created handmade Christmas and other greeting cards, some with hand-drawn sketches and poems or inspirational sayings. These were all marked on the back with 'Handmade at The Abbey Press, New Norcia', or 'The Abbey Press Desktop Publishing'.³³



Figure 5: a sampling of the printing machinery and typefaces used at Abbey Press, now museum relics, 2022. Photo: Jim Longbottom

And To the Present

The last record of Abbey Press is from 2001, around the time Dom Benedict left the monastery. While the relics of the golden age of printing gather dust in rooms once alive with the acrid smell of ink and the pulse of machines disseminating an era of New Norcia's written history, her legacy remains. Though 'Abbey Press' is no longer the banner used, publishing activity continues at New Norcia. Along with the annual publication of this journal, *New Norcia Studies*, the liturgy department continues to produce a ceaseless stream of ordo's (a list of offices and feasts for each day of the Catholic year), pew sheets, and brochures and pamphlets for special events and liturgical days.

The monastery publishes a monthly electronic newsletter (*The Chimes*), and since 1990 a bi-annual *Friends* magazine, which succeeded a weekly newsletter (*New Norcia Notes*) written for monastery staff and local residents, has been published for the wider community of New Norcia supporters.

Other departments produce their own material, often professionally designed and printed to maintain the new branding that was implemented for New Norcia in 2006 by Globe Advertising and Design in Perth. This branding was integral to the monastery's revised website (July 2009), replacing the original site published in the late 1990s. And during his early days as the seventh abbot of New Norcia, Fr John Herbert produced hand-made cards, which included his own photography and excerpts from the Rule of St Benedict.

The potential to revive the sleeping giant and take Abbey Press to a new level persists (*Figure 5*). Other monasteries around the world run publishing arms that produce a broad spectrum of material, from theological treatises to spiritual reflections. Whether the monastery assumes that role will largely depend, as it always has, on the ingenuity and talents of the monks who call New Norcia their home. However it expresses itself, the spirit of its founder will ensure the literary history of New Norcia continues on.

About the Author



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Notes

- ¹ R Salvado, *The Salvado memoirs*, ed. & trans. EJ Stormon, University of Western Australia Publishing, Perth, 1977.
- ² JT McMahon, *Bishop Salvado: founder of New Norcia, W Australia*, Abbey Press, New Norcia, 1943, New Norcia Archives [NNA], 00017.
- ³ See various documents relating to Abbey Press, 1908–1929, Benedictine Community of New Norcia [BCNN], NNA, 04370 (1912), 04374 (1908, 1916) and 04379 (1917, 1922, 1929).
- ⁴ B Rooney, interview with the author, 4 August 2009.
- ⁵ Students of Printers Trade School, *Modern Ideas in Printing, The History Trust of South Australia*, South Australian Government, NNA, 04366.
- ⁶ Sr Joseph, personal correspondence to A Catalan, 20 February 1945, BCNN, NNA, OI378.
- ⁷ AD Scott, personal correspondence to A Catalan, 10 August 1945, BCNN, NNA, OI369.
- ⁸ *New Norcia 1846–1946*, BCNN, 1946, NNA, 00163.
- ⁹ H Fassel, personal correspondence with G Gomez, 15 June 1961, BCNN, NNA, OI928.
- ¹⁰ P Wood, *Otley and the Wharfedale printing machine*, Otley Museum, West Yorkshire, 1985. See also: *Early Wharfedale preserved at Otley*, Otley Museum, viewed 12 April 2022, <<http://www.otley.co.uk/museum/PrintingPress.htm>>.
- ¹¹ 'There is a plate on the side which gives the date 1888': P Hocking, interview with the author, 18 April 2022.
- ¹² This is a different publication to the newsletter/paper, NNA, 00049.

- ¹³ *New Norcia Sunday Leaf*, BCNN, no. 1, 31 May 1953, NNA, A5-5.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *PAX*, BCNN, no. 1, 6 June 1954, NNA, A5-5, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, no. 26, 28 November 1954, p. 2.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, no. 27, 5 December 1954, p. 4.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*
- ²¹ *ibid.*, no. 36, 20 February 1955, p. 4.
- ²² 'Why men are communist', *ibid.*, no. 62, 21 August 1955, p. 4.
- ²³ *ibid.*, no. 51, 5 June 1955, p. 2.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*, no. 93, 8 April 1956, p. 2.
- ²⁵ *ibid.*, no. 111, 12 August 1956, p. 1.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*, [no. not available], July 1959.
- ²⁷ D Barry, interview with the author, 9 August 2009.
- ²⁸ *PAX*, [no. not available], December 1961, p. 3.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*
- ³⁰ B Spadanuda, interview with the author, 12 August 2009.
- ³¹ *The Abbey Press: a business statement*, BCNN, 1994, NNA, 04332.
- ³² *ibid.*
- ³³ *Sample greeting cards*, BCNN, NNA, 04314 & 04307.