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THE SISTERS OF ST JOSEPH:

THEIR FOUNDATION AND EARLY HISTORY,

1866 - 1893

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Abstract  | iv   |
| Acknowledgements  | vi   |
| List of Abbreviations   | viii |
| Introduction  | x    |
| Chapter 1: Genesis of an Order  | 1    |
| Chapter 2: Foundation of the Institute,<br>1866 - 1867                  | 25   |
| Chapter 3: Under Way, 1868 - 1869                                       | 64   |
| Chapter 4: Gathering Clouds, 1870                                       | 125  |
| Chapter 5: Storm, 1871 - 1872   | 172  |
| Chapter 6: Towards Reconstruction, 1872                                 | 240  |
| Chapter 7: On the Move, 1872 - 1881                                     | 275  |
| Chapter 8: Tempests and Lulls, 1882 - 1893                              | 340  |
| Chapter 9: Towards Calmer Waters  | 414  |
| APPENDICES:   |      |
| I: Details of the Expansion of the<br>Institute outside South Australia | 434  |
| II: Lengths of Bishops' Absences from<br>Adelaide, 1858 - 1873          | 435  |
| III: Syllabus and Time-table  | 436  |
| IV: Sisters listed according to Place of<br>Birth                       | 439  |
| V: Departures according to Age at<br>time of Entry                      | 445  |
| VI: Departures according to Year of Entry                               | 446  |
| VII: Later careers of Priests who left the<br>Diocese                   | 447  |
| VIII: Anti-Josephite Memorial, 1871                                     | 448  |
| IX: Nationalities of Clergy serving in<br>South Australia, 1850 - 1871  | 455  |

|        |  |     |
|--------|--|-----|
| X:     | Priests in the Adelaide Diocese,<br>September 1871   | 456 |
| XI:    | Sisters who ceased wearing the Josephite<br>Habit at the time of Mary MacKillop's<br>Excommunication | 457 |
| XII:   | Ages of Sisters who left the Institute<br>during the Excommunication Period                          | 458 |
| XIII:  | Details of the Bathurst Foundation   | 459 |
| XIV:   | Details of the Queensland Foundation   | 461 |
| XV:    | Sisters who worked in Queensland,<br>1869 - 1880   | 462 |
| XVI:   | a) Map of Eastern South Australia showing<br>its division into Counties, 1842 - 1885                 | 464 |
|        | b) South Australian Convents, Schools and<br>Institutions listed according to<br>Counties            | 465 |
| XVII:  | Foundations within and from South<br>Australia, 1866 - 1895  | 466 |
| XVIII: | Priests recruited by Bishop Reynolds,<br>1879 - 1881   | 467 |
| XIX:   | Foundations in the Archdiocese of Sydney,<br>1880 - 1895   | 468 |
| XX:    | Foundations in the Armidale Diocese,<br>1880 - 1895  | 469 |
| XXI:   | Foundations in New Zealand, 1883 - 1895  | 470 |
| XXII:  | Openings and Closures, South Australia,<br>1872 - 1899   | 471 |
| XXIII: | Western Australian and Victorian<br>Foundations  | 472 |
| XXIV:  | Membership of the Institute, 1867 - 1899   | 473 |
|        | BIBLIOGRAPHY   | 474 |

ABSTRACT.

Many present-day Australians will have heard of Mary MacKillop and will be aware that Catholic Church authorities are in the process of examining her life and works with a view to having her declared a saint. Significantly fewer will know more than a minimum of detail about the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, the Catholic Religious Order in whose establishment and early history she played a key role, or be able to place her or her Order into the social, religious and political context of her time.

This thesis has been written with a view to filling at least a part of that lacuna. Hence, an attempt has been made to discover the socio-economic background to the foundation of the Congregation, with special reference to the question of Catholic education and the means adopted by the Catholic Church to provide Catholic schooling for all Australian Catholic children.

After its foundation in South Australia in 1866, the membership of the Order increased with great rapidity. Most of those who joined it were either colonial-born or bred and came from the lower-middle or working-classes. Who they were, why they decided to become sisters, how they fared while members of the Order and their influence on its growth and development are all questions that have been addressed.

That the Sisters of St Joseph came into conflict with Catholic Church authorities and that Mary MacKillop was excommunicated by the Bishop of Adelaide are all well-known facts. Less well known are the root causes of the conflicts in which she and the sisters became involved and the parts played by the clergy and laity in the foundation, growth and development of the Order.

The story of this small, seemingly insignificant group of colonial women is far from simple and touches upon a number of important issues. These include the quality of ecclesiastical leadership in colonial Australia, the intricacies of Church politics and the all-pervasive presence of Rome, the question of separate Catholic schools for Catholic children and how these should be staffed and financed and, finally, the role of religious women in the life of the Church.

This history begins in 1866 because that year marked the foundation of the Order. The end date, 1893, has been chosen because Archbishop Christopher Reynolds, who had ruled the See of Adelaide for twenty years, died during that year. His passing marked the end of an era in the life of the Catholic Church in South Australia and also in that of the Sisters of St Joseph. Their story has been related chronologically and an attempt has been made to avoid the hagiographical style common to much contemporary writing about Mary MacKillop.