

The Hidden Lives of Helen Leishman

By Thomas W. Campbell

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MARY HELEN MARGARET LEISHMAN was born at Bunbury Western Australia on 17 April 1902. She died on 7 May 1995 in Launceston, Tasmania. Helen's fascinating life journey included 22 years of service to the Anglican Church's Melanesian Mission in the Solomons and New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), and then more than 38 years in a Carmelite Monastery, where she died. Along the way nursing Sister Helen Leishman became Sister Madeleine of the Cross, a member of the Anglican Sisterhood, the Community of the Cross, then Sister Mary of the Cross, Carmelite nun within the Roman Catholic church. This is the story of her life up to the time she joined the Carmelite community in Longford Tasmania on 7 December 1953.

Helen Leishman was born into a strongly religious family at Bunbury. Several generations of the ancestors of both her father and mother had filled significant positions as clergymen in the Church of Scotland, while some were well known and respected in the medical profession; at least one was an early missionary in Melanesia. Helen was the fifth of nine children (six girls, three boys), one older brother, a twin, not surviving infancy. After early childhood years spent in Coolgardie the family settled on a property near Highbury, a small farming village about 250 kilometres to the south east of Perth WA, the nearest large community being the service town of Narrogin. Helen's schooling comprised home tuition, bush schools, and a year at a high school in Perth. During these years she learnt to play the piano, and to dance.

Nursing training followed, at the Children's Hospital, Perth. After graduation and certification Helen then worked as a contract nurse, some of her time spent in the Collie coalfields, about 55 kilometres inland from Bunbury, the only coal producing region in the State. Midwifery training was then undertaken at Queen's Home, Adelaide SA, following which Helen nursed in Adelaide for a time. That ended in 1928 when Helen returned to Mount Hawthorn, a suburb of Perth, to live with and provide support for her mother and younger sisters, following the sudden death of her father. It had been necessary to sell the family farm at Highbury, after her father's death.

While living and working in Perth Helen heard a popular clergyman preach on the work of the Anglican church's overseas missions. Some time after hearing that sermon she decided, on an impulse, to enquire about the life of a missionary, when passing an Anglican office and shop. The Bishop of Melanesia, John Mainwaring Steward, happened to be in that office on that day, met the young nurse, accepted her on the spot as a lay missionary for her nursing skills, and organised for her to travel to the Solomon Islands where she was to spend a period of enculturation at Mission headquarters, Siota, before assignment to a school in the New Hebrides, which region also was part of the diocese of Melanesia.¹

Helen's voyage to Melanesia on board the ship *Mataram* was quite uncomfortable, with almost all of the trip through monsoon weather.² She disembarked at Tulagi in the

¹ John Mainwaring Steward (1874-1937), born Southampton, England, educated Magdalen College Oxford and Ely Theological College, priested 1901. Joined the Melanesian Mission in 1902, Bishop from 1919-1928, retired to England.

² 'I packed myself between 3 pillows at night . . . half the passengers have got up today for the first time'. (letter of 9 June 1930). Helen did boast, however, that she was a good sailor: 'I've had every meal on this ship and spent most of my time on deck'. (Letter of 9 June 1930).

Solomon Islands on Thursday 11 June and was taken by launch to Siota some hours after arrival and the mail had been sorted. While in Tulagi, the administrative headquarters for the region, Helen was able to visit the hospital, tour other facilities, and gain a first impression of life in such a remote location. One of her fellow passengers was Rev Dr C E Fox, a long time member of the Melanesian Mission, returning from a visit to Brisbane, from where the ship had sailed.

The enculturation programme Helen attended was conducted by the Community of the Cross, an Anglican Sisterhood of three members established only a year previously.³ Two of the Sisters were English. They were well experienced with mission life, as both had been professed members of the Society of All Saints, Sisters of the Poor, an English Sisterhood that operated schools and performed other charitable works in England, South Africa and India. One had worked in all three countries, the other only in England and India.⁴ By the time Helen Leishman arrived for her period with them to learn the lingua franca, Mota, and the realities of Melanesian life, a third member had joined the Sisters, a lively New Zealander (who also had been born in Perth).⁵ When Helen arrived by launch in Siota she was met immediately by Sister Margaret, the senior of the Sisters, and a large group.⁶

Helen spent some months with the Sisters Margaret and Gwen, the third newly joined member, Sister Veronica, and Miss Nell Fagan, who joined the Melanesian Mission as a teacher at the same time and also needed the language training and other help. Over the months of her training Helen's ultimate destination was changed, and re-changed, several times. Originally destined for Torgil in the New Hebrides, with Nell Fagan, it was then proposed that she would go to Fonabou, on the island of Malo (Malaita), where the people spoke a different language from Mota, which she was learning. That change of plan was cancelled, and the two women eventually sailed for Torgil, arriving late November 1930, where Helen immediately became involved with the children of the school that was her base, and started clinical work giving injections, visiting and helping the sick in the region. Her first letter from Torgil revealed how Helen believed she had found her real home and role in life. 'I feel I have really found the life I was meant for, now, amongst these people. I feel I can get on with them & understand them so easily. They say Melanesia gets you. I think it must, also the Melanesians'.⁷

Helen's early letters back to her family in Western Australia reveal how impressed she was by the women in the Sisterhood of the Community of the Cross but, being from an evangelical Presbyterian and Anglican background, she found the Anglo-Catholicism of the Melanesian church too overpowering for her liking.⁸ She told her family not to

³ The Sisterhood also is referred to in various published works as "The Sisters of the Holy Cross" or "The Community of the Holy Cross". In the Community's Constitution, and the Rule, the title is "The Community of the Sisters of the Cross".

⁴ The two women were Margaret Pears Wilson (1887-1985), born Clifton England, educated briefly at Oxford and Cambridge, joined Society of All Saints Sisters of the Poor, Oxford, professed July 1914, served Capetown, Oxford and Bombay (as Novice Mistress), and Gwendoline Elsie Gladys Shaw (1897-1985), born London, educated Oxford, joined Society of All Saints Sisters of the Poor, Oxford, professed December 1925, served Bombay.

⁵ Beatrice Alice Wilson (1897-1985), born Upper Swan, Perth WA, educated Auckland, joined Community of the Cross, professed 1 May 1934.

⁶ '[I] walked off into the arms of Sister Margaret & a long line of natives waiting to shake hands with the new white Missus'. (letter of 9 June 1930)

⁷ Letter of 3 December 1930.

⁸ 'Everyone here is very high church. I have been sitting on my own fence like a small model of virtue, thanking God I'm not as other heathens etc. I told Sister [Margaret] I didn't agree with such things & felt I couldn't do them. She said she didn't think they mattered in the least in themselves, they were only outward & visible signs & she knew God understood & some people were helped by them, especially the natives here, which is very true, but as we are all here for the one purpose & the same end & the natives can't understand why one does one thing & one doesn't, it increases their doubts and does no good. It makes me feel who am I to judge, so my humble self must do what I don't like, that we all may be one'. (Letter of 31 August 1930)

worry about her joining the Sisters.⁹ Within a year, however, after return to Siota following her first leave back in Australia from Torgil, Helen joined the Community as its fourth member, making her profession in 1934, and taking the name Sister Madeleine of the Cross.

Sister Madeleine's second life as a committed missionary now began in earnest, and she became very busy indeed. Her base was Siota, until the Sisters all moved to the school island of Bunana, which Helen had toured with Sister Gwen in 1930. Her medical skills made her a valuable member to the whole Melanesian Mission. She taught in the school run by the Community; she somehow or other fitted in being nurse, dentist, midwife and otherwise multi-skilled member of the Community. She became the de facto mother of the babies taken in as orphans, showering unbounden love and affection on them, and taught personal and community hygiene and mothercraft to the older students at the school. Various letters talk of sleepless nights with sick babies and constant concern for their welfare. Her enthusiasm for all these roles clearly shows up in her preserved letters to the family back home.

In 1932 the Community of the Cross took the very bold step of accepting indigenous women into their fold, after a group of indigenous men had formed the Melanesian Brotherhood some years previously, with some success. The young women who joined, Taina as they were known (a word taken from a local language, and equivalent to the term 'Sister'), were relatively uneducated.¹⁰ They were brave breakers of strong local tribal traditional customs that gave women little freedom of choice in their lives. Marriage was almost inevitable; the customs of the tribe determined to whom they would be married, and when, and generally governed all other aspects of their lives. The first Taina had to endure great hardships and dangers as they committed themselves to this unmarried way of life so different from what traditional tribal society had mapped out for them. They became valued members of the Community.¹¹

As with the senior students Sister Madeleine trained many of the Taina in hygiene, child care, midwifery and other elementary medical skills; the other European Sisters helped some of them develop the ability to teach young children basic literacy. The Community realised that the best opportunity for increasing the chances for women within the reach of the Melanesian Mission came from education, and set out to give them those opportunities, teaching subjects of most value to them. Literacy, agriculture, handicrafts and basic medical competence strongly featured in the Community's schools. One of the Sisters wrote simple text books that ultimately were published world wide for the benefit of students in other under developed regions where such elementary books were badly needed.¹²

Because of her medical skills Sister Madeleine, either alone, or with colleagues (mostly one or two Taina), spent a very busy life working in extremely difficult terrain, in

⁹ Letter dated 3 August 1930

¹⁰ For a description of the establishment of the Taina, see Baddeley, W H, *Ta'ina: some lines on a new movement in Melanesia* (Sydney: Melanesian Mission, 1935). See also Gwen Cross, Aloha Solomons, *Aloha Solomons: the story of a people's courage and loyalty*, Suva Fiji, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, [1982]: 'As we met the first two young indigenous women for our community that day in 1932, we could not help but wonder how it would work out for they looked such a wild pair! They were big, well-built young women with wild, black curly hair - not tight brown curls like the Melanesians - and brown light-coloured skin, who answered anything we asked with a wide-mouthed 'Uh'.

¹¹ Even the Roman Catholic Church, with its vast experience in such matters, did not establish an indigenous Sisterhood in Melanesia until 1948, when the Daughters of Mary Immaculate were formed. The potential problems these women faced are vividly explained in Sister Gwen Shaw's unpublished manuscript "Notes written for the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference held in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1952 for a Sister-Delegate", Gwen Shaw papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney, ML MSS3105/1, item 14.

¹² For a list of these publications see Gwen Cross, *Aloha Solomons: the story of a people's courage and loyalty*, Suva Fiji, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, [1982], Appendix 1, p 148.

harsh living conditions, frequently far from her base. She and her colleagues went periodically to distant islands to preach Christianity, teach, and attend to the sick. These expeditions were organised in the manner of military operations by the Bishop of Melanesia, Walter Hubert Baddeley, who had been a serving officer of the British army in World War I.¹³ They were called 'Flying Columns', and had a marked effect on the achievements of the Mission.

Mission life was not all intolerable heat and primitive living conditions. Sister Madeleine made several furlough trips back to her family in Western Australia. In 1938 she accompanied the Community's Superior, Mother Margaret of the Cross, on her furlough to Britain, where Madeleine was able to enjoy English and Scottish life through Mother Margaret's many family connections, and those of Sister Gwen, and visit her younger sister Peg (Jessie Macleod Leishman), who was nursing in Scotland at the time.¹⁴

World War II affected the Sisters, and all missionaries in the Solomons, most seriously when the Japanese began their sweep into the South Pacific after entering the war by bombing United States forces at Pearl Harbour. While many European officials and their families left the region for safety most of the missionaries of the several different churches remained, including Sister Madeleine, her colleagues, Sisters Gwen and Veronica, and a number of the Taina. Mother Margaret and some of the Taina coincidentally had gone south to the New Hebrides at the request of their bishop to staff a school, shortly before the Japanese arrived. The Japanese advance forced the missionaries and other remaining Europeans up into the mountains of the island of Malaita, where they stayed under the protection of the indigenous people until after the battle of Guadalcanal, when the United States forces defeated the Japanese and forced their retreat.¹⁵ The Sisters then were finally evacuated to the New Hebrides, and reunion with the other Sisters, and from where Sister Madeleine was again able to enjoy furlough in Australia. After her return from that leave to duty in Torgil, however, and before the war ended, she had to be evacuated to New Zealand for essential medical attention. On that occasion she encountered the private secretary to the Catholic Archbishop of Wellington, whose standing instruction was that he be alerted to the arrival of any sisters at the international airport, in order to render assistance. His discovery that Sister Madeleine was not Catholic, but Anglican, did not diminish the help provided, a happy recollection of hers for many years thereafter. A similar incident occurred in Noumea while en route to New Zealand for that medical treatment in an American military aircraft. The aircraft stopped in Noumea for the night, and Sister Madeleine was whisked away by a driver to a convent where the community of 12 was lined up waiting her arrival. Alerted that a Sister Madeleine was arriving, they believed it might miraculously be Reverend Mother Madeleine, Mother General of their Order from France, visiting them despite world disorder. Much confusion, enjoyment, and wonderful hospitality saw Sister Madeleine happily on her way to Auckland the following day.

In 1950 Sister Madeleine began the transition to the next phase of her remarkable life. The members of the Community of the Cross (both European and indigenous

¹³ Walter Hubert Baddeley (1894-1960), born Sussex, England. Served in the British armed forces 1914-1919, educated Keble College Oxford and Cuddesdon Theological College, priested 1921, Bishop of Melanesia 1932 to 1947, returned to England, subsequently Bishop of Whitby, then Blackburn (1946-1960). Died England.

¹⁴ This sister eventually married Rev Arthur Milner, who had been a member of the Melanesian Mission for a number of years, prior to his return to England, and service in World War II. They settled in New Zealand after the War.

¹⁵ The Sisters were cared for in the village of Aesasale from 18 February 1942. In August 1942 Bishop Baddeley asked the Sisters to come down from the mountains to Qaigeo, about half way between Aesasale and the coastal village of Fiu. In the November they were removed to Auki, and from there by launch to Aola, Guadalcanal, from where they left the Solomons for the New Hebrides and comparative safety.

women) corporately decided that their spiritual home should be the Catholic church, rather than the Anglican communion they had served so well since 1930. Made in July 1950 the change caused much angst to many friends and colleagues, and resulted in lengthy and serious recriminations and communication breakdowns. The matter was made worse by Sister Madeleine's older sister, Jean. When Jean Leishman received a letter to tell her that the move to the Catholic church was imminent, she went to Perth's Anglican Archbishop Le Fanu, and demanded he do something to prevent it happening. The Archbishop despatched a telegram to Sister Madeleine urging her not to do what was intended, and to 'remember her vows'. Because of the manner in which cable traffic was then distributed to remote Pacific areas, it was broadcast by radio across Melanesia for several days for the whole world to hear, until its receipt finally was acknowledged. Jean Leishman became very embittered by her younger sister's actions, and refused to speak to or see her again during her lifetime. As a twist to the story the Rev Sidney Hoey, who finally had to enforce the immediate withdrawal of the Sisters from the Anglican school property at Bunana, ultimately left the Melanesian Mission and became Rector of Bruce Rock WA where, from time to time, he encountered members of Sr Madeleine's family who attended his church for services.¹⁶

Sister Madeleine's next life now began. Removed quickly from Anglican spheres of interest the women insensitively were placed by the Catholic authorities in very difficult positions close by their former Anglican clerical and lay colleagues. Organised as a small but temporarily informal community known as Oblates of the Cross, and despite many pressures, they were able to remain together for some time. In February 1951 they were sent to Tangarare, against the desires of everybody, and told to work in a mission station where the priest of 20 years had just been replaced, and from where two long serving Catholic Marist Sisters were removed. They did this. A polio epidemic also broke out, and some months later a huge flood destroyed virtually all the mission centre and its infrastructure, sweeping all their belongings out to sea. The resultant difficulties proved to be almost the last straw for a number of members, who began drifting off to join existing Catholic religious congregations.¹⁷ One, Sister Veronica, had visited the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny in New Zealand and enthusiastically decided, wrongly, that it was the right home for them all.¹⁸ Sister Madeleine gave careful consideration to this proposal, but finally went to and was accepted into the Carmelite community at Longford, Tasmania, aged 51.¹⁹

Helen Leishman once again was transformed, commencing the next and last chapter of her life's remarkable story. She entered the Carmelite monastery, Longford on 7 December 1953, and was professed as Sister Mary Helen Philomena of the Cross in 1956 (known in Community as Sister Mary of the Cross). Being able to retain the words 'of the Cross' as part of her name in religious life was a generous gesture recognising her years of commitment in Melanesia and the Community of the Cross. Once again she had to bear with family misunderstanding. It had been bad enough that she had joined the

¹⁶ David Sidney William Hoey, Inspector of Schools, Melanesian Mission 1946-1951, rector Bruce Rock WA 1951-1952, Head Master, St Mary's School, Maravovo, Solomon Islands, from 1952.

¹⁷ Sr Gwen of the Cross (Sister Mary Gwen), entered the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary Wairoa NSW, August 1951, died Killara NSW 13 June 1985. Mother Margaret entered the Sisters of Mercy, Ponsonby Auckland NZ, 30 June 1960, died 18 May 1985, Auckland (known within that Community as Mother Mary Margaret of the Cross).

¹⁸ Sister Veronica (Sister Mary Dismas of the Holy Face), entered the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny, Auckland NZ, 21 December 1953, died Suva, Fiji 2 August 1985.

¹⁹ 'It . . . became clear that we couldn't continue as a Community and God gave me a wonderful gift, a Carmelite vocation which was very clear. Fr Moore SM R.I.P. helped me over this and Mother Teresa R.I.P. in her loving generosity received me into the Carmel at Longford, in spite of my being 51 and having led such a wandering life'. Undated autobiographical notes (but written 1982) held within the Leishman family.

Catholic Church, but it was even worse that she should voluntarily place herself in such an enclosed religious community. None of the family, with its evangelical Anglican background, could understand how this woman, so full of life and experience, could withdraw so completely into the enclosure of the Carmel. It was five years before the breach was healed, when the family finally discovered how happy Helen was in her life of prayer in the Carmel. The Carmel moved from Longford to Launceston, Tasmania, in 1975.

Within the monastery Sister Mary of the Cross took responsibility for the care of sick and elderly Sisters for much of her Carmelite life. She also was Sacristan for many years, and participated fully in the many activities of the Community. Sister Mary of the Cross was Prioress of the Carmel from 1969 to 1972. She died on 7 May 1995, and is buried within the monastery's grounds.

In her long life of 94 years Helen Leishman spent 61 years as a professed religious. Those years were spent in serving her fellow human beings, for the first years in very primitive conditions, with equally primitive materials available to her, and then in prayerful solitude. Many of her letters to family and friends from 1930 onwards survive. Those letters, the published and unpublished writings of other members of the Community of the Cross, and Helen's own written recollections from within the Carmel at Launceston, reveal that she never lost her sense of service, compassion, fun and faith. Unsung, and publicly unremembered, Nurse Helen Leishman, Sister Madeleine of the Cross, and Sister Mary Helen Philomena of the Cross surely was a significant woman whose life can be held up as a model for all.

Tom Campbell is a Canberra based historian interested in the work and significance of communities of religious women (nuns) in both the Anglican and Catholic churches in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific.