

# Bathurst Island Mission

1911 – 1974

## Details

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The Bathurst Island Mission run by the Roman Catholic Church opened in 1911. In 1914, the first nuns from the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart arrived in Bathurst Island. In 1912 a dormitory for girls aged 5 to 18 was opened, and a boys' dormitory was established some time later. All residents of the dormitories attended schools at the Mission. The dormitories were closed by the early 1970s and the Bathurst Island community took over the Mission's administration. In December 1974 the Bathurst Island Mission became known as Nguui.

In 1909 Catholic Priest Father Francis Xavier Gsell wrote to the Government Resident of the Northern Territory requesting that land on Bathurst Island be made available for the establishment of a Roman Catholic Mission. The government considered the request favourably and in further correspondence, the best location for the mission was discussed. In 1910 Father Gsell stated the purpose of the mission as follows:

*This institution would be in the shape of an industrial and agricultural school, where the natives would receive together with a moderate literary and religious training, all the attainments that would make of them useful members of society*

In September 1910 the Mission was granted a permit to occupy 10,000 acres of land on the South East corner of the Island. The rest of the island was designated as the Wongoak Aboriginal Reserve in December 1912.

The Mission included two dormitories, iron buildings with cement flooring which were built in 1912. Records suggest that the dormitory for girls grew more quickly and was more strictly managed while the number of boys accommodated fluctuated. This contrast was a result of the fact that the primary focus of the Mission was on protecting girls. In order to prevent the marriage of young girls to older men, and/or their prostitution to Japanese pearlers, Father Gsell instituted a practice of buying the marriage rights of girls and housing them in a dormitory where they would receive education and training until the age of 18. When they reached that age, they were encouraged to marry young Aboriginal men.

The majority of the buildings at the mission were severely damaged in a cyclone in 1919 but rebuilt through donations so that the dormitories could continue.

By 1934, 124 girls had been brought into the dormitory system. Reports to the Administrator from the Mission, state that both boys and girls attended school. However, while the girls lived in the dormitories, boys had more freedom and many still lived with their families.

The girls at the Mission were cared for and educated at a school run by three Sisters from the Order Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. The boys were supervised and educated by Brothers from the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. The schools later became known as St Therese's School and Xavier Boys School respectively.

In 1935 the government's Chief Medical Officer reported on his visit to the Mission. He noted that all the girls wore short white cotton skirts while the boys were issued with loin cloths. The clothes were washed and changed

weekly. Each child was also given two blankets.

The Bathurst Island Mission was approved as an institution to receive child endowment in 1941. On the application form, the Mission stated that 141 children under 16 were resident.

On 19 February 1942, Japanese bombers headed for Darwin strafed the runway at Bathurst Island. Following the air-raids, many of the Aboriginal people 'went bush' for a time. The Sisters were evacuated from Bathurst Island and did not return until 1945. While the girls' dormitory continued to run during World War II, the boys' dormitory was closed due to a lack of staff.

In a letter to the Child Endowment office dated 9 September 1942, Fr Henschke described wartime conditions at Bathurst Island and Port Keats Missions:

*These missions are under great difficulties at present. One is 60 miles from Darwin by water, and the other 150 miles. Communications between them and the mainland is very irregular as the Japanese bombers often come over that area. They are carrying on the mission work under great difficulties and often shortage of food (NAA A885, B258).*

By 1950, 64 girls aged from 5 upwards were living in the dormitory while boys lived with their parents and attended the school daily. Various reports written during the 1950s reveal that the Mission was considering re-opening the boys' dormitory.

In 1970, the payment of Commonwealth Child Endowment payments to Aboriginal mothers directly rather than to institutions was the first step towards the closure of the residential dormitories. The girls' dormitory closed in 1972. Children at the Mission continued to attend the schools.

During the early 1970s the Bathurst Island community took over responsibility for its own affairs and in December 1974 the Bathurst Island Mission became known as Nguui.

## Gallery



**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - Reserves, missions and homeland centres - Roman Catholic Mission on Bathurst Island**

**Description:** This image shows several buildings on the Roman Catholic Mission on Bathurst Island. The purpose of these buildings and whether or not they would have housed the children in care on the Mission is not known.

## More info

### Related Entries

#### Run by

- [Missionaries of the Sacred Heart \(1885 - current\)](#)

The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart were in charge of the boys at the Bathurst Island Mission.

## Resources

- [Missions - Inside Australia](#), National Shrine of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, 2011
- [Health Check on NT Aborigines](#), Barrier Miner, 13 November 1950

## Other Resources

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**Title:** Bathurst Island - Reserve for Aborigines [56pp] (1904-1939)

**Type:** Image

**Date:** 1904 - 1939

[Details](#)



**Title:** Institution - Bathurst Island Mission - Port Keats (1941-1952)

**Type:** Image

**Date:** 1941 - 1952

[Details](#)



**Title:** Bathurst Island Mission Reports - Northern Territory (1910-1952)

**Type:** Image

**Date:** 1910 - 1952

[Details](#)

## Records

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For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

### Records

- [John Mulligan Photograph Collection, ca. 1960-1976 \(c. 1960 - c. 1976\)](#)
  - [Records held by Roman Catholic Church, Diocese of Darwin \(1882? - 1983\)](#)
  - [Bathurst Island - Reserve for Aborigines \[56pp\] \(1904 - 1939\)](#)
  - [Institution - Bathurst Island Mission - Port Keats \(1941 - 1952\)](#)
  - [Bathurst Island Mission Reports - Northern Territory \(1910 - 1952\)](#)
  - [Garden Point \(Melville Island\). Review, reports etc - Northern Territory \(1940 - 1952\)](#)
  - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
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