

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL

Strange, rare and peculiar: Aborigines, Benedictines and homeopathy

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Preamble

Winston,¹ in his erudite and entertaining history of homeopathy, referred to Bishop Rosendo Salvado who reputedly treated Aborigines with homeopathy in 1857, in Western Australia. This was possibly the earliest use of homeopathy in Australia. Winston² could not recall where he read this. What follows is an account of an attempt to discover the origins of this story.

Hypothesis

Homeopaths have a phrase for what is most useful in the study of *materia medica*, and so also in the study of patients in an effort to help them, 'strange, rare and peculiar'.³ The clues to a cure lie in what are uncommon and characteristic in both the properties of the medicine and the symptoms of the patient. To have worked as a homeopath with aboriginal people in the mid-19th century in Australia is uncommon, indeed strange, rare and peculiar; and I assumed that if I searched hard enough I should find some interesting case studies of patients treated at this time by Salvado.⁴

Discovery: New Norcia

What I discovered was to me fascinating, but it was not, alas, case studies, so this is a negative result, yet might still be of some interest.

There is a wealth of biography and hagiography about Salvado (1814–1900).⁵ A Spanish Benedictine priest, he studied in Italy, and was a man of wide

European culture, not just a cloistered monk. He came to Australia after a short stay in England including a visit to the monastery at Downside near Bath,⁶ with a party which included English and Irish as well as Spanish and Italian clergy. He suffered many privations and hardships, but together with colleagues, succeeded in founding a monastery, a pastoral and agricultural community and schools in the Victoria Plains, in the interior of Western Australia, north east of Perth. His achievements were more than the founding of these institutions. He took care to import the artefacts and ideas of European culture. The small town still stands, with a monastery, a museum, library, art gallery, with schools (now closed and used for conferences or to store archives), and a hotel. A roadhouse attracts travellers and tourists.

In order to raise funds for his mission he organised a piano concert in the largest hall of Perth in 1847, this was a huge success, uniting Protestant, Catholic and Jew in support of his work.⁷ He himself was the pianist, showing himself to be a virtuoso performer.⁸ He invited his brother to come from Europe to help him; he was a photographer so a pictorial record exists to add a dimension to the extensive archives. He persuaded friends to donate paintings, including a Murillo; there is still an impressive collection of minor Italian old masters, all the more so for being conserved and open to public view in the middle of the Australian desert, both climatic, and, at that time cultural.⁹ He imported books, both secular and ecclesiastic, it was his ambition that there should be a substantial library of all that was best of European literature available for his community. He embraced such technology as was relevant to pastoral agriculture, whether animal husbandry, bread baking or wine making and distilling. The products of the community were a commercial success, achieving high prices for example in the London wool markets.

He claimed not to know anything of medicine, 'we were completely ignorant of medicine'¹⁰ and managed

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to secure the services of a Father Coll who, although not qualified in medicine, had trained and was apparently knowledgeable. Until then they used olive oil, tea, rice, soup, and Epsom salts.¹¹ An outbreak in 1848, of what may have been syphilis (it is referred to only by euphemism), was cured only after asking for advice from a medical man in the city.¹² A sick young boy was even taken to Italy to be cured there (the name of the illness is not mentioned).¹³ This may of course simply mean that any knowledge of homeopathy was acquired after 1851 when these memoirs were written. It has been reported that Salvado¹⁴ corresponded with Florence Nightingale on the subject of contagious diseases. Biddle¹⁵ suggests that a Spanish speaking homeopath may discover more material in the later personal diaries of Salvado and in the archives. The archives mention Rosendo Salvado's brother Fr Santos Salvado who did not trust homeopathy and tended to scoff at Salvado.¹⁶

Coll arrived in 1860 and soon gained a positive reputation in New Norcia and the surrounding areas. At this time the Aboriginals only had the services of untutored monks, or native healers, whom Salvado¹⁷ considered charlatans. There had been traumatic epidemics of measles and whooping cough and few therapeutic modalities, other than nursing care were available.¹⁸

All of this may, in terms of modern political correctness, appear to be some sort of patronising colonial plot, especially as there was also the objective of the mission to convert the Aboriginals to Christianity. But most of all Salvado embraced and appreciated the Aboriginals. From the very first exploration on foot into the outback he learned their language, and his memoirs include an Aboriginal language glossary. His papers show that he could converse with them in their own tongue. He took care not to break up tribal cultures and relationships, so that New Norcia would not deliberately seek out people from too far away but set up small satellite missions to be close to indigenous peoples at their own locations. He defended their rights with some success with the local authorities. Berndt,¹⁹ professor of anthropology at the University of Western Australia characterised Salvado as a man of and before his time. From his memoirs Salvado emerges as a great humanist.

Homeopathy: the Library

There are 19 homeopathic titles in the library,²⁰ some of them multi-volume sets bringing the total to 28, of which only one is 20th century.* They are in English, French Italian and Spanish. One has Salvado's signature, and one is marked as being in a special Salvado collection. Therefore we know that he was aware of homeopathy. I found no evidence that Salvado or Coll actually practised homeopathy; but someone did, it may or may not have been them. There

*The full Library list can be obtained from the author.

is a spread of dates in the collection from 1833 through to the late 19th century, so it is possible that the books were acquired at different times, perhaps during one of Salvado's voyages to Europe.

Until I arrived and examined the collection in detail not all of the homeopathy books were correctly identified and catalogued, the *Organon* appeared to have been lost—but we found it. These books are a valuable and rare collection in themselves. I doubt that there are any comparable books elsewhere in Australia. They are in good condition and I augmented the collection with a gift. Their existence demonstrates that Salvado considered homeopathy to be of sufficiently high status intellectually and culturally to be worthy of inclusion in the library. The collection comprises first aid manuals, but also an early edition of the *Organon* of Samuel Hahnemann, the foundation text of homeopathy.

Homeopathy: the museum

In the museum of New Norcia is an alcove devoted to the history of medicine in the community. I discovered a cache of medicines, perhaps a half dozen medicine chests, one of which is a Chinese box but the contents were homeopathic. The largest display was of small corked vials from Gould's of London, the oldest, still extant, homeopathic pharmacy of this city. Some of these were incorrectly signed as patent medicines for external use. There were also some vials still with liquid in them which were indeed for external use. There were also some medicines labelled from Madrid, and a chest from Germany. A wide range of individual homeopathic remedies was displayed, but mixed up with allopathic exhibits.

With the help of the archivist at New Norcia some important letters were revealed. One is dated 1868 from a priest with an illegible signature from Little Malvern Priory, England, which also refers to Downside where Salvado stayed before he went to Australia. The writer recommends a book by Hering, *The Homoeopathic Domestic Physician*, of which I saw a copy in the New Norcia library. He also suggests other reading, and explains to him where he may obtain medicine chests in London and Bath. The pharmacies, for example Headland's²¹ were well known but Gould's is not mentioned. There are two more letters dated 1880, to and from Salvado and his agent in London, Charles Wainwright of High Holborn. Salvado orders 'a case of homoeopathic medicines and some more books about it' In the reply Wainwright comments on the high prices New Norcia wool is fetching and confirms that the order for medicines is in hand.

Discussion

A historian of medicine in Australia, Martyr²², has noted that in 1894 there was at least one physician and two homeopathic pharmacies in Perth: Martin of Hay

Street and Wiggs of Murray Street. This is of course later than these letters, but it does show that homeopathy was available in Perth. That the local branch of the BMA banned homeopaths from medical registration suggests that the medical profession feared their competition. Although none of the 18 homeopaths listed in Australia at that time were actually in Perth. 'It is difficult to trace the extent of homeopathic usage in Western Australia' writes Martyr, 'partly because much homeopathic treatment was self-administered. The ready availability of homeopathic chests with instructions on treatment left much prescribing in the hands of the patient....' For this scenario the Hering book is both the first in the English language, and the archetype. Hering originally wrote notes on first aid for missionaries in Surinam in the 1820s, and this he expanded in a book published in Pennsylvania in 1828. It has remained in print ever since.

As white settlers occupied more and more of North America in the 19th century without sufficient doctors they took their chests and their Hering with them. Coulter²³ has described the importance of medicine chests and kits in the spread and acceptance of homeopathy, the use made of these kits by women and lay prescribers, and the fear that this aroused in the medical profession. A historian of alternative medicine in America, Haller²⁴ more recently refers to lay practitioners as 'lay doctors', devoting a whole chapter to their work, regarded as most important in the survival of homeopathy. Only Ruddock's²⁵ *Vade Mecum* in England rivalled Hering, and chests were made with a slot for the book. Ruddock was even reprinted in Melbourne for chests made in England and rebadged with Martin and Pleasance or Gould of Melbourne or Collins of Sydney. Throughout the history of homeopathy pharmacies have prepared kits for lay prescribers, for home use and for travellers. These kits may be seen in the advertisements at the end of 19th century books, in journals and magazines for lay homeopaths, and in museums. For example the Hull Maritime Museum (in NE England) has a kit for seafarers.²⁶ The Oxford University museum of the history of science has a domestic kit.²⁷ Kirkstall Abbey (West Yorkshire) museum of local social history has some fine examples.²⁸

It has been reported that many of those who came to Australia during the gold rush brought chests with them from their home countries: England, France and Germany.²⁹ (There is a German chest in the New Norcia museum). Communication and travel over long distances between the Australian states was not easy, and most of the medicines in the New Norcia museum came from London. It is not known why Salvado bought his medicines from London, except that he had an agent there and friends at Downside. Homeopathic pharmacies with a good reputation existed in all the major Australian cities, but we do not know when the first need arose for remedies for New Norcia, and the Australian pharmacies also had recourse to

London for their supplies. There was at least one self-help manual published in Australia, the quaintly named miniature book, 'Medical Telephone'. This was not in the library at New Norcia.³⁰ It was a first aid guide covering advice for preservation of health, nursing and feeding, dealing with wounds and fractures, and treatment of disease. Evidently it was produced to promote the services of the (still extant) Hobart pharmacy with much material on homeopathic medicines and their use.

Allopathic medicine was often practised by priests of all denominations, especially where there were not enough doctors in the 19th century, so it was too with homeopathy.³¹ Many of the Swedenborgians who practised homeopathy in 19th century America, especially on the Eastern seaboard were ministers.³² As there was a shortage of doctors, and the legislation for medical registration was not fully enforced, the Christian clergy also practised medicine in Australia.³³ Homeopathy was practised not only by Salvado but by Reverend Wilson,³⁴ a pioneer of homeopathy in Queensland. Reverend C Schuhknecht practised homeopathy both in Mount Gambier, South Australia, and Natimuk, Victoria. Reverend George Wilkinson of Williamstown 'combined the cause of temperance with the practice of homeopathy.'³⁵ But their focus was not so extensively on the Aborigines as at New Norcia, expressly created as a mission. On the other hand medical care for settlers was also sometimes provided by Father Coll. In China A Gladstone Clarke,³⁶ a Christian missionary in 1925 published a small reference book for lay prescribers which is still in print. This had the support of a medical doctor, Neatby,³⁷ who wrote the introduction, and himself wrote a manual for missionaries. Homeopathy practised by missionaries trained in London as lay prescribers, continued throughout the 20th century.³⁸

Martyr makes the useful distinction between unregistered practitioners and non-registered practitioners. There is something of the illicit implied with 'unregistered'. But the non-registered, which would include the clergy and other non-medically qualified homeopaths went about their work openly and without hindrance, and when they could avoid allopathic prejudice, with some success.

Other sources

There is an extensive list of works on the history of homeopathy in Australia, some of the modern articles repeat the assertions of earlier works, without verification. There is obviously rivalry between states as to where the first homeopath in Australia landed. Was it Salvado, or perhaps Dr Stephen Simpson of Queensland,³⁹ the author of an early book on homeopathy in England,⁴⁰ whence he fled prejudice against homeopathy? Melbourne, Sydney, and Tasmania (Launceston and Hobart) had homeopathic hospitals. There is a

scholarly institutional history of the Melbourne hospital,⁴¹ shorter pamphlets about Tasmania.⁴²

Without more recourse to original sources this work is unfinished, and like other modern essays on this subject,⁴³ all that remains is the possibility that further research will uncover more evidence, about Salvado and New Norcia, and about the early history of homeopathy in Australia.

The work of lay prescribers who care for their family and friends continued into the 20th, and continues into the 21st centuries. There is a growing demand for first aid kits, for example for family use, for travellers, for childbirth. Helios Homeopathic Pharmacy of Tunbridge Wells reports a 17% growth in sales of kits over a 10 year period from 1995 to 2005.⁴⁴ Contemporary magazines like *Homeopathy Today* (USA) and *Health and Homeopathy* (UK) carry display advertisements for kits. Owen Homeopathics of Mount Lawley close to Perth in Western Australia sells remedy kits online.⁴⁵

This story adds something to our knowledge of lay homeopathy, of the importance of home medicine chests and the self-taught practitioner, as distinct from the physician, and the modern professional homeopath.

Acknowledgements

The reason for my visit to Perth and my interest in this story was personal: early in 2003 my daughter was to be married in Perth, Western Australia and I travelled there for the wedding. I owe a great deal to the practical help and kindness of the staff at New Norcia, especially Sue Johnson, the librarian, Wendy G McKinley archivist, and Jenny Waddell, Manager Visitor Services.

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