

Groote Eylandt Mission

1921 – 1978

Other Names:

- Emerald River Mission
- Angurugu Mission
- Groote Eylandt Half-caste Institution

Details

Groote Eylandt Mission was established by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1921 at Emerald River on Groote Eylandt. By 1924 it operated a school and dormitories for Aboriginal children from the mainland. From 1933 most children were sent to Roper River Mission and the Groote Eylandt Mission worked more with the local Aboriginal community. In 1943 the Mission moved to Angurugu. The dormitories operated into the 1950s. In 1978 the CMS passed control of the township of Angurugu to the Angurugu Council.

The Groote Eylandt Mission was the second mission established by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the Northern Territory. After the establishment of the Roper River Mission the CMS sought additional areas they considered suitable for new Missions. After an extensive expedition in 1917 by the then Superintendent of the Roper River Mission, the Reverend H. E. Warren, the CMS applied to the Northern Territory Administrator to establish two new Mission Stations, one at Rose River and another on the banks of the Emerald River on Groote Eylandt.

In 1920 the government declared the whole of Groote Eylandt an Aboriginal Reserve and gave the CMS a 21 year lease on a large portion of the island. The Mission was granted 200 square miles (51,800 hectares) of land on the western side of the island.

Warren and the CMS considered moving the whole of the Roper River Mission to Groote Eylandt because of problems with flooding and poor soil quality at Roper River. However, they instead decided to make the Emerald River site a Mission specifically for Aboriginal people deemed at the time to be 'half-caste'. The CMS purchased a boat called 'The Holly' and construction at the Groote Eylandt Mission began in 1921. A sawmill was constructed to enable wood to be cut for further building at the Mission. In 1924, 35 children and young people from the Roper River Mission were transferred to the Groote Eylandt Mission. Warren became Superintendent of both Roper River and Groote Eylandt Missions.

A 1927 report from Superintendent Warren stated that a two storey girls' dormitory was operating at the Mission. There were 34 Aboriginal children, 16 of whom were attending the school on a daily basis. A further 15 were receiving technical instruction. In his report Warren described the schoolwork:

The Elementary education imparted in the School consists of Phonics, reading, writing, composition, letter writing, arithmetic, geography, singing and physical drill. The educational work is under the personal direction of two qualified ladies, formerly government school teachers, assisted by Half Caste teachers trained by them. The Technical Education consists of the usual station work supplemented by lessons in carpentry, engineering, mechanics, gardening, seamanship, sawmilling, motor car driving and repairs and housebuildings. There are two competent engineers in charge of all the industrial work.

The girls took turns assisting with housework and the boys worked on the station. Every resident was expected to spend two hours a day working in the garden, two hours in school and two hours working towards the extension of the Mission, building and clearing the land. Often children would work outside of these hours as well in order to earn pocket money. Warren stated at the end of the report that the Mission was ready and open to take in a further 50 children from the mainland.

Constance Bush, one of the children brought to Groote Eylandt from Roper River in September 1924 remembers:

The Mission was built on a small clearing and was made up of the missionaries' houses, the girls' dormitory upstairs above the Chapel, the boys' dormitory, the school and some other buildings. We were not allowed to go outside the fence by ourselves, or to talk with anyone except the missionaries. We were not allowed to have anything to do with the natives who were camped at the edge of the Mission.

Another former resident of the Mission, Gerry Blintner, who arrived the same year, remembered being locked in the boys' dormitory every night:

I think the worst thing about the Mission was locking us up at night. We had no key to our dormitory, not mosquito nets and no toilet. We all used a tin which we had to empty in the morning.

While local Aboriginal people visited the Mission for medical treatment and for trade and instruction they were not allowed to stay or enter the main Mission area. It was Superintendent Warren's intention to set up an 'outstation and dispensary' for the local people 'towards the north of the island'.

By the end of 1928 a school had been erected. A church, further dwellings and an 'open air hospital' were under construction. There were four staff, two women and two men, one of whom was designated 'Missionary in charge' as Superintendent Warren was absent for most of the year.

Reports of cases of leprosy at the Mission in 1932 raised concerns about how the disease was being dealt with. The Missionary in charge sought medical assistance and after some delays a number of young people from the Mission were transferred to the Channel Island Leprosarium. A 1934 report by the chief medical officer stated that half the adult population of the Mission either had or had suffered from leprosy. Dr Cook put this 'alarming incidence' down to the low resistance to disease among mission residents 'following years of improper feeding'. The Doctor was very critical of the general poor health of those at the Mission caused by their extremely poor and insufficient diet.

Correspondence reveals that the isolation of Groote Eylandt created difficulties for regular government inspections and visits by medical inspectors as were common practice for other Missions. A 1934 memo reveals that the administration had no reliable transport to visit Groote Eylandt, Oenpelli, Millingimbi and Goulbourn Island Missions.

In 1933 complaints from some of the Aboriginal residents of the Mission about the grueling work, the state of the dormitories, the punishments meted out for infraction and the poor quality of clothing and bedding were passed on to Protector of Aborigines Constable E.H. Morey. A letter from one resident of the Mission, Richard Hall, was particularly critical and spoke of punishments like the use of stocks, the chaining of girls to a tree outside the kitchen and their being locked up in a small cell for up to two weeks. In his report accompanying this letter Morey confirmed many of the accusations leveled at the Mission administration and added:

I would like to add that from observation it is evident that this seclusion of half-castes of both sexes cannot possibly be of any noteworthy benefit to them. They are, virtually, the drudges of the Mission and appear to

be no more that the missionaries unpaid servants.

In 1933, after changes in CMS and government policy, a new Superintendent was sent to Groote Eylandt with orders to close up the work with 'half-castes' and shift the focus of the Mission to the local Aboriginal people. The Reverend E W Evans sent the remaining school aged children in the 'half-caste' institution, numbering 14, to Roper River Mission in preparation for them to be transferred to the government run Kahlin Compound in Darwin and the Bungalow in Alice Springs. However, after criticism that the Mission did not sufficiently segregate people found to be suffering from leprosy the government refused to accept the children in Darwin or Alice Springs on the grounds that they may have contracted the disease. The children from Groote Eylandt, therefore, remained at Roper River Mission.

Although the focus of the mission changed to work more with the local Aboriginal population, approximately 15 young adult 'half-castes' stayed at Groote Eylandt Mission, as well as several married couples, and the young women continued to be kept in the dormitories and locked in at night. In 1939, 60 children were still attending school at the Mission. A new girls' dormitory was built in that same year.

A cyclone in 1940 destroyed many of the older buildings at the Mission including the boys' dormitory and severely damaged the new girls' quarters. After the cyclone a delegation from the CMS inspected the Mission and began looking at alternative sites. A decision was made to move the Mission to the new site at Angurugu.

In May 1941, after the start of World War II, the Australian Defense Department entered into discussion with the CMS about the Mission's aerodrome at Emerald River and how it may be required to be expanded for use by the RAAF. With the growing possibility that a large number of RAAF personnel might be coming to Emerald River, work on construction of a new Mission at Angurugu was begun. An increase of Government funding was obtained towards the construction at Angurugu on the basis that the CMS agreed to take 40 to 50 young Aboriginal people from the Myilly Point Home, also known as the Darwin Half-caste Home. The movement of these children to Groote Eylandt never eventuated as the bombing of Darwin by the Japanese in 1942 changed the situation.

After the bombing of Darwin many Aboriginal children and young people who were considered to be 'half-caste' were evacuated from Darwin and from Missions in the North of Australia. Children from the CMS Missions at Roper River and Groote Eylandt were moved to a temporary home in Mulgoa, west of Sydney in NSW known as the Church Missionary Society Home for Half-castes, Mulgoa. Five boys of about 15 years of age were returned to Groote Eylandt in June 1945 "to be trained in timber getting, sawmilling and building" at the new Mission site at Angurugu. Most of the children, however, remained at Mulgoa until they were again relocated in 1948 and 1949. The majority of the boys were transferred to St Francis House in South Australia and many of the girls went to St Mary's Hostel in Alice Springs.

In 1943 the RAAF took over the Mission Airstrip at Emerald River and the Groote Eylandt Mission was moved to the new site at Angurugu, 8 miles (12.8 kilometres) to the north. A new statement of policy adopted by the CMS in 1944 recommended the re-establishment of a 'half-caste' institution at Emerald River that utilised cottage style accommodations rather than dormitories. Making allowance for this proposed institution was a further reason for the move of the Groote Eylandt Mission to Angurugu. A number of Aboriginal people from the Groote Eylandt Mission, and from the Umbakumba Settlement in the north east of the island, worked with the RAAF on the Emerald River airfield and at the flying boat base that operated at Little Lagoon near the Umbakumba Settlement. Many also worked on road building on the island.

Records suggest that during World War II the CMS was unable to keep the dormitories at their Missions operating. This was due to a lack of staff and the evacuation to southern states of all female Missionaries, and many Aboriginal women and children from the Missions.

By January 1945 two houses for Missionary staff, a school, and a store had been constructed at the new Groote Eylandt Mission site. Within a year two girls' dormitories and 10 cottages for Aboriginal families were added. In January 1947 the Mission reported that it now had two girls' dormitories and a boys' dormitory. In 1951 two boys' dormitories were operating, one for boys under the age of 12 and one for 12 and over. The report from that year stated that there was one girls' dormitory operating with 26 girls and that a second girls' dormitory was 'being

equipt'.

A 1951 report described the boys' and girls' dormitories:

The boys and girls dormitories are each in charge of a senior married native couple. The girls are expected to go into the dormitory at about seven years of age and stay there until they are married... The girls work with the women each afternoon in the garden and go hunting on weekends under the supervision of the native married couple. The boys go with their families each weekend.

Through the mid 1940s and into the 1950s the CMS discussed the possibility of taking control of the privately run Umbakumba Settlement located at the north east corner of the island and merging its inhabitants with the Groote Eylandt Mission. However, Fred Gray, who ran the Umbakumba Settlement, was opposed to the idea and would not relinquish control. In 1958, after Fred Gray's retirement, the CMS did take control of the Umbakumba Settlement. For a short time prior to the final hand over from Gray to the CMS much of the Aboriginal population of Umbakumba Settlement were moved to the Groote Eylandt Mission at Angurugu which created problems of overcrowding and placed a strain on facilities and supplies. When the CMS reopened the Settlement as the Umbakumba Mission in February 1958 all the original Umbakumba residents left Angurugu and returned to the new Umbakumba Mission. So, from 1958 the CMS was running two Missions on the Island.

In his book, *We wish we'd done more: Ninety years of CMS and Aboriginal issues in north Australia*, CMS historian, John Harris suggests that after World War II the dormitory system at each of the CMS missions focused primarily on girls. He also states that the dormitories were phased out completely by the late 1950s. However, research into other records shows that there were both boys and girls dormitories still operating at Groote Eylandt Mission in the mid-1950s. The school continued under missionary control until 1966, when staff shortages led it to be handed over to the Welfare Department.

In 1973 a change in federal government policy from assimilation to Aboriginal self-determination brought change to Northern Territory Missions. The CMS, however, continued to operate the Groote Eylandt Mission as before for another five years.

Groote Eylandt became Aboriginal Freehold Land in 1976. In 1978 the Groote Eylandt Mission ceased to operate as a Mission when administrative responsibility for the township was taken over by the Angurugu Council.

Gallery



Coconut avenue

Description: This image shows the 'coconut avenue' and Mission House at Emerald River. It is not certain whether the building shown would have housed children in care on the Mission.



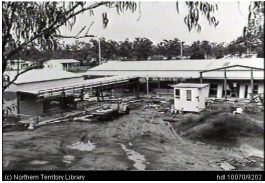
Angurugu Mission House

Description: The description states: No. 1 Mission house, front view. It shows Angurugu Mission House, part of Groote Eylandt Mission.



The Mission house, Groote Eylandt

Description: This image shows Groote Eylandt Mission House.



Groote Eylandt mission

Description: The description reads: Buildings at Groote Eylandt mission, under construction.



School at Groote Eylandt mission of the Church Missionary Society 1958

Description: Groote Eylandt mission of the Church Missionary Society - School



Church at Groote Eylandt Mission, Church Missionary Society 1958

Description: Groote Eylandt Mission, Church Missionary Society - Church



Nature quarters at Groote Eylandt Mission, Church Missionary Society 1958



School room at Groote Eylandt mission of the Church Missionary Society 1958



Dormitory for girls, old Emerald River site [altered from original title]

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Church Missionary Society of Australia \(1916 - current\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Roper River Mission \(1908 - 1988\)](#)

Aboriginal children were sent from Roper River Mission to Groote Eylandt Mission in 1924. A number of school aged children returned to Roper River Mission in 1934.

Date: 1934 -

- [Umbakumba Settlement \(1938 - 1958\)](#)

Fred Gray began Umbakumba Settlement at the request of the Superintendent of Groote Eylandt Mission

Other Resources



Title: Groote Eylandt Mission (Church Missionary Society), Part 1 (1918 - 1942)

Type: Image

Date: 1918 - 1942

[Details](#)



Title: Church Missionary Society Groote Eylandt (1943 - 1953)

Type: Image

Date: 1943 - 1953

[Details](#)

Records

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

Records held by other organisations

- [Gribble, E.R.B. \(Ernest Richard Bulmer\) 1868-1957, Collected Papers, 1892-1970 \(1892 - 1970\)](#)
- [Church Missionary Society of Australia, North Australia Committee \(1907 - 1989\)](#)
- [Church Missionary Society Groote Eylandt \(1943 - 1953\)](#)
- [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
Item B5 of the Child Endowment correspondence files relates to Groote Eylandt Mission.
- [Correspondence files, class 1 \(general, passports\) \(1892 - 1970\)](#)
Correspondence files, class 1 (general, passports) contains a file on Groote Eylandt Mission
- [List of Northern Territory evacuees, World War II \(1942 - 1942\)](#)
- [Essington House, reports on juveniles \(1969 - 1974\)](#)
- [Essington House, reports on juveniles \(1969 - 1974\)](#)

A file in this series relates to a child on probation at the Groote Eylandt Mission, also known as Angurugu Mission.

You can view this page online by visiting <https://findconnect.efront.digital/entity/groote-eylandt-mission-2/>