



Kimberley Society

Book Note

***Memoirs of a Spanish Missionary Monk* by Seraphim Sanz de Galdeano OSB MBE OAM CSM. Hesperian Press, Carlisle (WA), 2006. Soft cover, 260 pages + vi, illustrations. ISBN 0 85905 386 5, price \$33.00.**

Father Sanz, who is now [2006] 93, served with the Benedictine Order in Western Australia from 1931. He studied at New Norcia, was ordained in Sydney in 1938, worked in the Kimberley from 1939 to 1981, and returned to New Norcia until 1993. Then, after living in Spain for some years, he gained permission to return to Kalumburu.

He wrote his memoirs at the urging of people who found verbal accounts of his experiences fascinating. He attributes that situation to their experiences differing from his and he rejects the notion that he has done anything extraordinary. Some of his experiences have, however, been somewhat unusual. Few other people, for example, are likely to have culinary skills that include making flying foxes more palatable 'by skinning them and passing the flesh through vinegar'.

The memoirs have a history of their own, with the preface explaining how the pre-1990 component (the bulk of the book) was published without authority from tapes that Father Sanz recorded in Spanish and sent to his family. That version also appeared briefly on the Internet with the author's *Metamorphosis of a Race* and his *Pelá Dictionary and Grammar*. This version, which Father Sanz translated into English, contains additional material that relates mostly, or perhaps wholly, to the years since 1989. Hence, in total, the book consists of the original memoirs (written when the author was 76) and more recent anecdotes, letters and reflections.

The memoirs are perhaps most valuable for their tales of people, events, conditions, and natural history in the Pago and Kalumburu area. Told quite candidly, with equal sprinklings of humour and criticism, the tales show how things were from 1939 to 1981. Indeed, the candidness is such that Father Sanz, with no hint of contrition, mentions instances in which he used his fist or his foot on Aboriginal people who were disinclined to take orders.

Because the author went to Pago Mission soon after being ordained, and left the adjacent Kalumburu Mission after serving as its last Superior (1955–1981), his book reveals a great deal about the work of missionary monks on the Kimberley coast. Among other things, it covers the isolation, the use of luggers and barges for transport, the building of the Truscott Aerodrome during World War II, and the rescue of passengers and crew after the bombing of the *Koolama*. The *Koolama* coverage is perhaps most interesting when read in conjunction with Bill Loane's *The Koolama Incident in the Timor Sea, 1942: Malice or Mutiny*. That book benefited from accounts offered by Father Sanz (generally identified by the more familiar name of Father Seraphim) but he adds a bit more to the story in *Memoirs of a Spanish Monk*.

Like *Metamorphosis of a Race: Kuíni and Kulári Tribes of Kalúmburu Mission*, which was the subject of a book note in the October newsletter, *Memoirs of a Spanish Monk* mixes current affairs with history. Father Sanz, despite wanting to live nowhere but Kalumburu, is extremely critical of that place in its current guise. He is clearly uncomfortable with it being a parish of the Broome Diocese and with the community embracing the opportunities afforded by tourism. His book is thus as much a lament for the loss of a mission as it is a chronicle of his life. Readers will draw their own conclusions as to whether the withdrawal of the Benedictine mission from Kalumburu was, as he argues, premature and ill advised.

Cathie Clement (December 2006)