

## **“The upholding of the sap from the tree”: the reminiscences of Sister Monica Fanny SSJD**

*Mandy Goedhals*

School of Anthropology, Gender and Historical Studies,  
Howard College Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal,  
Durban, South Africa

### *Abstract*

This article explores the life and work of Sister Monica Fanny of the Society of St John the Divine (SSJD), an Anglican religious community for women which was founded in Pietermaritzburg, Natal in 1887. The biographical text itself is a unique document, since records of religious communities tend to focus on the work of the community as a whole rather than on the life of an individual. The article examines Monica Fanny’s own representation of her life, as well as the particular personality and ministry of a woman in the context of the largely educational work of the community as a whole, and explores themes of race, class and gender both in the Anglican church and in colonial society in the first four decades of the 20th century. While the article indicates that membership of a religious community enabled women to exercise a more public ministry than that allowed to lay women, it also shows that this was not accompanied by the gender consciousness which would lead the sisters of the community to seek greater freedom of ministry for all women in the church.

### **Introduction**

Autobiographical accounts written by Anglican nuns in South Africa are rare: in religious sisterhoods, the focus usually falls on the life and work of the community rather than of the individual. However, Sister Monica Fanny, who made her profession as a member of the Society of St John the Divine (SSJD) in Natal in 1902, was requested, some fifty years later, when she was in her eighties, to write down her memories by Mother Mary Richmal, who was then the reverend mother superior of the community. Her *Reminiscences*, seventy-four pages of handwritten text in a hard-backed exercise book, beginning with her arrival in Pietermaritzburg in 1899, is the result of this request.<sup>1</sup>

This article is part of a wider project to explore women’s lives within Anglicanism, with critical attention to women’s biography, autobiography and identity,<sup>2</sup> from the perspective of gender relations in southern African Anglicanism and the role of Anglican women within colonial and apartheid society. The specific aim of this article is to examine the *Reminiscences* of Sister Monica Fanny, to show how she chose to represent herself; to reflect on how the life of a religious sister impacted on gender relations in the church; and to explore the role of sisterhoods in both buttressing and challenging the colonial society to which they belonged.

### **Self-representation in the *Reminiscences of Sister Monica Fanny SSJD***

Sister Monica Fanny begins her *Reminiscences* with her arrival in Pietermaritzburg: she was met at the railway station by Sister Hilda at 10pm on 8 May 1899. There is nothing pious about her first memories of convent life:

The first night I had a visitor, a rat, so next day I was moved to another room. The Revd Mother (Mother Margaret) came after Prime and asked if I would like to have breakfast in bed. Of course I said Yes. I found out later that the Postulant’s cap had not been ironed. In the afternoon, I was taken by the Revd Mother to visit some of the St Luke’s

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Reminiscences* are housed with the records of the Society of St John the Divine in the Natal diocesan archives at the Cathedral of the Holy Nativity complex in Pietermaritzburg: DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences of Sister Monica Fanny SSJD* (hereafter, *Reminiscences*).

<sup>2</sup> This has been an increasingly important area of scholarship since the 1980s: see, for example, works by Backscheider, Coullie, Heilbrun.

people. As the coal skuttle [*sic*] bonnet, then worn by the Postulant, was not ready so I wore my nurses cloak and bonnet.<sup>3</sup>

The Society of St John the Divine, the community in which Sister Monica Fanny was to spend the remaining fifty-nine years of her life, was established in Pietermaritzburg in 1887. From the 1840s, the catholic revival in the Church of England was accompanied by the re-establishment of the religious life. Finding little support among evangelicals and the broad church, the movement was also regarded with suspicion by the English bishops, because women established communities largely independent of episcopal authority.<sup>4</sup> Anglicanism in southern Africa had developed a high church reputation and bishops came to see the establishment of religious communities as important for the growth of the spiritual life and for the development of nursing and educational institutions in their dioceses. Robert Gray, bishop of Cape Town and first metropolitan, made efforts to establish a community (Lewis & Edwards 1934:106-109), and as early as 1869, William Macrorie, bishop of Maritzburg, was actively seeking a sisterhood to work in Natal (SSJD 1987:17). The most prominent South African bishop in terms of development of religious communities was Alan Webb, who founded the Community of St Michael and All Angels in Bloemfontein 1874, and the Community of the Resurrection of our Lord in Grahamstown in 1884 (Anson 1958:436, 578). Webb also recruited Fanny Bayly in England for the Bloemfontein community in 1878, but in early 1887, she left and came to Natal with two novices, Sister Anna and Sister Margaret, who made their final profession as religious sisters on 9 July 1887.<sup>5</sup> Sister Fanny was subsequently installed as first mother superior of the new Society of St John the Divine in October 1887: she died in 1890, and was succeeded as mother superior by Sister Anna and then Sister Margaret. By the time Sister Monica Fanny joined, SSJD had seven fully professed sisters and several novices, and they ran St Cross, an orphanage for sixty children in Pietermaritzburg, another children's home in Durban, as well as several schools (mostly for white children) (SSJD 1987:17-59).

Because the community did not keep records of the lives of the sisters before they entered SSJD, we know nothing about Sister Monica Fanny's early life beyond the information that she was born Fanny Rawthorn in 1868,<sup>6</sup> and had been a nursing sister in London before she came to Natal (SSJD 1987:44). The reference to a postulant's cap above makes it clear that she joined SSJD in response to a religious vocation rather than to work with them as a lay associate. As a postulant, she wore a uniform, and for a trial period of about six months lived with the community, to enable the sisters and herself to assess whether she was suited to the life before being clothed as a novice. At that stage (i.e. when she joined the novitiate), she put on the community habit, which included a white veil, while she underwent training and preparation as a religious: in SSJD, the novitiate lasted about two years before profession as a sister. Sisters then took temporary vows for three years before making their final profession.<sup>7</sup> Since the community did not repeat the name of a sister, and as Fanny had been the name of the mother foundress, Fanny Rawthorn took Monica Fanny as her name in religion, but was usually known as Sister Monica (SSJD 1987:45).

At the heart of community life was the praying of the divine office by the sisters at regular hours of the day: the services of Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline, all of which included psalms, hymns, scripture readings and prayers. Sisters also attended the Eucharist daily when possible, and were expected to fulfil "spiritual duties" (SSJD 1887:3), which consisted of at least an hour and a quarter of meditation, fifteen minutes of intercession, as well as religious reading with particular attention to the history and doctrine of the church and the lives of the saints and "such other literature as may be useful for their own edification and the instruction of others"<sup>8</sup> Gill (1994:149) has suggested that "the inner strength and vision needed to meet the arduous demands of active philanthropy grew out of the life of prayer and self-discipline of the community". The SSJD Rule of Life intended that the "spirit of Religious consecration" came first; that it was to be lived in accordance with their motto, "Let us love one another"; and that

<sup>3</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15, *Reminiscences* p1. St Luke's church, situated near the convent, had been opened by Bishop Macrorie in 1882 to serve the Coloured Anglican community in Pietermaritzburg. This research has revealed the paucity of academic work on Coloured communities in Natal. A recent exhibition at the Umsinduzi Museum attempts to address this, but substantial work is needed on political and social as well as religious aspects. I am grateful to Professor Bill Guest for advice and for this information.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed study of Anglican sisterhoods in Britain, see Susan Mumm's work, cited above. The history of the South African sisterhoods parallels this in some ways, but there are also significant differences.

<sup>5</sup> Even after the lapse of a century, the religious communities concerned were somewhat reticent about details, but see SSJD 1987:19.

<sup>6</sup> SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.1 List of all Sisters SSJD.

<sup>7</sup> See SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.1 Constitution of Society of St John the Divine, statutes 13 *Of Admission to the Society*, 14 *Of Novices*, 15 *Of Profession*; and DN/DR/0/2.2 Rule of Life of the Society of St John the Divine, section II *Of Postulants*, section III *Of the Novitiate*, section IV *Of Profession*.

<sup>8</sup> SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.2 Rule of Life of the Society of St John the Divine, section I *Of the Society*.

In the further pursuance of this duty of charity the Society devotes itself to further in any way compatible with its strict Religious observance the work of the Church of God wherever the Sisters may be set to live.<sup>9</sup>

One of Monica Fanny's personal reasons for joining SSJD was that she hoped to continue her work as a nurse. Soon after she arrived, she was allocated work as infirmarian, caring for ailing sisters, for dying women and men in the town who requested assistance, and for sick children in SSJD institutions. This work and outbreaks of ringworm, even involving large group of children,<sup>10</sup> were not quite the challenge she had envisaged:

I had letters sent to me before I came out saying that a Nursing Home was going to be opened in connection with the Community. I asked one day where the building and equipment was. I was handed a face towel and told the present Infirmary was to be the Home. Alas, it was only wishful thinking.<sup>11</sup>

Since the infirmary had only one bed, Monica Fanny wrote indignantly to Miss Lucas, Mother Margaret's sister, who had been responsible for placing the advertisements for nurses that she (Monica Fanny) had seen in English nursing periodicals, and pointed out that there was nothing to nurse with – she was then given £9 to fit up the infirmary.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of the clear disappointment of her nursing hopes, Monica Fanny did not return to England, which indicates that her main motivation had other roots. Swaisland has shown that there was a fairly steady stream of English women migrating to South Africa from England during the colonial period: on the whole, women were not pioneers but travelled to areas of existing settlement. From the 1880s to the Second World War, which was the period during which Sister Monica came to Natal, the main need was for skilled professionals. Women came out for religious or humanitarian motives, but were also attracted by the opportunity for varied employment and for protecting themselves against the threat of downward social mobility (Swaisland 1993:3-9). In Monica Fanny's case, apart from the obvious religious one, there is little to show what her reasons might have been: she claimed no imperial motive and indicated no overt commitment to British culture (Swaisland 1993:159-163), although these are clearly material factors which must be considered in the broader historical context of her *Reminiscences*.

Sister Margaret Anne, who wrote the SSJD centenary history, records in preliminary research notes that Sister Monica Fanny had "no education".<sup>13</sup> Gluck (2002:12) remarks that autobiographical accounts of their own lives by "less educated" women are often characterised by a string of anecdotes about courageous or humorous or tragic episodes with little connecting material or personal introspection,<sup>14</sup> and this partly applies to Sister Monica Fanny's own recorded memories. Written in a firm and even hand, with occasional lapses of grammar and spelling, the events described in the *Reminiscences* follow a rough chronological order, but very few dates are actually provided. However, as a religious, Monica Fanny was accustomed to reflecting on her own life.

There is no documentary record which explains why Monica Fanny was asked by the community to write down her memories. It was perhaps intended to provide a 'therapeutic tool'<sup>15</sup> for the aged, as Monica Fanny's health broke down in 1936 when she was sixty-eight, and she did no active work after this, although she lived to be ninety. Perhaps Monica Fanny's decided personality and approach to work was unusual in the community and therefore considered worth preserving. There is an element of drama in the way that the *Reminiscences* are written, perhaps reflecting the way her stories had been told during community recreation time. In some ways, the memories read like oral history, though not shaped by an interviewer but possibly by the fact that she was writing for her sisters in community. This would act as a check on the accuracy of her account, as other sisters would be familiar with the events. The minimal reference to the monastic offices, prayer and spiritual reading in the *Reminiscences* suggests that the *Reminiscences* were written for the community, since among the sisters themselves, this aspect of their lives would be taken for granted.

<sup>9</sup> SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.2 Rule of Life of the Society of St John the Divine, section XIX *Of Reading*.

<sup>10</sup> Faced with a particularly recalcitrant case, she reports: 'in desperation I mixed some sulphur & Flour & Carbolic, made a paste and clapped it on her head & kept it covered for a week. When removed her head was as clean as a new born babe. She had a lovely crop of hair afterwards' SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p2.

<sup>11</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p3.

<sup>12</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p4.

<sup>13</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.51 Sister Margaret Anne's notebook for SSJD history.

<sup>14</sup> Gluck is referring to oral accounts but it seems reasonable to extend to written memories in this case.

<sup>15</sup> This may be a quotation, but I have been unable to trace it: I would be grateful for the source so it can be acknowledged.

However much influenced by sisterhood life, the *Reminiscences* also record Sister Monica Fanny's own sense of herself, her understanding of the world and how she wished to present her life. As Portelli (1991:52) states:

Memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings ... These changes reveal the narrator's effort to make sense of the past and to give form to their lives and set the interview and narrative in their historical context.

Written at the end of her life, the *Reminiscences* reflect the meaning Monica Fanny gave to her life in community and how she found wholeness and integration in the events she records, but although her narrative provides a glimpse of sisterhood life, it only reveals partial truth. Firstly, we cannot understand even Monica Fanny fully from the *Reminiscences*, because we only know what she chose to reveal; and secondly, we know even less about the other SSJD sisters because their memories are not recorded (Armitage & Gluck 2002:81-83).

Sister Monica Fanny was clothed as a novice on the feast of St Matthew, 21 September 1899. The South African War broke out in October 1899. Pietermaritzburg was a garrison town, to which all seriously wounded troops from the Natal battlefields would be sent,<sup>16</sup> but there was a shortage of trained nurses and in this context, the Mother Superior SSJD offered the services of Sister Monica Fanny so that for the next few months, her work as military nurse overshadowed the novitiate. Her humorous account of her running battle with, and triumph over, petty army bureaucracy is an integral part of how she chooses to present herself:

The first thing I asked for was a requisition form and made a list of immediate needs. The Dispenser nearly had a fit & sent 2oz packets of wool. I send another order asking for pounds of wool ... Fancy beginning an operation with bits of wool ... I asked for a razor. The Dispenser was horrified, also Hypodermic syringes, saline apparatus, bottles of lotion, chloroform & brandy. The Dispenser asked for the name of the man I wanted brandy for, his name, no, in regiment. I wrote across the order: the man has not been shot. Such red tape. I asked for 6 yards of jacinet: the order came back, disallowed for Dr's aprons. I sent another request asking 6 yds for use in the Theatre, it came ... Two Drs went down to Durban & bought everything in shape of a surgical instrument they could find. I was told they were in the Quarter Master Store. I went up (nearly a mile) & asked for them to be sent. I was told I must give a list of what I required (such nonsense) how could I know. I met Dr Wood who was one of them to collect. I told him that the Q. M. refused to hand them over. I don't know what happened but all the Instruments were in the Theatre when I got back ... I went up one day to the Q. M. Store for nail brushes. It was mid-day the Q. M. was not there. I saw a door open ... so I asked the assistant if I could go in and have a look around. Oh what a find I had. The first thing I saw a complete Field Hospital ... I wrote a fine order signed by the Colonel.<sup>17</sup>

Her *Reminiscences* go on to record the gruelling and exhausting (full time and unpaid) work when the wounded arrived: assisting with operations all day and into the night, as well as superintending two wards. There is no evidence in the *Reminiscences* that Monica Fanny was inspired in her work by imperial fervour, although Marks (2002:172) suggests that this was implicit in work as a military nurse. In 1957, Monica Fanny applied for a war veteran's pension, pointing out that "all wounded of both forces engaged in the war were received and treated ... No discrimination was made. Both Boer and British wounded were operated on and nursed at the hospital".<sup>18</sup>

When the siege of Ladysmith was lifted in March 1900, the need for her nursing skills ended and she notes pragmatically "So ended a wonderful experience ... I now returned to the routine life of a novice."<sup>19</sup> Monica Fanny's *Reminiscences* cover about thirty-five years of active life in SSJD, yet she devoted more than ten percent of her account to the five months she spent as military nurse. However, this account should not be seen as separate from her life in community or as an indication of longing for another life. Rather, Monica Fanny uses this experience to depict her professional skills and managerial ability, to show the strong qualities of personality and character which she brought into the community, the hard work she was willing to undertake, the humour, flexibility and determination with which she faced the challenges of existence.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed history of Pietermaritzburg in this period, see WH Bizley 1999.

<sup>17</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* pp 6-10.

<sup>18</sup> SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.5 Sister Monica Fanny papers, Sister Monica Fanny to FV Blignaut, November 1957.

<sup>19</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p15.

## Victorian ideology, sisterhoods and feminism

The theology of gender relations which prevailed in the 19th century Victorian church and which was carried over into the early 20th century, rested on the notion of women's subordination to men because of original sin and the fall.<sup>20</sup> This was accompanied by a rigid understanding of distinct male and female attributes and a divine division of labour: men were governed by reason and made for leadership in the public sphere, whereas women's destiny, for which they were particularly fitted by God, was the home, marriage and motherhood (Gill 1994: 89-111).

How did the formation of sisterhoods fit into this? From a study of Sister Monica Fanny's *Reminiscences*, can the sisterhoods be seen as feminist organisations in any way? Some of the implications are explored in this section, through examples from Sister Monica Fanny's *Reminiscences*. The Society of St John the Divine does not appear to have been closely supervised by the bishop of Natal; they were not always able to appoint a permanent chaplain, and some of their institutions were in areas without a parish priest; all these factors created scope for independent action.<sup>21</sup> However, in the 19th century, exercise of public authority was regarded as unwomanly, and so Monica Fanny's triumph over officialdom when she was a military nurse depended on her ability to call on the authority of the colonel and the doctors to get what she wanted. According to the SSJD Rule of Life, within the community the mother superior was regarded as "exercising the authority of our Lord". Nevertheless, there was a distinctly domestic tone, albeit one which brooked no disobedience, in the way that Mother Margaret allocated Monica Fanny's first major responsibility as a fully professed sister:

During the holidays I wondered what my next adventure was going to be. Not a hint did I get until at Obedience after Terce the day the schools were to open. The Revd Mother said "You dear are to go to the Good Shepherd School." It certainly was a slight surprise, as I was a nurse and had nothing to do with schools since my young days ... I walked into the school not knowing anything about teachers, time tables or children.<sup>22</sup>

From our present perspective, the term of endearment and the short notice about the new occupation grates, but for contemporaries, both were presumably compatible with a loving mother preventing holidays from being spoilt by preparation for work ahead. Monica Fanny responded with initiative and professionalism. Coloured children had been excluded from Natal government schools in 1900, so SSJD established the Good Shepherd School for which they received an education department grant in 1901. By the time Monica Fanny took over in 1903, the government's Greyling Street School for Coloured children had been opened and the Good Shepherd grant was withdrawn, together with desks, books and other equipment. Sister Mary St John SSJD, Monica Fanny's predecessor at the Good Shepherd, had received a government salary which was used to buy new desks, but as Monica Fanny noted, "alas they were all sent to St Saviour's school [for white children, also staffed by SSJD] and we had their desks etc made by a carpenter". Following the example of the mendicant friars, she asked local government schools for old readers. Realising the limited capacity of the existing teachers, she eased them out. She also persuaded the Reverend Mother to re-apply (successfully) for government aid, because the Good Shepherd remained the largest school for Coloured children in Natal. Government support meant not only better teachers but also access to resources and advice on teaching methods and so, according to the *Reminiscences*, "I settled down as Head Teacher of a school. (If they had all been in little beds I should have been very happy)".<sup>23</sup> Sister Monica Fanny also ran the convent infirmary and was responsible for care of the chapel: "I don't know to this day which was my work and which were the sidelines."<sup>24</sup> She also spent time tracing absentee children, on one occasion rescuing a child who had been exchanged by her father for a debt, and who was then brought up at the convent, educated and employed until she married. In theory, there were strict limitations on women's public role in the church as the home was seen as their sphere of influence, but at St Luke's parish, which served Coloured Anglicans in Pietermaritzburg, Sister Monica Fanny found that she was "expected to

<sup>20</sup> Genesis, 1 Corinthians 11,1 Timothy 2: for a detailed discussion see Gill 1994:76-89.

<sup>21</sup> SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.1 Constitution of Society of St John the Divine, statute II *Of the Authority of the Bishop* makes it clear that the diocesan bishop was 'the supreme canonical authority' and the successive bishops of Natal were supportive of the sisterhood but did not have the experience of religious life such as that exercised by Bishop Webb in Bloemfontein and Grahamstown.

<sup>22</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences*, p26. Mother Margaret (1854-1916) was the daughter of an honorary canon of Winchester. Like Mother Fanny, she started work in Bloemfontein – but as a lay worker - with Bishop Webb in 1878. Her sister and father were both generous supporters of SSJD(SSJD 1987:33-34).

<sup>23</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* pp27-32.

<sup>24</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p34.

do all sorts of things” not usually undertaken by women. The parish had no priest until 1911 and she was on the receiving end of various requests, for example, “Dear Sister Monach [*sic*] will you please Christened [*sic*] my child” and “Sister my wife died last night will you see about the burying.”<sup>25</sup> During the 1904 Mission of Help,<sup>26</sup> which was run by priests for whom the call to repentance expressed in confession was the Anglo-Catholic equivalent of an altar call, she found herself not only providing instruction but somewhat unusual intervention which demonstrates the trust her religious vocation inspired:

The S. Luke’s people had not been taught about Confession so I had to tell them to go up & ask to speak to the Father. Some were very shy so I took them up & broke the ice for them by informing of what I thought about their faults: This man swears and drinks ... Every one brought me their resolution to read & to the end of their days (nearly all of those have passed over) thought I remembered them. One man when he was dying said to me “we listens to you Sister because we knows it is your business”.<sup>27</sup>

The celibacy of the Anglican sisterhoods faced severe criticism as it challenged the assumption that women should live under male authority, of father, husband or brother (Gill 1994:153), but this was usually overcome by explanation that the bishop or clergy provided necessary patriarchal guidance as wardens or chaplains to the communities (Webb 1883:57-58). The women who joined religious communities viewed their vocation as a call from God similar to the vocation to marriage and saw the community as modelled on a family structure. Sister Monica Fanny’s determined arrangement of marriages between those she found living together shows adherence to the doctrine that the family was at heart of Christian life:

Another [marriage] was between a man called Cato, a member of one of the old settlers. His wife & he did not get on together so he left her & made a home with a Coloured woman ... they lived several years together and had a little family. At last his wife died, so I insisted that they should be married. The Banns were put up in the Lobby of the Town Hall. The difficulty was to get a suit of clothes befitting the affair – he was a very big man. I came across Mrs Dick who was the mayoress. When I told her about Cato, she knew him and asked Mr Heine the magistrate for a suit – he gave a very nice one. On the day fixed I went to the Town Hall but they were not there. I went again at 2-o-c still not signs of them. I took a Ricksha and went to see why they were not there. Oh says Emily, the old man does not feel very well today. I said I am going to sit on this chair until you both are ready. I have a Ricksha outside for him, so they got ready and the deed was done.<sup>28</sup>

Monica Fanny does not discuss theological issues nor is she in the least judgmental, but we see her views in action. Notable is a willingness to meet people where they are and to assist with the secular expectations of respectability in order to achieve her spiritual ends.

Between 1887 and 1928, the number of professed sisters in SSJD rose from three to thirty-three: after this, the size of the community declined gradually, while the average age of the sisters increased, which naturally determined the work they were able to undertake. In 1903, the sisters opened a boarding school for white girls at Frere, which they ran until 1929. In 1916, Sister Monica Fanny’s health broke down, and this time she was able to exercise some influence over where she worked. Mother Margaret had died and Sister Edith was acting mother superior:

I found that Sister was worried about Frere as there had to be a change there. Also wondering what to do with me, so I offered to go to Frere, much to Sister’s relief, it settled two things. I thought that if I could get into the country I should soon be stronger. Also, I could supervise and get enough people to do the work.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p48.

<sup>26</sup> The 1904 Mission of Help was an initiative by the Church of England and the Scottish Episcopal Church to assist the church in South Africa to rebuild after the South African War by sending a missionary team to every white parish (Hinchliff 1963:189). Fr Hart CR, one of the missionaries sent to Pietermaritzburg, offered to go to St Luke’s when he found that nothing had been organized for the Coloured people: for Sister Monica Fanny’s account, see SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15, *Reminiscences* p43-46.

<sup>27</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p45.

<sup>28</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* pp 49-50.

<sup>29</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* pp53-54.

On one occasion, the estate manager at Frere, Cassim Siddayya, reported to Monica Fanny as sister-in-charge, that African workers were threatening to leave because of disturbing sounds near their quarters at night. Police were summoned from Escourt and Colenso but provided no deterrent to the mysterious noises. Sister Monica Fanny's suggestion that the noise was supernatural occasioned further alarm among the workers, and as there was no priest in Frere, she took action:

At 6-o-c I told Cassim to gather together all the members of the estate round their room. We took candles & gave each a litted [*sic*] one. We were Cassim and his two wives, Hindu cook, 3 Christians, 3 Coloured girls & a Coloured woman (a visitor) Sister & myself. It was dark. I said the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm & then sprinkled Holy Water on the building, using In the name [of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost] depart ye evil spirit etc then the collect for Michael, & we went to bed. Next morning they were all smiles, there had been no noise.<sup>30</sup>

She had no authority for carrying out this exorcism, so informed the SSJD chaplain general<sup>31</sup> in Pietermaritzburg immediately, and Fr Alston assured her that she had acted correctly. She also saw her work in pastoral terms which went beyond the school. On one occasion, she heard that the local hotel manager and his wife were consulting spiritualists after their young daughter died:

I said to Sister Agatha I am not going to allow these people to poach on my ground. On the Sunday I armed myself with the Gospel of the Hereafter and went down to the Hotel at 3pm and told them, the husband and wife, that I was going down every Sunday until we had read the book. We had to go to their bed-room, all other rooms were in use. I read and we talked.

Monica Fanny heard afterwards that "the book I had read to her had changed their lives. Her husband bought a copy for himself & recommended it to people [who] came to the hotel".<sup>32</sup>

From 1911, Coloured people began to leave Pietermaritzburg and St Luke's congregation to work in Durban: Fr Alston visited and found that there was "no church which they could understand or feel at home in".<sup>33</sup> In 1920, Sister Monica Fanny agreed to go to Durban, where, supervised by Fr Alston from Pietermaritzburg, she worked among Coloured men and women for three and a half years, until a rector was appointed for the new parish of St Raphael's. Her extraordinary evangelical warmth astonished the clergy:

I can't tell you what a joy it was to see those lost sheep taking their place in their Father's house ... I am sure there cannot be any joy in the world equal to the joy of bringing souls to Christ.<sup>34</sup>

Heilbrun (1989:21-25) suggests that women who put God at centre of their lives made their own desires secondary, and that the achievements of such women were regarded as acceptable by the patriarchal leadership of the church because their work was carried out in the name of religion, and was done without claiming independent managerial ability. The case of Sister Monica Fanny suggests that she recognised and revelled in her abilities as a manager, but although the responsibilities she assumed often went beyond those normally allocated to women, in my view, neither she nor the community as a whole can be described as feminist. There was clearly ambiguity in her work, a combination of what Vicinus (1985:48) describes as both subordination and self-determination. In spite of her extraordinary dedication, determination, self-sacrifice and even independent actions, Sister Monica Fanny did not

---

<sup>30</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* pp57-58. The collect for Michael is a reference to the collect or special prayer for the feast of St Michael and All Angels in the Book of Common Prayer, which Sister Monica Fanny presumably regarded as particularly appropriate for the occasion: 'mercifully grant that as thy holy Angels always do thee service in heaven, so by thy appointment they may succour and defend us on earth.'

<sup>31</sup> From 1911-1949, Fr Alston was the parish priest at St Luke's and was Chaplain to SSJD from 1911-1931 (SSJD 1987:114-115).

<sup>32</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p60. *The Gospel of the Hereafter* by John Paterson Smyth (-1932). Smyth was educated at Trinity College Dublin, obtaining a BA in 1880 and a DLitt in 1901. He was ordained priest in the Church of Ireland in 1881. At about the turn of the century, he moved to Montreal in Canada. Paterson was the author of several popular works such as *How we got our Bible*, *How to read the Bible*, *The Bible for School and Home*, *A People's Life of Christ*, as well as *The Gospel of the Hereafter*, which was in its 14<sup>th</sup> edition by 1911. <http://home.zipworld.com.au/~lnbdds/home/smythclergy.htm> accessed 14 April 2011.

<sup>33</sup> St Raphael's File, Notes on St Raphael's Mission, Durban by Fr W. T. Alston, 1940, p1.

<sup>34</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p 63.

*consciously* identify or challenge women's oppression, or ever assert female independence, but used opportunities created by her life as a religious to move beyond conventional limits imposed on women.

### **Race, class and colonialism: SSJD in Natal**

What role did the sisters of the Society of St John the Divine play in supporting the colonial and apartheid order in Natal? In 1938, the 50th sister joined SSJD, so it is important not to exaggerate the size of the community and their role. At the same time, about three or four women workers lived and worked with the Society each year, which expanded their influence, as did their work in public institutions such as orphanages and schools, not only in Pietermaritzburg but also in Durban and in upcountry towns such as Dundee and Frere. Although a biographical essay should honestly reflect the meaning that a subject gives to her own life, it is also important to deal with the larger context (Armitage & Gluck 2002:81).

Although they did not work among African people until 1929, and although there is little obvious evidence of "imperial consciousness" (Burton 1992:137) in Monica Fanny's *Reminiscences*, it is important to recognise SSJD's role in shaping a racially divided society, particularly as the sisters were active in Natal society beyond women's usual sphere of the home (Dagut 2002:555-572). The Sisters did not come to plant the religious life in Africa, but to live out their own religious vocations.<sup>35</sup> English religious communities usually had two orders: choir sisters identified as "ladies", and lay or second order sisters, these being working class women who did most of the manual work. SSJD abolished the second order as early as 1899,<sup>36</sup> perhaps because of lack of accommodation for two orders separately; perhaps because this was incompatible with their motto; perhaps because they were getting more vocations from working class women than from "ladies"; perhaps because it was not desirable to perpetuate divisions among white women in colonial society, but not apparently as a result of a radical social vision (Gill 1994:159).

The work chosen by the community, regarded as essential to the work of the church in Natal,<sup>37</sup> reinforced the social and racial boundaries which characterised colonial society, as a 1914 article indicates:

Why is most of the Sisters' work for the European people of South Africa rather than for the natives? The need for religious education of white children is quite as great as for the evangelizing of the heathen, and in one sense more so. Since the well-being and training of the natives is practically in the hands of the white population, it is of the first importance that white people should show forth to the large native population amongst whom they live, and whom they employ, a pattern of what a Christian life should be.<sup>38</sup>

Although they envisaged their work as ameliorating the lot of the indigenous people by educating white children, the text shows no understanding of the inequalities and injustices of Natal society or of any need to address them, but rather illustrates the extent to which Christianity was identified with empire and the colonial order.

Among the first works of the SSJD sisters were orphanages for white children in Pietermaritzburg and Durban. Undoubtedly the Sisters provided love and care, but also addressed racial expectations which the children's families had not met:

The habits of order, discipline, and refinement contracted at St Cross are of incalculable value to the girls in after-life. Many of them are the offspring of worthless parents, and St Cross is in some sense a reparation for the shock given to native opinion by the evil example of our fellow-countrymen in the past.<sup>39</sup>

In 1902, Sister Monica Fanny was sent to Durban where, for a brief time, girls from St Cross who had reached the age of fourteen were provided with domestic training before being sent out to work, but this was soon given up in response to market forces: "it was found out that the ladies wished to train the girls themselves".<sup>40</sup> Contemporary criticism of SSJD was based on religious prejudice: "Old bogies

<sup>35</sup> Nicolas Stebbing discusses this failure with regard to Anglican men's communities (2003:46-52). I have begun research on this with regard to women's communities, where the pattern was to create separate communities for African women.

<sup>36</sup> SSJD Time charts 1887-1937 DN/DR/0/3.5.1 Sisters.

<sup>37</sup> SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.14 'Sisterhood of St John the Divine, Maritzburg' London: Odhams 1894, p3.

<sup>38</sup> SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.6 'A Sisterhood in South Africa' *Oxbey Church Monthly Magazine* June 1914, p124.

<sup>39</sup> SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.14 'Sisterhood of St John the Divine, Maritzburg' London: Odhams 1894 p2.

<sup>40</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p20.



of oppressing children or immuring them in a dark hole without any ray of light are revived for our benefit.”<sup>41</sup> To such charges, they usually did not respond:

It is vain to ask them for what reason we would leave comfortable homes to look after other people’s children in what, to most of us, is a foreign land; what advantage we find in walking through damp and heat from door to door, to ask for food or old clothes or money; what pleasure we derive from subjecting ourselves to rude remarks and refusals and newspaper abuse.<sup>42</sup>

Although the Sisters kept in touch with many of the orphans when they left to be employed as servants, their training of the children for this sphere of employment also buttressed colonial society.

The Sisters’ work extended over a wide class spectrum: they ran St Lucy’s hostel, where children of working class parents could board while attending St Saviour’s School, and this enabled their parents to remain and work in the Transvaal.<sup>43</sup> The hostel clearly addressed a capitalist need, enabling skilled workers to remain on the mines while their children were educated. The community also established a major boarding school for the children of the colonial elite in the 1890s. St John’s was intended

for the daughters of farmers, country shopkeepers, &c. The girls come to us from their distant homes, quite untrained, and, in some cases, uncivilised, and here, at the most impressionable period of their lives, every good influence is brought to bear upon them.<sup>44</sup>

The broad aim of Monica Fanny’s work among Coloured children at the Good Shepherd was likewise to train children for their role in colonial society and a 1914 report noted that they “make most excellent servants”.<sup>45</sup> Young women from St Cross and from the Good Shepherd School, including those rescued from abusive situations,<sup>46</sup> often remained with the Sisters to do housework and laundry in their various institutions, but the Sisters did a large amount of manual work for themselves in the convent. SSJD records make hardly any mention of Africans being employed, and this in itself is revealing, but photographs show that African women were employed as cooks and African men to work outdoors.<sup>47</sup>

In 1929, the Sisters decided to close the school for white children at Frere: it was difficult to get teachers, government hostels for boarders had opened in nearby towns, and the financial position was unsound. They noted however, that “it was a lack for our Society to have no native work after 42 years of existence”, and in 1930, they agreed to open a clinic and run the primary school founded in 1907. Sister Monica Fanny was sister-in-charge. There was clearly a demand for the clinic, with 100 patients a month, but the Department of Native Affairs, the Natal Provincial Administration and the diocese turned down requests for funding and the work of nursing was so heavy “that it seemed impossible to combine its bulk with the proper keeping of our Rule”,<sup>48</sup> the clinic closed in October 1931. Monica Fanny, who taught Scripture and English reading in the primary school, had a clear plan for what could have been achieved at Frere, in keeping with the labour needs of the province:

There is no doubt but if we had had sufficient Sisters, we could have had an Industrial School, as it was a self-contained place. We grew enough mealies to last a year. We used to send them to Ladysmith & had them ground into meal. Also vegetables were easy to grow. We had 2 cows, 2 donkeys & a horse (retired St Cross animal) who did the ploughing, also chickens, dog & cat.<sup>49</sup>

In 1934, Sister Monica Fanny was in hospital and then spent time recuperating in England. She returned to Frere in 1935, but was ill again from February until May, and in September it became clear that she could not continue: in January 1936, the community decided to close the work at Frere because

---

<sup>41</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Typed records of SSJD 1887-1937, St Cross p2.

<sup>42</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Typed records of SSJD 1887-1937, St Cross p2.

<sup>43</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Typed records of SSJD 1887-1937, St Lucy’s p1-2.

<sup>44</sup> SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.14 ‘Sisterhood of St John the Divine, Maritzburg’ London, Odhams 1894, p3.

<sup>45</sup> SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.6 ‘A Sisterhood in South Africa’ *Oxbey Church Monthly Magazine* June 1914, p122.

<sup>46</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* pp18, 47.

<sup>47</sup> SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.6 ‘A Sisterhood in South Africa’ *Oxbey Church Monthly Magazine* June 1914, p1 and SSJD 1987:54.

<sup>48</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Typed records of SSJD 1887-1937, Frere pp8-10.

<sup>49</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p72.

of lack of personnel and funds.<sup>50</sup> For Sister Monica Fanny, it was the end of her active work in SSJD: “It was a great sorrow to me to leave all those dear people.”<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

I began this article by setting out three aims: firstly, to examine how Sister Monica represented her life in her *Reminiscences*; secondly, to examine the role of religious sisters in the prevailing patriarchal gender structures of the Anglican church; and thirdly to examine the stance of Monica Fanny herself and the sisterhood as a whole, towards colonial society, in the light of criticism that the Christian church has all too often been in close alliance with imperialism and colonialism.

In practice, the three issues are closely linked. The picture of Sister Monica Fanny that emerges from the *Reminiscences* is of an independent woman clearly capable of taking the initiative in the various contexts in which she worked, revelling in her capacity for independent action and management, and able to exercise a ministry which went beyond the docile obedience and self-effacement expected of women in the church. Readers might argue that here is an example of feminism in deeds if not actually claimed in words, but there are other issues which need to be considered. Firstly, although the *Reminiscences* show that religious sisters were able to exercise a ministry far beyond that normally envisaged for women in the Anglican Church, it should be recognised that neither Sister Monica Fanny nor her community saw themselves as pioneering a new role for women in the church. Their deeds may appear feminist, but they were not combined with the feminist consciousness which is required to challenge and address injustice. This is illustrated by the concluding sentence of the *Reminiscences*, in which Monica Fanny sets aside the independent personality we have glimpsed and emphasises that her work must be seen as part of the life of her religious community:

In all my work given to me to do I always tried to keep in my mind that I was only a branch of the Community Tree & that anything I was allowed to do was owing to the upholding of the sap from the Tree (Community prayers).<sup>52</sup>

Related to this is the issue of the links between the religious community and colonialism. The call to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience is a radical one, but this does not directly lead to radical analysis of the context in which the community lives. It is clear from the examination of the evidence in Sister Monica Fanny’s life that the sisterhood tended to conform to the racial and class divisions of colonial society. Given that patriarchy was a strong element in the enforcement of colonialism, this is yet another factor against any claim that the sisterhood can be seen as feminist in any significant way, however much their charitable actions attempted to ameliorate the worst aspects of colonialism.

In spite of these limitations, the *Reminiscences of Sister Monica Fanny SSJD* enable us to recognise the importance of the personal and of everyday life as history, while the *Reminiscences* also provide a new perspective of the role of women in southern African Christianity, much of which still remains hidden from history.

## Works consulted

### *Natal Diocesan Archives*

SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences of Sister Monica Fanny SSJD*.

SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Typed records of the Society of St John the Divine, Pietermaritzburg, Natal 1887-1937.

SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.51 Sister Margaret Anne’s notebook for SSJD history.

SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.1 List of all Sisters SSJD.

SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.14 “Sisterhood of St John the Divine, Maritzburg” London: Odhams 1894.

SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.5 Sister Monica Fanny papers.

SSJD Sisters DN/DR/0/1.4.6 ‘A Sisterhood in South Africa’ *Oxby Church Monthly Magazine* June 1914, pp122-124.

SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.1 Constitution of Society of St John the Divine.

SSJD Society DN/DR/0/2.2 Rule of Life of the Society of St John the Divine.

---

<sup>50</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.10 Typed records of SSJD 1887-1937, Frere pp8-10.

<sup>51</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p74.

<sup>52</sup> SSJD History DN/DR/0/4.15 *Reminiscences* p74.

SSJD Time charts 1887-1937 DN/DR/0/3.5.1 Sisters.  
St Raphael's File, Notes on St Raphael's Mission Durban by Fr W. T. Alston, 1940.

#### *Books and journals*

- Anson, Peter 1958. *The call of the cloister: religious communities and kindred bodies in the Anglican Communion*. London: SPCK.
- Armitage, Susan & Gluck, Sherna 2002. Reflections on women's oral history: an exchange, in Armitage, Susan, Hart, Patricia Hart & Weathermon, Karen (eds.), *Women's oral history: the frontiers reader*, 75-86. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Backscheider, Paula 2001. *Reflections on biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bizley, WH 1999. Maritzburg during the siege of Natal as reflected in the *Natal Witness* from October 1899 to March 1900. *Natalia* 29, 61-90.
- Burton, Antoinette M 1992. The white woman's burden: British feminists and "The Indian Woman", 1865-1915, in Chaudhuri, Nupur & Strobel, Margaret, *Western women and imperialism: complicity and resistance*, 137-157. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Coullie, Judith 2004. *The closest of strangers: South African women's life writing*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Dagut, S 2002. Gender, colonial "women's history" and the construction of social distance: middle class British women in later nineteenth century South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26(3), 555-572.
- Gill, Sean 1994. *Women in the Church of England from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present*. London: SPCK.
- Gluck, Sherner 2002. What's so special about women? Women's oral history?, in Armitage, Susan, Hart, Patricia & Weathermon, Karen (eds.), *Women's oral history: the frontiers reader*, 3-20. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn 1989. *Writing a woman's life*. London: The Women's Press.
- Hinchliff, Peter 1963. *The Anglican Church in South Africa*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
- Lewis, Cecil & Edwards, Gertrude E 1934. *Historical records of the Church of the Province of South Africa*. London: SPCK.
- Marks, Shula 2002. British nursing in the South African War, in Cuthbertson, G, Grundlingh, A & Suttie, M-L (eds.), *Writing a wider war*, 159-185. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Mumm, Susan 1999. *Stolen daughters, virgin mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain*. London: Leicester University Press.
- Portelli, Alessandro 1991. *The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories: form and meaning in oral history*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- SSJD, Sister Margaret Anne 1987. *What the world counts weakness: a centenary history of the Society of St John the Divine, Natal*. Durban: SSJD.
- Stebbing, Nicolas (ed.) 2003. *Anglican religious life: a well kept secret*. Dublin: Dominican Publications
- Swaisland, Cecillie 1993. *Servants and gentlewomen to the golden land: the emigration of single women from England to Southern Africa 1820-1939*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Vicinus, Martha 1985. *Independent women; work and community for single women 1850-1920*. London: Virago Press.
- Webb, Alan 1883. *Sisterhood life and women's work in the mission field of the church*. London: Skeffington.

#### *Websites*

*Some Smyth clergy*. Available:  
<http://home.zipworld.com.au/~lnbdds/home/smythclergy.htm>. Accessed 14 April 2011.