

Mornington Island Mission

1914 – 1978

Details

The Mornington Island Mission was established by the Presbyterian Church in 1914. The island is located in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Children on the Mornington Island Mission lived in dormitories, nearly totally isolated from their families. The children's dormitories closed around the late 1960s. Mornington Island was self-managed from 1978, when the Mornington Island Shire Council was constituted with the introduction of the Local Government (Aboriginal Lands) Act 1978.

Elsie Roughsey lived in the dormitories at Mornington Island Mission from the age of 8, in the early 1930s. In her memoir, Roughsey described how all children of school age on the Mission had to live in dormitories. The boys and girls were separated from one another, and all children were locked in the dormitory when they were not in school, church or working around the Mission. Children were only allowed to spend time with their parents on Sundays. She recalled that when life in the dormitory got too hard or when they got into trouble from the superintendent, both the boys and girls used to run away into the bush and spend time with their parents.

Roughsey's memoir describes how in the 1930s boys were allowed to leave the dormitory around Christmas to spend 6 weeks in the bush with their parents. However girls had to stay on the Mission. After girls finished school they had to stay in the dormitory and work on the Mission, including looking after babies and young children. She wrote that girls only left the dormitory when they got married – this was her experience (Roughsey, 1984).

In 1942, during World War Two, almost all the mission staff and the children in the dormitory were evacuated to the mainland. The older children were put into domestic service at stations in the Gulf and the younger ones were sent to Doomadgee Mission (Queensland Government, 'Mornington Island').

In 1947 and 1948, people were brought by the Queensland government to Mornington Island Mission from Bentinck Island. This relocation was said to be due to the effects of a tidal surge on the island, however some people dispute this. In 2022, Kaiadilt woman Coreen Reading said:

"In school we were taught that Bentinck people were saved after our island was inundated by a tidal wave and there was no fresh water after years of drought ... That's not the story I was told. I've seen the chain marks on the tree at Oak Tree Point where our people were chained up and forced onto boats" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2022).

In 1958, some families voluntarily moved to Mornington Island from the Doomadgee Mission, "to take advantage of the liberalised philosophies of the new Superintendent Reverend Belcher" which resulted in children not being separated from their parents, although the dormitories remained in operation until the late 1960s (Queensland Government).

In 1978, Mornington and other nearby islands were granted Local Government status with a Shire Council and elected representatives of the community.

Woomera Aboriginal Corporation was founded in 1973 and incorporated in 1983. In 2009, Woomera Aboriginal Corporation underwent a name change, becoming Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation (MGAC).

Gallery



Mornington Island Mission, 1940s

Description: From the catalogue of the National Film and Sound Archive: "This is an excerpt from colour home movies made between 1944 and 1948 by Reverend James McCarthy, the Superintendent of the Presbyterian Mission on Mornington Island. Mornington Island, a remote community in the Gulf of Carpentaria, has been occupied by its traditional owners, the Lardil people, for thousands of years. In this excerpt from the home movies we see the medical dispensary and Flying Doctor Service, school students performing calisthenics, people fishing and swimming and a plane dropping supplies by parachute."



Mornington Island Mission, 1933

Description: This is a copy of a photograph of buildings on the Mornington Island Mission.



Large group of children in front of a building, Mornington Island Mission, 1933

Description: This is a photograph showing a group of approximately 80 children ranging in age from roughly 5 to 18, accompanied by a woman. The children are posed for the photograph, arranged in four lines in front of a tin building.

More info

Resources

- Diaz, Amanda, [Caitlyn finds footage of her island home](#), No date

Records

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

Records

- [Health & Home Affairs/Education Department Batch Files \[Correspondence\] - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander files \(1884 - 1970\)](#)
 - [Correspondence - Alphanumeric Prefix - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs \(1909 - 1992\)](#)
 - [Correspondence Files - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs \(1916 - 1999\)](#)
 - [Correspondence Files \[Offices of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals and Director of Native Affairs\] \(1901 - 1944\)](#)
 - [General Correspondence - Torres Strait Islands \(1922 - 1994\)](#)
 - [Miscellaneous Items and Correspondence - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander files \(1859 - 1997\)](#)
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