

Rosemary Opala's Voice

29 September 2023

Rosemary Opala was a woman who had voice, to use a current and now rather contentious term. We are here to celebrate one hundred years since Rosemary was born in 1923, and her voice is my topic. Her voice was doubly powerful because she was both an artist and a writer. Rosemary applied the power of her voice to her love of nature, to educate people about nature and to advocate for the appreciation and the preservation of nature in all its diversity.

Everyone I have spoken to about Rosemary stresses she was a very quiet, modest and reserved person. She herself wrote that she attempted to 'keep a low profile'. But we have the legacy of her voice through her paintings, drawings and writings, showing that her voice, through these mediums, was indeed a powerful a voice.

Rosemary grew up in Noosa and then in the Palmwoods area, west of the Sunshine Coast. Her earliest visual memories are of 'flotillas of pelicans, tea tree blossoms, soldier crabs, jellyfish'. She described herself as 'A beachcomber from formative days'. (1.) Her parents struggled through the Depression, trying but not succeeding to make a farm. Her father suffered from PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, from service and being a prisoner-of-war in the First World War. Her mother, Ethel Fielding, was a published writer. Among Rosemary's papers there is a manuscript of a children's book that her mother wrote, but which was not published. The story is about ants and is called 'A Little World of Insects', with the subtitle 'For children who like to watch them'.

We know from this manuscript that Rosemary would have been influenced by her mother being a writer, but also a lover of nature. For her own career, Rosemary first chose commercial art and enrolled at the George Street Technical College, now QUT. When war broke out, however, she changed to becoming a nurse, in her own words to 'do something more useful than playing with paints, seeing as though everybody was rushing off to the war'. Nursing led to her working at the leprosy hospital on Peel Island here in Moreton Bay, and she worked there through the late forties and the fifties. As the leprosy hospital was the only human habitation on Peel island, Rosemary's life through this time would have been surrounded by the island's bush and beaches, an ideal place for her to further her own love of nature, especially Peel island's largely isolated and unspoilt nature.

Rosemary married a Polish immigrant, Marian Opala, and lived here on Coochiemudlo Island in the 1960s. Rosemary had fallen in love with Coochie, after she had visited it earlier by her feat of rowing herself from Cleveland to Coochie and then struggling back again on the same day. She came to live in Coochie as a single woman and described this time as being 'a stress-free life as a farm hand cum beachcomber.' After her marriage, Rosemary and her husband built their own house overlooking Main Beach. Again, Rosemary would have been surrounded by the beauties of nature on this island, which was then largely not developed, with infrequent ferries, and without electricity, sewerage, piped water or tarred roads. She later returned to her nursing career in Brisbane and eventually she retired to Caloundra, where she died in 2008.

Rosemary wrote prolifically during her retirement. She wrote for community groups, such as for the Sunshine Coast Environment Council in their journal Eco Echo, and also for the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. She contributed to the Queensland Naturalist, the journal of the Queensland Naturalists Club. For some ten years Rosemary also wrote regular columns for the Sunshine Coast Daily newspaper.

Rosemary was a naturalist, and her writing and her art focused on the breadth of nature as she knew it on the southern Queensland coast, its inland and its islands. She used her voice, through her articles and the accompanying illustrations, to share her love of nature, and to educate people about flowers, birds, trees, insects, frogs, lizards, plants, mangroves, crabs and sea creatures. From the huge amount of Rosemary's work, I have selected just a few of Rosemary's articles in the frames here, to show the diversity of her subjects.

On the hanging panel, it is also my special privilege to include two original works by Rosemary herself. Rosemary made plaques in terra cotta clay. This one is called 'Bark man', and you can see the rough face captured in what at a glance looks just like rough bark. It has been loaned to us by Margaret Gillett, a long-time householder on Coochie. Margaret knew Rosemary as a supervising nurse in her own nursing career. The second work is an embroidery of a Banksia, beautifully stitched to show the textures and character of this remarkable Australian plant. The embroidery is a treasure owned by the Coochiemudlo Island Heritage Society, thanks to a gift from Keith Stebbins, a past president. His parents, Rowly and Jean Stebbins, lived in Caloundra, and knew Rosemary. Keith inherited the embroidery from his parents.

Rosemary's columns are all illustrated with her own drawings, adding both charm and visual information to her words. The columns are a delight to read, as she has an easy writing style. She writes with great knowledge from her years of close watching of the natural world around her. In reading her work, you become aware that educating people about nature is her primary goal. Part of this education includes giving everything its proper Latin botanical name. While using the popular name or names of things, she always inserts somewhere the botanical Latin name. This practice indicates that she did her homework on all the subjects that she writes about. For example, an article I especially enjoyed was the one about Ant Lions (2), which are the larval stage of Lace Wings. She tells us, of course, that they are called '*myrmelion pictifrons*'. I learned much from this article, as I have seen the characteristic small, shallow conical holes in the sand around the bush tracks here on the island. Rosemary describes them as neat little 'moon craters'. I had been told that the name Ant Lions was associated with these tiny craters, but I had no idea until I read her article that they were ant traps set by the larvae of Lace Wings. Rosemary describes how hapless unsuspecting ants come into these sand traps and are 'snatched with lightning speed.' She tells of finding these sandy circles as a child, though not understanding what they were. She ends her column by suggesting they might be kept as little pets, in a sandy tray with a regular supply of ants. She suggests putting honey or fresh meat nearby to attract ants, thus feeding the Ant Lion will be easily accomplished.

Rosemary frequently wrote sadly and ruefully about native species disappearing. Rosemary was not only educating people about nature, she was advocating for its preservation. 'Where have all the flowers gone' was the title she gave to a piece about the vanishing flowers on Coochiemudlo Island. Having lived on the island in the sixties, she knew what was missing by the

nineties when she wrote the piece. The list of flowers is a long one, including greenhood orchids, a white ground orchid called *Caladenia alba*, a Sarsaparilla creeper, a native passion fruit, native Dogwoods and Irises, and Pinkeys, all of which she describes, including, of course, their proper botanical Latin names. Her article about frogs, here, is also along this losing or lost nature theme, and it has the title 'Catch a frog before they all croak . . .' (3). In it she mourns the disappearance of the Large Green Tree Frog which coastal development has eliminated. In her writings Rosemary often included mentions of her childhood, often with humour. In the frog article she mentions her mother's outrage, in pre-refrigerator days, 'outrage over a large frog happily embedded in a in a raspberry jelly left overnight on the window sill to set.'

Rosemary mourned the disappearance of Christmas Bells in a column titled 'Christmas Bells peal no more'. Of course she also gives them their botanical name, *Blandfordia grandiflora*. She writes that the Christmas Bell, 'once wall-to-wall on the Sunshine Coast, is now rarely seen outside national and environmental parks. She lists areas where they have disappeared, but also lists conserved land where she hoped that they may survive. In another article (4) on the same theme, she says that when she was living in Caloundra, she was part of a small band of locals dedicated to saving the remnant *Blandfordia*. Saving them was no easy task, she says, 'battling a mucky terrain pitted with invisible, water filled depressions'. Rosemary was involved in conservation activities, as well as writing about them.

In an article in Eco Echo, 2002, Rosemary wrote about Mangroves and their importance as a 'vital part of the marine ecosystem'. She headed the article with the evocative title 'Twixt Land and Sea'. The species she calls the

White mangrove has little roots that stick up vertically out of the mud. These roots, she explains, are called pneumatophores. She introduces a characteristic humorous note in relating that one member of a walking group, when noticing these vertical spikes of mangrove roots, asked if they were Asparagus! Rosemary describes the other mangrove types, such as the Red Mangrove, the Orange Mangrove, the Yellow Mangrove and the River Mangrove, each with their very distinctive roots, flowers and seeds. A mangrove popularly called Blind your Eye is known for its poisonous milky sap. All these species, by the way, can be found here on Coochiemudlo Island. Rosemary finishes the article by being critical of the human flotsam and jetson found amongst the mangroves, especially the remnant pieces of plastic and the frequently found thongs. Look carefully at her illustration of the mangrove, and you will see that she has included a thong! Rosemary's care for small creatures is seen in another Mangrove article she wrote, where she describes how she brought some mangrove leaves home, only to find a tiny shellfish attached to one of the leaves. Caring Rosemary carefully returned the little creature to its tree on the beach.

In 1996 Rosemary wrote about a very particular tree that her sharp eyes found here on Coochiemudlo Island. She wrote about it in several articles, and one of them is here on the fence, between the photographs showing the tree as it is now. Her article is called 'Strangers on the shore'. Although she had not noticed the tree in her frequent walks on the island, she spotted this tree when it was in flower, a tree that is rare for this area. Intrigued by her find, Rosemary set about finding out all she could about it. After research, she found out that it was a *Thespesia populnea*, a tropical tree with Morteon Bay its most southerly reach.

The leaves of this tree are similar to the common Cotton Trees (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) found particularly on the north shore of Coochiemudlo island, along Morwong Beach. When the rare tree she found is not in flower, at a glance it would look just like the nearby Cotton trees, as both trees have heart-shaped green leaves. But the leaves are different on closer inspection, in that on the rare tree they are green on the underside, rather than the grey suede of the Cotton tree. Insects also like to eat these Cotton tree leaves, so often they are lacy. You can see these distinguishing features in these photos which show the common Cotton tree leaves, with their grey underside and the lacy, insect eaten leaves. The flowers on the tree she found had lemon-yellow blossoms with dark red centres, and very different seeds, which were shaped like little tomatoes, quite unlike the spiky seed pods of the Cotton trees.

Rosemary wrote to the Herbarium about the discovery of the *Thespesia* on Coochiemudlo Island, and found that it was common further north. Rosemary's drawing of the plant was used on the front cover of The Queensland Naturalist, the journal of the Queensland Naturalists' club, in December 1996, and her article about it was in the same issue, complete with her illustrations of its flowers and seeds. My only problem with her description of the tree was that she said it was in the north-east corner of the island when it is actually on the north-west corner, where we took these photographs of it recently. Perhaps this may have been deliberate misinformation, to help protect the tree.

Rosemary had had long interest in Hibiscus plants. In the 1980s she participated in helping the survival of an endangered Hibiscus plant from Philip Island, an island in the Pacific near Norfolk Island. An account of her interest

was in her papers (11). The name of the plant was *Hibiscus insularis*, and it had been almost wiped out by colonial mismanagement, particularly by the release of pigs, goats and rabbits on the island. The World Wildlife Fund became involved and Rosemary wrote to Norfolk Island about her interest because she had acquired a plant from a nursery in Australia labelled 'Norfolk Island Hibiscus', a plant which she found later was thanks to the propagation work of George Trapnell of 'Save the Trees'. Tests of Rosemary's Hibiscus conducted by the National Botanic Gardens proved that it was the endangered Philip Island variety. Rosemary promoted it through sharing plants from cuttings.

As for Rosemary's writings, there are so many more of her articles that I would like to share with you, articles about flowering Trigger plants, Native Lasandra, also known as Blue Tongue, and the brightly coloured Pigface, which, she writes, is a very unfortunate name. She wrote about Soldier crabs, spiders, beetles, lizards and hairy caterpillars. She tackled issues about weeds in some columns. In one column she wrote about Australian Melaleucas that have become weeds in Florida. Her cheeky solution is to suggest sending a few squads of Australian developers to solve the problem. Rosemary wrote many articles about birds: the Tawny Frogmouth, the White-necked Heron, the Grey Shrike-thrush, Barn owls, and one of my favourite birds, Willy wagtails. Also she wrote about the ospreys, the plovers, budgerigars, the Black faced cuckoo shrike, the Pheasant Coucal (which apparently is not a pheasant at all), the Spoonbill, the brilliant Lorikeets, and the omnipresent Sacred Ibis and Magpies. Then there are columns about flies, jelly fish, the Casuarinas, the Melaleucas and Pandanus trees, and the Strangler Fig. And most of these are only the articles I had time to copy from her collection of papers at the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland. But I hope this all tells you about the

breadth of Rosemary Opala's writing and illustration. Her voice was surely used to educate people about the wonders of nature's diversity, to help them know more and be more conscious of both what we have, and what we are losing. She would have hoped her words might help stop further destruction of the environment that she loved so much and knew so well.

Through this exhibition, we honour Rosemary's voice.

Margaret Paxton-Rolfe

References

1. 'The Trees of Paradise' MS.
2. 'Ant Lion survives constant changes to environment', South Coast Daily, 6/1/98.
3. 'Where have all the flowers gone' MS.
4. Untitled article on Christmas Bells, from U3A source undated.
5. 'Catch a frog before they all croak . . .', South Coast Daily, 5/2/91.
6. 'Christmas Bells peal no more'. South Coast Daily, 26/10/91.
7. 'Twixt Land and Sea', Eco Echo, Spring 2002.
8. 'Two Sides to White Mangrove', Sunshine Coast Daily, 19/3/1996.
9. 'Strangers on the shore', undated. Also see 'Strangers on the shore: *Thespesia populnea* (*Hibiscus populnaeus*), an unusual species for South Morton Bay', Queensland Naturalist, 34, (4-6) 1996.
10. 'Friend or foe'
11. 'A Hibiscus survivor' MS circa 1986