

Rosemary Opala

We all know Rosemary as a great character – an artist, a poet and funny, with an understanding and love of the environment and a sense of adventure.

Her perceptive mind and way with words and art were evident at an early age. She came to Brisbane from Palmwoods in the 1940s to complete an art course at George Street Technical College.

As I go on I will mention some of her writings. They create pictures in my mind as much her words do on paper.

I'd like to share the poem, written when she was a Form IV student at the Nambour Rural School. She had left school in Palmwoods to go to the Nambour school where she said *'the drawing paper was much better'*!

Long forgotten, the poem was sent to Rosemary by a friend from their old school magazine.

It's titled "The Dreamer"

He stayed beside the moving street
And watched them pass him by.
The crowd with busy, countless feet,
The rolling cart and carriage neat –
All these he marked with dreamy eye
And wondered at their hurrying,
And reason for their journeying.

He chose a shady lane for rest,
And saw before him go
A dog upon some secret quest,
A butterfly in scarlet dressed,
An old horse grey and slow.
He wondered as they heedless passed
Their destination at the last.

And so he was content to stay
A loiterer by life's hard way.
Unwitting last in fortune's race
Through pausing o'er each passing face.
And little knew, when they were gone,
While he stood still, the world moved on.

Rosemary's biography in [Design and Art Australia Online](#), describes her as a 'Late 20th century cartoonist, botanical illustrator, painter, journalist and short

story writer, who became a nurse during World War 2, wanting to do in her words, *'something more useful than playing with paints'*.

Many drawings in watercolour, pen and ink, reflecting her nursing experiences are in the collection of The University of Queensland's Fryer Library. Rosemary described them as *'Disrespectful cartoons'*. They serve as historical artefacts in the documenting of the Brisbane General Hospital between 1940 and 1945.

We have in the Redland Museum several of Rosemary's botanical artworks in pen and ink and watercolour which she and Peter Ludlow have passed on to us over the years.

As an environmentalist, Rosemary illustrated extensively the fauna and flora of the greater Brisbane area, particularly focusing on Peel and Coochiemudlo Islands.

She was involved in the Botanical Artists Society of Queensland with her friend Louise Saunders and was an active member of the Coochiemudlo Art Group.

Although she had drawn since early childhood she believed that it was her time living on Coochiemudlo Island that started her interest in botanical illustration. Mangroves being a favourite subject, she illustrated the Bay's seven mangrove species, the Redland (then) Shire Council adding two of her watercolour mangrove studies to their Environmental Collection.

In the 1950s, Rosemary served two terms at St Ann's hospital in Cleveland.

Reminiscing, she had forgotten the exact dates of her time there but not the operating table which we have in the museum, together with her description of the operating theatre.

Rosemary told me once that during her time at St Ann's, she visited the Mortons, farming on Coochie, rowing there in her tiny dinghy and then rowing home to Cleveland.

On one occasion, when returning to St Ann's, the tide had gone out and she had to tow the boat back, arriving just on time to go on duty.

A chance meeting with Mary Morton who was visiting a patient, elicited an open invitation to visit the island. Rosemary immediately fell in love with what she called this '*pre developer spot*' and later, with her new husband moved here and '*built own house with our own hands*' near Main Beach.

After retiring in 1980 Rosemary was able at last to devote time to wildflower painting, in particular banksias, describing them as '*time consuming*'.

In the late 1960s during her time in Caloundra with her husband Marian, Rosemary and her artist friend the Botanical Illustrator Kathleen MacArthur, were members of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland contributing articles and drawings to the quarterly magazine *Eco Echo*.

In 2004, her 80th year, Rosemary was recognized in the Inaugural Women of the Redlands exhibition presented in the Redland Museum by the Wynnum Redland Branch of Zonta International. Curated by Bettina McCaulay the exhibition honoured 15 influential Redland women.

From the late 1940s until 1959 when it closed, Rosemary nursed at the Lazaret on Peel Island. Between her duties she painted and explored and attempted to make the most of the island and its isolation. She wrote about her experiences there and sketched its native flora. She expressed great empathy for the

patients and wrote about the impact of isolation and the stigmas attached to patients.

In an interview with Peter Ludlow in 1995, Rosemary said:

'I don't think I'll ever get Peel out of my system, for some reason or other. I've worked in many other places, but this one will probably haunt me till my dying day. There's just something about it.'

In 2007, at the Redland Museum, together with the Friends of Peel Island, I curated the exhibition 'Going to the Gums' to mark the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the Peel Island Lazaret. The patients referred to dying as '*Going to the Gums*'

When planning the exhibition, I asked Rosemary for some of her memories of her time there. Her insightful words, proved a major contribution to the exhibition, beautifully transcribed in Calligraphy by Ruth Venner onto mulberry paper hangings. These are some:

Still there on Peel, Mid-summer.
Cast cicada shells like amber brooches deck old trees
Invisible among the boughs above
These liberated drummers belt our ears.'

and another:

Casuarina and Callitris
Beach She Oaks sway and brush their shadows on the sand, crying in every
wind.
Indifferent, on higher ground, old Beach Cyprus spreads its emerald layers over
ancient trunk and twisted roots and boughs.

These few words express her intuitive appreciation of beauty in nature:

and then, Rosemary the realist wrote:

Isn't it a marvelous view
Enthuses the newest R.N.
'Not if you're forced to live here Sister'
Is the dour reply.
N.B. Not a poem but fact.

Of the Lazaret in 1990, having last seen it in the 1950s, she wrote:

'Well tended open space, round staffs old homes.
All else an archipelago – derelict huts drowned in a Lantana sea'.

A poignant illustration from the exhibition was her sketch of '*Laddie the Patient Birdwatcher*'. During his incarceration on Peel, around 30 years, Noel Agnew (Laddie), a patient at the Lazaret, identified and compiled a comprehensive list of 76 species of birds, published in the Royal Australian Ornithologists Journal, *The Emu*. Rosemary's sketch shows Laddie sitting on a log amongst the mangroves observing a hovering bird.

Another patient she never forgot, and just referred to as Red, was an Oxford scholar who had also flown a plane in the First World War.

Rosemary says: '*Devoid of self pity, his disease being advanced and incapacitating, the unsophisticated nurses found him fascinating. I for one had my reading and musical tastes tactfully redirected and learned there was more to poetry than I love a sunburnt country*'.

One for the small courtesies, Red kept somehow both identity and pride within the threefold prison, of island, one tiny hut and a wrecked body.

Rosemary's sensitive painting of Red shows her skill at portraiture.

Whimsical drawings from that time were included in the exhibition. One titled *'White Man's Midden - Peel's own jetsom'*, cleverly depicted the detritus of times past.

Others shows the windswept conditions of a working day, and leisure time - *'Nurses in the Bunyip Swamp'*. *Black water entered with unease on way to Horseshoe. Bunyips and bad Banksia Men.*

I spent some happy times chatting with Rosemary in her home in the Adventist Retirement Village at Victoria Point , listening rather than contributing, surrounded by the evidence of her many interests. *'There is more to life than just existing – more than being upright and breathing'* .

Years ago, my wife Cecily enjoyed her company when they met at bookclub in the Cleveland Library together with an interesting group of like minded Redland ladies.

I feel privileged to have been included among the eleven people Rosemary requested to be at her funeral. I'm so pleased to have known her albeit in her later years.