

# ***Rosemary Opala — the Nurse***

**A Fragmentary Biography of Rosemary Opala (1923-2008)**

**Her Service as a Nurse**

***“Rich in Good Works”***

**John Pearn**

**An invited paper presented at the Symposium,**

***Rosie Changed Lives — A Retrospective***



**The Coochiemudlo Island Heritage Society**



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Rosemary Opala was one of the life's special people. To thousands, she was an artist whose skills brought special pleasure; to many, she was more than an amateur botanist and a passionate environmentalist, whose advocacy played a part in the protection of the native environment and its wonders. To a privileged few, she was a good friend whose company was always enjoyed in the context of the sheer goodness of her mind.

To hundreds, she was their personal nurse — whether the patient was a child, mother-to-be in labour, or a patient with leprosy on Peel Island. Much has been preserved about her contributions as an artist, journalist and environmentalist.<sup>1</sup> This biographic fragment documents some of her contributions to healthcare.



***Nurse Rosemary Fielding , later  
Rosemary Opala***

Rosemary Fielding was born in Bundaberg in 1923. Her mother, Mrs Ethel Fielding, was a poet and writer who published under the gender-neutral name of “Biron Fielding” and who wrote the children’s book, “*Adventures on Parrot Island*”.<sup>2</sup> Rosemary’s early life was one of considerable hardship. Her father, a veteran of World War I, acquired land for a farm at Palmwoods and for a time the family lived in a tent. She went to Nambour State School ( a State Rural School in the 1930s) where she passed her State Junior Examination. She then undertook studies in commercial art at the Brisbane Technical College in the Domain in central Brisbane. Her flair for drawing was to capture a number of special moments which she experienced during the three years of her life as a young trainee nurse in Brisbane; and later, when she worked as an environmental advocate and contributed to botanical art.<sup>3</sup>



When she was 18 years of age, Rosemary began her preliminary nursing studies followed by her three-year nursing training based at the Brisbane Hospital in Herston. That Hospital was one of 11 hospitals under the aegis of the Brisbane and South Coast Hospitals Board — including both the Hospital for Sick Children and the Metropolitan Hospital for Infectious Diseases, always known as *Wattlebrae*. Her experiences in those latter two hospitals, in particular, were to shape her future destiny.

***“Baby dead of diphtheria”. Hospital for Sick Children, Brisbane. Pencil and watercolour by Rosemary Opala 1941.***

## Nursing Training

Rosemary Fielding began her early training at the Preliminary Nursing Training School in August 1941 and passed examinations in both “Invalid Cooking” and “Bandaging”.<sup>4</sup> She enrolled as a first year nurse on 25 May 1942, based at the Brisbane Hospital, always known as “The General”.<sup>5</sup> Her annual salary was £33. It was a time, in the dark days of World War II, when there was a severe shortage of nurses. New recruits were accepted as a first year trainee, within weeks of application. Rosemary later wrote about those experiences of the early 1940s:

*“Those who were fully trained nurses had headed eagerly for ‘active service’; while some students, their training unfinished, had to leave to marry their soldiers posted for overseas — this was the inflexible rule that only single nurses could do their training. Despite the acuteness of the staff situation, no hospital would employ married trainees, the profession still ‘strongly influenced by the religious overtones of its Victorian heritage which tended to draw a clear line between marriage and vocation’ ”.*<sup>6</sup>

If they had a relatively common surname, or a sister with the same surname who was also a nurse, junior nurses in that era were given a separate “hospital name”. Rosemary Opala became “Nurse Whitnee” when on duty. She wrote:

*“The new trainee nurses were lambs to the slaughter, they swapped an often cosseted family home-life for the austerities of the Nurses Quarters. Actually, living conditions weren’t all that bad, and were certainly an improvement on an earlier day when the elegant, colonial-style building [The Lady Lamington Nurses Home] boasted six earth closets and each nurse [was] provided with a cut-down kerosene tin for personal laundry. The Nurses Quarters were on top of a steep and aptly ‘Coronary Hill.’”<sup>7</sup>*



***The Lady Lamington Nurses’ Home, Brisbane Hospital. These nurses’ quarters were on the high hill, “Coronary Hill” above the Hospital, accessed by a steep path from the Hospital, with a final flight of stairs which led to their quarters.***

Between 1943 and 1945, the Brisbane Hospital (The “General”) was desperately overcrowded. In 1945, the last year of the War, the Brisbane Hospital had 900 beds, but at an average daily inpatient occupancy of 1164.<sup>8</sup> The healthcare staff were often exhausted, doctors and nurses alike.



**Recruiting poster for older teenage girls to train as nurses based at the Brisbane Hospital. Photograph circa 1945. Many enrolled for altruistic purposes, but the appeal of “free board” also held a special appeal for many.**

Rosemary herself was to write:

*“The Brisbane General suffered a period of greatest overcrowding, greatest inefficiency and greatest patient inconvenience... Before any other major hospitals were built, the BGH was the only hospital in an area of 4500 square miles. The comparison of the Hospital with that of a great ship did apply, well down to the Plimsoll line! Those of us drawn into the hospital system in the 1940s had little notion that working conditions of the time were, to use the succinct American term, ‘the pits’.... Most of us ‘went nursing’ because there was a war on and we needed to be doing something useful... There may have been nobler aspirations... But those who wrote of these seemingly hadn’t experienced the rewards of delving into the pig tin in search of a lost spoon to even up the thrice-daily cutlery count: or even the less attractive “close encounters” with the depressing physical functions of humankind... My salary as a first year nurse in 1943 soared from £33 to £65 per annum [at a time] when a 16 year old shop assistant could earn £97 per annum... Mind you, with the free uniforms and laundry, board and lodging, plus learning on the job, not many of us felt hard done by. I personally managed to save £10 in my first year”.<sup>9</sup>*

During her time as a student nurse, her younger sister, Margaret Jean Fielding, also trained as a nurse and was registered in 1946.

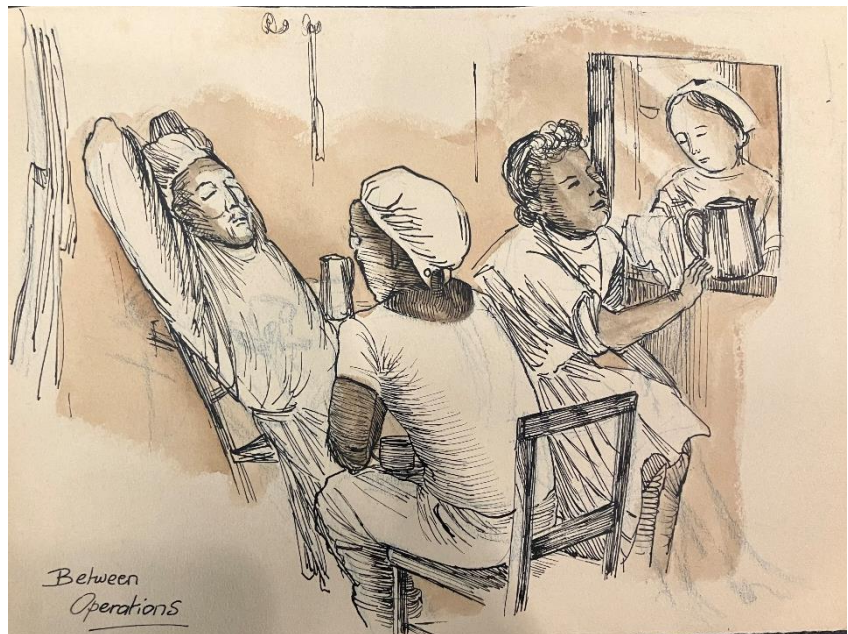
Rosemary sat for her first State Registration Examinations in March 1943, passing in two subjects — “anatomy and physiology” and “general nursing”. Six months later (November 1943) she passed in “medical nursing” and in the following year ( July 1944), sat for and passed the State Registration Board examinations in “ surgical nursing” and “hygiene”.<sup>10</sup>

Rosemary's flair for sketching, combined with her quirky sense of humour, led her to record moments of heightened emotion in her sketchbook. Some 32 of these have survived and are preserved in the archives of the Fryer Library, the University of Queensland. Examples of these, from her time of service as a junior nurse working in the Casualty Department, the Infectious Diseases Hospital and the Children's Hospital are today precious artefacts of life in a State Hospital during World War Two in the pre-antibiotic era.



***"Day's End". Pencil sketch and watercolour wash by Rosemary Opala, circa 1943. Rosemary included herself in many of these sketches. She included herself here, washing the wall of the Operating Theatre, wearing the black stockings which were a part of the uniform rank for trainee nurses, together with a simple cap.***

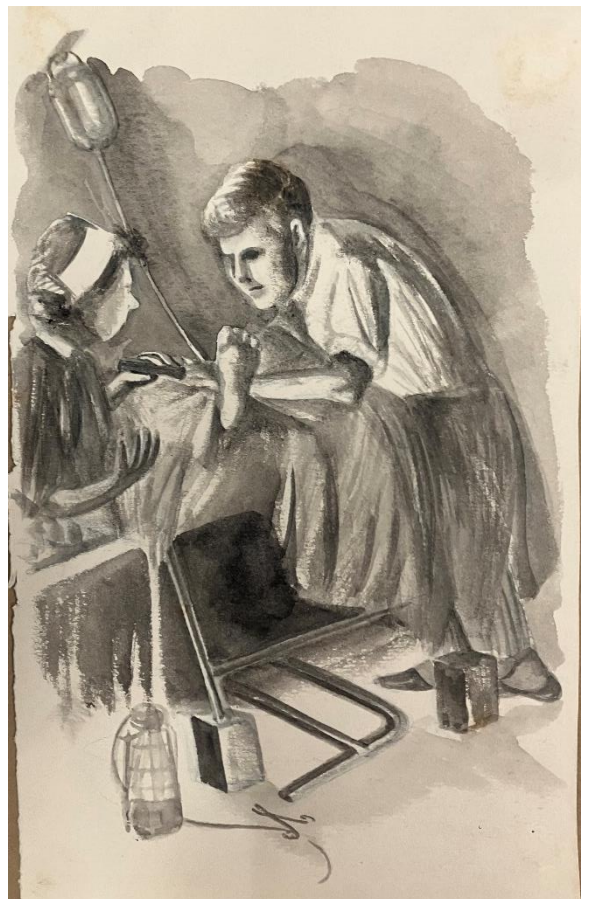
***"Between Operations". Pencil and watercolour wash by Rosemary Opala, circa 1943. Rosemary has included herself in this sketch, having made tea and passing this to the surgeons and the senior operating theatre nurse, between operations.***

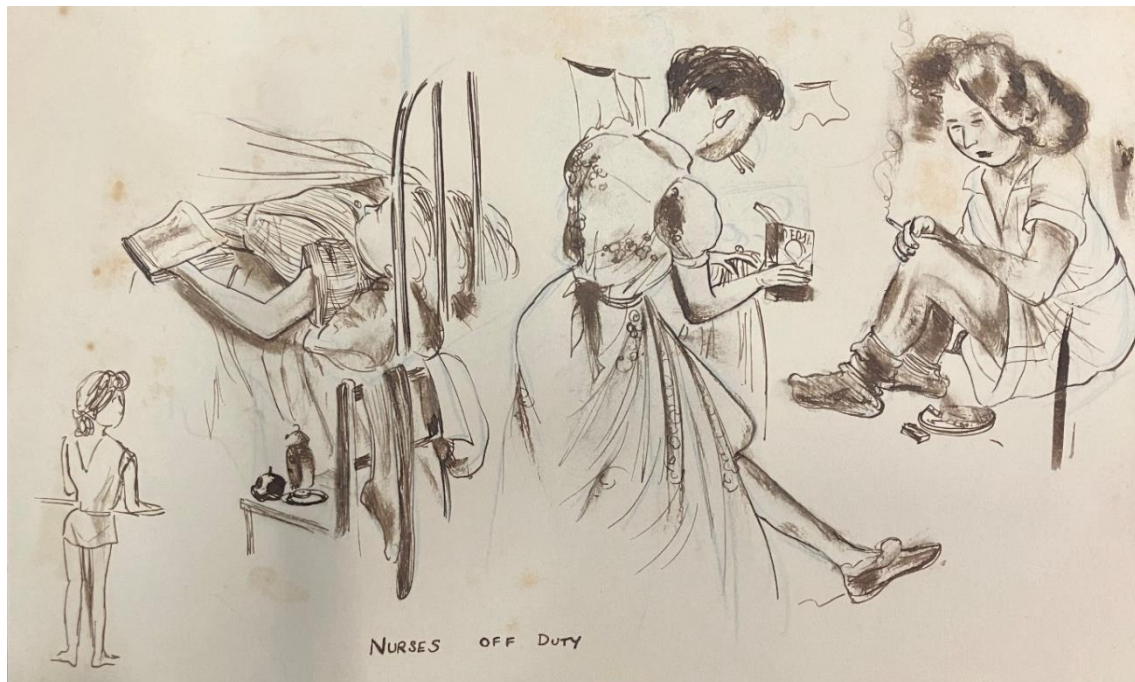




*"Sunday Morning". Pencil sketch by Rosemary Opala, circa 1943. This is a self-portrait of Rosemary testing urine from a male patient[who is looking on], in the Urology Ward of the Brisbane Hospital.*

*Untitled sketch by Rosemary Opala, circa 1943. Here she has portrayed herself as a first or second year nurse, holding a torch for the junior doctor attempting to set up a difficult intravenous line, in the Casualty Department of the Brisbane Hospital.*





***“Nurses off Duty”, by Rosemary Opala, circa 1943. The junior nurses worked exhausting hours throughout World War II and were subject to the strictest disciplinary rules. This sketch is a montage of four nurses in the Lady Lamington Nurses’ Home, the Brisbane Hospital in Herston, Brisbane. Rosemary has betrayed herself here, having fallen asleep whilst reading following an exhausting shift. Beside her is her discarded first year nurse’s cap; and the black stockings which were part of the training nurses uniform as well as a rank of junior nurses. These sketches are reproduced courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland, with acknowledgements.***

In these sketches, Rosemary portrayed the rigid hierarchy in the nursing system, the confrontation of sick and dying patients, the constant presence of death, and the camaraderie of fellow nurses. She was to write:

*“The first moment of truth in the new nurse’s career was the day when, in new black lace-up shoes (blisters still to come) and cap well down on brow, she tiptoed into a big open ward. All those beds running to the horizon; and — with the hospital bursting at the seams —the beds interspersed with extra stretchers. Everyone summing her up, except the terribly ill patients nursed close to Sister’s desk. Bottom of the Hospital peck order, when even a girl a week senior had power to boss you! And so much to learn, along with growing up yourself. A hundred unfamiliar and meaningless routines; a minefield of protocols, policies and personalities... Girls were not allowed to use Christian names. Nor were they supposed to get sick...Protocol extended from segregation by rank at dining room tables, to the order of entering lifts and doorways— junior nurses, of course, last — Senior Doctors and Sisters first.”<sup>11</sup>*

Rosemary Opala passed her final examinations on 3 May 1945 and was certified as a Registered General Nurse with the Queensland Registration Board on 6 June 1945. She was immediately appointed as a Staff Nurse. Her first appointment was to be in charge of the Scarlet Fever Ward in *Wattlebrae*. Over the subsequent three years she served severally as a midwife at the Brisbane Women's Hospital and at the St Anne's Westwood Tuberculosis Sanatorium, west of Rockhampton.<sup>12,13</sup>



*St Anne's Westwood Sanatorium. The hospital was built to treat miner's phthisis, a lung disease suffered by miners working in dusty conditions. By 1925, the incidence of this disease had decreased and the hospital then specialised in the treatment of tuberculosis. Rosemary Opala worked here briefly following her nursing graduation in 1945. Photograph courtesy of The Brisbane Courier, with acknowledgements.<sup>14</sup>*

Subsequently, she was to write frankly but perhaps pessimistically about what she saw as shortcomings in her profession. She wrote critically about the "glorified domestic" role of nurses, particularly those revolving around cleaning and cooking, "rather than specialised medical and nursing duties".<sup>15</sup>

## The Peel Island Lazaret

Rosemary Opala's service as a nurse at the Peel Island lazaret was to define her association with Moreton Bay, Coochiemudlo Island in the Redlands Shire. The Lazaret was opened in 1907 and closed in 1959. It was the first purpose-built isolation lazaret in Australia.<sup>16</sup>





Mr Peter Ludlow, an historian of Moreton Bay and a close friend of Rosemary Opala, wrote:

*In 1873, Peel Island was proclaimed a reserve for quarantine purposes. A quarantine station was established on the south east corner of the island and was in regular use throughout the 1870s and 1880s as the colony received a constant stream of immigrant ships. Between 1910 and 1916 the buildings were used as an inebriates' home .In 1906 an area of 160 acres on the north west corner was gazetted as a reserve for a lazaret, which opened in 1907.It was designed and organised on the principle of isolation. Patients were housed in individual huts grouped in three separate compounds - male, female and 'coloured'. Additional huts were erected as more patients were sent to the island. During the 1920s major improvements were undertaken, including the construction of a surgery, nurses quarters and new store. In 1940 the coloured patients were transferred to a new lazaret established on Fantome Island near Townsville.<sup>17</sup>*

From 1907 until 1949, physical conditions at the Peel Island Lazaret were relatively primitive. A 6-bed hospital was constructed in 1937; but until 1949, there was no water supply, no electricity and no sewage. Rosemary Opala witnessed these changes, and others relating to the introduction of curative drugs. Geographically, the physical environment was beautiful, summed up in Peter Ludlow's description of the lazaret as "Paradise or Prison".<sup>18</sup>

The Lazaret was closed to the outside world. Patients were allowed a maximum of two visitors, once each month, for a period of 30 minutes. No child under the age of 16 was allowed to visit under any circumstances. Visitors came by launch from Cleveland, landed at the long Lazaret Jerry, and stood at the end, talking with their relative, for their 30 minutes' visit. Until 1949, there was no resident doctor on the island. Senior medical officers from the Queensland Department of Health and Home Affairs visited the Lazaret every 4 to 6 weeks. They included Sir Raphael Cilento and Dr (later, Sir) Abraham Fryberg.



***The Peel Island Lazaret 1954, courtesy of the late Dr Morgan Gabriel, the last resident Medical Officer on Peel Island.***

In 1959, the remaining 10 patients at the Lazaret were transferred to a special Ward at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in South Brisbane. I recall, as a medical student, doing ward rounds in that Ward and being profoundly affected by the depressed state of several patients, recently diagnosed with Hansen's Disease.

## Hansen's Disease

Hansen's disease is a chronic disease caused by the bacterium, *Mycobacterium leprae*. The cause, a slow-growing bacterium, was discovered in 1873 by the Norwegian physician, Dr Gerhard Hansen and the German physician, Albert Neisser (1855-1966).<sup>19</sup>



Leprosy, or Hansen's disease, has been associated throughout its history with extreme prejudice, fear, and revulsion. Through the passage of time, the disease has spread globally to affect nearly all regions of the earth. In addition to the disease's physical effects, patients historically have suffered severe social stigma and ostracism from their families, communities, and even health professionals — to such an overwhelming extent that leprosy has been known as “the death before death” since ancient times.<sup>20-22</sup>

***The bust of Dr Gerhard Hansen in the Botanic Gardens, Bergen, Norway.***

In contradistinction to its feared transmissibility since ancient times, leprosy is not highly infectious and requires close and frequent contact to be transmitted. The disease has a long incubation period of one to 20 years. The germ affects the nerves, both motor and sensory which results both in bulbous swellings, enlargement and the loss of sensation. The resulting anaesthesia, particularly of the limbs and digits, results in the effects of chronic trauma, because the patient cannot feel pain. This leads to deformity. Infection of the motor nerves also causes paralysis. The nerves to some muscles are selectively damaged with the result that limbs become twisted as the unaffected muscles pull the joints into often grotesque deformities.

***Clawing of the fingers due to selective ulnar nerve paralysis in Hansen's Disease.***



## **A Nurse at the Peel Island Lazaret**

Rosemary was constantly asked, in her later life, why she had volunteered to work as a nurse to care for patients with Hansen's Disease at the Peel Island Lazaret. It was a time when there was great odium attached to the disease. It was believed that leprosy was highly infectious and the incarceration of patients suffering from Hansen's Disease was absolute. She wrote:

*"My first encounter with a HD sufferer was a very ordinary-seeming man in transit from North Queensland. Probably because of departmental red tape (maybe arriving in Brisbane on a weekend!), he'd spent several days in a side room off the Scarlet Fever Ward in what was then Wattlebrae (Brisbane's Infectious Diseases Hospital) where I was in charge of my first unit since nursing graduation. My heart went out to him, but I was too preoccupied with a Ward full of sick children (and also, too shy) to offer any sort of comfort. The Ward's 'special guest' wasn't even allowed access to the toilet and had to suffer the final indignity of a bedpan ... I still remember this lost human looking wistfully at the sick children on the other side of his fixed window. What speculations, one wonders, must have been haunting this quiet man about his future in an unknown piece of the map[the Peel island Lazaret], where nobody under the age of 16 was allowed to visit?"<sup>23</sup>*

Subsequently, several patients with Hansen's disease who had developed severe eye complications were transferred from the Peel Island Lazaret to Wattlebrae where they were again incarcerated prior to outpatient consultations with specialist ophthalmologists at the Brisbane Hospital. Rosemary was impressed with the courage and resilience of those patients, some of whom were blind from the disease. She later described that it was the contact with and care of those patients that led her to apply for the nursing position at the Peel Island Lazaret.

She described that:

*“After an interview at Brisbane’s Health Department, I was immediately appointed and as a hapless traveller I continued by train to the little Bayside town of Cleveland, last stage on the mainland journey before embarking for the wooded silhouette on the near horizon. As a last ignominy [like the patients with Hansen’s Disease], I was towed to the final destination in an open dinghy behind the Island launch. Seasick and dishevelled, I was then offloaded from the battered hospital truck, along with mail bags, milk churns and bags of potatoes and onions. Normally keeping a low profile, it didn’t help to be the focus of dozens of curious eyes, and those of other staff, patients and even a motley assortment of dogs”.<sup>24</sup>*

A significant element in her life at that stage was the perplexity, held by many of her colleagues, that she would put herself in what was perceived to be great danger in a closed island lazaret. She later wrote:

*“As it transpired, with leprosy, as with AIDS, there were cases of ‘blaming the victim’; and not only the patients with Hansen’s Disease, but very often, even those associated with them. For instance, when I first went to work on Peel Island, some of my mother’s more nervous friends stopped visiting her. With others, I had to fend off probing hints about a Broken Heart, and whether I had missionary zeal. One lady, talking to my mother, darkly described my situation as ‘Your daughter throwing away her whole life!’ ”<sup>25</sup>*

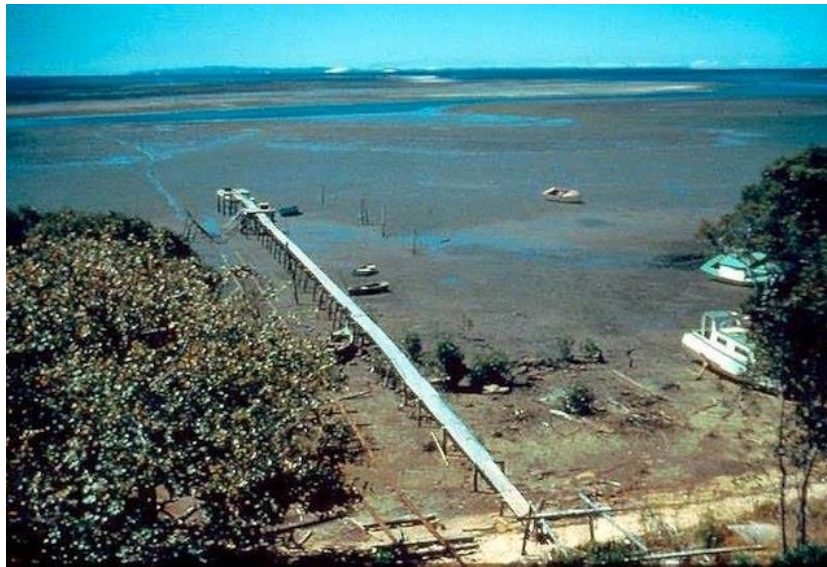
In 1995, in an invited paper to the Australian Society of the History of Medicine, Rosemary wrote :

*“I am still asked, close to 40 years after the Peel Island Lazaret was closed, “weren’t you afraid of Catching leprosy?” It didn’t cross my mind, even long before it was known that Hansen’s Disease was the least infectious of all infectious diseases. I was taught to waltz by a patient with Hansen’s Disease whose permanent tracheostomy tube came just level with my face. Conversations and instructions were managed with stubby fingers over the orifice” it is an irony that the Peel Island Lazaret was so healthy and that on a “day-off” Brisbane, I contracted measles, having been always well on the Island”.<sup>26</sup>*

Rosemary served for two separate periods as a nurse at the Lazaret — from 1946 and again in the 1950s. During this period lazaret had 120 buildings, including a recreation hall, hospital, surgery, the superintendents quarters and the doctor’s and Matron’s homes.<sup>27</sup> She was universally respected and held in affection by patients and staff alike. There are few surviving images of her at the lazaret. She later described some aspects of her life at the Lazaret:

*“On Peel Island, a job description included general nursing, attention to the frail and elderly, basic dispensing, dressing burns and ulcers, and care of*

current infections and injuries. Fraternising with the patients was discouraged, nurses managed to provide some elements of the village-style social life. We joined in entertainment such as tennis and dances; and attended movies after power was installed[in 1949]. When nurses first went to Peel Island, they were forbidden by Matron to swim from the handy patients' jetty and had to make a long cross - Island walk, through a swamp, to Horseshoe Bay to do so. Nurses and the other staff worked several weeks without a "day-off", although afternoons were free. Overtime was not considered. Before the installation of electricity[1949], there was a 4 AM start every morning in nightwear to get the two-primus steriliser boiling, ready for 6 AM surgery".<sup>28</sup>



*The Lazaret jetty with patients' boats. The Lazaret Gutter is in the middle distance with Moreton Island is on the far horizon. Photograph courtesy of Peter Ludlow and "Peel Island history — a personal quest" with acknowledgements.*



*Rosemary Opala ( Staff Nurse) and Dr Eric Reye, Medical Officer to the Lazaret, on the steps of the Surgery, Peel Island Lazaret, circa 1949. Photograph courtesy of the Bayside Bulletin 1996, 1 October: 5.*

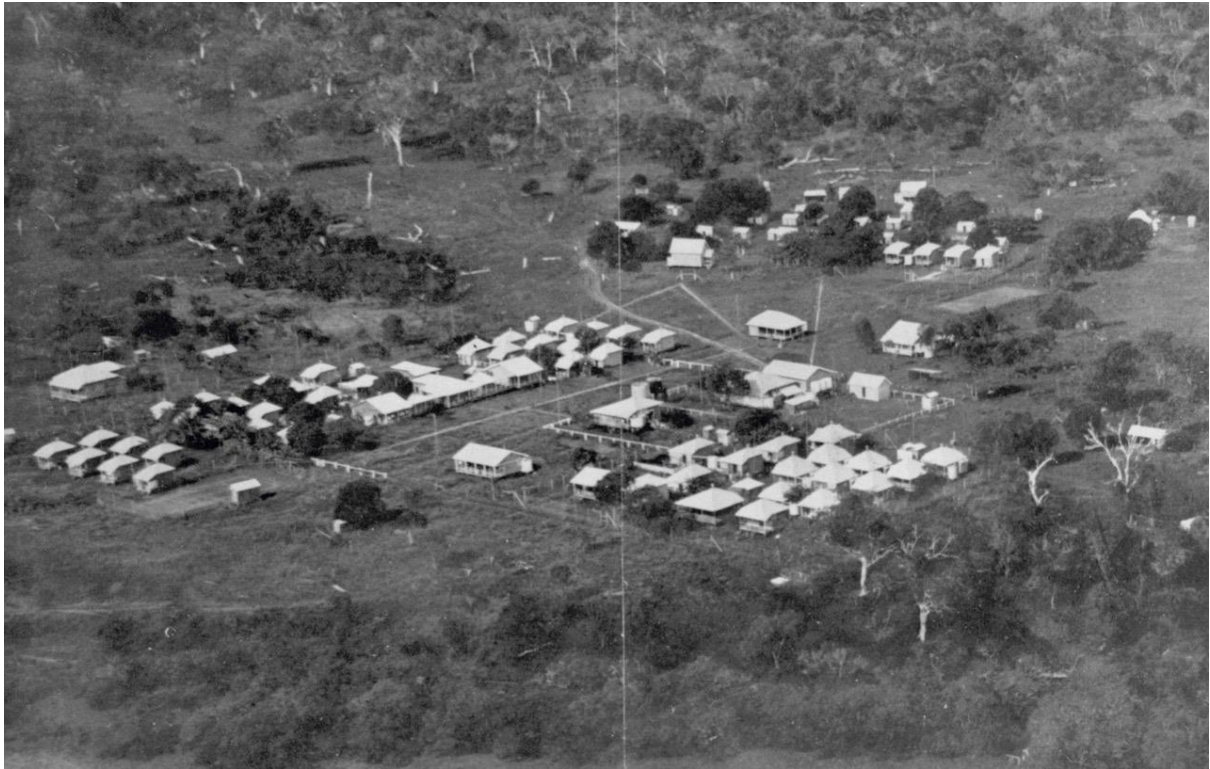
The staff at the Lazaret comprised the superintendent, the matron (Matron Ahlberg), the resident doctor (after 1949), several nurses (including Nurse Sharp and Nurse Rosemary Fielding) and the Laboratory Assistant, Dorothy Herbert — this latter, later one of Australia's most esteemed Royal Flying Doctors.



*Matron Ahlberg, Doctor Reye, Nurse Sharp at the Lazaret late 1940s. Photograph courtesy of Mr Peter Ludlow, with acknowledgements.*



*Dorothy Herbert outside the laboratory at Peel Island lazaret in 1948  
Dorothy worked as a biochemist at the Peel Island lazaret during 1948. She graduated in medicine(MBBS 1958) and went on to become a Royal Flying Doctor and one of Australia's most famous aviators. Photograph courtesy of Mr Peter Ludlow, with acknowledgements.*



***The Peel Island Lazaret, circa 1932. Photograph courtesy of the State Library of Queensland, with acknowledgements.***

The nurses' role was principally one to administer and supervise the treatment for the patients with Hansen's Disease.

The first scientific attempt to treat Hansen's disease was by the injection of the lipid component of *Mycobacterium* bacteria, marketed as "Nestin". It was introduced in Turkey in 1904 and was used for the first seven years of the life of the Peel Island lazaret.<sup>29</sup> Injections of Chaulmoogra Oil been introduced in 1915. The oil was pressed from the seeds of *Hydnocarpus wightiana*. The injections were terribly painful and injection sites could become infected. The injections also produced granulomatous lumps. Treatment had only limited success.<sup>30</sup> The modern era of leprosy treatment started in the 1940s, when Dr. Guy Faget of the National Hansen's Disease Center in Carville, Louisiana, was able to show remarkable benefits of sulfone therapy (*Promin*) in treating the disease. This discovery was heralded as "the miracle of Carville" and marked the onset of the first real hope that leprosy could be successfully treated and eventually "cured."<sup>31</sup> In the late 1940s, further work on limiting the toxicity of treatment led to the use of dapsone, the parent compound of *Promin*, which was broadly used as long-term monotherapy until the onset of drug resistance was noted in the 1970s.<sup>32</sup> The introduction of dapsone in 1949, during Rosemary's service on the Island, lifted morale and was to produce monumental changes in the status of Hansen's Disease throughout the Western world. She said: "It was a particularly interesting time, a time when a cure was on its way". In 1960, the first curative antibiotic, rifampicin, was introduced.<sup>33</sup>

Dr Eric Reye was the first Resident Medical Officer at Peel Island. He had graduated in medicine from the University of Queensland in 1943, and served as a medical officer in the Department of Health and Home affairs from 1944 to 1957.<sup>34</sup> Even before his retirement from the Queensland Department of Health in 1987, he had become an international authority on sandflies, the Queensland biting midges, *Culicoides molestus*.<sup>35</sup> He remained a lifelong friend of Rosemary until his death in 2007. They had shared many experiences and stories from the Peel Island Lazaret.

For obvious reasons, it was difficult to recruit nurses to serve at the Lazaret. One nurse suffered from severe Parkinson's disease and following an injection which she gave, a patient recalled: "Injection going in one place, the needle coming out further along, and a piece of sticking plaster slapped on somewhere else".<sup>36</sup> One of the "nurses" on Peel Island, with whom Rosemary Opala briefly worked, was the confidence trickster, Andrew John Gibson (1870-1952). He was born in Canterbury in England in 1870, and left for Australia in the early 1890s. Without any medical training whatsoever, he set up in practice initially at Sofala (a former mining township north of Bathurst) as "Dr Ernest Moore Chadwick". Subsequently, he practised in Sydney as "Dr Henry Irving Llewellyn Cooper".<sup>37</sup> Suspicions arose in Sydney and he caught the Brisbane Express to Brisbane. In Brisbane: "He reduced himself from the rank of doctor to that of a male nurse and took a job at the Lazaret on Peel Island, Moreton Bay, a place where few detectives were likely to pay visits".<sup>38</sup> It transpired that "many scores of impressionable women all over the world were left with broken hearts and empty purses".<sup>39</sup> Rosemary Opala was not one of those!

Over the Lazaret's lifetime, the patients' ages ranged from those of children of seven years to senior patients aged in their ninth decade. The patients enjoyed fishing, social evenings, a weekly film night and church services. Alcoholism was rife amongst patients, with social and disruptive consequences. This difficulty was finally controlled by Dr Morgan Gabriel after he arrived in 1953. It was also an era of sectarian rigidity, exemplified by a surviving account of 1947, when the first curative drugs, the sulphones, were introduced to the Lazaret :

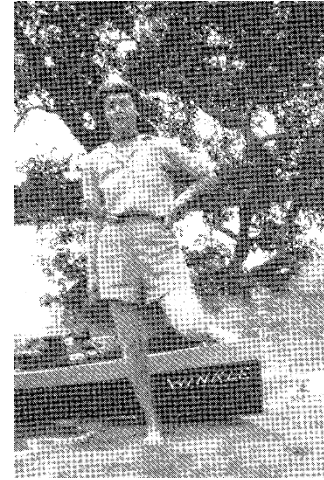
*In January 1947 Promin therapy was introduced to treat the leprosy patients at the Peel Island Lazaret. Its daily intravenous administration necessitated Doctor Eric Reye remaining full time on the island. Thus, he became Peel's first Resident Medical Officer, and his wife, Mardi, was appointed a temporary laboratory assistant, because no one was available at the time, and because the nurses were fully occupied. By the end of 1947, the services of a science graduate, Miss Dorothy Herbert, had been obtained, and Mardi was no longer needed. Because of the possible haematological effects of the sulphones on the body, a laboratory was set up on Peel for blood counting and urine examination. For a start, the laboratory was set up in a disused hut down in the bush, but because of its distance, dilapidation, and lack of water, Dr Reye asked the Padre if he could use the Church as a laboratory. All would have been well but for the Roman Catholic patients who refused to enter the church because it had been consecrated "Anglican". The best Dr Reye could do was to coax them into the church's tiny vestibule where staff took the necessary samples from them. Clearly, this was not a satisfactory arrangement, and new premises again had to be found for the laboratory. The choice fell to the library cum billiard room, which belonged to the male patients.<sup>40</sup>*

Rosemary developed her love of botany in the natural environment of Peel Island during her years of service at the Lazaret. It was during this period also, in 1952, that her



father, Mr Harold Fielding, built a “one-roomed, fibro shack” on Coochiemudlo Island, which she visited from Peel Island, in her small dingy, *Winkle*. It was written:

*The social stigma of the disease caused ongoing staffing and servicing challenges. Some younger nursing staff had to defy their families’ wishes to serve on Peel Island. Rosemary Opala was one nurse who engaged with the patients and the island itself. Between her duties, she painted, explored the island and attempted to make the most of its beauty and isolation. Patients, medical staff and others also continued the fight for better resources. In 1948 Dr Eric Reye’s threats to resign resulted in the relocation of several ex-army huts to the island to improve the facilities available.*<sup>41</sup>



One of the former patients, Evelyn Hogan, was later to write about how the patients formed a Patients’ Committee with bargaining power and advocacy to reduce the draconian rules to which they were subject:

*“A Patients’ Committee got together, and they stirred things up quite well. They formed a big Committee down there amongst themselves and laid down demands to the Board and implacably to the Government. The patients hadn’t been allowed to have anything of their own on the Island ; but then the Health Department under Dr Fryberg did give them quite a few things that they wanted. They were allowed to have chooks or ducks or whatever. This was a really good help for them because it gave them something to do”.*<sup>42</sup>



***“Patient Alex and his chickens”.***

Evelyn Hogan, a former patient, went on to write:

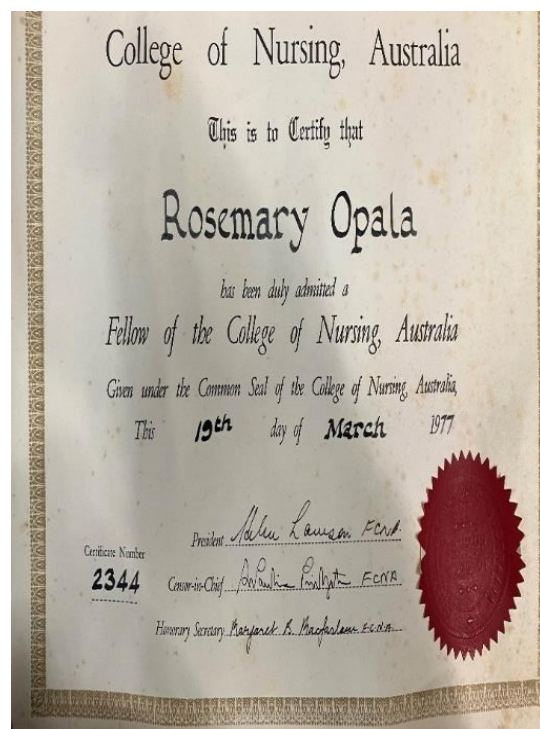
*“Originally, patients weren’t allowed boats, they eventually did allow them a boat amongst themselves. They were only supposed to be small boats or rowing boats — but the Health Department relaxed the conditions a bit towards the end. The boats were difficult to police all the time because there was no one there to do it. The patients weren’t allowed to leave the island. They could go out fishing on the reef ... They had quite a few parties away from the island... I don’t think the authorities ever knew, or if they did, they didn’t say anything.”*<sup>43</sup>

## Nursing after Peel Island

After she left Peel Island, Rosemary continued nursing but wrote prolifically for a series of local and women’s magazines. She wrote:

*“Magazines for which I wrote are of a period when it was possible to have items published, unedited, in popular magazines. I learnt my trade from my mother’s experience — carbon copies of typewritten manuscripts, return-stamped envelope to the editor, and the wait for acceptance slip and a check — or for “the Editor regrets...”. I was just lucky to have a writing style that suited to a particular editor.”*<sup>44</sup>

She re-entered the Queensland State hospital system in the mid-1960s and stopped writing fiction. She studied for and sat for the Diploma in Nursing Administration course which she described as “probably the most stressful year of my life!”<sup>45</sup>



**Rosemary Opala was awarded the Diploma of Nursing Administration on 17 December 1976 and the following year, was created a Fellow of the College of nursing Australia.**

She worked at Princess Alexandra Hospital and at the Cleveland Private Hospital prior to her final retirement.



*Rosemary Opala in her robes as a Fellow of the College of nursing, Australia. Photograph 19 March 1977.*

*She was awarded the Australia Day medal in 2005, not for her nursing service, but for her contributions to, and advocacy for the preservation of the natural environment.*



## Later years

Following her service on Peel Island in the 1950s, Rosemary Opala wrote a series of articles in women's magazines and in local publications in south-east Queensland. At the first Symposium held on Coochiemudlo Island, on 16 May 1993, she told the story of her life building a house, with her husband, Marian Opala, on Coochiemudlo Island.<sup>46</sup>

She and her husband cut down timber on the island, prepared the dressed timber using a crosscut saw, and built their house in the hinterland of Main Beach on Coochiemudlo Island with their own hands. They carried cement in their boat, and used a horse to carry it from the shore to their building site.



***Building an Island Home. Rosemary Opala and her husband, Marion, clearing land and cutting timber by hand, in an era before the electricity supply came to Coochiemudlo island. Photo, 1955.***

She wrote about Banksias and Cotton trees and ecology; about the preservation of the beautiful environment and precious ecosystems particularly of the Moreton Bay region.<sup>47</sup>

After her retirement, she also wrote a number of papers or manuscripts, several unpublished, about her life on Peel Island. Such included such titles as “Looking Back”; “Peel Island: a nurse’s story” in *Generation* in 1996;<sup>48</sup> and “A Legend of leprosy in Moreton Bay” published in *Australian Folklore* in 1997.<sup>49</sup> Much of her writing focused on correcting the 'myths' and 'misunderstandings' associated with the island and the Lazaret. In the article in *Australian Folklore*, she wrote "Even though decommissioned, some institutions however continue to be a focus for 'myths and legends.' Among such Peel Island remains both source and object of its folklore".<sup>50</sup>

Rosemary’s life after nursing was that of an artist, journalist and ambassador for environmental protection and enjoyment. Her *persona*, indeed her qualities, were those of cheerful acceptance of what life offered, of high intelligence, of humility, of hard work, of sensitivity and empathy for those in need, of good humour and seeing the ironic humour in life’s circumstances, of loyalty to friends, of creativity, of the promotion and preservation of history and heritage, and of being a quiet but effective ambassador for issues which she regarded as important.

Such are the highest qualities of those who serve in any of the healthcare professions — especially that of nursing.



*Photograph of Rosemary Opala, above Morwong Beach, Coochiemudlo Island, Moreton Bay. Taken by the author on one of their botanical walks together, 1992.*

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank particularly Mr Peter Ludlow, for his extensive research and documentation not only of the Peel Island Lazaret, but also of the history and heritage of Moreton Bay. I thank also Mrs Joy Wilson, Curator of the Museum of Nursing History, Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital; and Mrs Jan MacIntyre, President of the Coochiemudlo Island Heritage Society — all for much encouragement.

## References and endnotes

- 1 Note: Some of Rosemary Opala's service and contributions are recorded in: Peter Ludlow, *Peel Island, Paradise or Prison*. Second Edition. Brisbane, Privately published, 2005; and in Boxes 1-11 of the archival-preserved Rosemary Opala Collection(UQFL 361) held in the Fryer Library, Duhig Building, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Brisbane. One deposition, dated 31 May 2002, (Folder 2) comprises a fragmentary *curriculum vitae*. In this account, Rosemary mooted that she left her Commercial Art Course as soon as she turned 18 to commence her nursing career.
- 2 Biron Fielding, *Adventures on Parrot Island*, London, Ward Lock and Co, 1964. In later writings, Rosemary Opala described the poverty in which she and her sister grew up in their early years. She wrote: "Though my sister and I never classed ourselves in the 'poor kid' category, we learned in later years the depths of our parents desperation. There were times when, when we were fed, they went without.... We didn't feel that life was short-changing us".
- 3 Note: Some of Rosemary Opala's nursing sketches are preserved in the Fryer Library of the University of Queensland. Ref UQ FL 361. Box 1. This Folio contains 36 "Sketches of scenes from the Brisbane General Hospital between 1940 and 1945, most done in 1942". Other examples of her botanical art are preserved in the Redlands Museum.
- 4 Nursing Staff Register Book. Book 15,dated 9 March 1942 to 12 December 1942. Original Folio held in the Museum of Nursing History, P.O. Box 63, Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, Herston Qld 4029, p.92.
- 5 John Pearn, "The Brisbane Hospital (the "General")". In: *Doctors for the World. A History of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Queensland... and Its People*. Brisbane, Faculty of Medicine (UQ), 2023,pp. 5, 8, 14, 17, 23, 29, 30, 45, 46, 73, 75, 85, 91, 394.
- 6 Rosemary Opala.. Folio of unpublished personal accounts. Ref UQ FL 361. Boxes 1 and 2.
- 7 Ibid.
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- 9 Rosemary Opala. Unpublished personal accounts of nursing experience at the Brisbane Hospital, 1943-1945. UQ FL 361 Folios 1 and 2.
- 10 Nursing Staff Register Book. Book 15, dated 9 March 1942 to 12 December 1942. Original Folio held in the Museum of Nursing History, P.O. Box 63, Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, Herston Qld 4029,p.92.
- 11 Rosemary Opala. Unpublished personal accounts of nursing experience at the Brisbane Hospital, 1943-1945. UQ FL 361 Folios 1 and 2.
- 12 The Nurses and Masseurs Registration Board, *Nursing certificate*, Rosemary Opala Collection, UQFL 361, Box 10, Folder 3, Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library.
- 13 Rosemary Opala, 'Written Request for Interview on my 80th Birthday', Rosemary Opala Collection, UQFL 361, Box 1, Folder 10, Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library.
- 14 "Westwood Sanatorium on Opening Day". Accessed at [achha.org.au/detailed.php?num=48](http://achha.org.au/detailed.php?num=48).Accessed 10/09/2023.
- 15 Rosemary Opala,. "Wanted, a tidy girl as nurse. History of the Royal Brisbane Hospital and nursing conditions there." *Generation* 19:1 (1996). 3-9.
- 16 The Peel Island Lazaret. Accessed at <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/ref/qld/biogs/QE00740b.htm>.

- 17 Peter Ludlow, *Peel Island, Paradise or Prison*. First Published 1989 Second Edition, Brisbane, Privately Published, 2005.[ISBN 978-0-7316-3410-1].
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Note: There was much controversy about who made the major contribution to the discovery of the bacterium which causes Hansen’s disease. Hansen himself was not able to show that the organisms were infectious. In a time before ethical supervision of doctors’ experiments were introduced, Hansen attempted to infect at least one female patient without her consent. This subsequently resulted in a court case and Dr Hansen was dismissed from his post at the Bergen Hospital where he worked . Nevertheless, his advocacy led to the passing of the Norwegian *Leprosy Acts of 1877 in 1885 which resulted in a two thirds decline of the disease in Norway over the ensuing 20 years*.
- 20 Feeny P. *The fight against leprosy*. New York: American Leprosy Missions; 1964.
- 21 Browne SG. The history of leprosy. In: Hastings RC, editor. *Leprosy*. 1st ed. Edinburgh (Scotland) and New York: Churchill Livingstone; 1985. pp. 1–14.
- 22 Trautman JR. A brief history of Hansen's disease. *The Star*. 1990;50:3–16.
- 23 Rosemary Opala. Archives Ref UQ FL 361, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Rosemary Opala, “A nurse’s experience of Hansen’s disease on Peel Island, Queensland, Australia”. In: *History, Heritage and Health: Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of the History of Medicine*. Brisbane, Australian Society of the History of Medicine, 1996,p.200.
- 27 Brian Williams, “Purgatory turns time capsule”. *Courier Mail*, 2007.
- 28 Rosemary Opala, “A nurse’s experience of Hansen’s disease on Peel Island, Queensland, Australia”. In: *History, Heritage and Health: Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of the History of Medicine*. Brisbane, Australian Society of the History of Medicine, 1996,p.200.
- 29 Deycke Pasha and Reschad Bey, A Bacterial Fat as Immunizing Substance in Leprosy; Its Theoretic Significance and Practical Application , *Therapist* , London, 1907, xvii, 49, 67, 79.
- 30 Jacobson RR, Krahenbuhl JL. “Leprosy”. *Lancet*, 1999, Vol 353, pp. 655-660.
- 31 Trautman JR. “A brief history of Hansen’s disease. *The Star*, 1990, Vol 50,pp. 3-16.
- 32 Browne SG. “The history of leprosy”. In: Hastings RC, editor. *Leprosy*. First edition, Edinburgh and New York, Churchill Livingstone, 1985,pp. 1-14.
- 33 Bennett BH, Parker DL, Robson M. Leprosy: Steps Along the Journey of Eradication. *Public Health Reports* 2008; 123(2): 198–205.
- 34 [Editor]. Reye, Eric MB BS 1943 CMP 1977. In: *Medical Directory of Australia 2003*. 23<sup>rd</sup> edition. Sydney, Australasian Medical Publishing Company, 2003, p. 755.
- 35 Note: In parallel with his career as a clinician and public health officer, Dr Eric Reye became a professional entomologist, with a particular interest in the sandflies of Moreton Bay — the biting midge, *Culicoides molestus*. He was an active member in the Entomology Department of the University of Queensland, supervised Doctorate theses and contributed extensively to the News Bulletin of the Entomological Society of Queensland. e.g. Eric Reye, “A storage and retrieval system for small vials”; and “A new light trap”. *News Bulletin of the Entomological Society of Queensland*, 1980, Vol 8 (4): 37-39.
- 36 Rosemary Opala, “A nurse’s experience of Hansen’s disease on Peel Island, Queensland, Australia”. In: *History, Heritage and Health: Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial*

- Conference of the Australian Society of the History of Medicine. Brisbane, Australian Society of the History of Medicine, 1996,p.200.
- 37 [Anon.] With “Con-man Andrew John Gibson”, *The Daily Telegraph Mirror* 1991; 5 September, p. 28.
- 38 Blaikie, George, “The bush quack and his life of fraud”. *The Sun*.
- 39 [Anon.] With “Con-man Andrew John Gibson”, *The Daily Telegraph Mirror* 1991; 5 September, p. 28.
- 40 [Editor] “1940s: A White Only Lazaret and Medical Improvements”. Accessed at [cyark.org/projects/peel-island/lazaret/in-depth](http://cyark.org/projects/peel-island/lazaret/in-depth). Accessed 8/09/2023.
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- 42 Evelyn Hogan, “The Patients’ Committee”. Accessed at: [https://web.archive.org/web/20140126123608/http/www.historianludlow.com/Historian\\_Ludlow/Peel\\_Island\\_Quest.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20140126123608/http/www.historianludlow.com/Historian_Ludlow/Peel_Island_Quest.html). Accessed 10/09/2023.
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- 49 Rosemary Opala, “A Legend of Leprosy in Moreton Bay”, *Australian Folklore*, 1997, Vol. 12,pp.220-223.
- 50 Ibid.



## The Author

Major General Professor John Pearn is a senior paediatrician based at the Queensland Children's Hospital in South Brisbane. He and his family have been a part of the Coochiemudlo Island community for more than 40 years, since they bought their house at Morwong Beach in 1982. He has published two books of the Island — *Chronicles of Coochiemudlo* in 1993 and *Character, Coves and Cliffs* in 1995; and has published historical papers relating to the Indigenous forebears on the Island and the military history of the southern Moreton Bay. As Vice-President of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland, he convened the first Symposium of Island history and heritage, *Colloquium of Coochiemudlo Island*, on 16 May 1993.

In his professional life, John Pearn has served as a senior clinician at each of the three Children's Hospitals in Brisbane; and for more than 50 years served as Professor of Child Health, Deputy Dean and Acting Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Queensland. He has published much in the research domains of neuromuscular disease, clinical envenomation and toxicology, and the prevention of childhood injury and illness.

In a parallel career in military medicine, he served on operational service in Papua New Guinea, Vietnam and in the post-genocide Emergency in Rwanda. For three years (1998-2000) he served as the Surgeon General of the Australian Defence Force.

John Pearn first visited Coochiemudlo Island in a gaff-rigged, canvas-sail sloop in 1958; and as Patron of the University of Queensland Medical Society for 30 Years, took medical students to visit the former Peel Island Lazaret. On 29 May 2008, with six friends of Rosemary's, he and the group scattered her ashes in Moreton Bay, off Coochiemudlo Island.

