

Rosemary Opala – The Person

Early Life

Rosemary Opala (nee Fielding) was born in Bundaberg, Queensland in 1923. She began to study a commercial art course at the George Street Technical College (now QUT) but took up nursing at the onset of World War II because as she said: "I wanted to do something more meaningful than playing with paints, seeing as though everybody was rushing off to the war." After finishing her nursing training at the Brisbane General Hospital, she stayed on the staff at Wattlebrae, the city's infectious disease section. It was here that she met a small and engaging group of Peel Island (Leprosy or Hansen's Disease) patients, temporarily housed in one of the pavilion-type wards while waiting specialist consultation about eye problems. They convinced her to go to Peel as a nurse and she spent two stints there in the late 1940s and early 50s.

Rosie and I

I had never known Rosemary when she was young. She would have been in her mid 60s when I first met her. Therefore, it came as quite a shock to glimpse a framed photograph of a very young, uniformed Rosie placed on top of her coffin. It was obviously her favourite and one she had never shown outside her family.

When I first met her, I had been working on a manuscript for my book *Peel Island – Paradise or Prison* and during an interview with Eric Reye, a former doctor at Peel Island's Lazaret (Leprosarium), Eric suggested that I contact Rosemary Opala, a former nurse who had worked there. 'She is very good at nature sketches which would look good at the end of your chapters,' he said. 'She lives with her husband at Caloundra.'

So off I went to Caloundra.

I visited Rosemary and her husband, Marian, in their modest but modern home at Caloundra. The house had a garden of native plants – fairly unusual at that time (about 1980) – which I was soon to learn was her passion. Rosemary was very involved with the Sunshine Coast Environment Council and used to send articles and drawings for the quarterly magazine *Eco Echo* - her pages were a regular feature. Rosemary was also a close friend of early Moreton Bay conservationist Kathleen McArthur and she took me around to her home to introduce me to her. Kathleen also lived at Caloundra in a modest house with its encircling mass of native scrub, and known as "Midyim", her beloved home since first coming to Caloundra with her young family in 1943. As well as sketching, Rosemary also wrote non-fiction articles, with an emphasis on Queensland's environment, botany and its history. Rosie and Kathleen McArthur were members of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ).

It was not long after my visit to Caloundra that Rosemary's husband, Marian, collapsed and died while taking photographs amongst the mangroves. After Marian's death, Rosemary moved down to Victoria Point where she was to continue contributing sketches and articles to local environmental groups.

Rosemary had much more to offer than her nature sketches. As a nurse on Peel Island on two occasions in the late 1940s and early 1950s she had accumulated a vast knowledge of life at the lazaret. I was fortunate that she was very happy to share this with me.

Rosie at Peel

Dr Eric Reye reminisced in 1988 about his days at Peel's Lazaret: 'We had to be odd. It was a grossly abnormal thing to be a person on the staff at Peel Island. The people who were there were odd in the first place, that they had overcome their fear of leprosy, a fear which was well entrenched in the rest of the community. They were also odd in that they were capable of working in the relatively isolated situation at Peel with few of the amenities that were then available in the adjacent city situation. Some of us were odder than others, but *to each other*, we were perfectly normal. We were *all* odd!'

While there and ever since, Rosemary worked tirelessly to *de-mythify* Peel Island folklore. 'It was a particularly interesting time then, a time when a cure was on its way,' she said.

Rosie was an acute observer of life at Peel. She was stirred by compassion for the patients' condition at Peel, and by the simplicity of its lifestyle. Her arrival at Peel marked the beginning of an influx of young nurses who were to work on the island over the next decade or so. Apart from her nursing duties, Rosemary found plenty to occupy her time on Peel. A lover of nature, she was fond of beachcombing, and floating over the island's coral reefs in her small dinghy. She also enjoyed bike riding around the island, and learnt to horse ride on the settlement's draught horses, now living in semi-retirement except for the task of pulling the mower to keep the grass down around the settlement. Swimming at Horseshoe Bay was also popular with the nurses, but at that time, there was no road directly across the island. The road to the eastern jetty was too far to walk, so Rosemary and her colleagues had to wade, knee deep, through the swamp at the back of the lazaret to reach the western end of Horseshoe Bay. Peel's swamp is quite an eerie place, especially when one stands knee deep in it, and Rosemary's imagination used to conjure up images of a Bunyip suddenly rising from its murky waters.

Rosie maintained that Peel had a definite aura (a conviction not necessarily supported by those visitors who don't appreciate the island's mud, mossies, midges, and mangroves).

Rosie wanted to record the unsung heroes on Peel's staff:

'Ernie-the-Laundry-Man was a cheerful Solomon Islander. With little assistance, and in most basic conditions, Ernie washed patients' sheets, blankets, and hospital linen. His work area was an open tin shed. With no power, of course, all washing was done by hand and boiled up in wood fired coppers. Ironing was neatly done by petrol iron. I'm not sure, but I think Ernie also may have washed the garments for some male patients? Able-bodied women did their own laundry and cooking.'

'Another Quiet Achiever was Little Alfie, who was responsible for (let's call it) Waste Disposal. In other words, collection and disposal of contents of all those now-picturesque earth closets that adorn Peel's landscape. Alfie did a great job, as evidenced by an old snap I still have of empty dunny cans neatly stacked under a mango tree.'

The most notable of all the patients at Peel was Bert Cobb. After his blindness, he was cared for by an orderly, Bill Fleetwood, a quiet man (unlike some of his alcoholic comrades), who also used to write letters for him. Bert once told Rosemary that Bill was the perfect 'gentleman's gentleman'. Another letter writer for Bert was Miss Howard, a social worker who used to visit the island every two weeks. Bert trusted her and always kept the day free for her. Rosemary remembers her as a tall pleasant woman.

Bert Cobb could be a charming man, especially with the ladies, but was also very intolerant. He was a dreadful snob, supercilious, and scathing. He had a growl of disgust, which could be very disconcerting. He was fussy about who came into his hut. Men were allowed to call him 'Bert' but he preferred 'Red' or 'Mr Cobb' from women. Once Rosemary forgot herself and called him 'Bert' to which he replied with a sniff of disgust and then ignored her question.

A well-educated and intelligent man, he loved people to read to him (after he went blind). Rosemary, his nurse, was one of these. He had a large collection of books, which he would buy after hearing reviews read from the newspaper or on the wireless. If the book was not to his liking he would not bother with it and would give it away.

Rosemary's mother, Ethel Fielding, was quite a well-known writer in her day, with her short stories often being published or read on the radio. After a visit to Rosemary at Peel she was introduced to Bert Cobb and the pair formed a very close relationship, bound by their common love of literature. Ethel often visited Bert and when he died, she told Rosemary that she had lost the best friend she had ever had.

Rosemary After Peel

After leaving Peel Island Lazaret, Rosemary eventually became a nursing supervisor at Prince Charles Hospital in Brisbane. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, she wrote popular magazine fiction - gaining some notoriety with the publication of various short stories in women's magazines. The University of Queensland Fryer Library later accepted these and a collection of what she describes as 'disrespectful cartoons'. A stint at St Anne's Hospital at Cleveland revealed another love - that of Coochiemudlo, which she visited by rowboat, returning that same day. She was later to live there, exchanging nursing for 'a stress free life as farm hand cum beachcomber'. Later she and her husband Marian built their own home on the island, at a time when the ferry ran only on weekends and public holidays.

Rosie had a way with words:

'My father had a coronary while he was building a verandah on Mrs Morton's house,' says Rosemary. 'My husband and I carried him down to the beach and rowed him out in the dinghy to our family launch. It had a temperamental engine and my father was the only person who knew how to start it, so he had to get up in the middle of his coronary attack to get the thing going!'

'...In the early days when Dick Whitehall only ran his ferry service at weekends, residents were able to catch weekday lifts with Ted Westcott, the island's mailman and shop owner. Ted was a better mailman than he was a boatie, and he had a penchant for getting stuck on mudbanks from which his passengers would have to get out and push him off. Also, pulling up the anchor and untying from the jetty were two things he couldn't remember together.'

Rosemary and Marian later moved to Caloundra, in the late 1960s. After her husband, Marian, died suddenly from a heart attack while photographing mangroves near Cairns, Rosemary sold up and moved to Victoria Point. This was back to her 'home territory' for her parents had lived there and on nearby Coochiemudlo Island. Rosemary was a great letter writer, and over the last two decades of her life was a constant source of information for me – not just about Peel Island, but about Moreton Bay people in general. I owe Rosemary and Eric Reye for much of the material I have subsequently published about the bay.

From her time as an early resident of Coochiemudlo Island, she had many reminiscences of her family's early struggles to get established there. As such, she was a member of the Coochiemudlo Historical Society. However, her art was always close to her heart and she was an active member of the Coochiemudlo Art Group. Even after her admission to the Redland Hospital just prior to her death, Rosemary's one concern was that she would not be well enough to attend an upcoming exhibition at the Redland Council's Art Gallery, in which she is to exhibit.

Rosemary was involved in the Friends of Peel Island Association as a foundation member, was a member of U3A, a Friend of Eprapah and was an ecological writer with Eco Echo, a tri-annual Sunshine Coast publication. Regarding her foundation membership of the Friends of Peel Island Association (FOPI), Rosemary once said 'It's just an excuse to get into the place (Peel). I don't really contribute. I'm sort of the elder statesman.' Fellow FOPI committee member Debra Henry said her involvement was far more than this. 'She is a very active member. She just plays it down.'

But this was Rosie all over.

FOPI President Simon Baltais once said, 'Rosemary Opala is a kind and generous soul, a willing listener, a provider of much humour and strength through words and art, a much-admired person, a truly living treasure.'

And it is as a living treasure that we are meeting here to honour Rosemary Opala.

Peter Ludlow
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