

A Nightingale nurse in Tasmania: the working and personal life of Nurse Alexander.

Presentation for the ANZSHM 15th Biennial Conference, 14 July 2017.

I am a Librarian with the National Office of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation. My role includes archiving, and it was during an archiving project that I found the subject of my presentation, this handwritten note.

Image 1: Florence note

It was sitting at the bottom of a dusty archive box in a broken picture frame, covered in glass shards. It reads:

Offered Nurse Alexander on her going to Tasmania. And may she have the knowledge and humility to be making continual progress. And may she remember that a nurse who is not always advancing is going back. Forward - not backward - in all ways. Florence Nightingale, Feb 18 1883

I had wondered who Nurse Alexander was, and this conference has provided an opportunity to find out. I now hope to tell you something about her, and see if she fulfilled Florence's brief to go forward, not backward, in all ways?

Her Christian name was Selina, and she departed England in February 1883, aged 29. She'd had a meeting with Florence prior to her departure, who gave her a book and apparently a reference. Selina arrived in Australia on 3 April 1883.

She worked as a nurse at the Hobart Hospital, but in December 1883, was appointed Matron of the New Norfolk Hospital for the Insane. (Image 2: Asylum)

The Hospital originally opened in 1827 as an invalid barracks for ex-convicts. Its early construction was not far removed from a prison, with dank timber cells and meagre facilities.

Its function as an invalid barracks was to change in the 1830s. It was now to accommodate the insane, as Tasmania had no such facility. Despite some efforts, its crude form was never able to be properly adapted to this new function.

The Hospital for the Insane was the subject of many government inquiries - three within a decade - 1882, 1883 and 1888. Each inquiry had similar findings. Deficient, rundown buildings, ill-equipped for

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purpose; no means of classifying patients; patient accommodation which was dark and comfortless; crude bathrooms and toilets; a standard of hygiene so bad outbreaks of typhoid occurred; kitchens and laundries that did not work and where blankets weren't washed for 'some years'; and small and cheerless outdoor spaces.

Hospital staff were of a low standard, mostly untrained and drawn from the criminal and lower classes. (Image 3: Asylum staff) Better staff could not be attracted or retained, due to low wages and no consideration for their comforts, including no proper accommodation for attendants and nurses, and no proper guidelines for staff to undertake their roles successfully.

It emerged during the 1882 inquiry that within a short period of time, no less than three matrons had been 'driven away' from the Institution. Here, Selina's immediate predecessor Matron Martha Laland, deserves acknowledgement.

Miss Laland was frank in her evidence to that inquiry about the Hospital's deplorable conditions, and her repeated calls to remedy deficient situations, which went unheeded. Her dismissal as matron soon after instigated the convening of the 1883 inquiry, which was to examine the internal and general management of the institution.

The inquiry Committee reported in December 1883 and its findings were scathing.

'the management of the insane at New Norfolk is and has been devoid of system, tact or administrative ability; with some few exceptions, humanity, kindness and consideration of the helpless insane have not found place; and knowledge, even of the most elementary character, applicable to the treatment of the demented, had not been possessed by the majority of those to whose care and supervision that State has entrusted their keeping¹.

Miss Laland is one of the exceptions, recognised as possessing tact, knowledge and discrimination in the care of the insane, and it is noted that her dismissal on trumped up charges was unjustifiable. One Committee member suggested that she was resented because she "had greater knowledge of her duties than those around and over her, and, therefore, she must be got rid of"².

This is the scene into which Selina Alexander stepped, appointed by the inquiry Commissioners to replace Miss Laland. How could she possibly go forward in such circumstances?

¹ Hospital for the Insane, New Norfolk: Report of the Select Committee. Tasmania Legislative Council, December 18, 1883

² Daily Telegraph, 29 September 1883

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From the few records I've found of her working life, Selina appears to have fared better at the Hospital than her predecessors. Her tenure at New Norfolk was from December 1883 to January 1890, when she resigned to marry.

As arduous as her job must have been (Image 4 & 5: Rules), Miss Alexander seems to have made a life for herself in the New Norfolk community. A news item from May 1888 names her as a participant in an autumn flower show and awarded a prize for her floral arrangement, a table display³.

My romantic mind couldn't help wondering if Selina met her future husband, the well-to-do Robert Wilkins Giblin Shoobridge, at this event? Robert Shoobridge was a pioneering fruit-grower in New Norfolk, and devised a method of transporting Tasmanian apples to London. He was also an exhibitor of flowers at this event. Did sparks fly over Selina's arrangement of Robert's flowers?

At the next government inquiry in 1888, Selina was called upon for evidence⁴. (Image 6: Selina's evidence). In her own voice, her observations include:

The kitchen, washhouse and laundry are very small, and not adequate for the requirements of the place considering we have to wash for the whole building.

The attendants give general satisfaction but sometimes we have a little difficulty in securing suitable attendants.

Asked about general improvements that should be made: 'There should be better sleeping accommodation for the attendants as soon as possible. Some of them sleep two and three in a room, quite close to the patients. They have also to take all their meals in the kitchen, which is also their sitting-room. It is necessary that this should be altered'.

There is a lack of vegetables, and we get no fruit. The nurses only get potatoes.

There is not sufficient bedding for the patients and we have great difficulty in obtaining either mattresses or the hair to make them.

And asked for other suggestions, 'It would be better if our requests were attended to more promptly than at present.'

³ Hobart Mercury, 5 May, 1888

⁴ The charitable institutions of Tasmania: Report of the Commissioners, with evidence taken and other documents. Tasmania: Government Printer, 1888, p 29.

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Selina's evidence is demure compared with Miss Laland's in 1882, however I think the picture still conveys that not much has changed. Perhaps the problems raised by Miss Laland had been addressed somewhat, but I doubt it.

The differences in the two matrons' descriptions of essentially similar conditions are I think of further interest. Perhaps Selina's mildness here helped her survive this dysfunctional workplace. And, she may have had other ways to assert herself, as there is some mention of her improving wages and conditions for the nurses.

What was Selina's reputation among colleagues? Upon her departure on 29 January 1890, the Mercury reports, 'The attendants at the Asylum presented Miss Alexander with a very handsome travelling bag, as a token of their respect and a memorial of their regret at her leaving the institution'⁵. Another reports that she performed her duties in a most highly satisfactory manner⁶.

Now, Miss Selina Alexander became Mrs Selina Shoobridge. Her husband Robert was a successful businessman active in the community, and the Shoobridge family was prominent in the district.

A daughter, Nancy Hope, was born in December 1890. There was a tragedy however, when Nancy drowned at sea aged 8, on a voyage to England to visit her grandparents. Nancy is commemorated in a stained glass window at St Matthews Church, New Norfolk (Image 7: Window).

Selina and Robert were married until her death in 1924. There are many news reports of the Shoobridges being active fundraisers, sitting on committees, helping establish community facilities and generally participating in social life.

In 1910, they funded and opened the New Norfolk Cottage Hospital. It was designed for twelve patients and built to the highest standards of modernity, hygiene and comfort. While Selina's role in this project isn't detailed, I can imagine she had a strong nursing perspective to contribute in terms of the design and function of the new hospital. Descriptions are of a friendly, warm, efficient, well designed facility – a sharp contrast to the Asylum where she had been matron.

Selina was volunteer matron of the Red Cross Society ANZAC Hostel, a busy organisation which provided accommodation and meals to returned WW1 veterans between 1916 and 1919.

In the Mercury in 1936, a former hostel volunteer posthumously recalls Matron Shoobridge's dedication, gift for organisation, common sense, humour and kindness. She had to run the hostel

⁵ Mercury 29 January 1890

⁶ Troubled Asylum, Gowland, 1981

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with the help of girls from all strata of society with no experience in housekeeping, but never had any confusion, squabbles or scandal. She was small but had a dominating and masterful spirit. Soldiers and aids respected her thoroughly, and all did their very best because she wished it⁷. (Image 8: Mercury article)

I believe this allows me to close my presentation with confirmation that Selina fulfilled Nightingale's brief to go forwards, not backwards. (Image 9: Nightingale Note).

Thank you.

⁷ Mercury, 21 September 1936

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