

Traditional Nursing: The Life and Times of Irene Hall

My association with Royal Newcastle Hospital goes back to 1959 when I first started there as a trainee nurse and has continued post closure of the hospital in 2006.

Acknowledgments

This presentation is prepared with reference to:

- PhD of Dr Betty Capper – “The Hospital Matrons in New South Wales 1868-1980 - The Rise and Decline of a Tradition of Female Authority” submitted to the University of Newcastle in 2003
- Entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol 14 1996 by Betty Capper
- The Golden Age of Nursing, author Audrey Armitage, published by the RNH Graduate Nurses Association 1992
- Reminiscences of The Royal, published in 1997 by the RNH Heritage Committee
- The Royal – A Castle Grand, A Purpose Noble, The Royal Newcastle Hospital 1817-2005 by Susan Marsden and Cynthia Hunter, published by Hunter New England Area Health Service 2005
- My memories
- My work on the RNH heritage Committee and later the RNHHT

Slide 2 Photo of Irene Hall

Irene Hall

Background

From the Australian Dictionary Biography entry by Betty Capper 1996

- Irene Slater Hall (1888-1961) was Born 19th July 1888 at Ryde, Sydney
- Fourth child of **Moses Slater Hall**, farm Servant, and his wife Harriett
- Educated at Ryde Public School
- She commenced her nursing career in 1907 as an assistant in nursing at Ellen Gould’s Ermelo Private Hospital, Dulwich Hill.

- Commenced training as a probationer on 16 November 1908. Gained her general nursing certificate from Sydney Hospital in November 1912 after 4years of training., registered 9th July 1913
- Remained on the trained nursing staff until November 1914 as head nurse in charge of a female surgical ward.
- Appointed Head Nurse and Deputy Matron at Newcastle Hospital 1st December 1914 on a salary of 80 pounds per annum.
- Had impeccable credentials from the Sydney Hospital Matron and 5 honorary physicians who acclaimed her intelligence and competence in glowing terms
- Appointed Matron of Newcastle Hospital on 1st April 1915 after being in the position of Acting Matron for 1 month and following the resignation of the Matron Hannah Blacklock.
- Was only 27 years of age when appointed Matron.

Hall's appointment was Beginning of a reign of 43 years. She retired 1958 due to ill health. Deceased 11 August 1961.

The Minutes of the Newcastle Board, 20 April 1915 recorded that "the Hospital Board led by Mr AA Rankin (chairman 1914-1951) unanimously resolved that Sister Hall, Acting Matron, be appointed. The secretary of the Medical Board stated "The staff has had the opportunity of working with her and seeing her carrying out her duties and believe she is in every way qualified to fill the position of matron". It was noted that there had been sixteen applications for the position and one was ruled ineligible because she was not registered. Hall's salary was 120 pounds per annum. In March 1916, the Hospital Management Committee increased the Matron's salary to \$132 pounds per annum, the deputy matron and head sister from \$80 pounds to 90 pounds per annum and ward sisters (trained certificated nurses) to receive 72 pounds.

Slide 3 Photo Irene Hall (2)

Hall's Characteristics

Betty Capper in her PhD thesis outlined the characteristics of Irene Hall.

“As well as possessing a certain presence’, she was extremely tall, almost 6 feet (1.8 cm), endowed with good looks and eyes, which can generate a glacial glance or showing great compassion.

Hall had an impressive ‘reign’ of 43 years, during which time her name become synonymous with nursing, and the institution which grew from a small district hospital to a large teaching and referral hospital. She became a skilled nurse, administrator, a champion of the nursing profession, worked tirelessly and with dedication to influence the status of nursing by perpetuating with its overtones of military discipline – the Nightingale tradition of nursing”

Hall was a rigorous disciplinary. Her Matron-Militaristic attitude was evident in her Induction address to new trainee nurses

“you will find that my school can be likened to the British Army, there is only one difference- they have slackened discipline I have not”

- Hall was cutting and severe when she detected infringements of the rules of her training school or anything less than excellence in patient care.
- She was resolute in cultivating the manners of a 'lady and placed great emphasis on good manners and ladylike behaviour.
- Hall's beautiful handwriting, letters and reports demonstrated her intelligence
- Hall was a dignified and dedicated woman of great integrity.

Newcastle Hospital in 1915

In 1915 when Hall was appointed The Hospital Board had been recently established, replacing the Hospital Management Committee, and was led by Mr AA Rankin (chairman 1914-1951). The hospital was in a dire financial state. Infectious diseases were rife.

The Newcastle Hospital had 80 beds nursing staff had increased to 15. The Nightingale Model of nursing was well established and the training school was well respected. There had been 63 graduates and five had been employed as hospital Matrons in NSW. The period of nursing training was four years, having been increased from three years in 1904. Only respectable young unmarried women were accepted into training. A nurse agreement signed in July 1915 showed the

salary for a first-year nurse was 12 pounds per annum and 35 pounds for a 4th year nurse. This was in return for working a ten to twelve-hour day and rigid off duty discipline.

Slide 4 Photo of North Wing 1916

In 1916 The North Wing opened and was built and incorporated traditional nightingale wards which allowed incessant observation of all patients and staff from a central location. The number of beds increased to 113.

Nightingale Model of Nursing

Hall was familiar with the Nightingale Model of Nursing, having trained at Sydney hospital (formerly known as the Sydney Infirmary where Lucy Osborne a protegee of Florence Nightingale and five nurses from St Thomas' Hospital London had commenced implementation of the model. in March 1868.

Osborne's influence had spread throughout the Colony, in that her discipline, principles and practices were adopted in most hospitals, and in many of them, such as Newcastle Hospital,

Preceding Hall's appointment to Newcastle Hospital were two Matrons who had been trainees at Sydney Hospital and who implemented the nightingale traditions at Newcastle hospital.

In 1870 Jane Morrow who was appointed the first trained nurse to assist with the management of the hospital following a visit by Lucy Osborne in 1868 which had been initiated by the Hospital Management Committee At the time of Morrow's appointment there were untrained nurses at the hospital. nursing was a despised female trade, more particularly so in Newcastle because the first nurses had been convicts.

In March 1871, Morrow was appointed Matron and commenced nurse training scheme at Newcastle Hospital. She was followed by Laura Holden, a Sydney Hospital trainee who was Matron until 1887. Thus there were seventeen consecutive years (1870-1887) where the matrons of Newcastle Hospital were trainees of Sydney Hospital and implemented the Nightingale model of Nursing

Nursing Uniforms

Hall was resolute in cultivating the manners of a 'lady' and placed great emphasis on good manners and ladylike behaviour and appearance. – a characteristic of the Nightingale model.

Bows

Hall was fastidious about nurse's presentation and uniforms. Upon her appointment at the hospital, she introduced the wearing of bonnet and bows by senior nurses, based on the tradition of Sydney Hospital where Lucy Osborn had introduced the sisters wearing of a bonnet with a bow tied under the chin. [Slide 5 Photo of Nurses 1915](#)

The photograph taken in 1915 shows Newcastle Hospital trainee nurses wearing bows. The bows became a status symbol of a "Senior Nurse" and were given to nurses who had successfully completed their second-year examinations. Wearing of this status symbol was the goal of all trainees [Slide 6 Photo Nurses Betty Fenton and 2 unidentified nurses \(1950\), Slide 7 June Sneddon \(1961\)](#).

With some modifications of the cap the bows were worn on the left side of the face by RNH nurses until 1987 when general nursing training ceased at RNH following the transfer of nurse education to the tertiary sector in 1985. (70 Years). It was a tradition that senior nurses bow to their favourite junior nurse after graduating.

Hall would withhold or remove bows and the senior cap as a punishment if a nurse's behaviour contravened the standards required, not only in nursing practice but in personal life. It was reported that one nurse had the embarrassment of remaining in a junior uniform for all her training and being denied a hospital badge on completion of her training

Ongoing surveillance of the wearing of the uniform was undertaken by Hall and senior nursing staff. This extended to the dining room- as nurses entered the dining room nurses passed by Hall's table she inspected the uniform and general grooming of the nurses.

Selection of Nurses

Hall was determined to select girls from the right background. She interviewed each applicant individually and believed that the selected girls were extraordinarily lucky to have the opportunity to train at her hospital. Those applicants not quite up to

standard were put at the bottom of the waiting list. Hall favoured girls educated at private schools such as Newcastle Grammar and the selective school Newcastle Girls High school (NGHS). She considered 'the staff of NGHS had done the ground world in good education, the art of good manners and how young ladies should behave ". The Archives Matron's Report Book 26 June 1946 shows seven of the intake of 12 trainees were educated at NGHS (referenced in Betty Capper theses page 208).

Hall selected trainees from well-known established and prominent middleclass family backgrounds, or those from a lower-class background but with a high academic record. She was very keen to achieve academic prominence and social standing for her hospital and did discriminate, sometimes depending on the nurse's background.

Margaret Marks, secretary to Miss Hall, and later Matron of RNH stated 'Matron Hall always insisted on the right to employ and dismiss her nursing staff... She was said to be adept in recognising the qualities, which in her opinion were desirable in her trainees and worthy of admittance to her training school" (Betty Capper theses p 209). However, Hall could not always dictate her strict selection rules. She had difficulties during the war years and in the period post war reconstruction recruiting sufficient staff and only managed by making some appointments that were not quite desirable. (Hall's Report to the Directors of the Board 1945).

All the nursing trainees were unmarried. Nurses who married were required to resign. This practice continued until the 1961 when Matron Irene Hills allowed married nurses to become student nurses. Married trainees were still required to live in the nurse's home.

Education System

The four-year nurse training period implemented in 1904 continued until the late 1960's (circa 1968) when training reduced to 3 years by the Nurses Registration Board. It was associated with an apprentice system which incorporated on the job training for a small salary. Training on the job continued until nursing transferred to Colleges of advanced Education in 1985 and last general nursing graduates of RNH 1987.

First Year nurses were assigned to work in the wards immediately on commencement. Poppy Adams who trained in the 1930s and who later became Director of Nursing of Royal Newcastle Hospital stated, "New probationers worked 2 days with a junior nurse and then were allocated responsibility for patient care". In the Nightingale ward, junior nurse assigned to care for 10 patients. These were frequently the sickest patients in the ward (no nurse patient ratios).

Nurses received training from the Charge Sisters (Head nurses) and the Senior Nurses. There was a distinct emphasis on mastering of nursing task, which included cleaning, sweeping, scrubbing and clerical duties

Lectures were provided by Matron Hall and Doctors. No tutor sisters were employed.

Nurses were required to attend lectures in their off-duty hours and these may have included their day off. This may have been attending lecture at the end of night shift-availability of the doctor. Examinations were frequently held between 6pm and 9pm. This pattern of instruction continued until 1968 when a full block release system was introduced.

The final examinations to become a Registration Nurse were set by the NSW Nurses Registration Board. Nurses were required to complete 3 written papers in medical, surgical and nursing followed by a viva voce examination by physicians, surgeons and matrons and other senior nurses. This continued until well into the 1960's

At the 1933 Matron's Conference held in Newcastle where spoke of the difficulty of examining hospital trainees fairly in the final exams. As a result, a Matron's handbook of lectures for trainees was developed with several Matrons contributing and was edited by Hall. The book preceded the first published nursing textbook in NSW by 9 Years 'Modern Practical Nursing Procedure by Doherty, Searle & Ring'.

Organisation of Nursing work

The role of the Charge Sister was to oversee the management of the ward and ensure high standards of care were maintained.

Work by trainee nurses was officially performed under **task assignment** with the more complex tasks being delegated to senior students and menial tasks being given to junior nurses. The assignment of tasks was intended to be organised

according to the level of theoretical experience obtained in lectures and examinations. However, all nurses frequently performed tasks prior to undertaking theoretical instruction and beyond their level of competence. There was a lot of trial and error learning.

All nursing care and treatment was monitored by the clock. Rituals included all patients having to be sponged and ready for the day before breakfast at 7.30am. The night nurse was required to commence sponging at 4am and complete a specified number of patients (6). Nurses frequently commenced at 1am following supper.

Another nursing ritual, cleaning of pan room commenced about 9am by the Junior Nurse and expected to be completed before morning tea. "***The better the shine, the better the nurse***".

Night duty - student nurses were allocated one per ward (responsible for up to 27 patients in a Nightingale ward), one Charge Sister was in charge of the building and one sister was rostered for the operating theatre

The tradition of task nursing continued well into the 1970's when there was an increase in the ratio of registered nurses to student nurses and patient assignment was introduced.

Surveillance – Rounds (unremitting surveillance)

Matron Hall would undertake rounds of the hospital at any time of the day or night, usually when least expected. Despite the unannounced round, word would get around the hospital she was on her way and occurred via the switch and telephone.

Rounds by Hall were a highly structured and ritualised activity which always loomed large in the nursing staff's daily routines and patient's hospital experience. Nurses learnt in preliminary training school that only the ward sister or senior nurse ever spoke to or did rounds with matron or doctors. A military system prevailed with hierarchy and rank - nurses stood to attention with hands behind back when speaking to seniors and doctors.

During the rounds Hall checked the uniforms of the nurses, the environment to ensure the blinds were carefully aligned or whether the beds were in straight alignment with the wheels facing in, pillow case end were facing the windows and patient water jugs with placed with handles facing the patient. The appearance of the

ward took precedence over patient care and comfort. Matron's round was an excreting and stressful experience for both trained and trainee nurses which, engendered the thought – 'what will be wrong today.'

Slide 8 Photo Nightingale Ward 2 1938

The practice of rounds was widely adopted by the charge sisters and the nurses. There were rounds of patients – Observation rounds, comfort rounds, medication rounds and cleaning rounds. Charge sisters and senior nurses stringently checked nurses work with a view to ensuring excellent standards of patient care were maintained.

Slide 9 Photo of Nurses Old Home

Living in the nurses Home

The requirement that trainee nurses live in the nurse's home was part of the process of socialisation of nurses aimed at achieving integration of working and non-working life and automatic responses to discipline. Hall lived in the nurse's home in a flat serviced by a personal maid and was supported by a home sister in monitoring the nurse's activities. Nurses had to sign in and out when entering or leaving the nurses home.

Strict rules extended to leave passes, lights out at 10pm, dress regulations including off duty dress, nurses visiting other nurse's rooms, punctuality, respect and deference for high rank, and etiquette. Rigid rules were applied to the night nurses who had to be in bed by 10am and could not be disturbed under any circumstances until 4pm. Hall checked that this rule was obeyed and did rounds of the nurse's home. This rule for night duty nurses continued well into the 1960's

Rules applied in the nurses dining room where Hall's surveillance she scrutinised nurse's manners and eating habits.

Hall had mirrors strategically placed in her office located in the nurses home so that she could see people coming up and greet them by name when they presented. Nurses were required to present to her in uniform, to request a late pass (that is to stay out after 10pm), to request a replacement for broken thermometers (only allowed to break 3 before a shilling had to be paid by the culprit). Going the stairs was avoided by nurses buying a thermometer at the local pharmacy in Hunter Street.

If a nurse called up the stairs it usually was related to disciplinary punishment, inappropriate behaviour or nursing practice. On occasions, it related to good behaviour.

Under the vigilant eye of the matron nurse developed a culture and folklore of their own. Many stories have been handed down through generations of nurses regarding the dreaded stairs and breaking the rules, many of which have been embellished.

Establishment of A Nurses Preliminary Training School

Slide 10 Photo of Hilda Towns and student nurses

In 1944 Preliminary Training School established by Sister Hilda Towns who had trained at Newcastle Hospital from 1931- 1935. She had travelled to England in 1939 and completed a Sisters Tutors Course at King College (University Hospital of London) in 1941.and worked in London during the 'blitz' of World War2.

Early in 1943 Matron Hall sent a message to Towns and the British Authorities demanding she return home as she was needed at Newcastle Hospital.

Establishment of a nurses training school proposed and strongly supported by Dr Chris McCaffrey, Medical Superintendent (1939-1965) to address nursing shortages which had been aggravated by the War, and to augment on the job training provided by senior nurses and ward sisters. Towns returned via a merchant ship which was part of an Australian bound convey that was under constant threat of U-boat attack. On her arrival, back in Newcastle she was given the responsibility of establishing a Nurses Training School and overseeing theoretical and clinical instruction. A preliminary training school was introduced where students entering nursing spent three weeks learning the principles of nursing and the duties of a junior nurse. The first intake of six nurses commenced on 4th January 1944. Groups regularly commenced and were gathered into one big class for ensuring lectures over the four years of training. The Newcastle Hospital Training school under the direction of a Tutor Sister attracted growing numbers of trainees relieving the severe nursing shortages. Wastage rates reduced substantially.

Slide 11 Photo of Ruth White Other tutor sisters were appointed to support Towns in her work and included Ruth White who was appointed in 1956.

The training school produced high calibre students who performed exceptionally well in the State Nurses Registration Examinations, with several of them being the top students.

Slide 12 Photo of Midwifery Students In 1952 midwifery nurse training was introduced and was controversial, in that babies stayed in the rooms with their mothers instead of being cared for in a central nursery.

Other post-graduate courses followed, such as Intensive Care (1968) and Renal Nursing Certificates (1972) in association with the commencement of specialisation in nursing practices.

Slide 12 Photo of Nurses Choir

Nurses Choir

Hilda Towns founded the nurses choir in 1952. A friend who was a music teacher at Newcastle Girls high acted as a conductor and wrote the Nurses Hymn. The choir sang this hymn at every graduation ceremony until the last one at Christ Church Cathedral in 1987.

Slide 14 Photo of Nurses Badges

Nurses Badges

On successful completion of the Nurses Registration Board examination and general training nurses were issued with a badge with the letters (NGH) Newcastle General Hospital, and from 1953 (RNH), a tradition which continued until the general nursing training school ceased in 1987

Slide 14 Photo of Nursing Graduates- 1957

Slide 15 Photo of Midwifery students

In 1952 midwifery nurse training was introduced and was controversial, in that babies stayed in the rooms with their mothers instead of being cared for in a central nursery.

Being Invited Back

During the four-year training period Hall observed nurse's manners, morals and behaviour and nursing expertise and rewarded special trainees with an invitation to remain on the staff. Hall explained to be asked back on her trained nursing staff was an honour. When only 7 nurses were invited to stay on, she told the eighth *"If you don't know why you have a very poor memory"*. (Betty Capper PhD thesis)

Retention of graduates who had completed their nursing training at the hospital assisted in the perpetuation of the hospital's traditions and training methods. For many years all the trained nurses were graduates of the hospital. All the Matrons appointed to RNH after Hall had trained at the Hospital. Porter, Hills, Marks, Adams, Anderson. (1958-1995) – a period of 37 years.

When Chris McCaffrey, Medical Superintendent appointed Hall's successor, Hilda Porter in 1958, he was reported to have said at the Board meeting .. *"don't want any alterations to the policies which have been established here"*.

Slide 16 Photo of Hall & Hilda Porter

Agnes Hilda Porter graduated in 1933, was Deputy Matron from 1938-58, and provided very strong support for Hall and McCaffrey in the management of the day to day hospital. Porter was quite different to Hall in personality, always wore a smile and ready to discuss problems; however, implemented Hall's regimes.

Slide 17 Photo of Hall & Chris McCaffrey

Hall, and Chris McCaffrey

Hall worked closely with Dr Chris McCaffrey who was Medical Superintendent of the Hospital from 1939. He was a man ahead of his time and his aim was to develop a system of care which focused on the "whole patient. He encouraged team work and innovation in approaches to services delivery. In late 1940's the introduction of the imprest system whereby supplies, materials and services were the responsibility of the appropriate department (dietary, pharmacy, laundry, stationery, central sterilising, released nurses from managing these responsibilities. Allocations of supplies were made to each ward area based on established need and bed occupancy and arrived ready for immediate use. The Catch Cry was "Nurses for

Nursing”. McCafferty’s work in implementing new systems was made easier by, Hilda Porter, Hilda Towns and Ruth White

Slide 18 Photos of Hilda Porter & McCaffrey

Slide 19 Photo of RNH 1948

Hall’s Power & Influence

Dr Ruth White wrote in the Reminiscences of the Royal published in 1997) *“The myth in Sydney was that nursing at RNH was submerged under a wealth of administrative decisions made by others. Rather than diminishing the role of nursing it was clear that nurses were free to do what they were educated to do – nursing.... “I was from RPA – and being an outsider was quite something. People were suspicious of me at first. The ward sisters were not keen on a stranger in their midst.... It was quite difficult for me, for about a year”. ... Matron Hall was such an impressive influence – she had a great presence, and you couldn’t help admiring her. Her staff were strongly influenced I’d see her senior sisters standing with their hands behind them as they spoke to her”.*

Hall was said to have very good relationships Archibald Rankin, Chairman of the Board, McCaffrey and the medicos.

With regards to her communication Hall advised:

“Sister, always let men think they are doing the administration”

“Always present your recommendation to the doctor and the chairman of the Board ...in a way that encourages them to think it was their idea in the first place... in that way you (sic) can have them do exactly as you (sic) wish”

“... go to the Board meetings. why would a matron want to go to board meetings in an industrial city like Newcastle? No, a matron lets the men know how she feels about issues before the meeting”. (PhD thesis by Betty Capper).

Doctors reported they were terrified of Hall and many thought she was magnificent. Gordon Ker ridge in an interview with Betty Capper in 1996 Ker ridge stated “As a resident medical officer was a terrified of her as a resident medical officer. but what a fantastic, superb person she was... all people including staff and patients knew that someone oversaw the hospital”. (PhD thesis Betty Capper).

Halls Interactions could be very charming as shown in the following:

Slide 20 Photo of Hall with Jack Smith & Gordon Kerridge

Slide 21 Photo of Hall with Duke of Gloucester- opening of Nixon Wing 1948

The civic fathers thought they may have had it all arranged when his Royal Highness visited the hospital but instead of leading him along the corridor to waiting signatories Matron Hall said this way and turned down another corridor so her nurses could see and be seen.

RNH Graduate Nurses Association

Hall held an Annual Matron's Afternoon tea I and invited guests were past Newcastle Hospital Graduates. In 1952 Gave permission for the establishment of a Royal Newcastle Hospital Graduate Nurses Association and was appointed Patron of the association. This Association closed in 2006 having operated for 64 years.

Comradery among graduate nurses developed into life-long friendships.

Halls' activities beyond the hospital

Hall was well-known in Australia and internationally and was a council member (1927-58) of the Australasian Trained Nurses' Association, a foundation member and fellow of the College of Nursing, Australia, president of the State branch of the Florence Nightingale Committee of Australia, and a delegate to congresses of the International Council of Nurses in London in 1937, at Atlantic City, USA in 1947, and in Rome, Italy in 1957. She was also interested in a range of civic and charitable organisations.

"Hall was a champion of the nursing profession and worked tirelessly and with dedication to influence the status of nursing" (Betty Capper PhD thesis p201).

Matron Hall was awarded King George V's Silver Jubilee (1935), Queen Elizabeth 11's Coronation (1953) medals, and appointed M.B.E. in 1957.

Following her death at the Hospital on 11 August 1961 the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, Mr Frank Purdue paid tribute to Hall: *I am sure the citizens of Newcastle will join in the tribute to the memory of Miss Hall, who was so widely known and deeply loved*

as one who made tremendous contribution to the success of Royal Newcastle Hospital.

Irene Slater Hall was a most brilliant, dominant personality, and nurse administrator of Royal Newcastle in the institution.... Hall helped instil a tremendous sense of pride in RNH. Deirdre Anderson, Director of Nursing RNH 1982-95, stated: *“It is a truism to say that you can always tell a “Royal” nurse...they are readily identified by the mark of Matron Hall “(Betty Capper PhD thesis p222).*

Slide 22 Photo of Irene Hall Nurses Home opened in 1960

In 1960 a new nurses home opened in 1960 was named the Irene Hall Nurses Home This building was sold in the mid 90's and is now an apartment building

Slide 23 Photo of Monument for Hall

In 2002 a monument was erected in Pacific Park by the Royal Newcastle Graduate Nurses Association.

Conclusion

Irene Hall was a woman of substance - power and influence, and was one of the 'Giants' of the Royal.