



Great Queensland Women From Our Past

Lilian Cooper (1861 – 1947)

Audio transcript

Now, another woman who is very important in supporting much better medical care for women and children is Dr Lilian Cooper, Brisbane's first woman doctor. She studied medicine in London at a time when women were rarely allowed to study medicine, and she saw just how many women died in childbirth, and how many children were also dying within a few weeks of birth.

Lilian wanted votes for women, better contraceptive advice, free birth control clinics and free baby clinics. And doing house-to-house visits, she'd seen the terrible conditions in which most working class women and children lived. She arrived in Brisbane accompanied by Jean Bedford, an art student who'd shared a house with her in London. Lilian had studied medicine against her parents' wishes. They wanted her to stay home and get married. She saved up her dress allowance and took extra tuition in the scientific subjects that would get her into medicine. So she was very dedicated to medicine, and when she gets to Brisbane - it's before the days of the vote. Nice ladies did not work for money, and Lilian and Jean defied the system. They drove around Brisbane so Lilian could do her house calls in a pony and trap. Eventually, they'd get a car, they'd get one of the first cars in Brisbane, and Jean Bedford learns how to change the tyres.

It was really quite revolutionary for a woman even to have a car, but she was working for a general practitioner, who she'd got the job from England, Sutton on Sea, and she discovered he was an alcoholic, and he was neglecting his patients. So she stood up to her employer, and they had a terrible row, and he fired her, and said "You will never work anywhere else in Queensland."

Lilian was not going to take this lying down. She goes and gets a job with the nuns of the Mater Hospital, which at the time, is on North Quay. North Quay was very different to today, and it's in one of those houses that they set up the Mater Hospital. Now Lilian ran a free clinic for women and children there - she would often go into children's wards there with a big basket of toys for children who were too poor for their parents to buy them toys. She was very beloved by her patients.

At the outbreak of World War I, Lilian Cooper is in her 50's, and she volunteers her services to the Australian Army. By this time, she has spent a couple of years in America, getting a post-graduate degree in surgery, but this does not impress the colonel in charge of the Australian Army, recruiting in Brisbane, and he says "The army do not want women doctors. Dr Cooper would do much better to stay home and knit for the war effort."

Lilian is furious! She goes home, and she writes away to the Scottish Women's Hospital Service in Edinburgh. Now they were set up for two reasons, one was, in World War I, to provide free medical services to countries like France and Serbia. Serbia had been invaded by Austria, the allies of Germany, and all the hospitals had been taken over by the Austrians. Austrians have burned all the fields and the farms. Lilian and Jean Bedford are sent to the Ostrovo Field Hospital, and Lilian runs the ambulance division with volunteer ambulance drivers, all women, some of who supply their own ambulances.

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Lilian finds herself operating, in tents, very near the frontier, with bullets whistling around her, which is very ironic, because, there they are, being incredibly brave, having been told ... the British women have been told, "Oh no, you're too stupid to have the vote". So one of the things that the British women in the Scottish Women's Hospitals wanted to get, was to get the vote, and they thought that if they showed they could run all-women hospitals, and all-women ambulance services very efficiently, men would have to give them the vote, as in fact they did. After the 1914-1918 war, the British government could hardly hold out against the vote, and so British women get the vote in the 1920s.

Lilian, who is extremely brave in this campaign, is given the main order for valour of the Serbs, the King of Serbia awards her the Order of St Sava.

Now Jean Bedford runs the ambulance service, and these are lorry ambulances, they are converted lorries as ambulances. They are very heavy to drive, you need to double de-clutch. Again, they drive down from the battlefield, bullets whistling around their ears, some of the ambulance drivers are killed, one ambulance goes over the edge of a precipice. This is not a service for the faint-hearted, I'll tell you! And Jean Bedford is operating under terrible conditions, either in field hospital tents, or in abandoned buildings.

After the war, they come back to Brisbane, and Lilian opens up now in practice in The Mansions, and once again, like Margaret Ogg, she puts her money where her mouth is, to help other people. When she dies, she bequeaths the land that her house is on at Kangaroo Point to what is now the Mt Olivet Hospice. There is now a *Lilian Cooper Aged Care Facility* there, there is also a *Lilian Cooper Medical Centre* in the middle of town, so her name is remembered.