

EXPRESSIONS OF MERCY: BRISBANE'S MATER HOSPITALS 1906-2006, HELEN GREGORY. BRISBANE: UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS, 2006; VII + PP379, PHOTOGRAPHS, NOTES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, INDEX; PAPERBACK.

THE ROYAL. A CASTLE GRAND, A PURPOSE NOBLE. A HISTORY OF THE ROYAL NEWCASTLE HOSPITAL 1817-2005, SUSAN MARSDEN ASSISTED BY CYNTHIA HUNTER. NEWCASTLE: HUNTER NEW ENGLAND AREA HEALTH SERVICE, 2005; VI + PP250 + VI, PHOTOGRAPHS, NOTES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, INDEX; PAPERBACK.

A PROFESSION'S PATHWAY: NURSING AT ST VINCENT'S SINCE 1893, MARY SHEEHAN WITH SONIA JENNINGS. KEW (VICTORIA): ARCADIA, 2005, PP218 + XIII, PHOTOGRAPHS, NOTES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, INDEX; PAPERBACK.

These three hospital histories were written by experienced professional historians, all at ease with evaluating evidence and practised in conveying complicated scenarios to commissioning bodies and the public. The result is three excellent histories which provide a model for other professional historians. Their particular interest to readers of *Public History Review* is that they are also three very different books, illustrating very different approaches. Which one is best? As always, that depends. It depends most of all on the scope required by the commissioning body and the intended audience.

The narrowest in scope is Sheehan's book on nursing at St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne. Sheehan also had the inestimable advantage of being able to draw upon five well-researched secondary sources. Two were relevant to the hospital (Bryan Egan, *Ways of a Hospital: St Vincent's Melbourne 1890s-1990s* and Michael Tyquin, *A Place on the Hill: The History of St Vincent's Private Hospitals in Melbourne 1906-1993*) and three to the general context of nursing in Victoria (Angela Cushing, *A Contextual Perspective to Female Nursing in Victoria*; Judith and Bob Bessant, *Growth of a Profession: Nursing in Victoria 1930s-1980s*; and Richard Trembath and Donna Hellier, *All Care and Responsibility: A History of Nursing in Victoria 1850-1993*). Sheehan had another great advantage in that she was a St Vincent's trained nurse before becoming a professional historian. It is not surprising that she straddles with ease the perspectives of the 'insider' and the 'outsider'. The result is an engaging book, basically written for St Vincent's nurses but accessible to all interested in nursing or medical history. There are no surprises in the themes – such as the mindless discipline of early nursing, the camaraderie of the nurses' home or the Sisters of Charity's resistance to the Hospital being brought under state control – but they are evocatively told. External events are largely confined to introductory sections of each chapter, patient experiences to the last

chapter and the nurses' experience is mostly that of the laity. There are signs of haste in completion but the production values, especially photographs, are generally high.

Marsden's history of Newcastle Hospital is quite different in concept and scope. She had to skate over nearly 200 years, but also considerably upped the ante by her emphasis on the hospital as community. In one sense all these histories do this in their stress on the staff of their hospital being, in Gregory's words, a 'family', and also in their stress on their hospital's links to the community. Marsden extends the notion by examining how the hospital shared in, rather than was simply influenced by, community fluctuations of fortune. She also, most innovatively of all, gives broadly comprehensive biographical vignettes. These are regrettably in tiny print but are worth reading. They include the expected senior administrators, doctors, nurses and fund-raisers but also patients, domestic and auxiliary staff and volunteers. These vignettes are all interesting and, as in the description of the life of the first indigenous nurse at the Hospital, revealing equally of broader history and individual character (in this case, resilience). Other aspects of Marsden's book have much in common with the two others reviewed here, including an admirable attempt at impartiality when dealing with the many controversial issues and personalities that are part of any hospital's history. She too uses photographs to enliven and add to the text.

Gregory's history of the seven Mater Hospitals in Brisbane shares with the others the excellent standard of research, the generally high production qualities and attempt to weave individual stories into the broader context. She deliberately chose a broad brush (p336) approach and, it is hard to resist concluding, primarily wrote to meet the needs of her commissioning body. The end result is basically an administrative history which traces the many vicissitudes and triumphs of the Sisters of Mercy as they, or so it appeared to this reader, constantly stretched to the limit their resources and standard of care. The promised board-brush approach translates, especially in the last half of the book, into a sustained argument about state policy and its impact on the hospital. There is also a valiant attempt to conceptualise the history as an expression of Mercy values although the comparative neglect of the health of its nearby Aboriginal community, especially during most of the twentieth century, is an unexplained and glaring anomaly. Still, this book is a valuable record even if one not as engaging to the general reader.

These then are three excellent hospital histories, all taking a different approach to suit different requirements. Only Sheehan had the luxury of rich secondary sources upon which to draw her more specialised study. Only Marsden could tap into the distinctive Newcastle sense of a community with its hospital as a centrepiece. Only Gregory chose to stress the dominant role of the state in determining the direction of recent healthcare. These books indicate that hospital history is in good hands which hopefully will encourage more commissions. I am less confident that two other needed developments will be soon achieved. The first need is for a generalised history of Australian hospitals

so that developments in each hospital can be placed in context. The second need is a work where 'nuns' are so mainstream that we, as historians, critique them in the same spirit as we do the laity.

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