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Mary Ann Nicolay (1850–1939) **Matron, Nightingale Trainee and** **Boer War Nurse from Western Australia**

Mary Ann Nicolay was born on 2 August 1850, London, fifth of eight children of Rev. Charles Grenfell Nicolay and his wife Mary Ann. Her father was himself quite a significant figure in Western Australian history. Educated at Clifton High School, Bristol, young Mary Ann became a pupil-teacher. She joined the Nightingale School of Nursing at St Thomas's Hospital, London, on 13 March 1876, later recalling long days, cleaning as well as nursing, and writing notes for checking by Miss Nightingale. She was given only moderate assessments by Nightingale. In 1890 she was appointed matron at Perth Colonial Hospital. She was staggered at her first glimpse of the hospital

"buildings were good; walls were good; the institution was in a deplorable state. There was accommodation for only 12 women patients."

Soon after her arrival she was horrified to discover bugs in her bed, she caught a number and showed them to the Colonial Surgeon. His only comment was "woman you must get used to such things." Matron however had all the beds burnt as soon as possible.

21 March 1900, sponsored by the public (they had no connection with the army) Sister Nicolay took ten nurses to the South African War in the steamer *SS Salamis* from Albany, despite criticism for taking scarce, trained personnel from local hospitals. Criticism was also based on many 'experts' view that women had no role on the battlefield and had no skills which were appropriate for military nursing. Writers to the papers stated that they had heard positively that British military



authorities were turning away a deluge of nurses wanting to nurse in South Africa. The coordination of the contingent was by the Western Australian Nurses Contingent Fund chaired by Lady Forrest. Fund-raising activities, including a concert in Perth Town Hall, were held to pay for the contingent. The nurses themselves assisted in the fund-raising.

Of all the official contingents, the Western Australian nurses situation was the most chaotic. Either someone had blundered



or little consideration was given to how they would get to South Africa as they were sent steerage class with as many as eight per room. Nor were they able to dine in saloon class as they had been promised.

The muddle grew worse in South Africa as no one in Western Australia had thought to tell either the army or British authorities that they were coming or provide letters of introduction. They were dumped on the wharf at Capetown and left to fend for themselves. Fortunately the captain of a liner berthed nearby gave them cabins for the first night then they had to find and pay for their own hotel accommodation.

Initially they were employed as Red Cross nurses in a private

facility in Ladysmith, Natal. By September 1900 Mary apparently was superintendent of nursing at the hospital in Ladysmith.

The Western Australian nurses were eventually split up after Ladysmith. Ultimately they came under more direct army control and onto the British Army payroll. Unsure what to make of them, the British Army eventually decided that they were an official contingent like those nurses from Victoria or NSW. Officialdom was much more comfortable with this decision.

Nicolay herself went on to work at No 1 General Hospital Wynberg, No 4 General Hospital Mooi River, No 12 Stationary Hospital Ladysmith and No 14 Stationary Hospital Pietermaritzburg before transferring with that hospital to Pretoria. By

1901 she was also assigned to boat service from time to time. This was an essential nursing task looking after invalids and convalescents but also gave medical authorities a chance to spell nurses from the field operations. In February 1901 she was on duty on the *SS Raneë* at Albany. Nicolay arrived in Albany on 17 April 1901 on board the *SS Antillian* and returned to South Africa shortly after on the *SS Raneë*; in June she was back again in Melbourne on the *SS Narung*. Nicolay returned to Western Australia in late 1901.

The Coronation medal was added to her QSA in 1937.

Miss Nicolay died on 15 October 1939 and was buried in Karrakatta cemetery.

READ THE FULL STORY AT bwm.org.au



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