

RESTORING ETTIE'S GRAVE

Ettie Annie Rout (1877-1936)



The NZVS badge, on her lapel, stands for New Zealand Volunteer Sisterhood

Ettie was a woman well ahead of her time. She was born in Tasmania and came with her family to New Zealand as a young child. She became a public shorthand typist in Christchurch but she had wide, if unconventional, interests and was a rationalist, socialist, and freethinker. Single handedly she promoted 'safer sex' with the Australian and New Zealand troops of World War I before that term was ever used. She argued strongly that venereal diseases were a medical and not a moral problem. She campaigned for the issue of prophylactics for troops going on leave. After researching what would be the most effective means for prophylaxis (which would not have been easy for a non-medical person) she included the following items in the prophylactic kit: calomel ointment (containing mercury), Condy's crystals (potassium permanganate) for irrigation, and condoms.

The kit was finally adopted by both New Zealand and Australian armies. She also provided social amenities for the soldiers. After spending time with the troops in the Middle East she continued her campaign in England and France. In Paris she would meet the trains bringing the troops and hand them kits and cards advising them of the safe brothel she has set up with the help of French venereologist Dr Jean Tissot who dubbed her 'a real guardian angel of the ANZACs'. However in the House of Lords she was called 'the wickedest woman in Britain.' In New Zealand women's groups campaigned against her. Her name is not mentioned in the official war history of New Zealand but she is acknowledged in the Australian war history, twice in Bean's multi-volume history and once in the medical history. The French awarded her a medal, the Reconnaissance Francaise.

In 1920, when they were both 43 years old, Ettie married her long time partner, physical culturist, Fred Hornibrook. They settled in London where Ettie wrote books on diet, exercise, birth control, venereal diseases and Maori culture. Her book *Safe Marriage* which discussed contraception was banned in New Zealand. She was a contemporary of two other family planning pioneers, Margaret Sanger (1879-1966) in the USA and Marie Stopes (1880-1958) in Britain.

Ettie and Fred parted and at the age of 59 she returned to New Zealand where she was lonely, unrecognised, and depressed. Hoping to benefit from the sunshine of the Pacific Islands she

travelled there but on a boat trip in the Islands she took a fatal overdose of quinine and was buried in Rarotonga. In 1983 she was featured in a TVNZ documentary on pioneer women. Belated recognition came in 1988 when the AIDS clinic in her hometown of Christchurch was named after her.

In December 2009 Dr David Bradford and companion Michael went on a fantastic cruise on the Regent 'Seven Seas Mariner' across the Pacific from Auckland to LA. The second port of call was Rarotonga and David and Michael made a special pilgrimage to see Ettie Rout's grave in the churchyard of the Cook Islands Christian Church in Avarua.



Dr David Bradford at Ettie's grave December 2009

David writes "It was interesting that the handout from the Cruise Ship advised that there were several famous people buried in the graveyard, including Ettie Rout - it mentioned her by name and yet when we actually got there it was a real problem to locate the grave. There was a tour from the ship that afternoon - a circle island tour- and the bus paused beside the church and churchyard and the guide reeled off a list of famous people buried there -including American author Robert Dean Frisbie (1896-1948) - but omitted Ettie. The tour didn't stop there as we had hoped - consequently we had a good mile or so walk from the pier to the Church afterwards and another mile back to the ship to ensure we saw the grave.

We had a lot of trouble finding the grave at first until Michael remembered that suspected suicides were always buried at the very back of the churchyard and sure enough there it was almost against the back fence behind the church on the right hand side. Some (discreet) signposting would have helped. It really wasn't easy to find! Only Michael's sharp eyes found it after we had been round and round the churchyard two or three times and had almost given up hope of finding it.

I was saddened to see that her grave is very dilapidated and unkempt - such a shame that someone who had done so much for sexual health and who had been such a pioneer against considerable opposition would be so little remembered.

I was asked to speak on two occasions during 2009, one in Sydney at an Art Conference at the Casula Power House Museum and one in Canberra, a History of War Conference at the Australian War Memorial about the problems of STIs in Australian and New Zealand soldiers in the Vietnam conflict. I began both talks by paying tribute to Ettie as "the guardian angel of the ANZACs" and the first safe sex campaigner and saying that it was almost entirely due to her influence that both the Australian and NZ Armies dropped their punitive approach to soldiers with STIs by the time of the

Vietnam War and that we as Army regimental medical officers (RMOs) there were not only advocating condom use but mandating the supply of same before soldiers went on leave. So her influence lives on and her stance has been vindicated many many times over since the coming of HIV/AIDS in the eighties.

I believe she should be regarded as a national icon in both Australia and New Zealand and there ought to be a well beaten track to her grave - who knows how many countless men and women have been saved the ravages of STIs and more latterly HIV/AIDS by her wonderful example and courageous fighting spirit? It is very sad that so many seem never to have heard of her despite the official record - a historian at the medical War History Conference in Canberra told me he was grateful to me for drawing his attention for the first time to her work in my talk - if even the official war historians don't know about her, things are pretty grim!"

Author Jane Tolerton who in 1992 published the biography *Ettie: A life of Ettie Rout* (Auckland, Penguin Books) enthusiastically supports the initiative to restore Ettie's grave. She recalls how Leslie Grange, then head of the NZ Soil Division went to Rarotonga in the 1950s to survey the soil. He was a WW1 veteran and someone mentioned Ettie. They looked for the grave but, like David and Michael, they couldn't find it.

Jane writes "After Grange returned to NZ, the grave was found and he was sent the inscription. He got the second gravestone made and shipped it over - and it was put on top of the grave - which is why there is one sloping gravestone and one sitting upright on top with exactly the same wording. Grange had been nursed by Ettie in WW1. One of the most interesting things is that when I phoned his family (as he was dead by the 80s when I was researching) his son assured me that 'That wouldn't have been Dad'. In fact, luckily Grange had written to a would-be biographer - who had kept the letter....and there was back up evidence as well. In Rarotonga I had met the man who had physically put the second gravestone on - and he was the one who told me about Grange's visit.

This vignette is perfect: the wish of the man to do something to recognise Ettie - but not publicly (just as the RSA collected money for her after the war and sent it to her in England, but did not publicly speak out in her favour) and the family not even thinking about it but just - no, it wouldn't have been our Dad."

Jane also recalls her last visit to Rarotonga. "I had a copy of my book with me. There was an auction of art and so on - the proceeds going to a safe sex campaign for young people amazingly. So I donated the copy of *Ettie* and it was auctioned....and bought by a man who owned a resort."

Dr Janet Say is 100% behind the project to restore Ettie's grave. She has a friend Iola Penney who is from the Cook Islands and stays there for 6 months every year. When in Auckland she lives not far from Janet and after Janet explained the situation she agreed to help out on site. It would be great to have someone reliable to keep an eye on things and report anything that needs attention.

Some suggestions to date:

- The actual grave is just dusty and neglected and would respond to a clean up.
- The marble headstone is weathered and blackened and difficult to read and we need advice from a person experienced in maintenance of marble headstones. It is not envisaged that a new headstone is needed as the present one is perfectly OK if the lettering could be cleaned and restored. Iola has offered to investigate.
- A semi-permanent bouquet on the grave, or a flowering shrub if it could be watered, or something to indicate someone actively cares.
- Directions are needed. The actual grave site lies right against the back wall of the graveyard - if you approach the main entrance to the church from the roadway, turn right at the porch

along the back wall, turn left when you reach the corner of the church and then walk down the whole right hand side of the church the grave site is directly ahead and a little to the right.

- A signpost at the main entrance to the churchyard from the street (the little path from the main entrance leads directly to the porch of the church) would be helpful, although the advice from Iola is that signposts are not a Cook Island thing.
- A little pamphlet about Ettie in the church which had a map of the churchyard marking her grave would be all that was necessary or better perhaps a durable sign on the wall of the church inside the porch. There is always a problem that the church authorities might be resistant to our ideas especially as Ettie was hardly a Christian in orthodox terms and was believed to have been a suicide, and the denomination is evangelical and fundamentalist.
- Publicity for visitors. The handout from the cruise ship mentioned Ettie's grave and had a couple of (accurate) sentences about her so it was a shame that tourists from the Cruise ship who might have been interested to see the grave would have had difficulty finding it when they got to the actual church. As well it is mentioned online when you look up details about Avarua, the one city on the island, and apparently it is included in the Lonely Planet's guide. The problem seems to be local. Iola suggests that the library is the centre where tourists go for information pamphlets. Other tour operators and cruise ships should be encouraged to provide publicity in their own brochures.
- Involve the Cook Islands Tourist Board. This would be MOST helpful and Iola has offered to approach the Tourist Board. This might be a way of ensuring a good opinion about restoration of the headstone was obtained and might smooth things over in dealings with the Church people too.
- Involve members of the New Zealand Sexual Health Society and Fellows of the RACP Australasian Chapter of Sexual Health Medicine who are interested in doing something towards improving the memorial to our first Safer Sex campaigner. Obtain an estimate of the cost involved before asking both groups to consider meeting the costs involved in the restoration of the grave, its maintenance, and publicity to assist visitors to the grave site

Margaret Sparrow

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With thanks to David Bradford, Janet Say, Jane Tolerton