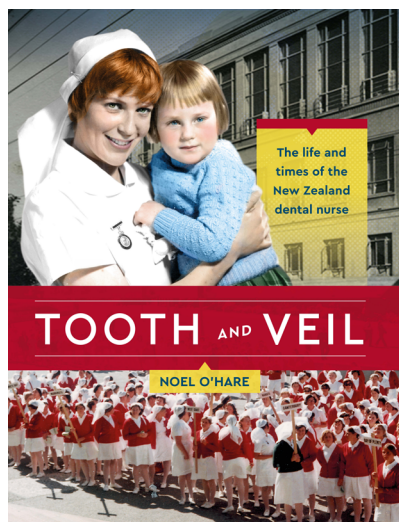


# Tooth and Veil

## *The life and times of the New Zealand dental nurse*

NOEL O'HARE



\$49.99

CATEGORY: History

ISBN: 978-0-9951229-6-3

ESBN: n/a

THEMA: MKE, NHTB, 3MP, 1MBN

BIC: HBJM, MMD, HBLW, HBTB, 1MBN

BISAC: HIS004000, MED039000,

MED016010, HIS058000

PUBLISHER: Massey University Press

IMPRINT: Massey University Press

PUBLISHED: May 2020

PAGE EXTENT: 256

FORMAT: Limpbound

SIZE: 250mm x 190mm

RIGHTS: World

AUTHOR RESIDENCE: Wellington,  
New Zealand

### THE STORY OF THE YOUNG WOMEN CHARGED WITH WAGING WAR ON OUR NATION'S POOR TEETH

In 1921, the School Dental Service was established. A social experiment unique to New Zealand, it was lauded around the world and later modelled in 15 countries. This is the story of those on the front line of that experiment, the dental nurses who endured military-style training, poor resourcing and petty discipline, as well as increasingly anachronistic rules around uniform and behaviour.

Bringing together interviews with dental nurses from across the decades, Noel O'Hare has created an engaging social history of New Zealand in the twentieth century, through the eyes and voices of young women.

The book begins on 29 March 1974, when more than 600 dental nurses from throughout New Zealand marched to Parliament in their uniforms to protest at their low pay. They hadn't had a pay rise in 21 years . . .

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Noel O'Hare** is a freelance journalist, columnist, blogger and author. Northern Ireland-born, Noel has lived and worked in New Zealand since the early 1970s. In the 1980s he became a staff writer for the *New Zealand Listener* magazine, where he wrote many award-winning features on subjects as diverse as reading, tantric sex, diet, mental illness and alternative therapies. He was awarded a 2003–2004 Rosalynn Carter Fellowship for Mental Health Journalism to write articles on mental health, in particular about the effects of migration on mental health. He is the author of *Think before you Swallow: The art of staying healthy in a health-obsessed world* (2007) and *How to Save the World by Recycling Your Sex Toys* (2009). Until recently, he worked as a researcher and writer for the PSA.

### SALES POINTS

- A lively history written by someone who knows how to tell a story
- At turns funny, shocking, fascinating and surprising — and sometimes just plain mad
- Over 150 fantastic illustrations including some classic posters exhorting children to look after their teeth
- Includes the fluoridation debate and the risks for dental nurses of the long-term use of mercury

### PRINTABLE A3 POSTER AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST



## DENTAL HEALTH



IS IN YOUR HANDS

### INTRODUCTION

Shop assistants working along the 'grindin' row' in Wellington had witnessed their countrymen march over the years, mostly protesters against the Vietnam War, anti-apartheid and nuclear testing in the Pacific. Some marches with full-blown Army bands, rallies for Maori and women's rights.

They waved flags, held placards and banners, shouting to the governments and stopping traffic. The buildings old, clean, and new, amplified in the narrow street by the tall buildings on both sides, made it impossible to stand to customers and close was waiting for it to be used the protesters had passed and the noise subsided.

The school dental nurse's march on a busy street was a day in time was different. It was, more over, quiet, almost certainly the largest organised demonstration of women since the days of the suffragettes. Shop assistants and government had never seen anything like it, young women marching their absence to march, white uniforms, hats and red scarves. There were no placards, no shouting or demanding that, but small signs held high in the air, some with the name of the country the women had been from: New Zealand, Australia, Wales... a geographical spread that included the United States, Canada and New Zealand. And most important of all was the silence. A powerful look that made you stare at them, no understatement.

They were far from typical protesters. Most were middle-class, the daughters of farmers, accountants, businessmen and lawyers – conservative folk who despised their parents and could be reluctant to see National. Many of the daughters had never been to the capital, and certainly never envisaged that on their first visit they'd be parading down the main shopping street while bystanders stared. It felt weird. Since the time they'd spent for training, the rule had been assumed, the wearing of the uniform in the street is not permitted. This was disconcerting, indeed. What have the consequences when they returned to their clinics? It made some nervous, but there was comfort in numbers and their colleagues were marching with them.

7



More than five dental nurses marched down Wellington's main street on one of the largest organised demonstrations of women since the days of the suffragettes.

School Dental Service in 1911. The column, which led the New Zealand Dental Corps in the First World War, was composed of the state of children's teeth in New Zealand, a large percentage of whom needed extractions and/or fillings. As this book will show, despite opposition from many dentists and a lack of funding, the service thrived. A unique New Zealand social experiment that would be lauded around the world and modelled in 12 countries.

INTRODUCTION

8

In 1940, 205 dental nurses were in training when the Dominion School for Dental Nurses and Children's Dental Clinic opened in Willis Street, Wellington. The new clinic was a wonder of the dental world. In a room the size of a rugby field, with narrow high windows, rows that so children could be drilled and filed at the same time. Health experts, foreign delegates, even royalty visited regularly, escorted through the building by senior staff. We were never introduced to overseas guests, it was always the men, our dental nurse model.

If they'd been asked what it was like being a dental nurse, what stories they could have told. These first generation nurses who the whole world seemed to be against them, the press, the medical establishment, dentists, even parents. The loneliness of pioneering dental nurses over to the backblocks to set up makeshift clinics. The



Dental nurses around the steps of Parliament. They were refused entry but these nurses were 'not for turning'.

10

TOOTH AND VEIL



Coloured Separators separates a large number in the clinic. Dental nurses had to rely on natural light when teaching children's mouths, a problem in the summer days of winter.

When she asked him for a reference for her dental nurse training application, he refused. You tell them you don't drink or smoke and they'll have to take you, he said. Nevertheless, she was considered for dental experience would get her in. At the interview I was so cocky but they said, "You're only five foot four!" I stood up very straight and said I was a good athlete, a muscular little girl and very fit.

With the old for training I had to be a student teacher. I went to Wellington Teachers' College (closed for several years during the depression). At the time we had huge breadstuffs and dinner which some of the girls wanted to eat and named around their plates because they'd been sick. But so we were to have two mild meals. It was hard to survive, though, for those like her who did not receive support from home. The grime of those years stayed with her. Troubled lighting, dirty beds in dormitories with 30 people in a room, crowded around a small table with no coat, trying to eat from the jar and jam which was all we could afford. We would be mad as hell from the heat and make our own tea.

There was no money or time for the drinking or other social activities. "If we could have a nice penny double under ice cream on pay day we looked at each other with some sentiment. Many girls had had dinner but were dangerously near about. "There was one girl who got very very very with me and some that had been come out of the belly button. She was 12. I had been told by her brother that if a boy tried anything, she was to slap his face. We didn't know anything about birth control or if the emergency was there I can keep my legs crossed. I thought about my job, my career and my position and I wasn't going to jeopardize that."

Like many trainees, Kate took up smoking. It was the thing to do, you were sophisticated if you smoked cigarettes. She was carrying an old pipe a week – "we had no boy lunch, clothes and face out of that but it was security. And more security was the war. Previous to 1914 of nurses had found the third job because of the constant criticism, opposition from dentists and government cutbacks, but the election of the Labour government in 1919 would get on and in the war."

The new government provided social security for them and to give, and within two weeks of being elected it was making plans to expand the School Dental Service. It would dental services available to all primary school children within five years. In a 1914 Labour Party film region with old-fashioned banners, the narrator enthused: "One of the aims in the first thing in health! The Labour government has extended

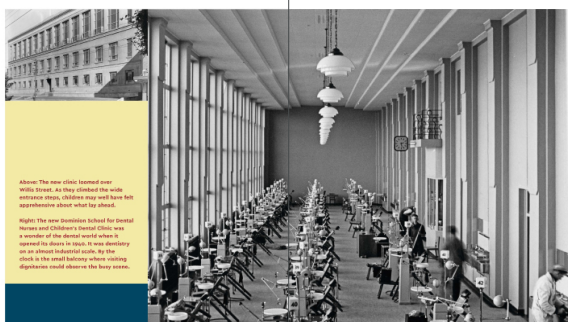
66

TOOTH AND VEIL



Rachel Thomson graduated as a dental nurse in 1911 and was a real pioneer. She was the first dental nurse to be sent to Palmerston.

Taking the Wellington-Waitangi Ferry, she disembarked at French Pass, dismounted a rope to slide on the side of the ship to avoid the water, a rocky and shifting beach, along with her equipment. The next day her equipment was dropped along the beach in a ditch for a horse. There were no roads, so she followed the walking tracks, getting up into the bush's branches and holding her equipment in a wind storm.



Above: The new clinic located over Willis Street. As they climbed the wide entrance steps, children may well have felt apprehensive about what lay ahead. Right: The new Dominion School for Dental Nurses and Children's Dental Clinic was a wonder of the dental world when it opened its doors in 1911. It was designed on an almost industrial scale. By the clock in the small balcony where nursing dentists could observe the busy scene.



Dental nurses in their red scarves made a colourful appearance as they marched on Parliament's forecourt. Dental nurse trainees in their blue uniforms brought in the rain.