



Dr Frank Couper Wooster DSO, MB ChM (Sydney), FRACS

Prepared by Errol Payne

Frank Couper Wooster was born in the Parramatta area of New South Wales on 24th January 1884, first of twelve children born to Jonathan Wooster and Elizabeth Maria Couper.¹ He was apparently a twin, but his brother died the year they were born. The family followed a quite common practice at the time when they recognised his mother by using her family name (Couper) as his second name. For this account of Frank Couper Wooster's life, we have not researched his childhood or schooling. We start our account at the beginning of his professional life and rely on public sources of information, particularly *The Morning Bulletin* archives available through Trove.

We are fortunate that Dr Wooster's own account of his early career was included in his application for the position of Medical Superintendent at the Rockhampton Hospital which was published in the *Morning Bulletin* on 23rd January 1914.² Prior to commencing his degree in medicine, Frank Wooster worked for three years as a teacher in the New South Wales Department of Education and for four years as a clerk in the Master in Lunacy's Office in Sydney. He completed a one year arts course at Sydney University as an evening student while doing clerical work, and obtained honours in mathematics.

He graduated from Sydney University in medicine with honours in December 1910. He immediately commenced work as Resident Medical Officer at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital where he was house surgeon and house physician for the whole of 1911. He gained experience under the supervision of senior practitioners as house physician, house surgeon and anaesthetist. He was also in charge of the lock depot for venereal diseases.

In 1912, he joined the staff of the hospital for the insane at Parramatta as resident medical officer. He remained there for 6 months studying mental diseases. This was followed by 6 months as resident medical officer at the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children. He was both a junior and senior resident while at the Children's Hospital. This was followed by 6 months as resident medical officer in charge at the Women's Hospital, Crown Street, Sydney. The senior role provided an introduction to considerable administrative work while he gained further clinical experience under the supervision of several obstetricians and gynaecologists. A period doing vaccinations on behalf of the Government completed his experience in Sydney prior to his appointment as medical officer to the Hospital Committee at Mt Chalmers, inland from the Capricorn Coast

At this time, Mt Chalmers was a thriving mining community. A hospital was built there but the mining industry collapsed and it was never used. It was subsequently relocated to Yeppoon as a convalescent home in 1917 and became the Yeppoon Hospital in 1922. Dr Wooster started work at Mt Chalmers on 30th July 1913.

There are interesting comments in a *Morning Bulletin* report of the farewell to his predecessor at Mt Chalmers, Dr T. E. Parker.³ Dr Parker had held the position for two years and was leaving to go to England to further his studies. During the speeches, Dr Parker said that he and Dr Wooster had been "old college chums" and Dr Wooster had passed his examinations with further credit than himself. He said that Dr Wooster was coming to Mount Chalmers with unquestionable credentials.

When the Rockhampton General Hospital Committee decided to appoint Dr Wooster to the position of Medical Superintendent on 22nd January 1914 they were choosing from a field of 14. He was 30 years of age but had a wide range of experience both in medicine and in other fields as summarised

above. His referees spoke not only of his excellent knowledge and competence in his discipline but also described a sympathetic, courteous man with notable tact both with his colleagues and patients. In fact one of his referees described him as being “unusually tactful with patients”.

In the report of the Livingstone Shire Council meeting published in *The Morning Bulletin* on 7th March 1914, it was noted that Dr Wooster asked to be relieved of his position as Medical Officer to the Council at Mount Chalmers and returned £2 12s. 6d. being half of his retaining fee since he had only occupied the position for 7 months.⁴ Council offered the Mt Chalmers position to Dr J. V. Church.

The *Morning Bulletin* of 10 February 1914 reported that Dr J. V. Church had arrived from the south and was acting as Medical Superintendent at the Rockhampton Hospital pending the arrival of Dr Wooster, at which time Dr Church would take up the position at Mount Chalmers.⁵ On 10th March 1914, *The Morning Bulletin* reported that the Hospital Committee held a special meeting to “consider the best way of improving the management of the organisation”.⁶ It was agreed “that the Medical Superintendent, Dr F. C. Wooster, should have authority to generally supervise all branches of the Hospital’s business. Dr Wooster was specifically requested to see that the rules relating to payment by patients were carefully observed and to insist that all patients other than emergency patients presented tickets of admission from the Secretary, the desire being to prevent imposition and continue free admission to patients who could not afford to pay. Authority was given to the Medical Superintendent to employ additional assistance to get the grounds put in order.”

When Dr Wooster applied for the position at Rockhampton, he said that he was unmarried but that his elder sister would housekeep for him. This appears to have happened because several newspaper reports during 1914 show that Miss Wooster was playing an important role in the organisation of the Hospital Fete to be held in Victoria Park on 31st October. Members who know our museum collection will be interested to know that Miss Rose Christmas was also at these meetings. Miss Wooster agreed to share responsibility for Sweet Stalls Nos. 1 and 2.⁷ Readers of these newsletters will also recall a story about the 1915 fete and a photograph of Sweet Stall No. 2 in our November 2012 Newsletter.

The social notes published on 1st July 1914 tell us that Dr and Miss Wooster’s mother and cousin visited from Sydney for two weeks during June.⁸

Apparently Dr Wooster continued to study concurrently with gaining practical experience and working, graduating with a Master of Surgery (MCh) degree from the University of Sydney in 1915.⁹

In July 1914, there was an announcement in the *Australian Government Gazette* that Dr Wooster had been appointed Captain provisionally in the Australian Army Medical Corps, 1st Military District.¹⁰

As we commemorate the centenary of the First World War which interrupted many careers and caused unimaginable loss of life we know that Rockhampton saw many of its citizens enlist including Dr Wooster. At a meeting of the Committee of the Rockhampton General Hospital held on Tuesday 3rd August 1915, the President moved that “in view of the fact that the services of the Medical Superintendent, Dr F. C. Wooster, had been accepted by the military authorities, he be granted extended leave of absence without salary on the understanding that, on his return after the termination of the war or earlier, should he wish it, his position as medical superintendent would be open for him”.¹¹ Members present praised Dr Wooster very generously for what he had achieved for the hospital in his 18 month tenure. “In taking up the reins of the institution he had not had a particularly rosy billet; but with his firmness, tact and general ability and forethought, assisted by their worthy secretary, he had brought the institution to a very excellent state, and everything was running smoothly”. Dr Wooster was presented with a wristlet watch in appreciation of his work.

A function was held to farewell him from the Rockhampton Hospital on 8th August 1915. On 10th August 1915 he was formally appointed as a Captain in the 8th Field Ambulance and enlisted in

Rockhampton on 12th August 1915. The information below is taken from his service records.¹² While these are quite complete documents and there is always some uncertainty their interpretation, this summary is thought to be quite accurate.

Dr Wooster departed from Sydney for Europe on the HMAT Katuna on 11th November 1915 and was soon serving with the field ambulance in France. On 30th October 1916 he was appointed Temporary Major and on 14th November 1916 as Major. After about 26 months service he was transferred to 1st AGH (Australian General Hospital) in France on 5th October 1917 where he remained until 5th June 1918. After a brief appointment to the 11th Field Ambulance he was promoted to Temporary Lieutenant Colonel in charge of the 13th Field Ambulance on 12th June 1918. His appointment as Lieutenant Colonel came on 11 November 1918.

During this posting he married Catherine Margaret Moir, a Rockhampton girl, in England in the latter half of 1918. Catherine had studied at the Rockhampton Girls' Grammar School, matriculating in 1909. She was a distinguished scholar who gained a BA degree with Honours at Sydney University in 1912 and an MA degree with Honours in 1915. She won a number of prizes including a travel scholarship in 1916 which enabled her to travel abroad and to undertake research work at Cambridge University.¹³

Dr Wooster embarked on his return trip to Australia on 10th April 1919¹⁴ on the HMAT Medic and disembarked on his arrival from overseas 01 June 1919. His military service formally ended on 31st August 1919.

Meanwhile, on 3rd June 1919 the London Gazette published the award of a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) in the King's Birthday Honours List.¹⁵ As well he was mentioned in General Haig's despatches on 16th March 1919. This was formally recorded in the London Gazette on 11th June 1919.¹⁶

The world-wide Wooster family has developed a website to share their family history¹⁷:

<http://woosterfamily.co.uk/TNG/getperson.php?personID=I33156&tree=GWTpublic>

The site has a page devoted to Frank Wooster and this photograph of him in uniform is shown here with permission. Three of Dr Wooster's brothers also served overseas in World War 1. Eric David was a sergeant in the Australian Medical Corps and was awarded a Belgian Croix de Guerre while Alfred Clive was killed in Palestine. Another younger brother Gordon Bruce Roy born in 1910 also enlisted in 1918 just as the war was ending but did not serve overseas. He went on to follow in Frank Couper Wooster's footsteps, graduating from Sydney University with a Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery in 1924 and a Graduate Diploma in Psychiatry in 1928.¹⁸



Dr Wooster was welcomed back to the Rockhampton Hospital on 9th August 1919 with quite a function in which many laudatory speeches were made, not only about Dr Wooster but also about the doctors who had acted in his place.¹⁹ There was also high praise for the hospital's nurses, recognising in particular their service in dealing with the very serious influenza epidemic of 1918/19.

Quoting a small part of the newspaper report about this function gives us something of an insight into conditions and attitudes just after World War 1.

“Dr. F. C. Wooster, Resident Surgeon of the Rockhampton General Hospital, who has only recently returned from war service, was, with his wife, née Miss Kitty Moir, welcomed home by the Hospital Committee and staff on Thursday week. The function was held in one of the large unused influenza huts, which, with its pretty decorations, made an ideal reception hall. A patriotic colour was lent by the national flags which adorned the building. The Mayor, Alderman T. W. Kingel presided. Seated near him were the guests of the evening, the Mayoress, the President of the Hospital Committee (Mr. T. B. Renshaw), and Mrs. Renshaw and Drs. S. Stuart and R. W. Richards. Other members of the Hospital Committee and nursing staff occupied seats at a long table running at right angles to the Chairman's table.”

Mr Renshaw read the apologies, and in particular said that *“he regretted the absence of the Matron, Miss R. Christmas, who had delayed her holidays in order to be present at the welcome but, in consequence of the illness of her mother, had to leave earlier than she had intended and thus could not be present.”*

The Mayor then called upon Mr. Renshaw to propose the toast of our guests. Mr Renshaw said that:

“he was pleased to welcome Dr. and Mrs. Wooster back to Rockhampton. They all knew of the work that Dr. Wooster had done before he went to the front. He had held a very high place in the hearts of, not only the members of the Committee, but of the inmates of the Hospital. Dr. Wooster, like many young men, had felt the call of Empire and left for the seat of war. They knew of the work of the medical profession in connection with the war, which fortunately, had ended in a victory for the Allies. In welcoming back Dr. Wooster they were welcoming back a man who had not hesitated to do his part in bringing to their knees those people who had done so much to smash the nations of Europe.”

During his speech, Mr Renshaw recognised *“the good work that had been done by some of the nurses who were trained at the Hospital. The nurses had also nobly done their part in combating the influenza epidemic.”*

As was often the case, those present were entertained by songs sung by several nurses with accompaniments also by the nurses. Mr and Mrs Renshaw sang a duet and the evening ended with the singing of the National Anthem.

This photograph from the ACHHA Collection shows Dr Wooster with staff of the Rockhampton Hospital in 1919.



Nurses Spilsbury, Haines and Stevenson were among those providing the entertainment at the welcome-back function.

The next significant event in Dr Wooster's career came on 8th November 1923 when he submitted his resignation as Medical Superintendent to the Rockhampton Hospital Committee.²⁰ The Committee accepted the resignation with deep regret and high praise for his achievements at the Hospital. Dr Wooster entered private practice in Rockhampton and began a long partnership with Dr Norman Talbot at the Tannachy Hospital. Dr Talbot had bought a very large residence on the river bank in 1922 and began the establishment of another private hospital which served Rockhampton and district for many years. Like Dr Wooster, Dr Talbot had served with distinction in the First World War.

Incidentally, the Hospital Committee met on 18 December 1923 and voted to appoint Dr J. V. Gordon, son of local pharmacist Mr J. P. J. Gordon, as the new Medical Superintendent.²¹ Dr Wooster had obviously not burnt any bridges because he was appointed locum tenens at the hospital in January 1925 while Dr Gordon took leave for a month. He was appointed a Life Governor of the Hospital in 1925.²²

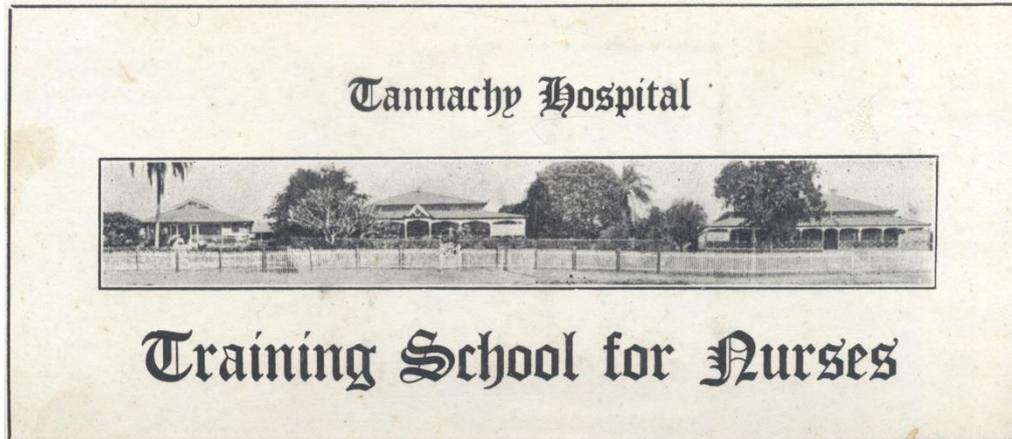
This photograph shows Dr Wooster with staff at Tannachy in 1939.



Staff at Tannachy Hospital 1939. Standing (L to R): Olga Freestone, Jean Flemming, Betty Stone, Elsie Roden, Margaret McIlwraith, Joyce Craig, Mercie Whellan, Dorothy Bradley, Margaret Axe; Seated: Margaret Hawkins, Sr D. Hill, Dr F. C. Wooster, Matron Sarah Costello, Jill Crossan.

Nurse S. E. Costello is also in the 1919 Rockhampton Hospital photograph above.

This 1942 print of Tannachy is taken from a nurse's graduation certificate for Virginia D'Arcy donated to our collection by her son John Miguel.



Over many years, newspaper reports paint a picture of a person well connected to community organisations, generally as an executive officer, and often in league with his colleague Dr Norman Talbot. The organisations include the Central Queensland Lawn Tennis Association, the Rockhampton Rifle Club, the Rockhampton Cycle Club and the Rockhampton Rugby League. Drs Wooster and Talbot served as Honorary Doctors for the Rockhampton Rugby League. He was Commanding Officer of the 11th Field Ambulance for a time and in that role was involved in cadet training.

It appears that he also became interested in exploring for gold, and was awarded a gold mining lease in 1934.²³ There are a number of reports related to this activity over subsequent years. In 1948, there are reports of him having interests in prospecting for silver and lead in the Mt Isa region.²⁴

His other key role outside the Tannachy Hospital and his private practice was as The Rockhampton City Council's Medical Officer of Health. He was appointed to the role in October 1931 and over the following years he reported regularly to Council on the incidence of infectious diseases such as whooping cough, rubella, poliomyelitis, tuberculosis and diphtheria.²⁵ As is the case today, he was clearly frustrated by the unwillingness of some parents to have their children immunised and devoted a great deal of effort to ensuring that immunization clinics were readily available to citizens. Remarkably, we find his final report to Council on 24th May 1950, just 12 days before his death.

His wife, Catherine Margaret died from pulmonary tuberculosis on 24th February 1941 and was privately interred in the Rockhampton Cemetery on 25 February 1941.^{26,27} She was 49 years of age. She is buried with her mother Anna who died on 22nd February 1917 at 50 and a brother Andrew who died on 10 October 1922 at age 24.

Dr Wooster later married Jean Middleton Sharples on 4th September 1946 at a private residence in North Rockhampton.²⁸

Dr Wooster died in Rockhampton on 5th June 1950.²⁹ According to his death certificate, the causes of death were chronic myocarditis and aplastic anaemia (2 years) and thrombo phlebitis in the left leg (3 weeks). He was privately cremated on 06 June 1950.³⁰ He had no children and was survived by his second wife.

His obituary published in the Morning Bulletin on 6th June 1950, began as follows:

"By the death of Dr Frank Couper Wooster, which occurred yesterday morning, Rockhampton has lost one of its most highly respected citizens. Tributes were paid yesterday by all sections of the community testifying to the esteem in which the doctor was held. He had a quiet manner, which was appreciated, because behind it was sincerity."

The obituary went on to describe Dr Wooster's career as portrayed above, with the added information that he had received the honour of Fellowship of the Royal Australian College of Surgeons when the College was founded.

It is impossible to tell how many patients he had seen during his 28 years at the Tannachy Hospital, or how many births he had attended. We know from birth certificates at the time that he also attended births in at least one of the many Lying-in Hospitals in Rockhampton in the first half of the 20th Century (Nurse Henrietta Costello's "Lucina" in Talford St).

Dr Wooster's death was a major blow to the Rockhampton community in its own right, but doubly so when Dr Talbot decided that, after almost 30 years sharing the workload, he would be unable to continue to operate Tannachy by himself and announced that he would be closing the hospital. This occurred in October or November of 1950.

However, in the meantime, great concern had been expressed in the city about the major impact of the loss of this hospital with its 40 beds, including maternity beds, operating and X-ray facilities and other invaluable assets.³¹ The local branch of the British Medical Association was at the forefront of raising the concerns. Public meetings were soon organised and a number of local businessmen were able to quite quickly establish a new company Tannachy Private Hospital Pty Ltd and negotiate the purchase of the asset. With the support of former hospital staff including many nurses, the company was able to reopen the hospital in mid-January 1951 and gradually bring it back into operation.³² Several private doctors provided their services to support the continuing operation of the hospital which was later purchased by the Anglican Diocese of Rockhampton in 1961 and renamed St John's Hospital. Both Dr Wooster and Dr Talbot were later honoured by having wards at the hospital named after them. A Rockhampton street is also named after him.

12 July 2014

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