

SR. JOAN BLUETT

by *Kevin Hannan*

For most of us, visiting a hospital is something of an ordeal: the proximity of illness on a grand scale, and the faint but ever-present odour of drugs and medicines has a daunting and sometimes depressing effect, and the mere thought of spending more time there than is necessary for visiting a relative or close friend is unthinkable.

But for a patient, a hospital is a horse of a different colour. The roles are reversed, and the daily routine is broken only during visiting hours, otherwise we depend much on the medical staff, especially the nurses, to break the monotony, and often to dissipate our fears and forebodings. Our one hope and ambition, however, is to get out as soon as possible. But when we are out and on our feet again, the nurses are still inside; and we seldom give them a thought.

Hospital beds are never empty for too long, patients come and go: the workload for the staff is always heavy and unending. Outside of the religious life, it is not often we find persons devoting their whole lives to the care of the sick and injured, allowing no domestic conventions to interfere with the performance of their duties, or even monetary considerations to influence the dedicated application to them.

Such a person is Sister Joan Bluett.

Without detracting from the excellent service provided by the medical staff of Barrington's down the years, the name of



Joan Bluett in the late 1940s.

Joan Bluett – known to countless citizens for more than forty years as 'Sister Bluett' – stands out prominently among the city's outstanding citizens, even if it were only that the rich bounty of her skills and compassion were so much taken for granted and enduring. Apart from the unstinted and dedicated service to those under her care, she lent a special polish to the etiquette and decorum demanded of her profession.

Sr. Bluett's career bears the impress of her own nature in its intensity of feeling for those, young and old, who sometimes badly needed that human touch that seemed (for them) to have no place in the general regimentation of a hospital. With her keen insight and devout heart, she displayed a full capacity of relieving distress on all occasions.

She did her early training in Lambeth Hospital in London, and left in 1944 to take up a position in Barrington's where her qualifications were rewarded by her promotion to Sister during her first year there. This position endowed her with the scope to pursue the life that was at once perfectly satisfying to herself and infinitely helpful to thousands of others. From the very beginning, she commanded the respect of staff and patients alike in the old hospital where she toiled for 41 years, most of which she served as assistant-matron.



Matron Anna Casey and assistant-matron Bluett in the boardroom on the day of the closure.

She at last sought that 'retreat from care' in 1985, but the peace and tranquility of her retirement was shattered by the dissolution of her beloved Barrington's. She emerged again to join the battle for its reprieve, and, when all was lost, to inveigh against the politics and intrigue that brought about its downfall.

I recently found her in one of the ghostly corridors of the hospital, where only a few months previously the ever-changing pageantry of nurse and doctor, patient and visitor, supplied that colour and animation that made up the busy place. She appeared like a persistent child, subdued at last by her own importunities, but her very presence there exuded that remote hope that this temporary solitude may not be made permanent.



Sr. Bluett and Dr. Gerald Tynan.