

Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia
An exhibition developed and presented by the
National Museum of Australia

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

Tropical habits, the Sisters of Beagle Bay, Western Australia

The Sisters of St John of God are one of many congregations of religious Sisters, also commonly known as nuns, who came from the lush green lands of Ireland to the often harsher landscapes of Australia for charitable work. Generally nuns from Ireland found the transition to the Australian climate challenging due to their heavy wool habits that included many layers of undergarments. Most Sisters put up with this inconvenience; others allowed an adaptation to acclimatise to their new home like the Sisters of St John of God. The Sisters founded their Australian congregation in Kalgoorlie in 1896 and quickly extended their mission throughout the far reaches of Western Australia. By 1908, they were in the Kimberley, Broome and also Beagle Bay, on the Dampier Peninsula. Irish priest Father John Creagh visited the Sisters in Broome in 1916 and was horrified to find them still dressed in their heavy black habits. Father Creagh quite rightly believed the black habit to be totally unsuitable for the climate and promptly ordered bales of white cotton from Perth. Soon the Sisters all over Western Australia were dressed in tropical white, a complete example of which is on display in the exhibition *Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia*. This change of habit had occurred in other tropical places, like New Guinea, where religious sisters were doing missionary work.

White habits are also traditionally worn by those religious Sisters involved with medical care, as the Sisters of St John of God were. The Sisters had already begun work at the leprosarium in Beagle Bay when they heard of the Government's need for nurses at the facility outside of Derby, called Bungaran. A group of Sisters volunteered their services,



The story of the Sisters of St John of God is represented in the exhibition *Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia* at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. (Above) a Sister of St John of God gives an Aboriginal leper an injection of chaulmoogra oil at the leprosarium, Derby, 1948. Photograph by Stuart Gore, image courtesy of State Library of Western Australia

staffing the facility for over fifty years until the centre was no longer required. Part of the rehabilitation of patients involved musical education, particularly string instruments that kept the fingers moving and the joints supple. The dexterity needed to play a string instrument in particular seemed to have enormous benefit for patients. One of the violins used at Bungaran will be on display in *Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia* with an accompanying multimedia piece featuring one of the players embarking on a musical reminiscence.

Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia is on show at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra from 17 March-31 July 2011. Admission charges apply.

For more information about the exhibition visit www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions_irish_in_australia

Curator's note prepared by Cinnamon Van Reyk, Curator, National Museum of Australia