

Deaf
Children
Australia.



F. J. Rose

A Deaf Advocate, Educator, and Inspiration

By Zelda Cawthorne

Frederick John Rose

A Pioneer of Human Rights

ON March 10, 1908, Melbourne daily newspaper the *Argus* published a reader's letter under the headline, A Veteran's Reward.



Signed, "J. E. Muir, ex-pupil of the Deaf and Dumb Institution", it was a plea to the public to support an appeal launched for the institution's founder, Frederick John Rose, then in his 77th year and almost destitute after losing his life savings in the catastrophic bank crash of the early 1890s.

No one had done more for the education of the deaf in Victoria – indeed in the Australian Commonwealth – than Rose, yet he was now reduced to eking out a meagre living as the Deaf and Dumb Institution's Collector for Melbourne and Suburbs, lamented John Muir who had gone on to become a long-serving Victorian Railways draughtsman and major sporting identity.

"It grieves me to see this fine, venerable gentleman trudging around collecting money for the funds of the institution... in order to support himself and his wife and ailing family," wrote Muir.

It wasn't until 1914 that the Victorian Parliament, after years of agitation by well-wishers, voted to grant Rose an annuity of £100 plus £50 each from the Deaf Society and Institution.

The modest pension sustained Rose until he died at age 89 at his home "Oxonia" in Malvern East on December 1, 1920. In his will, he left two photographs – one of himself, the other of his late wife and helpmate Elizabeth – to be hung in the hall of the school he founded and led for more than 30 years.

The photographs somehow managed to disappear and Rose's grave in the St Kilda cemetery remained unmarked and increasingly unkempt until November 12, 1990, when a granite headstone funded by leading deaf organisations, was unveiled.

The poignant ceremony marked the 130th anniversary of the opening of the first school for the deaf in Victoria. A century since his passing, Rose is recognized as the great pioneer of education for the deaf in Australia; a dedicated teacher and mentor who believed deafness was no obstacle to a successful, richly productive life.

The handsome Gothic Revival bluestone building that was erected between 1866 and 1871 on St Kilda Road as a purpose-built school for the deaf and which ranks as one of Melbourne's best-known historic landmarks, reminds powerfully of Rose's legacy.

Why his life's work was largely ignored, even scorned, in his twilight years, yet is now seen as visionary, is part of his remarkable story.



F. J. Rose Leaves England

In Search of Gold

JUST 18 months after Victoria's Gold Rush erupted in mid-1851, 21-year-old Frederick Rose and his brother Francis, 17, arrived in Melbourne on the *Gloriana* after more than three months at sea.

Born on September 21, 1831, in Oxford, England, to organ-maker John Rose and his shopkeeper wife Elizabeth, Frederick had become totally deaf from scarlet fever at the age of four-and-a-half. It didn't quell his adventurous spirit or limit his prospects in the booming Colony of Victoria.

Educated at London's renowned Old Kent Road school for the deaf - entry was highly competitive and students were taught a wide range of academic subjects as well as useful trades - the personable young Englishman's carpentry skills were soon in demand in Emerald Hill (now South Melbourne).

He also flourished as a carpenter and builder in Sandhurst (renamed Bendigo in 1891) which was just as well, because after walking all the way to the region's Forest River goldfields, the Rose brothers failed to strike it rich.

A good income allowed lodgings in Sandhurst's smartest hotels including the Criterion and Frederick Rose was enjoying their comforts when on February 16, 1859, he read a letter in the *Argus* that would change his life.

It was a cry from the heart prompted by a recent item in the paper about the total lack of education for an estimated 50 deaf children in Victoria. Signed "A widow", the letter read:

"I too have a daughter (actually, stepdaughter), eight years of age, deaf and dumb from colonial fever, and if nothing can be done speedily in this colony, I shall be put to the peril and danger of a sea voyage to get her educated in Old England. But should such an institution arise here, I would enroll myself a life subscriber."

Rose's response was published a week later. An affordable public school for the deaf in the colony was the obvious solution and for a "fair remuneration" he'd be glad to render "any assistance in my power", wrote the 27-year-old who revealed that he was deaf and dumb, and had been educated at the Old Kent Road school.

He followed up in the *Argus* with two advertisements for a proposed school and went to Melbourne to meet Sarah Lewis - the widow whose letter had galvanized him - before returning to England in 1860.

On June 27 that year, he married 25-year-old Elizabeth Manning Telfer in Oxford. Little is known about her and the few accounts - that she was a family friend or possibly a distant relative; that she was either deaf or just hard of hearing - are vague and confusing.

Between 1864 and 1868, the Roses had two daughters and a son in Melbourne - sadly, a second son was stillborn in 1873 - and a family photograph taken in the 1880s reveals a still comely Elizabeth. She worked alongside her husband throughout his long career, acting as school matron and was undoubtedly an invaluable asset.



Establishing the School

The Legacy Begins

NOTHING had been done to set up a school during his absence, learned Frederick after he and Elizabeth sailed into Port Philip Bay on the clipper ship Mermaid in October 1860.

He promptly rented a house in Prahran which served as home and from November 12, Victoria's first school for deaf children, starting with Sarah Lewis's stepdaughter, Lucy.



Enrolments grew fast and in 1861 and 1864, the Roses moved to increasingly larger premises, first in Windsor and then back to Prahran, to avoid overcrowding. From the start, their greatest supporter was the English-born and educated Rev. William Moss, minister of the Prahran Independent Church – Chapel Street was named after it – who had been introduced to Frederick by his parishioner, Sarah Lewis.

The Rev. Moss – handsome and popular, with friends in high places – was a born mover and shaker, and on May 6, 1861, he summoned a public meeting at which he was elected honorary secretary of a provisional committee to further Rose's work.

The deaf teacher and the cleric complemented each other. Close in age, they epitomized middle class respectability and Christian values – admirable qualities in the gold-drenched, rough-edged city that within two decades, would evolve into Marvellous Melbourne.

On August 28, 1862, a public meeting presided over by the then Victorian Governor, Sir Henry Barkly, was held to inaugurate the Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institution (subsequently, the Victorian School for Deaf Children).

It won strong support from the government, press, Boards of Education, and philanthropists, and in 1865 it was decided the time had come for a permanent school building. A six-acre block of land at the corner of St Kilda Road and High Street was granted and plans for the building were prepared by Melbourne architects, Crouch and Wilson.

The foundation stone was laid by Barkly's successor, Sir Charles Darling, on March 6, 1866 and on October 11, the south wing of the school opened with Frederick John Rose as Superintendent and Headmaster.

At age 35, the father of two - infant daughters Emma Louisa and Ellen Blanche - had the key roles in a grand new building, complete with tower, spire and stained glass, that would also be home for him and his family.



Two years later, his only son, Frederick William Moss Rose, was born at the bluestone institution and a two-tiered marble fountain was placed in a lily pond in front of the main entrance. Its inscription: "Presented and erected by F.J. Rose 1868."

A Life of Great Achievement

Paving the Way for Deaf Children

TWO stories about Rose persisted in the years after his death. According to past pupils, he had checked the school's bannisters for dust every day. Then after he passed away, his restlessly pacing ghost was said to haunt the cellars – so why was he unable to rest in peace?

His first decade in the bluestone building that welcomed both boarders and day students gave no hint of the traumas that lay ahead. Nor did his formative years prepare him for them.

Rose had grown up in an England with ample opportunities for the educated deaf and able to boast a raft of deaf notables from the Royal Academy's first president, Sir Joshua Reynolds, to heavyweight boxing champion, James Burke.

The young Frederick had spent five-and-a-half years at the academically demanding Old Kent Road school whose subjects included the classics, mathematics, and foreign languages. Crucially, the key medium of instruction was British sign language – in effect, English was the second language - and eight of the teachers were deaf.

A solid education would also be provided by the St Kilda Road school, vowed Rose. He had an able assistant teacher in Frances Lorrigan who had been educated at the Deaf and Dumb Institution, Dublin. By 1870 they had 75 pupils, the majority of them impressively literate and numerate.

Rose was gratified, but not surprised. He viewed his charges as normal youngsters, some with exceptional gifts, as one would find in any decent school. The institution's success, he gratefully acknowledged, owed much to its dynamic honorary secretary – and his best friend – William Moss.

For years, the two devoted their annual holidays to holding fund-raising public meetings in towns across regional Victoria, as far as Albury. Accompanied by senior boys from the school and travelling by horse and carriage, Rose and the Rev. Moss proved to be a winning team.

Largely as a result of their efforts, the bluestone's northern wing was erected in 1871 and in 1878 the institution's committee was able to announce in the 16th annual report that the premises were entirely free of debt.

The future seemed full of promise. But in September 1880, an inaugural international conference on the education of the deaf was held in Milan, Italy and Frederick Rose's troubles began.



Tragedy Strikes

The Misfortune of F. J. Rose

OF the 164 delegates at the Milan Conference only one, America's James Denison, was Deaf. He and the handful of others who bravely championed sign language, never stood a chance.

The event, organised and funded by France's Pereire Society which supported the oral-only method for educating the deaf – a process involving lip-reading, articulation and later, hearing aids and other technology - was not just blatantly partisan, but determined to ensure that sign language for deaf education was banned worldwide.

The game plan largely succeeded. While there were pockets of resistance, oralism, along with a push for professional teachers – almost invariably hearing ones with academic qualifications - rapidly became the norm, and those who taught through sign language lost their jobs.

In 1882, Rose stopped teaching and it was all downhill from there. In 1890, he asked to retire because of ill health, but instead was appointed non-resident principal. Elizabeth resigned as matron, daughter Emma, who had taught at the institution, also quit and the family moved out of their bluestone haven.

The next three years were brutal. On March 14, 1891, William Moss died at the age of 62 ("Thou hast been my right hand throughout," wrote a grief-stricken Rose). In 1892, Rose's non-resident post was terminated with six months' pay and he was denied a pension. And in 1893 he lost his life savings when the Victorian Permanent Building Society went bust.

At least he'd previously acquired a plot of land through the society and with help from supporters, was able to build his two-storey home "Oxonia" on it.

Rose was certainly not short of friends. Since 1883, when he and the Rev. Moss founded Melbourne's Adult Deaf and Dumb Mission (known today as Expression Australia), he had been a vital presence in the deaf community and commanded enormous respect and affection.

That was obvious when the Victorian branch of the Australian Deaf and Dumb Association hosted a splendid banquet to celebrate F.J. and Elizabeth Rose's golden wedding anniversary.

The happy event was held in Flinders Street on June 30, 1910. Almost a century would pass before the United Nations formally recognized the vital importance of what Frederick Rose had always regarded as his first language, indispensable for education and communicating within the deaf community.

Rest in Peace

The Legacy of F. J. Rose

IN retrospect, the push for oralism owed much to perverse interpretations of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859.

Obviously, the deaf had an evolutionary fault and must be taught to master speech (preferably English), so they could be part of society. As for signing - at best, relegated to basic gestures and fingerspelling, and of course useless for communicating with hearing humans.

From correcting a defect to eradicating it was a short step for some and banning marriage between the deaf was seriously considered during the grim era when eugenics was all the rage.

Gone were the days when deafness was an unfortunate, but otherwise unremarkable condition that affected neither intellect nor creativity. Or as Britain had shown, didn't preclude entry to professions ranging from the law to architecture – provided, of course, that one had a good education.

In 1981, a report by the British Deaf and Dumb Association stated that the Milan Conference's pro-oralism resolutions and the subsequent suppression of sign language had significantly damaged the education of generations of deaf children – in effect, a devastating abuse of their human rights.

Since 2009, the United Nations has recognized and promoted the use of sign languages – more than 300 of them worldwide, including our richly expressive Auslan - as equal in status to spoken languages, and in 2019 proclaimed September 23 as International Day of Sign Languages as part of International Week of the Deaf.

Not all the battles have been won, but finally, Frederick John Rose can rest in peace.



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