

SISTER ELIZABETH KENNY

1880 - 1952



A Pioneer in the Time of Polio

Elizabeth Kenny was born in New South Wales to Mary Moore and Irish farmer Michael Kenny. She received limited education at small primary schools in New South Wales and Queensland. About 1910 Kenny was a self-appointed nurse, working from the family home at Nobby on the Darling Downs, riding on horseback to give her services, without pay, to any who called her. In 1911 she used hot cloth fomentations to treat puzzling new cases, diagnosed as infantile paralysis (poliomyelitis). The patients recovered. Kenny then opened a cottage hospital at Clifton.

During World War I, she was appointed staff nurse in the Australian Army Nursing Service, serving on troop ships bringing wounded soldiers home to Australia. In 1917 she was promoted to Sister, a title she used for the rest of her life. After the war she resumed her home nursing and became the first president of the Nobby chapter of the Country Women's Association. In 1927 she patented the 'Sylvia' ambulance stretcher designed to reduce shock in the transport of injured patients.

In 1932 Sister Kenny established a backyard clinic at Townsville to treat long-term poliomyelitis victims and cerebral palsy patients with hot baths, fomentations, passive movements, the discarding of braces and callipers and the encouragement of active movements. Doctors and masseurs ridiculed her, mainly because they considered her explanations of the lesions at the site of the paralysis bizarre. The controversy raged at a time when there was no vaccination for poliomyelitis. The strong-willed Kenny was opposed by a conservative medical profession, which disagreed with her recommendation to discard immobilisation. Despite almost total medical opposition, parental and political pressure with some medical backing resulted in action by the Queensland government. In 1934, clinics to treat long-term poliomyelitis cases were established in Townsville and later in Brisbane. Kenny clinics in other Queensland cities and interstate followed, and her reputation attracted patients from around Australia and overseas.

Kenny became a heroine in America and was awarded many honours. Her autobiography, *And They Shall Walk*, was published in 1943. In 1946, her story was featured in the film, *Sister Kenny*. Abraham Fryberg, Queensland director-general of health and medical services, and Thomas Stubbs Brown, orthopaedic specialist, after an overseas visit recommended that treatment based on the Kenny method be used in the early stages of polio.

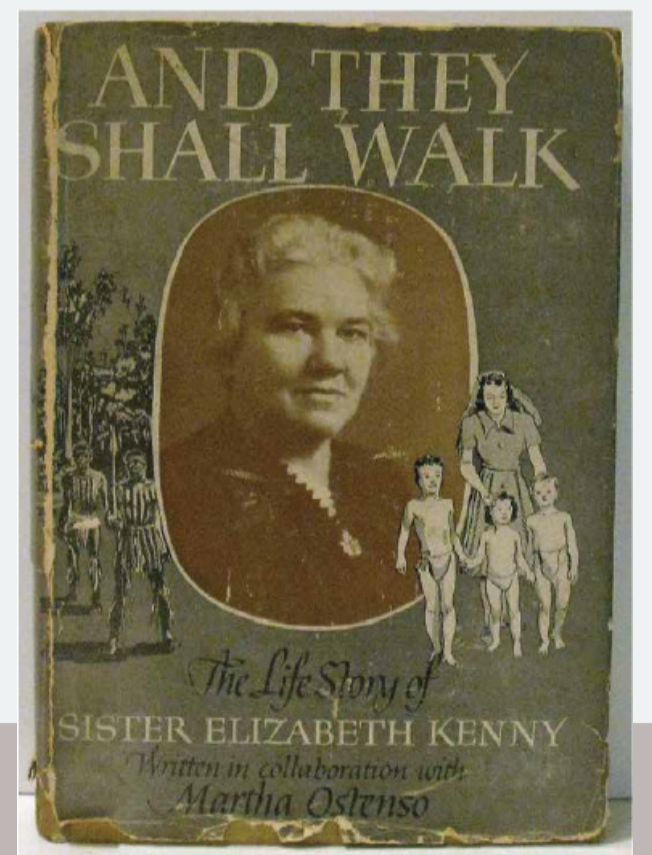
In 1950, the United States Congress gave her the rare honour of free access to the United States without entry formalities. Despite this success, she remained the centre of controversy, and returned to Australia several times with little acclaim. She retired to Toowoomba in 1951 and died there on 30 November 1952.



Nurse Elizabeth Kenny 1915
John Oxley Library, Brisbane



Elizabeth Kenny 1950
New York World-Telegram and Sun



And They Shall Walk
The life story of Sister Elizabeth Kenny