

CONSTANCE ELIZABETH BROUGHTON YOUNG

**Born 10 July 1892, Fairymead, Bundaberg, Queensland
Died 24 October 1924, Fo'ondo, Solomon Islands**

This essay on Constance Young is much longer than any other essay about a member of the Deck and Young families. This is both because of the esteem in which she was held during her short adult life and for many years afterwards, and also because a fine archive of her letters is in the National Library of Australia, throwing a most interesting light on the missionary service in the Solomon Islands of this outstanding woman. The story of her life and ministry explains why her family placed her on a pedestal. It was a just estimation.

Constance was born and brought up at Fairymead, Bundaberg,¹ the centre of operations, not only of the Fairymead Sugar Co., of which her father was a co-owner, but of the Queensland Kanaka Mission, founded by her Aunt Florence. The whole family were deeply committed to the mission, in Bundaberg from 1886, and after 1906 in the Solomon Islands, where it became the South Sea Evangelical Mission. It was a commitment to which Constance came to dedicate her life. Her home was an ideal one for children. 'Three families of cousins shared the delights of country life – riding, swimming, picnicking, etc. Constance was ever overflowing with life and energy, a leader in all games and a favourite with everyone.'² Her cousin, Constance Deck, who worked with her in the Solomon Islands, wrote that as a child

she liked to lead and plan and direct her elder sisters. She was always so full of life and energy. I picture the three little girls [Evelyn, Doris and Constance] in pink sun-bonnets on the Fairymead drive, Constance leading and planning their games... she used to say that she was going to be a missionary in Uganda, and she set herself to get ready, making timetables for her days to get in all the things that would fit her for mission work.³

Constance began her education with a governess at home, and may have followed her elder sisters who went to the well-regarded girls' school 'Normanhurst' at Ashfield, near the Deck family home,⁴ but like many children of well-to-do Australian families, was sent to England for her secondary schooling. She went to Sandecotes, an exclusive school at Poole, near Bournemouth, probably between 1906 and 1910. Likewise, her brothers went to Clifton College, Bristol. Both were doubtless recommended by English relatives for their high standard and Christian sympathies.

¹ F. Young, *Pearls from the Pacific*, p 247.

² *Ibid.*, p 248.

³ Constance Deck in *Not in Vain*, January 1925, p 3.

⁴ Deck/Young family timeline, compiled by Catherine (Kathie) Deck, ca. 1943.

She wrote affectionately of her years at Sandecotes to her cousin Charis who went there in 1913.

Oh, dear old girl, do try to like Sandecotes and get on there, for my sake, I am so keen that you should. You see, you will only have one school life, and there is so much happiness and glamour about it, if only a girl makes the very most of it. ... The amount of “esprit de corps” and sort of romance of school life depends on the kind of girls in the school, and how they look at their school life. I don’t know what Sandecotes is like now, but in my day it was at its tiptop prime not because of me, you know.⁵



Nurses and patients at Kingswood Park Hospital, Tunbridge Wells.

British Army.⁸ She served throughout World War I as a V.A.D. in France and at Kingswood Park Hospital, Tunbridge Wells, in Kent. Though she genuinely enjoyed her war service, these were years of trial and heart-ache, as Bill was seriously wounded and Arnold was killed in 1917. She gave her skin for her cousin, and the best years of her young adulthood for wounded soldiers. Soon she would give her life for others in the Solomon Islands.

At the end of the war, she came home to ‘dear old Fairymead’.⁹ She loved Bundaberg, and in July 1919 wrote, ‘we went out for a lovely ride this morning, all along the top of the hill, thro’ chocolately-red soil, and green cane (hardly any is frosted here, like at F’mead), and all the time getting a view of the country round and some blue hills in the distance, and the river winding along, below. I think Goodwood is quite the pick of the F’mead Coy’s plantations, it is all so pretty.’¹⁰

While in England, she had met John Seaton, perhaps a patient at Kingswood Park. Soon after her return to Australia in 1919, she wrote,

⁵ Constance to Charis, 18 September 1913. Margaret Pennington.

⁶ M.E. Young, *Life’s Precious Jewels*, pp 89-94.

⁷ Information from Janet Saxton, 12 March 2004.

⁸ Deck/Young family timeline, compiled by Catherine (Kathie) Deck, ca. 1943.

⁹ Constance to Charis, 10 July 1919. NLA MS 9564.

¹⁰ Constance to Charis, 31 July 1919.

My 27th birthday today – the first I’ve had at dear old Fairymead since my 21st – when we all went to Barrubera in a launch – do you remember? ... This time last year I was just about engaged. So far I have done nothing to celebrate this one except root out old letters and photos and dream over my hospital days and wounded boys.¹¹

She had taken him to Bundaberg, but he found the atmosphere oppressive, and the engagement did not proceed. ‘They’re too religious at Fairymead,’ he remarked.¹² Constance was heartbroken. Her parents did what they could on her birthday soon afterwards. ‘I got such a beautiful present from Father and Mother today. A huge moonstone ring, with pearls set around it, for my littlest finger – it looks lovely, and I feel so proud of such a beautiful thing.’¹³ However, it was not the same as an engagement ring. Two years later, she was able to reflect on the experience, counselling her cousin Charis ‘that lonely feeling must not be allowed to continue, as it is very conducive to picking up “any old thing”!’¹⁴ Towards the end of the year, she decided to visit the SSEM station at Onepusu in Malaita, spending eight months there, and then joining the mission. It was a courageous and self-sacrificing decision which meant that Constance, aged 27, turned her back on the prospect of marriage. She knew that her Aunt Florence, who ruled the mission with a firm hand, forbade missionaries to marry until they had served for many years. She told of her experiences in a series of remarkably interesting and beautifully written letters to her cousin Charis Young, of whom she was particularly fond and who she addressed as ‘My dear Sister-Cousin’. Four other cousins, Kathie, Northcote, Norman and Constance Deck, were already members of the mission,¹⁵ and the new-comer was at once dubbed ‘Miss Cousin’. It was in many ways a tropical paradise, and Constance had an eye to its beauty.

Everywhere parrots are screaming and jabbering, and cocoanut leaves waving in the breeze. You look towards Baunain, over a brown-grey reef (as it is low tide) and out to a hazy shimmering sea. There is a sort of heat haze over the mountains, and as it is just after dinner, the whole world seems to be having its midday sleep.¹⁶

Constance threw herself into the work of the mission with enthusiasm. By 1919 the head station at Onepusu had been established since 1905, and it was well set up. She wrote of her joy at being there, though she made no attempt to hide difficulties such as the lack of privacy, the enervating heat and perhaps above all a sense of isolation and times of depression.

¹¹ Constance to Charis, 10 July 1919.

¹² Alison Hawke to Patricia Braga, 4 August 2001. Seaton does not appear to have been an Australian serviceman.

¹³ Constance to Charis, 10 July 1919.

¹⁴ Constance to Charis, 21 August 1921.

¹⁵ F. Young, *Pearls from the Pacific*, p 254.

¹⁶ Constance to Charis, 4 November 1921.

I have almost forgotten how to laugh now, it's so long since I did much of it! There are few joys that are real joys when experienced alone, the only one to me that I can really appreciate the loneliness of is my bath! The only time I'm really cool and happy is when I've got two legs and all the rest of me squeezed into a small round tub, and can keep myself cool with spoonfuls of cold water – the best attempt at a bath possible in this house! Then there are only two curtains to my two 'doors', which have to be carefully watched all the time, as at any moment a boy or woman wanting "Miss Cousin" might poke their heads inside! They have not done it so far, but every day I'm expecting it. Little Aleck used to lie down on the verandah, just beside the curtain so that he could see into my room, until I discovered this habit of his and his mother whipped him for so doing!!¹⁷



Constance, probably taken in January 1922, when she returned to Australia to speak at the Katoomba Christian Convention.

Nevertheless, she wrote with great fondness of the Solomon Islands people. Two years after joining the mission, she wrote, 'I love Onepus. It is a little world of its own, and it's so nice having so many dear boys and women round you. You get to love so many, and so interested in their histories and their babies etc.'¹⁸ A year later:

They are such dear people, and the love that they give to you is like balm to your hungry, home-sick heart so often. And it is so lovely to see them growing (spiritually) while they are here, to feel that you are being used, in a small way to their spiritual help.¹⁹

Late in 1921, Constance returned to Australia and in January 1922 spoke at the Katoomba Christian Convention of her work in the Solomon Islands. 'Aunt Florrie' beamed as Constance spoke, at first diffidently, 'yet hearts were deeply moved when, with shining face and simple but glowing words, she told how the Lord had satisfied her heart and had given her "an hundredfold now in this present time."²⁰

There was no organised program of language study and no training for missionary recruits. More than

¹⁷ Constance to Charis, 27 December 1919.

¹⁸ Constance to Charis, 4 November 1921.

¹⁹ Constance to Charis, 30 April 1922.

²⁰ F. Young, *Pearls from the Pacific*, p 248.

a year after her arrival, Constance had told of her sense of helplessness at being unable to understand the language. However by 1923, she was teaching some 200 children from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m. in the primary school and had obviously learned quickly.²¹

Health was a major concern for the SSEM. Three Australian and New Zealand missionaries had already died and fourteen had been forced to return home, and in this situation, Northcote, a qualified doctor who soon became expert in tropical diseases, was a key man.²² Nevertheless, his wife Jessie died of Blackwater Fever on 26 March 1921. It was a reminder to all the missionaries that in this remote tropical place, life was precarious and serious illness often fatal. Following the death of Jessie, Northcote Deck's wife, his cousin Gladys Deck joined the mission in 1923, and they married that October. Aunt Florrie's stern dictum against quick marriage gave way on this one occasion to compassion, for Northcote was approaching the age of 50. They all felt for him.

It is for him a most terrible loss, the blank now in his life hurts so, poor fellow, and though he is so brave and resigned, you couldn't have 10 years of perfect love and fellowship with Jessie without missing her for ever after. I can't get over it yet, and I only knew her for eight months – so what must it be for him!²³

Gladys experienced severe culture shock, and differing standards of hygiene could be a problem.

Poor Gladys can't get over the undressed sores, and kakama etc of the people she has to visit and shake hands with! Some of them clasp you round the waist, and put their woolly heads (that are never washed or combed, perhaps) on your shoulder and you just have to crush down all your particular fads about cleanliness! And welcome the love that prompts it.²⁴

The support the missionaries gave each other was incalculable. Constance left Onepusu for a time early in 1922 and at once missed her fellow workers.

We have just left Onepus, and said goodbye to dear Miss McGregor, who has been just like a sister to me all these months, and I am devoted to her. You can't imagine how fond you get of your fellow missionaries you see, I think it's like the cameradie [sic] of the soldiers at the front – you go through so much together, tough, rough times when you find out your comrades' true worth. She has been such a comfort to me, she never gets ruffled or flustered like I do, and is such a capable girl, that

²¹ Constance to Charis, 9 September 1923.

²² F. Young, *Pearls from the Pacific*, pp 254,255.

²³ Constance to Charis, 12 May 1921.

²⁴ Constance to Charis, 15 August 1923.



*The missionaries at Fo'ondo. Mrs McBride, Mr McBride, 'Wee Robert',
Miss McGregor, Miss Waterson, Miss C Young*

From Pearls from the Pacific, p 250.

anything I can't do she shows me how, and her very presence seems to make Onepus home-i-fied for us all.²⁵

Constance had hoped to move on from the main station at Onepusu, and in August 1923, she was placed in charge of the more remote station of Fo'ondo, further north along the west coast of Malaita.²⁶ She wrote to Charis

I simply must go ahead with my letter, as soon I shall be cut off from Civilization and unable to send to and fro for letters, as we do at Onepusu. We are on the way to Fo'ondo, Cousin Kathie, Gladys, Northcote, Miss McGregor and me. We have been frightfully busy lately, packing up. You never saw such a weird lot of possessions we are taking! The Evangel is packed, full of our things, all sorts and conditions, and it will be a business arranging everything when we get there. There are at least three chairs, lounges, chest of drawers, tins of parsley and mint and paper bags with hats to say nothing of packing cases containing everything we couldn't get into our trunks – and about thirty cases containing stores.²⁷

²⁵ Constance to Charis , 27 February 1922.

²⁶ F. Young, *Pearls from the Pacific*, p 248.

²⁷ Constance to Charis, 15 August 1923.

She was conscious that she would be still more isolated, as the mission ship *Evangel* would take some of the party further on.

Tomorrow we get to Fo'ondo, and I sever completely my connection with Onepusu, and say goodbye to the ship, dear Cousin Kathie, who is my Island Mother, as well as the boys. I don't dare to think about it too much. I do hope you will write to me, though I won't get my mails regularly there, I suppose.²⁸

Fo'ondo, like Onepusu, had been established at the mission's beginning, in 1905, and there were already many Christians among the people, whose hearts were open to the Gospel. Three weeks after her arrival, Constance wrote again to Charis. 'I feel just so happy that I can't explain how happy!'²⁹ She outlined the missionaries' busy life.

Tonight after Supper, our verandah will be packed with men and women and children who come for singing. We have the McBride's organ [Mr and Mrs Robert McBride were co-workers], and have a great time. They do love singing...Nothing compares with the joy of seeing these dear people coming to Christ or to see their simple faith. Just taking him at His word, as they do, gives them such joy and confidence.... but now I wouldn't change with anyone ... There is a big scope here for missionaries - heaps and heaps to do, villages to be visited, children's school every day. Candidates Class Sunday [150 candidates for baptism] and Wednesday's teachers to be helped and taught, to say nothing of the weather. Oh! I am so glad I came!

The leadership that she had shown as a child bore fruit in Constance's last years. Constance Deck considered that 'she developed an authority that surprised us all. ...Mr McBride thought that she became the best speaker in the Mission, and yet she had such a spirit of humility [that] one of her strong characteristics was to 'esteem others better' than herself – seeing Christ in her fellow-workers and giving honour to them.'³⁰

On Saturday 17 October 1924 she learned of the death of her father a fortnight earlier and wrote a heart-rending letter to her bereaved mother.³¹ The next day she was taken ill with intussusception, an intestinal obstruction, and within six days she was dead after a painful and very distressing illness. Her last letter was dictated the morning she died. She was able to write only the first two words herself.³²

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Constance to Charis, 9 September 1923.

³⁰ Constance Deck in *Not in Vain*, January 1925, p 3.

³¹ Constance to Ellen Young, 17 October 1924. J. Saxton.

³² Constance to Ellen Young, 24 October 1924. J. Saxton. It is not known why she used the name Constanca in this last letter. It is unlikely to have been the error of Mr McBride, who would have taken great care in transcribing it.

Mother Darling,

I want to write to you, but I am too weak – I am hoping to go Home today – I shall get there before you – They will tell you about my sickness. We expect Northcote today or tomorrow, and I want you to know everything that love and friendship could do is being done for me by dear Mr and Mrs McBride. Connie sent the news on Sunday. They came straight away on Monday morning, walking the 20 miles with little Robert. I can't tell you how lovingly they have nursed me, I would have died long ago but for them. I feel so weak I can't say anything nice All my love Mother darling.

I am glad I've got Father there, perhaps it won't be long before you join us - I'm longing for the Lord to take me I always wanted just to do a little work for the Lord and then go Home. It is the greatest joy to me to die, if the Lord does take me today – I am too ill to write to Lyn. Give her my love.

God bless you my own darling Mother. Only Eternity will show how much I owe to your prayers and careful teaching with regard to the joy I've had in this work since I came down here

Your loving

Constancia

She was buried next day overlooking the bay at Fo'ondo.³³ Northcote Deck returned on the *Evangel* the following day, and wrote a lengthy obituary, which concluded by looking forward to the day of resurrection.

How gladly she used to welcome the ship in days gone by. What wavings! What joy! What greetings! Now in the cliff overlooking the landing where the *Evangel* anchors, and the boat comes ashore, she sleeps, silently awaiting, not our coming, but that glorious and fast approaching coming of our Lord of Glory.³⁴

³³ Robert McBride to Ellen Young, 26 October 1924. J. Saxton.

³⁴ *Not in Vain*, January 1925, p 7.



Constance had a way with people. In Shakespeare's 'Othello', Iago spoke enviously of Cassio. 'He hath a daily beauty in his life'. Constance too had a daily beauty about her. As a child, she had been a natural leader in her family. As a schoolgirl, she had a warm affection for the girls and staff of Sandecotes. She looked back with pleasure on her four years as a V.A.D. during World War I. To others, this might seem a time of tedium and drudgery, but she would never have thought of her duties in those terms. She won the hearts of the Solomon Islanders in her five years' service with the SSEM. In all the changing scenes of family life, hers was a voice that gave wise counsel and hers was a presence that brought serenity. She understood her Aunt Florence's rather demanding idiosyncrasies,³⁵ and wisely counselled her cousin Charis not to criticise her sister-in-law to be.³⁶ At a tense time in family relationships some years later, the name of Constance was remembered as one of the 'cloud of witnesses'.³⁷ On Malaita, she was remembered with honour and affection for most of the twentieth century. Her life left an afterglow in the light of which all those who knew her were glad to walk.³⁸

³⁵ Constance to Charis, 18 September 1913. Margaret Pennington.

³⁶ Constance to Charis, 9 September 1923.

³⁷ Hebrews 12: 1, 2, AV. Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.

³⁸ All three of her sisters named daughters in honour of Constance. The eldest, Evelyn, married Arthur Webb in 1926; their first daughter, born two years later, was named Constance Rosemary. However, she is known by her second name. Rosemary Webb married Dr Paul Hanbury, and now lives in Forbes, New South Wales. The next sister, Doris, married the Rev. David Knox. They had ten children; the ninth, born in 1927, was Constance Gloriel. Constance's youngest sister, Elinor,

More than 70 years later, her niece Alison remembered her fondly. ‘Aunty Con was a wonderful person – Bob (her cousin Robert) Young said they still remember her fondly in the islands. He attended a memorial service for her. She was lovely and it is terrible she died so young. Mummy [Evelyn, Constance’s sister] never got over it’.³⁹

References:

Young, F.S.H. *Pearls from the Pacific*, Marshall Brothers Ltd., London, 1925.
Not in Vain, January 1925 (magazine of the South Sea Evangelical Mission)
[Young, Margaret E.] ‘Pearl’, *Life’s Precious Jewels*, Parramatta, n.d. [ca. 1949]

National Library of Australia, Charis Young Papers MS 9564.
Letters in the possession of Margaret Pennington and Janet Saxton.

A collection of photographs taken in 1917 of the Kingswood Park Hospital, Tunbridge Wells, is at <http://website.lineone.net/%7Elizbamji/kpth.html> (June 2004)

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married Theo Nicholson. Their eldest daughter, Sheila Constance, later Mrs Sheila Knox, was born in 1921 while her aunt was a missionary in the Solomon Islands.

³⁹ Alison Hawke to Patricia Braga, 4 August 2001.